



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 16

(29 April 2002 to 16 June 2002)

BELFAST: THE STATIONERY OFFICE LTD

£70.00

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Produced and published in Northern Ireland on behalf of the
Northern Ireland Assembly by TSO Ireland,
which is responsible for printing and publishing
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ISBN 0 339 80014-3

Volume 16

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

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

Monday 29 April 2002

The Assembly met at noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on the environment that was held on 17 April 2002 in Dublin. Given the pressure of other business, the Business Committee has limited the time allocated to the statement and Members' questions to 45 minutes.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): With permission, I will make a statement about the sixth environment sector meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, which was held in Dublin on 17 April 2002.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Mr Denis Haughey and I attended the meeting on behalf of the Northern Ireland Administration. The Irish Government were represented by Mr Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for the Environment and Local Government, who chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed by Mr Haughey and is also made on his behalf.

The Council considered a report on the work programme of officials who were to identify ways of encouraging the expansion of waste recycling and produce a strategy for developing markets for recyclates. The group had gathered baseline information on waste streams and rates of recycling, North and South. It had also identified shared barriers to the development of a sustainable and widespread recycling industry, which might be better overcome by using a joint approach. These include small geographic size, low environmental awareness among manufacturers and consumers, lack of standards for recycled materials, and infrastructural deficiencies. It was agreed that, at the Council's next meeting, the group should submit proposals for the development of an all-island strategic approach to developing markets for recyclable material, taking account of developments in Great Britain.

Ministers noted that it might be necessary to look beyond local markets to the wider group of islands, continental Europe or further afield for available viable markets for recyclates. The group will also recommend appropriate linkages between market development programmes that are being introduced in either jurisdiction.

The introduction of European legislation on the disposal of chlorofluorocarbon compounds (CFCs) contained in fridges and freezers, leading to their storage or costly export for destruction, has had a major impact in both jurisdictions. Given the economies of scale required for establishing a viable treatment facility to recover CFCs, the Council noted that officials are developing a joint approach in conjunction with local authorities, including the possibility of letting a single contract for an all-island service.

The Council also noted progress on the establishment of an all-island community recycling network, designed to encourage community involvement in waste recycling projects in partnership with local authorities and businesses. The Council awaits the outcome of an economic appraisal of the proposal.

Northern Irish officials have also given initial consideration to options for the introduction of arrangements similar to those in the Republic of Ireland for the collection and recycling of plastic waste from farms. The Council was informed that Northern Ireland does not yet have the necessary primary legislative powers to introduce a statutory regime. With the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and farmers' representatives, officials will explore possible options for a voluntary scheme, taking account of any proposals that may emerge from consideration of the issue by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in Whitehall.

The second item on the agenda was a report from the joint working group on water quality, which is tasked with co-operating on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive in respect of cross-border waterways. A technical advisory group supports the group's work, which the Council endorsed. The Council also agreed that the findings of the group's review of water quality management strategies for the Erne and Foyle catchments should inform agreements for the implementation of the Directive.

Where river catchments span international borders, the Water Framework Directive requires that they be included in what are called "international river basin districts" to ensure their integrated management from source to sea. The technical advisory group has identified three core agglomerations of river basins that could form the basis for delineating international river basin districts for water quality management: the River Shannon catchment, the Lough Neagh/Carlingford Lough/Dundalk catchment and the Erne/Foyle/Swilly/Melvin catchment.

The Council requested that the working group make recommendations for delineations based on those catchment groupings, along with their associated coastal waters, and prepare proposals for public consultation. The group was also asked to produce proposals for joint funding of the cross-border activities required to implement the Water Framework Directive and for the financing of projects from INTERREG III funds.

The Council noted progress in the scoping study into the key environmental impacts of agriculture. The study had been commissioned with a view to developing co-operation on nutrient management planning and controls on the cross-border movement of slurries and spent mushroom compost. The final report of the scoping study will be presented to the next environment sector meeting in the autumn.

The Council was pleased to note that work on the North/South web site of environmental research had been completed. The web site uses the acronym “aNSwer” — the N and S are upper case to emphasise the North/South element — and it contains a register of comprehensive information on environmental research carried out by the two environment agencies and by academic institutions. It will be an invaluable tool for those interested in, or involved in, environmental research. The web site was formally launched by Ministers after the Council meeting on 17 April.

The Council was also informed of the completion of the project to develop a joint register of sources of environmental information. The environmental data sources site is accessed through the same aNSwer web site. It too was launched by Ministers after the meeting. The site will provide users with information about the availability and location of a wide range of environmental data and statistics. The Council will continue to receive periodic reports about the development of the site.

The Council approved a work programme for the development of co-operation on information exchange and environmental awareness. Ministers recognised the value of sharing expertise and resources to raise public awareness of environmental issues. The programme includes the production or revision of a range of environmental literature, shared use of exhibitions, staff exchange and local authority network meetings, including a waste management colloquium for local authority environmental education officers and recycling officers.

Finally, Ministers agreed the text of a joint communiqué that was issued after the meeting. A copy of the communiqué has been placed in the Assembly Library. The Council agreed that the next sectoral meeting on the environment would take place in November 2002 in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): The Minister will know that the public consultation exercise for the three local

waste management partnerships is soon to end. The groups have consulted with the Northern Ireland public on the future long-term management of the enormous amounts of waste produced here every year. While minimising the volumes of waste produced must be a major part of the strategy, it is clear that recycling is important. The Minister referred to a report that identified options on waste recycling and the development of suitable markets for recyclates. I am sure that he will agree that the proper consideration of all available information is the key to making the right decisions. Will the Minister, therefore, make that report — or an interim report on the ongoing work — available to the Environment Committee and each of the three partnerships in Northern Ireland for consideration?

Mr Nesbitt: The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment pointed up, correctly, the waste management partnerships and the necessary consultation for this aspect of waste management.

12.15 pm

The Committee has initiated a strategy from which the three groupings in the 26 district councils are implementing three plans, which is a sign of the necessary partnership. Partnership is needed between the district councils, the Assembly and, as the Chairperson rightly said, the Environment Committee.

The Chairperson referred to the importance of recycling. Recycling is important: reuse, recovery and recycling are the three Rs. Recovery means using waste without its having been recycled. All those aspects are important, and the Department will identify the options.

The Chairperson also referred to suitable markets, and I support his views on that. There are four key elements, of which suitable markets is just one. A key issue, which I have identified through dealings with the North/South Ministerial Council and the Environment Committee, is that we must make people aware of what is happening. For that reason the Department has implemented a campaign to make people aware of the different aspects of recycling such as the necessary machinery and, as the Chairperson said, sustainable markets.

I wish to share information with the Committee, and I am on record as having sought more regular meetings with its Chairperson. I want to keep the Committee fully informed, in writing and orally, as and when I can. However, when we implement the strategy, we must be conscious that we are not simply dealing with the island of Ireland. The key limiting factor is finding a market for recycled goods, and in order for the Committee to give me its thoughts, I hope to keep it well informed. Given that we are all part of the problem, we must all be part of the solution.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Lewsley): I welcome the fact that the Minister has made recycling number one on his agenda.

The Council noted the progress of an all-Ireland community recycling network, which includes businesses and local authorities. Can the Minister give us the timescale for the economic appraisal?

Mr Nesbitt: The Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee is delighted that I put recycling at number one on the agenda. We are trying to reduce waste, and that may be more important than recycling. Waste that cannot be reduced will be recycled or recovered. The most limiting factor is whether markets for recycled produce can be identified. There is little point in educating those who create the waste — which all of us do — if we cannot identify markets. If markets are identified, that will motivate entrepreneurs to become involved in the industry. Only then, as the Deputy Chairperson would like me to do, can I make recycling my number one priority.

Ms Lewsley mentioned all-Ireland recycling. We are all part of a local community, and we are all responsible for the problem, so we are all responsible for finding a solution. The Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee said that we have been considering the all-Ireland dimensional map and asked when it will be available. I hope that the final appraisal will be completed by the end of May 2002. The economic appraisal will assess the costs and benefits, financial and otherwise. It is difficult to put a price on the benefit of having fewer landfill sites, although we can assess how much pollution filters into the water system. When I went to Queen's University two weeks ago, I was fascinated to see the flow of water being assessed. Believe it or not, water that fell as rain 4,000 years ago is being drawn from the rock — such is the timescale involved in the process.

Mr McClarty: What are the key factors to consider when drawing up waste management plans?

Mr Nesbitt: I mentioned the key factors in my answer to the Chairperson of the Environment Committee. Waste management plans are the second stage of the strategy. Northern Ireland recycles only 6% of its waste. That compares poorly with countries such as the Netherlands, which recycles up to 42% of its waste. However, to be fair, other countries such as France and Spain recycle only 3% of their waste. We should never be complacent, but nor should we undersell ourselves and our efforts.

First, we must recognise the magnitude of the problem, which is simple: 6% of Northern Ireland's waste is recycled, but EU Directives require that that figure be 25% by 2005 and 40% by 2010. Deadlines and budgets crystallise a situation and focus the mind. Proper budgeting is critical to ensure that the waste management plans are implemented. Last year, we provided approximately £2 million to assist district councils to implement the waste management plan. I hope that next year that will rise to between £5 million and £7 million. The money must be spent where it is considered appropriate.

The Waste Management Advisory Board for Northern Ireland has an important role to play in the development of waste management plans. The board is independent of the Administration and was set up to advise it. Its membership comprises public and private sector staff, and it is chaired by a lady who works in the waste management sector. When I first met the board members, I was asked whether I would take account of their views. I said that I would take any advice that they cared to give, but that I would also expect them to address my questions. Partnership is needed in the development of these plans. There must be co-operation between the Environment Committee, the Executive and the Administration as well as between the Assembly and local authorities.

I dealt with education, compartmentalising waste, attracting entrepreneurs to develop the industry and, above all, the limiting factor of markets for recycled goods in my answer to Mr McCrea. Waste management plans are important, and I have tried to highlight some of the key elements.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement on one of the most important issues we face. He mentioned European legislation and the possibility of heavy fines being imposed if the Directives are not implemented. Why does this report not concentrate on the reduction of waste production in manufacturing, reprocessing and retail businesses? Given that the South of Ireland Government have introduced a plastic bag tax, has this Administration any plans to do something similar?

The management of waste from farms, and particularly slurries and spent mushroom compost, is a major pollution problem. There does not appear to be a joined-up approach by either Administration, or even by one Administration, for dealing with this issue. Surely digesters should be used to create energy rather than going down the road of incineration, which seems to be what the Governments on both sides of the border are planning. Are there any plans to use digesters to deal with slurries and mushroom compost?

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Molloy made many points, which I will try to address. He referred to incineration, as did Dr McDonnell when he spoke about an incineration plant in Copenhagen that he found to be environmentally friendly. There is no plan, as yet, for any particular aspect. We are waiting for plans to be introduced. However, we should not duck the problem that too much waste is going to landfill. We must find ways of getting rid of it by recycling, reuse or by using it to create energy. Incineration is one way forward; it is not on the agenda, but it is certainly not off the agenda for consideration.

Mr Molloy seems to be saying that there is little joined-up approach North/South, never mind within this Administration. Believe it or not, there is much co-operation

between the North and the South. He mentioned farm slurry. The North and the South have similar problems, and we compared notes on what needs to be done on farms in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. I am fully aware of the concerns of farmers on the storage regulations for silage and slurry.

I am also concerned about the Water Framework Directive and the possible extension of nitrate vulnerable zones and the impact that both could have on farmers. The Erne and Lough Neagh basins are being examined scientifically, and that could result in the expansion of nitrate vulnerable zones in Northern Ireland. Bríd Rodgers and I are working together on this issue. She knows that I have been in discussion with the Ulster Farmers' Union, and I have also contacted the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) to find out if it wants to speak to me or to my officials on this matter. Bríd Rodgers and I will not be trying to gold-plate this — we are not going for the super-solution. We will stick strictly to the scientific evidence, and my officials will collaborate with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the farmers' unions.

12.30 pm

Most of us come from a farming community; at least, we all recognise the importance of the farming community to Northern Ireland and share that community's concerns at the current weakness of the industry. I refute the allegation that there is no joined-up approach. Collaborative work continues between the North and the South, within the Departments in Northern Ireland and with those involved directly such as the farmers' union.

Mick Murphy raised the issue of plastic bags recently. I repeat that it is not for Northern Ireland to legislate about plastic bags, as has been done in the South. I replied to Mr Murphy that we would wait to see whether it would be successful, which I have tried to ascertain since then. The removal of plastic bags from our overall environment, where they are seen to be detrimental, seems to be a success. Therefore, I will have to examine closely what can be done about plastic bags in Northern Ireland. That issue will now exercise my mind greatly.

Mr Molloy's second point concerned the reduction of the production of waste. I agree with him. However, as I said to Patricia Lewlsey, that is only one element. We must reduce waste and recover waste that can be used again easily and recycle it. None of those actions will be viable unless or until we have markets for the recycled goods.

Infraction proceedings, European Union Directives and potential fines are important. That is why we want to ensure that all EU Directives are brought in as quickly as possible. We must meet those EU obligations. I am not doing this simply for the sake of it. I am doing it because the environment needs it; the European Union

has directed that it be done; and we will suffer severe fines if we neglect to do it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not want to eat into the time available, but I remind all Members and the Minister of the advice about time constraints that I gave at the beginning of the debate.

Mr Ford: I welcome the Minister's statement, which appears to show some progress on some important matters. I also welcome his response to William McCrea about his willingness to meet the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment. However, I remind him that this is not a substitute for the Minister and his officials meeting the entire Committee and taking our concerns with a spirit of openness.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: I note that the Chairperson agrees with me, and I have no doubt that the Deputy Chairperson would also agree if she were present. In that spirit, I welcome the fact that the Minister has taken on board my comments about the recycling of farm plastic waste when he last reported from the North/South Ministerial Council. The Minister said that there are no relevant legislative powers, but a farm plastic waste scheme in Northern Ireland would require subsidy from his Department towards the basic costs. Will that be in place before silage is unwrapped next winter, so that it will cease to be a problem after this season?

What is the timescale for the introduction of the necessary legislation domestically to deal with the EU Directives on the disposal of fridges and freezers, an issue that is starting to cause a considerable problem across all parts of these islands? It is an area that we need to be rather more proactive about than we have been so far.

Mr Nesbitt: First, I stress that I do recognise the Committee's position. When I made reference to the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson, I was reminded correctly that there is an overall Committee. I often liaise with the Committee through the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. I see that Mr McCrea acknowledges that that is the case. I do not want to put the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson above the full Committee, and nor would the Chairperson himself.

Mr Ford referred to plastic farm waste, or "farm film" as it is called, and asked if we would have something in place before silage is unwrapped next winter. The position is clear in the Republic of Ireland. Farmers are offered a deposit or refund scheme, or they can participate in an approved recovery scheme.

The story I will tell is similar to the story of the plastic bags: it is working in the Republic of Ireland. The recovery scheme is financed by a 100-tonne levy on sales, established in 1997, and 6,000 tonnes of farm plastic a year is being recycled — that is 40%. We are examining

the feasibility of that. However, we would need primary legislative powers in order to do that, and that would take time.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is considering whether a voluntary scheme would be helpful. We will monitor that scheme, and, as with the other matters, we are in preliminary discussion with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. That is another example of working together in joined-up government in this Administration. The key consultees — if or when it can be done — will be the farming unions.

We are exploring the possibility of an all-island approach to fridges and freezers, and officials North and South are working closely on that issue. It has nothing to do with politics, but rather with the reality of dealing with fridges and freezers, so that they are not being stored at council expense. Mr Meacher from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has provided £40 million to deal with that in the rest of the United Kingdom, and we will have to deal with it in the coming months.

Mr Gibson: I was interested in the Minister's reply to the Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee. Will the Minister explore the issue further? The dominant principle in Europe is that the producer of pollution pays. What efforts has the Minister made, in conjunction with the United Kingdom Government and European manufacturers, to ensure that pollution is reduced at source? Massive efforts made to handle the huge tonnage of waste are futile if a serious effort is not made to reduce it at source. In Germany, Coca-Cola and other manufacturers of mineral waters and drinks are not allowed to use plastic containers and must use recyclable bottles. What efforts has the Minister made to reduce waste at source?

Mr Nesbitt: Given what I have already said, I will not elongate this reply: I will be brief. We want to see pollution reduced at source, wherever that may be. I use the word "pollution" as distinct from "refuse" and "recycling", so I assume that Mr Gibson is referring to pollution of water. That takes longer to deal with. I accept that there are times when industry can create something immediately. However, there have not been many water pollution incidents in Northern Ireland, and no serious cross-border incidents either. However, safeguards are in place. Key officials are on 24-hour call to take action. The impact of the pollution to which the Member refers depends on its nature, its location and how soon it is reported. In that sense, water pollution is difficult to treat.

Oil pollution is noticed more easily, because it lies on the water's surface, creating surface booms. However, it is not easy to treat. We are working with the key officials

and we shall also endeavour to take legal action where necessary.

Mr A Doherty: I refer the Minister to the group's agreement to submit proposals to the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council for the development of an all-Ireland strategic approach to the creation of markets for recyclable material. Will those proposals include a firm timetable that outlines the practical steps that will make them a reality?

Mr Nesbitt: According to the current timetable, we shall have the waste management plans by May, so that a decision can be made on them before the autumn. However, I have made it clear to officials that when those waste management plans are presented, I wish to see action contained in them, not merely words. There is no timetable as such to implement the plans. As I have mentioned, there are timetables for targets, which are based on EU Directives.

Mr Hussey: It is appropriate that I should follow Arthur Doherty, a past chairperson of the north-west regional group. The Minister will know that that group has, for some time, co-operated with Donegal County Council. I agree with Mr Molloy and Mr Gibson on the issue of food production in the wholesale and retail sectors. One often wonders how many times they have to wrap a banana, when nature has wrapped it well enough.

The Minister said that he would deal with the issue of white goods. We need speedy action, not just words or endless consultation. Does the Minister agree that Government bodies, North and South, could do much more to encourage the development of a market for recyclates by instructing Departments and their agencies to use recycled materials? I think of the amount of paper that we use in this Building and wonder what the effect would be if Departments were instructed to use only recycled paper.

Mr Nesbitt: Both Governments could do much more by instructing Departments, although I am not sure that the use of the word "instruct" would sit well with the autonomous nature of those Departments. I am conscious, however, that we should lead by example. There is little point in this Administration asking the public to be mindful of waste if we do not give a lead.

The Member asked for speedy action on the issue of white goods such as fridges and freezers. In the autumn, we may be in a position to issue a contract for an all-Ireland mechanism to deal with white goods. Councils are storing them up and have asked me to take urgent action. I agree with the Member that speedy action is required.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, is there any way of harmonising the waste strategy so that householders will not be penalised? Secondly, with regard to the water quality working group's

recommendations for delineation, has a date been set for public consultation?

12.45 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I will have to ask Mr Murphy to repeat that question, because I did not get its drift.

Mr M Murphy: Has a date been set for public consultation on the water quality working group's recommendation for delineating river catchment basins?

Mr Poots: More clues are required.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Poots. If I have heard that right, Mr Murphy is talking about catchment basins for the Water Framework Directive. First, I shall define "international river basin" in the North/South context. It has to be transposed by 2003. The plans must be operable by 2009, and the water aspect must be operable by 2015. That is a long time. We are trying, through the North/South Ministerial Council, to establish where international river basins exist. When the basins are established, we will develop the plan. I apologise for not understanding Mr Murphy's question the first time. I hope I have understood properly, but if I have not, he will receive a written answer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Poots. I would be grateful for a brief question and an equally brief answer, because there is very little time left.

Mr Poots: Given that the Minister seems so keen on all-Ireland strategies and agendas, will he take a look at the all-Ireland clinical waste management strategy? Will he look at the tendering process, and can he say that everything was done correctly and was above board? Will that be the case for any future strategies?

Mr Nesbitt: First, I would like to correct Mr Poots. He referred to "all-Ireland", but all my references have been to "all-island." There is an important difference. It is a geographical unit comprising two political jurisdictions. I am not a lawyer, but I can understand what is meant by "jurisdiction", by "geography" and by "politics". It should be understood that we cannot have a market in recyclates in Northern Ireland. Therefore, there should be a wider all-island market. I also said that Great Britain and further afield must also be considered. We will not do anything underhand in that way.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Transport

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on transport that took place on 17 April 2002 in Dublin. I remind Members again of the time that has been set for the statement. I would like brief questions and answers, please.

Mr Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. What time have you allocated for the statement?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I cannot take that point of order. I gave the advice that the Member is seeking at the beginning of the sitting.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): Monday morning blues.

With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the second transport sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, which was held in Dublin on Wednesday 17 April 2002. Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Mr Denis Haughey and I attended the meeting, which was chaired by the representative of the Irish Government, Mr Noel Dempsey, Minister for the Environment and Local Government. This statement has been agreed by Mr Haughey and is also made on his behalf.

The agenda for the meeting focused exclusively on the programme for the enhancement of North/South co-operation on road safety, which was agreed at the Council's first meeting in transport sector format in December 2000. The programme includes several commitments, on which progress was reported at the meeting. The meeting began with the Council's endorsement of the existing level of road safety education activity on both sides of the border. In confirming its continued commitment to co-operation on that important activity, the Council approved a proposal to hold a North/South joint road safety conference and to consider holding an annual conference of that nature to allow for the development of a network of road safety professionals.

The Council considered progress on, and approved, the further development of a proposed new joint road safety campaign on pedestrian safety. The campaign, whose launch is proposed to take place in Belfast in early September 2002, will aim to raise people's awareness of the number of pedestrians being killed and seriously injured on the roads in the island of Ireland. It will also seek to make pedestrians and drivers more aware of their personal responsibility for avoiding road traffic collisions involving pedestrians.

Statistical data for 1996 to 2000 indicates clearly that pedestrian safety warrants attention. Pedestrians account for around one quarter of road fatalities, North and South. Since 1996, both Administrations have co-operated on the development of joint road safety awareness campaigns. Those campaigns can be especially effective on a North/South basis due to the similarities of the jurisdictions' road safety records and their common causes of fatalities and serious injuries. Sharing the cost of the development of campaigns between my Department and the National Safety Council in Dublin provides better value for money for each body. In addition, joint campaigns have been effective in attracting greater private sector sponsorship.

The Council considered the scope for the development of a common basis for the reporting of data on road traffic collisions. Ministers acknowledged the merit in having a definitive database to enable comparisons between countries. The Council welcomed the proposal to progress the sharing of information between the two jurisdictions on the databases and to explore the potential for reporting commonly held data. Relevant agencies were encouraged to investigate the similarities and differences in the characteristics of collisions that occur in border areas. The provision of such information may help to identify what measures could be taken in both jurisdictions to address the causes of collisions in border counties.

The Council reviewed the extent of the exchange of information on road safety awareness between the two Administrations. Arrangements are in place, through the exchange of key strategic documents and regular meetings between officials, for the Administrations to keep each other informed of significant road safety developments, North and South.

The Council took note of the position on the introduction of a penalty points system in the South, on the existing penalty points system in Northern Ireland and on developments in Europe as regards disqualification from driving and traffic fines. Ministers were pleased to note that the United Kingdom and Irish Governments are proceeding towards the ratification of the European Convention on Driving Disqualifications. They are also participating in a European Union initiative to facilitate the pursuit of the payment of traffic fines on a cross-border basis. Ministers also agreed that the mutual recognition of penalty points between the two jurisdictions remains a desirable objective. It may be possible to introduce such a measure when the system in the South becomes fully operational.

Finally, Ministers agreed the text of the joint communiqué that was issued after the meeting, and a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library. The Council agreed that the next sectoral meeting on transport will take place in the autumn in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): In July 2001, the Department of the Environment completed an extensive

public consultation exercise on the Northern Ireland road safety strategy for 2002-12. The Environment Committee has yet to see the finished document. When will that important document be available? Unlike the situation with his Department's recent publication of the key planning policy statement, PPS 10, will the Minister confirm that he will afford the Committee sufficient time for proper and effective final consultation before publication of the road safety strategy?

Mr Nesbitt: That is an interesting question because there was an additional point, which I noted and will refer to. Undoubtedly, the Chairperson awaits my comments with interest.

He is correct in saying that the consultation document on the road safety strategy was published in May 2001. It is anticipated that the strategy will be published in June 2002.

I have already referred to consultation with the Environment Committee. I have already referred to the general point, which since I became Minister I wish to subscribe to, and it is that the Committee should be consulted, fully and frankly, on all issues when it is possible to do so. I recognise — *[Interruption]*.

I am not sure what that was, but it was probably of no consequence.

I recognise that the Committee performs a function, which is to challenge the Administration. I also recognise that the Committee, in performing its role, makes a vital contribution to the final piece of legislation or policy planning statement being produced.

I noted with interest that the Chairperson asked:

"Unlike the situation with his Department's recent publication of the key planning policy statement, PPS 10, will the Minister confirm that he will afford the Committee sufficient time for proper and effective final consultation before publication of the road safety strategy?"

I presume that he was referring to the recent policy planning statement on telecommunications masts — and I see him nodding in agreement. The Department had full and lengthy consultation with the Committee on the statement. The Department also gave the Committee a full and detailed response. Following that full discourse between officials and the Committee, and before I had made any decision on the policy planning statement, I was made aware of further nuances and comments that had arisen between officials and the Committee. Before I decided to publish the statement, notice was given to the Committee on 9 April that I intended to publish the statement on 11 April. I was satisfied that all consultation had been exhausted during both the oral and written communications with the Committee.

I accept that there can be further discussion when Departments and Committees are not in agreement.

However, at some point the time for decision and publication is reached.

My Department consults widely with the Environment Committee, and I wish to have positive engagement with the Committee. However, after full deliberation, there comes a time when publication has to take place. That point was reached on 9 April.

1.00 pm

That does not preclude me from issuing a further policy planning statement on the matter. If there are further elements that must be dealt with, a new policy planning statement can be issued. It is not like creating primary or secondary legislation, which, once passed, must be followed for two or three years. The Department issues policy planning statements after consultation, and it can issue further ones.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Lewsley): I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that there is better co-operation on road safety education across the whole island. Has the Minister set a date for the road safety conference? He mentioned that it might occur annually. Can he outline in more detail the plans for cross-border co-operation on the payment of traffic fines? Will that money be earmarked for particular road safety projects?

Mr Nesbitt: Does Ms Lewsley want clarification on the road safety conference?

Ms Lewsley: On the date for the conference.

Mr Nesbitt: The conference will take place, although a date has not yet been set. The Council recognises the benefits of having a conference to bring road safety practitioners together to exchange views. Therefore, that will become a focus. If a date has been set, I have been remiss, and I will ensure that the Member and the Committee are informed of the date forthwith.

The Council is considering holding an annual conference, but it will wait to see how the first one goes. There is merit in bringing practitioners together to discuss ideas and exchange views in any discipline.

The Member also mentioned traffic fines. As I said, the North/South Ministerial Council is trying to ensure that the policy is operable in all jurisdictions in the European Union. If the system were fully operable, the authorities in the state where the offence occurs would be entitled to seek information from the vehicle registration authority in the offender's home state. Having obtained that information, they could write to the offender to demand payment of the fine. That would be the first stage. If the offender did not pay the fine within a stated period, the responsibility for enforcing the fine would be transferred to the authorities in his or her home state. It is hoped that such measures will ensure the payment of fines.

The United Kingdom and Ireland support, in principle, the implementation of that initiative. The Member asked what the revenue from such fines would be used for. Fines are not there solely to raise revenue. It is to be hoped that few fines and penalties will be required. On Sunday I met a man who spoke to me about the launch of the fixed speed cameras. He said that he would ensure that none of his money would go on a resulting fine. I said, "Well done, let's hope there are no fines, because that will mean people are abiding by the law."

Mr Davis: Can the Minister provide the House with the relevant road safety statistics relating to the Committee for the Environment's recent report on school transport?

Mr Nesbitt: I think that that is a double question — the road safety statistics and the Committee for the Environment's report on school transport.

The statistics for road deaths are emotional. So far this year over 40 people have been killed on the roads. The exact figure was 43 on 23 April, and I heard yesterday that another person has died. That compares with 36 deaths in the same period last year and 49 in 2000. We must not be complacent. However, road safety statistics show that there has been a significant reduction in the number of deaths on the roads, compared with the 1970s.

Statistics can be beguiling and simple and yet convey no message; their use can be dubious. However, if the death and injury rates of 1989 had prevailed until 2000, 4,000 more people would have been killed or injured — that is the magnitude of the reduction over that period. The number of children killed or injured has fallen by 31%, and that is to be welcomed.

The situation, however, is still bad. On average 150 people die, 1,500 are seriously injured and 11,000 are slightly injured each year. The main causes are speed, drink and a failure to wear seat belts, and those factors have been the focus of our advertising campaign. Two statistics about seat belts are particularly important. A person not wearing a seat belt is reckoned to be twice as likely to be killed as a person who is wearing one. That is a stark statistic — you are twice as likely to be killed if you are not wearing a seat belt. Indeed, if you are in an accident and you are seriously injured, you are six times more likely to survive if you are wearing a seat belt. Seat belts are important. It is estimated that, each year, 20 deaths and 250 injuries would not occur if people wore their seat belts. Too few wear their seat belts.

Mr McCarthy: The safety of pedestrians is referred to in the statement. It might have been useful if the Minister of the Environment had invited the Minister with responsibility for roads to travel to Dublin to hear the discussions. I do not know when Mr Peter Robinson was last in Dublin, but it would have been useful had he been there, because we are talking about pedestrians. As

the Minister said, they account for a quarter of road fatalities, North and South.

Every effort must be made to eradicate this unnecessary waste of human life. Was there any discussion about a possible legal requirement to wear bright clothing being placed on pedestrians using roads at night, thereby making them easily identified by drivers and preventing fatalities? Was there any discussion about a possible reduction in the criteria that exist in Northern Ireland before the roads authorities will provide crossings on busy main streets or roads? Anything that would reduce the number of pedestrians killed on our roads would be welcome.

Mr Nesbitt: I am not sure that my ministerial Colleague would permit me to call him "Colleague". However, I will do so for the record. I am sure that he can, in his own inimitable way, tell us why he is not involved in North/South co-operation, which is to the benefit of all on the island of Ireland. I must stress that. Pedestrian crossings are not within my remit; therefore I leave them to the appropriate Minister.

The wearing of bright clothing was not raised at the meeting. However, I am sure that some Members are old enough — or young enough — to remember the UTV advertisement that urged us to wear something light and bright at night. That has featured in advertisements for many years. Mr McCarthy is correct to say that pedestrians should wear something light at night. The Department will address the safety of pedestrians in its campaign to be launched in September.

All the campaigns have aimed at social and personal responsibility. If the people are not involved and do not understand what must be done, even the best measures will not work. The Department is trying to ensure that people are socially and personally responsible. Previous campaigns raised awareness. Likewise, the Department is certain that the latest campaign will raise awareness of the vulnerability of pedestrians. Everyone has seen the advert on national television about a person being hit by a car. However, awareness must be increased — not only that of pedestrians, but also that of drivers.

The campaign will challenge youth, those who drink and those who do not wear seat belts. The Department can change people's attitudes to pedestrians by challenging them and by raising awareness. By changing attitudes we change behaviour. Pedestrians are important, and a campaign will be directed at them. I will ensure that the matter of wearing something light and bright at night will be considered.

Ms Morrice: I am delighted that the Council meeting focused on road safety — not before time. Although I welcome decisions to hold conferences, form networks and exchange valuable information, I must ask the Minister whether he agrees that actions speak much louder than words. He quoted statistics today which referred to the possibility that 4,000 lives were saved in Northern

Ireland over the past 10 to 15 years. I remind the Minister that twice as many people died on Northern Ireland's roads over the past 30 years than died in the troubles. There is still not enough being done about that. In addition to those awareness programmes, concrete measures must be taken, such as traffic calming, reduced speed limits, greater enforcement by the police and the authorities and much more severe penalties so that we can save more lives, instead of waiting for the date of a conference to discuss it.

Mr Nesbitt: Traffic-calming measures are not within the remit of the Department of the Environment. However, the Member also mentioned penalties —

Ms Morrice: What about joined-up government?

1.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: Yes. Peter Robinson and I are working on that through joined-up government between our respective Departments. That will be wonderful when it arrives. I am glad that Mr Robinson was present to hear that.

From 2000 to 2001 there has been a 30% increase in the number of fixed penalty notices that have been meted out. I agree entirely with what Jane Morrice said. It is to receive publicity, but enforcement is also needed, as it helps to make the publicity more effective.

I said earlier that the three campaigns aimed to raise awareness and change people's attitudes. Ms Morrice said that such action is needed, but enforcement is also important. It is difficult to assess the impact of what we have done to reduce casualties. Levels have been reduced, but far too many people are still being killed or seriously injured.

What has been the outcome of the three campaigns? I shall provide some statistics. More than 90% of those surveyed — both North and South — are now aware of the message, contained in the advertisement, to encourage the wearing of seat belts. The message that we have a social responsibility to wear a seat belt has hit home, as has the message of how a back-seat passenger who does not wear a seat belt can injure or kill a front-seat passenger.

The number of people surveyed who, as a result of the advertisement, view it as irresponsible not to wear a seat belt has increased by 8%, from 63% to 71%. I hope that people see that as action. The survey found that 33% of drivers — 44% of 16- to 34-year olds — are more conscious of wearing seat belts than they were before the advertisement was first shown.

My next point is both positive and negative. As a result of the seat belt campaign, the number of six- to nine-year olds who wear seat belts has increased from 65% to 75%. It is good that the numbers have increased; it is action. However, the downside is that 25% of children are still not wearing seat belts. There is a lesson to be learned.

The Department endeavours to take appropriate action, but our responsibility is road safety and the mechanisms for it — not the legal implementation of the mechanisms, which is the police's responsibility. We are working on it as best as we can.

Mr Poots: One is tempted to say: "Come back, Sam. All is forgiven."

Mr Nesbitt stuck solely to road safety issues at the meeting; no other transport issues were discussed. Is that an indication that the DUP Ministers' boycott of the North/South Ministerial Council, a body that he seems so keen to pursue, is stifling its work?

Mr Nesbitt: I looked to see whether my Colleague and Friend Mr Foster was present for Mr Poots's comment. I am trying to interpret it. Perhaps in the margins I shall be enlightened as to what he meant.

Road safety is the Department of the Environment's responsibility. It was the only issue that I could deal with at the meeting. One aspect of road safety is to deal with deaths and injuries. Is Mr Poots trying to say that that is unimportant? It is not unimportant. To ensure that lives are saved is singularly one of the most important issues.

I am concerned because I have a youngish family. When my daughter qualified as a driver and went out on the road for the first time, I said: "Oh, help." My gravest concern is that something might happen to her or to my son. Every week we hear of young people being killed on the roads, and every week there are parents who suffer the traumatic experience of losing their children in such a way.

In focusing on road safety, I say to Mr Poots that — by gum! — it is important, and I hope that he does not take away from that.

Mr A Doherty: Pedestrians account for approximately one quarter of road fatalities. Has that figure been broken down to identify locations of particular danger and of a higher-than-average incidence of fatality? In that context, particular danger points are approach roads to built-up rural areas, such as housing estates, where there are no footpaths and which are perhaps poorly lit. I refer to those to make the further point that, as Jane Morrice said, it is fine to raise awareness of the dangers and the need for safety. However, there is also an urgent need to take practical steps to eradicate accident black spots, especially in places which seem to be unfairly neglected in contrast to other areas which are more than adequately supplied with footpaths and good lighting.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Doherty made an important point. It is not enough to say that we want to reduce the numbers of deaths and injuries. We must identify the particular circumstances which cause them. In a previous debate we tried to make that clear from a pedestrian's point of view. The Committee for the Environment investigated school transport and found that the danger was not in a

pedestrian's travelling on a bus but in his alighting from or boarding a bus. We therefore focused on educating young people by providing material amounting to £650,000 and increasing the numbers of road safety education officers by almost 50% so that twice-yearly visits can be made to each school. That means more than 4,000 visits to educate the young about when and where they are most at risk.

Mr Doherty is right to say that the statistics should be used to show the danger points. North/South co-operation provides a road safety reporting mechanism. The Garda Síochána and the National Roads Authority are jointly responsible for the statistics in the South, and in the North the Police Service has sole responsibility. We are beginning to share data not simply for the sake of sharing but to examine similarities and differences and to identify the key problems which cause accidents and where they occur. That will show the necessary measures that must be taken by the Department of the Environment alone, or with other Departments, to improve the situation.

To return to road safety and school buses, £161 million capital and £63 million annually will be needed to implement key aspects, and it will mostly be for other Departments such as Education and Regional Development to decide whether to allocate the necessary funds — this is not just a matter for the Department of the Environment.

I thank Mr Doherty for asking that important question.

Sir John Gorman: I thank the Minister for his statement. Would road safety be improved by seeking enforcement across borders, whether North/South, UK-wide or even across the European Union?

Mr Nesbitt: Enforcement would be improved if it were on a cross-border basis, because people travel across the border on the island of Ireland. If people felt that their penalty would stand, regardless of where they committed an offence, enforcement would improve. That is why I referred to the implementation of the new European Convention on Driving Disqualifications. If a driver has been fined in another country, the state in which the offence occurred can ask for the fine to be enforced in the person's home state, and it is important that that should happen.

There has been an interesting development in the penalty point system concerning discrimination. The EU has deemed it discriminatory that non-UK residents committing an offence in the UK are not subject to penalty points but to prosecution through the courts. The EU has requested that the penalty point system in the UK apply to everyone in the UK — UK citizen or not — so that all are treated equally in the EU.

Legislation will be introduced as soon as possible to bring non-UK driving licence holders in the EU within the scope of the penalty point system. This is an example of why we must have fair and equitable enforcement to

ensure that all are equal before the law, regardless of where misdemeanours occur.

Mr Byrne: Road safety is important, and I particularly welcome the analysis of road traffic accidents in the border area. Could the topic of different North/South trunk-road widths be included in the agenda for the next transport sectoral meeting in the autumn? The maximum trunk-road width in Northern Ireland is 7.7 metres, whereas in the Republic it can be up to 11.5 metres. I contend that narrowing roads at the border, from a broad trunk-road width in the South to a narrow trunk-road width in the North, adds to the number of accidents. I witnessed one this morning on the A5 in west Tyrone, which is part of the main arterial Dublin to Derry road. A Donegal-registered car was at the side of the road having been involved in yet another smash on the stretch between Omagh and Ballygawley.

Mr Nesbitt: The North/South difference in trunk-road width may be between seven metres and 11 metres, but the matter is not within my remit. Therefore it would not be for me to raise it at a North/South Ministerial Council meeting. However, the Department for Regional Development may have some input from a road safety point of view. If the Member were to write to the Minister for Regional Development, he might provide an appropriate answer.

It could be argued that wider roads are safer roads. When I was a district councillor I tried to prevent cars from parking on a village street by having double yellow lines painted. However, the council was advised that it was better to allow the cars to park there; they made the street narrower, which in turn forced other cars to travel more slowly. If the road were widened, cars would speed and perhaps cause more accidents.

I am not sure what the position on that is today. Widening a road can cause people to speed, and speeding is one of the primary causes of death and injury on the roads. After failure to wear a seat belt and drink-driving, speed is the third most important element in road accidents. A balance must be struck between the width of roads and the speed at which people drive. It is an interesting question.

1.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Dallat. It would be helpful if the Member could be concise when asking his question and if the Minister could be concise when answering.

Mr Dallat: Are there any plans to publish details of the economic and social cost of road traffic accidents on an all-Ireland basis, including not only deaths and injuries but also the cost to the emergency services and to health and social services and the cost of days lost at work, insurance claims, and so on?

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am glad that you asked the Member to be brief when asking his question, and I am even more glad that you asked that I be brief in my answer.

I cannot give a detailed answer on the economic and social costs of traffic-safety management. It is not easy to identify the terms of economic appraisals. The upfront financial costs can be identified, but what price do we put on a life or on the effect on the families of those who are seriously injured? What price can be put on the effect on the life of someone I know who was seriously injured years ago and has been in a wheelchair ever since? That is difficult to do.

One approach involves identifying two options. For example, one option might cost £20 million and another might cost £30 million, so we know the difference to be £10 million. We may not be able to quantify the benefit of the £30 million spent, but at least we know that the benefit is worth more than £10 million, so we would choose the option that cost £30 million instead of the option that cost £20 million. This is like shadow pricing — we do not know the actual price so we identify some other price. That is a complicated way of analysing the economic and social cost of traffic accidents. It is a fascinating, but complicated and intricate problem.

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES BILL

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

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

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 7 June 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill (NIA Bill 6/01).

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is examining the Health and Personal Social Services Bill, which has two main provisions. The first covers free nursing care for residents of nursing homes, and the second covers the establishment of a new practice and education council for nursing and midwifery. The Committee asks that the Committee Stage of the Bill be extended to Friday 7 June to give it more time to consider the implications of introducing free nursing care and its separation from free personal care. This is a complex matter that will affect how residential care is funded for many years to come.

England, Scotland and Wales have already taken different routes with the provision of financial support for residents of nursing homes. The Bill will introduce a new entitlement that will cost £9 million a year and affect some 2,000 elderly residents, so it must be considered carefully. I ask Members to support the motion.

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 7 June 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill (NIA 6/01).

WATER SERVICE METER SCHEME

Mr Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to review urgently the Water Service meter scheme, which results in farmers in particular and consumers in general being charged for wastage arising from previously unidentified leaks from water pipes.

I propose the motion in the sincere hope that, as a result of its content, it will receive action rather than sympathy and understanding. I thank the Minister for his attendance to hear my views and the views of others who may wish to speak on the subject.

In an effort to highlight the problems I will relate two conflicting situations. The first is the ongoing leakage of water as a result of the inferior and long-term neglected infrastructure. In the Northern Ireland Audit Office report of April 2001, 'Water Service: Leakage Management and Water Efficiency', the main conclusions, on page 12, state that the Water Service estimated that in 1998-99, 253 million litres of water put into the distribution system each day were lost as a result of leakage. Last year the Assembly was given similar figures from the then Minister for Regional Development, Mr Campbell, who stated that the Water Service was losing in excess of 50 million gallons of water a day because of water leakage. On Monday 4 February 2002 the present Minister told me in a written reply that 54 megalitres a day — approximately 12 million gallons — goes unaccounted for from the Silent Valley reservoir alone. I realise that those figures give the total leakage from the distribution system and include water lost because of leakage from consumers' supply pipes.

I place no blame whatsoever for this ongoing loss at the door of the present Minister or that of his immediate predecessor. We all know the record of the Ministers before them regarding spending on necessities, and the least said about them the better. I also recognise and accept that Mr Peter Robinson and his Department are investigating the entire matter of leakage with a view to addressing the loss. Members of the Committee for Regional Development learned from departmental officials last Wednesday that over £25 million would be spent over the next four years in an effort to lessen the water leakage problem.

The second scenario is not specific, but it is a common enough problem throughout the region. I refer to a leakage problem that is discovered by the Department only when a consumer's water meter is being read. Unfortunately the consumer discovers it only when his account arrives. The undetected leakage can occur, on farm holdings in particular, for a variety of reasons, including underground pipes being damaged by heavy vehicles passing over them, leakages at water traps, particularly at outfarms, and, I am sorry to say, leakages

caused by vandals who get their kicks from damaging equipment associated with the water supply.

The difference between the two situations is somewhat unacceptable and would not stand up to any equality scrutiny. The Water Service, as custodian of that part of the public purse relating to the water supply, is not held financially accountable for the loss of public money that flows away as a result of leakage. However, the same is not true of the unfortunate farmer or consumer who, through no fault of his own, is penalised in a sum that matches the cost of water lost within the confines of his holding. The consumers have the right to appeal, but that, in the majority of cases, is a pointless exercise, with no concessions offered or given by the Water Service.

I can only imagine what the reaction of the Minister or his departmental officials would be if the Executive or the Public Accounts Committee, acting in the public interest, demanded payment for water lost through leakage, even though such loss was, as in the farmer's case that I mentioned, through no fault of their own. I find it unacceptable that the same Department for Regional Development shows no mercy to consumers in a similar situation when it goes about recovering the moneys owing to it — even if that means taking the draconian measure of disconnecting the supply. I believe that it is correct to assume that the total extra money collected is a mere pittance compared to the Department's overall budget.

It is not, however, a mere pittance as far as the penalised farmers and consumers are concerned. The £300 to £400, which is the average sum incorporated when leakage has been identified, imposes additional hardship on rural consumers and others. Given the present state of agriculture, the sum could well equate to between six and eight months' profit for an ordinary farmer.

I am not seeking something unreasonable. I am asking the Department that, when a meter reading indicates water leakage in a farm or holding, the excess cost be waived on the first occasion and a bill based on average usage be issued. The problem should be brought to the consumer's attention immediately with a statutory warning that if the matter is not attended to within a specific period, or before the next reading, the entire sum will be deemed due. If such a system were implemented, nobody could accuse the Department of preventing fair play. The current system gives an innocent offender no chance: guilty is the only accusation made, and guilty is the only verdict reached.

I call on the Minister to take action if only to assure the public that his Department is interested in fair play. Members will agree that my comments are unique in that I have not asked the Minister for money — I simply seek the removal of an unfair penalty system.

Mr Savage: The motion is useful and timely, and I congratulate Mr Bradley for moving it. Water is an important and finite resource — that is difficult to believe

given the current weather conditions — and we need to preserve and conserve it.

It is important to eliminate all leaks in the water system thereby reducing the consequential loss incurred. Ultimately, leaks lead to increased water charges. All water systems age and need to be replaced by new, improved technology. Some water pipes in urban and rural areas are very old. Piped water supplies began in the early- to mid-nineteenth century in response to the public health reforms introduced by Edwin Chadwick following the outbreaks of cholera that caused havoc in south Belfast.

We are now entering a phase when the replacement of many outdated pipes is a matter of urgency. Water must be conserved, and systems must be maintained. Water charges will be an inevitable part of how we will fund the work. However, I wish to sound a word of warning. There are many difficulties, especially in rural areas. The Assembly is becoming too dependent on one source of income, and rates and water charges are key elements of that. Funding sources should be more diverse, and that should be considered urgently.

Lumping all Government finance under a consolidated tax such as rates is unwise and unfair. It makes more sense for taxation to be effected through citizens' choosing to pay tax according to purchases made — as happens in most places. I hope that water charges will not be part of a tax regime that needs to be reviewed. It should properly be part of the review of local government and public administration. Members may agree or disagree, but the argument is supported by overwhelming logic and justice.

It can take up to six months to identify water leaks in rural areas. As long as the meter is running, the cost is rising for the consumer. The farmer, or whoever is paying for the water, may not even know that there is a leak. A bigger emphasis should be put on the authorities so that they can identify leaks.

1.45 pm

Water is currently almost as dear as electricity. More encouragement must be given to the idea of farmers getting a rebate on the amount that goes through their meters. It is totally unfair that farmers must pay for their water while other people who live on the same road may use more water but get it free. It is not as if rates or other payments are any less for farmers than for other householders. Farmers should be treated fairly. If there is a law for one, that law should be the same for all. We have now reached the stage where some decisions will have to be taken. Those decisions may be unpopular, but they will have to be made. We cannot fudge this issue any longer.

If big leaks and burst pipes have been noticed that farmers are not aware of, they should at least be given a choice. Often, water is running down the sides of roads, and the authorities are dependent on a two-way flow of

information to determine where those leaks are. However, if that running water is going through a meter, someone must pay for it. I know where PJ Bradley is coming from. I do not know how it will be done, but concessions must be made. I support the motion.

Mr Hay: I have some sympathy with the motion. We all, especially Members representing rural areas, would agree that this has been an emotive issue in the farming community for many years. Many farmers would say that their water bill is sometimes their biggest outlay, which is undoubtedly true at times.

However, we must return to the serious issue and the background to this debate — the serious underfunding of the Water Service over many years. The water industry recognises that the most effective method of managing demand is to reduce leakage. Having compiled a report on the economic level of leakage, consultants have identified a substantial programme of short-term measures, including active leakage control.

We could say much about the serious underfunding of the Water Service. During the last Regional Development Committee meeting, we saw the figures for the type of money that we will need to bring the Water Service and our water supply up to a proper state. PJ Bradley and the other Committee members know the huge amount of money that it will cost. The problem is that it may be unfair to put the total bill onto the farming community on occasions.

That will be a live issue in the Committee in the next few weeks. Through the review of the water system in Northern Ireland, we shall all have an opportunity to voice our opinions on the best way to fund the water system. That debate will last for several weeks, both in the House and in meetings of the Committee for Regional Development.

Another interesting side debate is taking place on water charges. It would be interesting to hear Mr Bradley's thoughts on the issue raised by the Minister of Finance of Personnel. Dr Farren made it absolutely clear that he would support domestic metering in future. That caused a stir, not only among domestic owners in Northern Ireland, but among political parties, including Dr Farren's own party.

The Minister, who is a member of the SDLP, advocates meter charges for domestic householders.

A Member: He does not.

Mr Hay: Hansard will record exactly what he has said.

During a recent debate at which the Estimates and the running of Departments were being discussed, Dr Farren gave the impression to the House, through correspondence from the Minister for Regional Development, that he was suggesting that private consumers would be charged for metered water. The Minister for Regional Development

will need to clarify whether he intends to look at charging domestic consumers for water.

Water metering is an emotive issue in rural areas, especially among the farming community. A one-off payment is to be made to farmers if they can prove that they have not been responsible for leakage on their farms.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This subject matter of the motion is not covered by any of the Committees that I represent. However, I welcome the opportunity to speak, and I support the motion, as I am interested in the agriculture sector. The matter is high on many farmers' agenda. It has received more attention in the past few months because of foot-and-mouth disease. During that crisis farmers were unable to have their meters read.

On some farms, including my own, there are at least three meters. Some of them record very little output to particular farms. However, where outlying farms comprise several divided pieces of land, farmers are liable for considerable multiple charges.

Some meters are never read, which would lead me to question the amounts charged. There is a standing charge of £27 a meter, which, I am told, is payable even if the meter is not read. Farmers are not sure if that is value for money. Meters were not read for several months due to the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, and farmers received considerably higher bills last year than if the meters had been read normally. Some of the leakages that farmers experienced were not discovered until recently. People have shown me bills of £800 and more. It is placing farmers in a difficult position. Those who have recently acquired land or property and have suffered leakages have also been charged.

The one-off reduction available to people who were not responsible for situations in which they found themselves is to be welcomed. As regards rebates, farmers will say that they pay a high price for water in any case. Perhaps a way could be found to help farmers to check drinkers over the winter. It is something that farmers do not do, particularly on large farms, where it is difficult to check everything. Water wastage leads to an enormous cost to the general taxpayer as well as to the farmer each year. The Department for Regional Development is responsible for the provision and treatment of water. However, it must also deal with the large volume of water that is running down the drain. That water would have had to be processed and carried to the farmers.

I have mentioned multiple charges and the high cost to farmers. Most dairy farmers spend £1,000 or more on water each year while trying to maintain high standards. Most farmers are paying considerable sums, and it has been suggested that domestic consumers be charged. Farmers may not be worried about that. However, I would oppose domestic users being subjected to a water tax, primarily on hygiene grounds. People are taxed

enough, and the amount raised locally could be lost by a reduction in the block budget.

Farmers are also being hit by the aggregates tax, as some work part-time in quarries. Revenues raised on virgin aggregates go straight back to the Treasury. That is another tax on local people by the back door. The Government have taken money off us, but it has not come back in any other way. Ordinary taxpayers feel that they are already highly taxed without having to face water taxes. Some domestic users might use less water to make savings. People might run up bills only to have the supply cut off when they could not pay. That in itself is an important debate. The public would be against water charges.

This has been a good debate, and I support the motion. However, the Minister must do something to make farmers aware of what they need to do. They are paying massive bills that they have no control over.

Finally, there are problems with the Water Service's helpline. It sometimes feels that you have to go round the world when telephoning the Water Service, and it can take a long time simply to get through. That is unsatisfactory, and it needs to be examined. Go raibh maith agat.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Byrne: I support the motion. I am concerned about the undue charges that some farmers have to face in their annual water bill. It is particularly galling if a farmer receives a bill that is completely out of sync with the past pattern of water bills.

The debate is timely, because the water supply in Northern Ireland has become a major issue, particularly given the demand/supply situation and the enormous amount of water leakage that escapes from the distribution system. The current volume of water leakage in Northern Ireland is unacceptable. Some 37% of captured water is escaping from the system without account. That has two major outcomes: first, an economic opportunity cost waste of captured water and, secondly, some areas of Northern Ireland are in greater danger of suffering from water shortages, especially in the west. The Water Service is working on a water resource strategy to set out a 30-year water supply and distribution system for Northern Ireland. The historic lack of capital investment in the Water Service is causing major problems, and other Members have mentioned that. It is causing major problems for both the short-term peak demand times and the longer-term strategic supply needs.

I draw the Minister's attention to the real concern in the western zone. The water resource strategy draft document that was presented recently to the Regional Development Committee shows that there is a real crisis in the west. In 2000, the daily demand was about 130 million litres, but the supply was 124 million litres.

The other three zones in Northern Ireland had an excess of supply over demand in 2000. That highlights the need for an urgent short-term remedial policy to get to grips with water leakage, particularly in my constituency of West Tyrone. I agree with my Colleague Mr Bradley that we are appealing for a short-term measure to alleviate the current difficulties being experienced by some farmers. However, in the long term, we have to face up to the fact that water leakage from our system is causing undue difficulty in the whole water supply.

Mr Beggs: I declare a partial interest in that I assist on my father's farm, and that has some bearing on the motion.

The Water Service should review its meter scheme involving business users and farmers so that improvements can be made for those main users who may be suffering adversely from the scheme. However, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which recently held a hearing on the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report on Water Service leakage management, I would like to highlight a range of issues.

As has been said, one third of the water collected in Northern Ireland escapes through leakage in our pipes. That is at least 253 million litres a day. A target has been set to try to reduce that, but unfortunately the figure has been on the increase. Therefore, it is important that everyone, including domestic users, business users, the Department and the Water Service, contributes to the reduction of those leaks. Earlier this year we found that, even in winter, the Minister was issuing warning notices of potential shortages in the water supply in the Silent Valley. If we contribute collectively to reducing leaks, this could be a thing of the past, and restrictions on water use will not affect us at home or in business.

Such leakage has major implications, and I understand that the Water Service had planned a grand £72 million expansion scheme to capture additional water from Lough Neagh. That is how it intended to address the shortage, but it has only started to address the leakage problem with sufficient vigour. Northern Ireland's water has been leaking over and above what is known as the "economic leakage level", so we can spend money usefully on repairing pipes and so forth in the system. The money saved will justify the spending on the work.

Following the Public Accounts Committee's report, the Minister announced an additional £25 million towards dealing with leaks. Already there has been underinvestment in this area, and we must acknowledge and welcome the additional funds because they show that the Water Service is starting to try to manage the leaks.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office's report indicated that it was not only the Department that was not investing sufficiently in the management of leaks. The report stated that an estimated 48 megalitres leaked each day from customer supply pipes in 1997-98, and it has been estimated

that the economic level should be about 37 megalitres a day, so private users and businesses can also invest more money in the prevention of leakage because it is collective leakage that puts pressure on the water supply system, and it is important that they do that.

Substantial costs can fall on farmers, particularly in outlying farms, when frost causes leaks in pipes, and we have to ensure that farmers are not overburdened with costs. However, there also has to be an incentive for farmers and businesses to examine their properties carefully and to monitor their meters themselves or in co-operation with the Department. The Department could install electronic meters so that water could be monitored monthly instead of annually, particularly during the winter when driving up a road could capture the information and identify leaks earlier. This would benefit the Department and the farmers or businesses using the water supply. There is a problem with one-off annual bills as leaks are highlighted up to a year after they occur. Efficient information is needed, and business meters should be monitored more frequently.

The overall leakage programme is important, given how we use water collectively, and it even has a bearing on capital expenditure. The Lough Neagh scheme to capture additional water was going to cost £72 million, and it is important that, when considering overall capital expenditure, we do not invest too early when other improvements could be made. I ask the Minister to take these thoughts on board when responding to the Committee.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the opportunity to address this issue and to highlight some of the concerns which the people in my constituency of Strangford have brought to my attention. There is an unfair burden on the shoulders of some farmers and consumers due to unidentified leaks in the system. Over the past few years, those farmers and consumers have received large bills from the Water Service, which were above and beyond previous bills. Demands for payment have ranged from £1,500 to £3,500. To be suddenly confronted with a bill that is two or three times more than normal, and in some cases up to six times more than normal, is a shock to the individual and to his pocket.

The cases I speak of relate to breaks in the water system that occur during the winter months and are not noticed due to inclement weather and bad ground conditions. Many farmers and consumers can be completely unaware that there is leakage, that the meter is working overtime and that a hefty bill is in the offing. For first timers, the Water Service has been willing to reduce partially the resultant bills from unidentified breakage underground. However, the provision does not go far enough when bills could be two or three times more than the previous year's bill.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Many Members have spoken about the specific problem for the farming community. Will

Mr Shannon agree that Seán Farren's "tap" tax, which he has made much about, has not promoted a sensible discussion on water rates and their effect on the public? Ripples of concern have radiated across the entire community.

Mr Shannon: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member's comments. The ripples and waves will turn into a tidal wave of opposition to Mr Farren's proposals.

It is unfair to give farmers and consumers a bill that is above normal and that is at odds with the normal charge. To expect consumers to shoulder the burden in times of hardship and decreasing margins further compounds what, for many, is already a dire financial situation. People who contacted me were unable to pay the increase and, on top of their farming problems, were now being faced with a possible court case and litigation. For many farmers, these financial problems followed a difficult trading year, with BSE and the foot-and-mouth-disease outbreak pressing on their financial resources and squeezing them ever further.

The motion proposes a review of the Water Service's meter scheme. Due to the clear anomalies in the present system, the review cannot come quickly enough. It is a shock to any individual to receive a demand for payment he was not aware of. If that person had been aware of the speed at which the meter was running, he would have tried to stop it or make the Water Service aware of the situation. Farmers were not aware of the leakages on their land and so did not take any action. For that reason, and to prevent the unfair financial burden becoming an albatross hanging from the necks of the farmer and the consumer, we need to call a halt to such water meter charge incidents. I urge the Minister to ensure that a review will take place to address the issue.

Mr McFarland: Water metering, as we have heard from contributions, is an extremely vexed issue. The infrastructure has suffered from years of underfunding, and people always get into a tizzy about metering. In 1993, when I was working at Westminster for an MP, the great meter debate took place, and I received a call from one of the MP's constituents. The gist of the call was that, as it rained all the time in Northern Ireland, he was darned if he was going to pay for rainwater. We have heard the reaction to Seán Farren's announcement that there is a sentiment in favour of metering.

However, the water leakage problem must be considered seriously. We have heard that leakages account for a massive one third of water in the system. If the Minister carries out a review, he should consider the placement of water meters at key points. Although installation of meters in each house is not a possibility, meters installed at key points could identify the general area of a leak. The difficulty is that water leaks from the system from the moment it leaves the dam until it reaches the user, and the problem lies with identifying

the specific point of leakage. Perhaps the judicious use of water meters at key points in the system would help to identify the source of leakages. I support the motion, and I call on the Minister to implement a review.

2.15 pm

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I congratulate Mr Bradley on initiating the debate, and I thank everyone who contributed to it. I recognise the importance of the issue to many of the Water Service's metered customers, including farmers. I will deal with as many points as possible in the limited time available; however, I will first explain the rationale of the current policy.

The debate concerns water supplies to non-domestic customers, such as shops, factories, offices, businesses and farms. Water supplies to domestic customers are not metered, and I assure the House that I have no intention of introducing metering for domestic customers. A water supply may contain both a domestic and a non-domestic element; for example, a single pipe might supply a farmhouse, other farm buildings and water troughs. Such a supply is metered, but an allowance is given for domestic use. That allowance is 100 cubic metres every six months, which is 22,000 gallons in "old money".

Customers with metered water supplies are responsible for — and must pay for — all water that passes through their meters, including any that is lost through bursts and leaks. That obligation should not come as a surprise to customers; they are made aware of those responsibilities when they agree to accept a metered water supply. Each spring they also receive a leaflet that sets out the water charges for the year and their responsibilities for the metered supply. Customers know that they will be charged for all water that passes through the meter. They are advised to inspect regularly all pipe work and supply routes for signs of leaks. If customers follow that advice, they should be aware of leaks or bursts early, so that they can have their pipes repaired quickly and avoid receiving unexpectedly large bills.

It was suggested that such responsibilities are too onerous and that farmers and others should be charged only for the water that they use. I understand why farmers might feel that way, but other factors must be considered. Despite recent comments, water is not free. My Department will spend about £250 million on water and sewerage services this year. Water may fall freely from the sky, but it is costly to collect it in reservoirs, to treat it to the standards necessary to protect public health and to deliver it to almost 700,000 households in Northern Ireland.

Someone must pay for the water that is lost through leakage at a farm or a business. Either the customer whose pipe work is faulty or the taxpayers and ratepayers must pay. On the basis of equity, it does not seem unreasonable to expect the customer to pay. That would be the case for any other product that a customer purchased. For

example, if any of us lost our heating oil through a leak in the pipes, we would not expect the oil company to replace it free of charge — that would be unreasonable.

The Water Service recognises the difficulties faced by customers who are unaware that there is wastage. If a customer has not been negligent and has repaired the leak as soon as possible, a one-off reduction, equivalent to one month's consumption, will be made to the bill. In addition, repayment agreements are available to enable a customer to pay the bill over an extended period, usually 12 months. Given that the customer is legally responsible for all the water that passes through the meter, those measures represent a reasonable response to the difficulties.

Mr Bradley asked that a review of charging policy be carried out. I am pleased to inform the House that such a review is well under way. It is examining all aspects of the current policy, including charging customers for water lost through leakages or bursts to their pipe work. The review is well advanced, and I expect to receive a report on it in the next few weeks. I will, of course, consult the Regional Development Committee and other interested parties before reaching any conclusions on the review's recommendations.

I want to address briefly some of the issues raised in the debate. Mr Bradley referred to leakage in the public water distribution system. The Water Service accepts that the current level of leakage — which is probably nearer to 40% than one third — is far too high and must be reduced. However, water and sewerage services have been underfunded significantly for years. I am glad that Mr Bradley recognised that in his remarks. Current leakage levels are the result of lack of investment and certainly not of lack of effort. Key expenditure priorities — the improvement and protection of drinking water quality and the reduction of effluent discharges — continue to focus on protecting public health.

As Mr McFarland said, £22 million has been invested in leakage reduction measures over the past four years, and a further £25 million will be invested over the next four years. Ultimately, the extent to which the Department for Regional Development can deal with leakage in the water supply depends entirely on the amount of money that is given to the Department and its Water Service.

The House will be aware of the concept of an "economic level of leakage". There is a level at which it would be cheaper to allow leakage than to spend money repairing the leaks. I suspect, however, that we are nowhere near that level at present.

Mr Bradley also suggested that there is no equity between leakage in the public water network and the situation faced by those who have private supplies. That is not the case. The public water network is owned, as one would expect, by the public. If leakage occurs in the public network, it is the public who pay. If leakage occurs in a private network, it is the private individual

who pays. Mr Bradley also said that he was not asking for money. However, he was asking for money. Water has to be paid for by somebody, if not by the customer, then by the ratepayer or taxpayer.

Several Members mentioned water charging. It is clear from the debate today, and in the weeks since Dr Farren made his remarks to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), that it is an emotive issue. I think that Dr Farren has been misunderstood. I am not aware of any occasion when he has advocated metering the water supply or charging on the basis of metering. However, he has indicated that charging will be considered in the rating policy review. The review is a public consultation process. The Assembly and its Committees will also have their say on the matter. The notion that people are currently not being charged for water should be done away with. Of course they are being charged. The issue is the method employed to charge them.

I regret that we moved away from the system that existed when the Assembly was brought into being. Water was charged for within the regional rate. Increases in the regional rate benefited the water service industry. That was clear and transparent. People knew what was happening. However, that link was broken when the regional rate was changed into a simple top-up tax to benefit general public expenditure.

All of those issues can be considered. I suspect that they will encourage a lively debate during the course of the rating policy review.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Will the Minister assure me that he will consult the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee when farmers' water rates are discussed?

Mr P Robinson: I assure my Colleague that that matter is being considered. I am happy to hear and take into account his Committee's views and also those of the Committee for Regional Development. I look forward to receiving the results of my officials' report and to hearing the views of the Assembly and its Committees. Moreover, I shall take into account all comments made today.

Mr Bradley: I realise that time is not on our side. That may be just as well, because I may have said some things that would have caused some anger in the House.

I single out the comments of George Savage, Gerry McHugh and Jim Shannon, who related most to the spirit of the motion and demonstrated hands-on knowledge of the problem. I am grateful for their support. Support also came from Roy Beggs and Joe Byrne, and Alan McFarland also supported me in his own way. Again, I am grateful for their support.

I have no intention of replying to those who introduced icebergs in the desert to the debate. Those Members

have lost the spirit of the motion. I am simply looking for support for farmers and consumers who have to pay for leakages detected for the first time and who had no previous knowledge of wastage. I note that the Minister said that reviews are forthcoming. He should read in Hansard what I have said. I have said nothing contentious. Were he to agree with what I have said, that would be especially welcomed in the rural community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to review urgently the Water Service meter scheme, which results in farmers in particular and consumers in general being charged for wastage arising from previously unidentified leaks from water pipes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As there are only a few minutes until Question Time, Members should take their ease for that time.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 2, in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn and does not require a written answer.

Legislative Programme

1. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the legislation it expects to complete successfully in the lifetime of this Assembly. (AQO 1238/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): We intend to introduce a commissioner for children and young people Bill in the near future and to have that legislation enacted well within the lifetime of this Assembly. In addition, we will be bringing forward approximately a dozen pieces of subordinate legislation in areas such as disability discrimination, fair employment, race relations and the regulation of investigatory powers.

Ms Ramsey: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his short answer. The Executive have brought forward little or no legislation over the last four months or so. It has been indicated that more than 20 Bills will be introduced before the summer recess, with an urgency to complete them before the Assembly elections in 2003. Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister believe that Committees will have sufficient time to scrutinise those Bills properly and assess their effectiveness?

The Deputy First Minister: So far the Assembly has passed 26 Executive Bills. Six more have been introduced. We are working towards introducing more across all the Departments. My previous answer concerned only the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Executive have identified several issues which have contributed to the backlog on legislative productivity, and steps have been taken to improve that situation.

We recognise that if we are successful in bringing forward the number of Bills that we hope to introduce from the various Departments, a burden of work will be placed on Committees. However, given the importance attached to the legislation, with the value of having trailed the areas for which legislation is being considered and with as much pre-consultation as possible with Committees by Departments, we hope not only to produce

the legislation but also to process it with proper consideration through the Committees and the Assembly.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Deputy First Minister's reply. Has the Minister of Education earmarked any legislative time as a result of the review of post-primary education in Northern Ireland?

The Deputy First Minister: We have trawled all the Departments for their bids for the legislative programme. I imagine that departmental Committees will have access to details regarding their respective Departments' intentions. With regard to the review of post-primary education, the Minister has already indicated the timetable for proposals. I am not in a position to say at this stage whether there is a bid for legislation, although I do not recall such a bid. The Executive have received the bids for the introduction of Bills and for legislative time for the rest of the lifetime of the current Assembly.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On 27 September 2001 the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister wrote to the Speaker on that issue. The letter, which was forwarded to all Members, indicated that the intention was to bring forward 23 Bills during the current year. To date, considerably fewer than that number have been brought forward. Last week the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister wrote to me saying that more than two dozen Bills would be brought forward, but today that number seems to have been revised downwards. How much legislation really is in waiting and is about to appear on the parliamentary timetable? Are there problems with regard to the putting together of this material by legal draftsmen? Is there a difficulty within the Civil Service in that some Departments do not want local legislation? Did the Programme for Government promise far too much and now cannot deliver on significant numbers of those promises?

The First and Deputy First Ministers will also be aware that on 19 September 2002 there will be insufficient time for Bills to pass —

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is quite a long question.

Mr Paisley Jnr: By 19 September 2002 there will be insufficient time for Bills to be passed. Therefore, will the Minister assure Members categorically that no short cuts will be taken in the legislative process to circumvent the proper public scrutiny of legislation?

The Deputy First Minister: I have not revised downwards any indication. When I referred to the dozen pieces of subordinate legislation, I was referring to legislation from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister; I was not referring to legislation from all the Departments. The Executive intend to introduce around two-dozen pieces of legislation, and that aim is based on the assessment we received from the Departments. The Executive have asked the Departments to go through their assessments again, with as

much realism as possible, so that all the relevant Committees and the Assembly can reasonably anticipate what legislation there will be.

Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned several factors that may be involved. Departments lack the necessary personnel to draft legislation. Several other issues have arisen also. We have tried to improve things at Executive level to ensure that the process is quicker. Given that the relevant Committees have been canvassed on many of the subjects, the Executive are also encouraging Departments to work with them in advance of legislation. Committees must see the details of legislative proposals. Therefore, the more advanced the consultation the better. It is for the House, not the Executive, to determine whether any proposed legislation is amenable to accelerated passage.

Executive: Corporate Identity

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the development of a corporate identity for the Executive.

(AQO 1231/01)

The Deputy First Minister: A strong corporate identity is important to ensure that the public can easily recognise, and identify with, the work of the Administration by which it is served. At their meeting on 14 February 2002, the Executive approved proposals for a corporate identity for the Executive and the Departments. Officials from the Executive Information Service, along with a representative of the design company appointed to develop the identity, have met with all Ministers to discuss the implementation process. Ministers have also been consulted about the launch of the identity. Some issues have arisen from that consultation process that will require further discussion at a future Executive meeting.

Dr McDonnell: Will there be one design for all Departments? What difference would there be between the cost of one design and the cost of individual designs for each Department?

The Deputy First Minister: The intention is that the same logo would be used for all Departments but, to distinguish Departments, each would have its own colour scheme. A standard design across Government is cost effective because it avoids the cost of individual designs for each of the 11 Departments.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Today's papers announced the Prime Minister's move to pass a "begging bowl" to businessmen. Does the Deputy First Minister know whether some of the money will go towards this notion of a corporate identity for the Executive? Will he assure the Alliance Party, which is mentioned in the articles, because its leader has said that he has not been consulted?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is stretching relevance slightly, Dr Paisley.

The Deputy First Minister: Expenditure on a corporate identity is a matter for the Executive, and the money will come from their budget. The corporate identity will save money and improve recognition and accessibility for Government Departments and the devolved Administration.

Dr Paisley's other questions are not relevant to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. This is not the first time that I have —[*Interruption*].

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: This is not the first time that I have been asked questions on other matters. On that matter, as the leader of a party I was invited to a short reception that was attended by people who seemed to wish to probe the idea of starting a campaign.

Obstacles to Mobility Study

4. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether the views of all Departments and agencies on the North/South obstacles to mobility study have been canvassed. (AQO 1240/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): At a plenary meeting on 30 November 2001, the North/South Ministerial Council agreed to publish for consultation the consultant study on the obstacles to cross-border mobility on the island of Ireland. This was to allow interested organisations, including Government Departments and individuals, to give their views on the 50 recommendations and their implementation. The Council also agreed that the joint steering group should manage the consultation exercise. In late January, the steering group agreed that a public consultation exercise should be undertaken by the Centre for Cross Border Studies and that the group would consult each Government Department and agency, North and South. Both consultation exercises are nearing completion. The steering group is analysing the comments received, and at the next North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting it will submit a paper that summarises, evaluates and costs the recommendations. It will also, where appropriate, reach conclusions on certain matters including implementation proposals.

Mrs Courtney: Have all Departments responded to the consultation, and are any responses still awaited?

The First Minister: We have tried to undertake a full consultation. We sought the views of Departments and agencies in both jurisdictions, and that process is nearing completion. We have received responses from most Northern Ireland Departments. We have yet to receive a formal response from the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Department for Regional Development said that it would not be providing a substantive response. However, the most significant outstanding response is from the Treasury, as many issues relate to it.

Mr K Robinson: Is the report simply an exercise in making it easier to move from South to North, and does the First Minister agree that there are more obstacles for those moving North to South, such as the Irish language restrictions on primary school teachers?

The First Minister: Until recently, net movement tended to be from South to North. However, there are signs that that trend has been reversed. In the past few years there have been significant movements from North to South. The report deals with the obstacles, irrespective of where they arise. It is fair to say that there are more obstacles to movement from North to South than from South to North.

There have been some changes to the Irish language requirement, and Irish language proficiency now applies only in the Gaeltacht, where teaching is through the medium of Irish, and in primary schools. The maintenance of that requirement in primary schools is a significant matter, as is the pay differential between teachers who have Irish language proficiency and those who do not.

The Deputy First Minister: With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 5 and 15 together.

Review of Public Administration: Appointment of Independent Experts

5. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the appointment of independent experts to assist the review of public administration.

(AQO 1232/01)

15. **Dr Birnie** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the appointment of independent experts for the review of public administration.

(AQO 1210/01)

The Deputy First Minister: A key part of the review of public administration will be to draw on a wide range of independent expertise. We have been trying to identify suitable academics and practitioners. We want to find people with expertise and skills to provide as broad a base of support as possible for the review team. Various potential candidates were identified, and informal approaches were made to several to ascertain their availability and willingness to be considered for such a major role.

2.45 pm

As is to be expected with people of the calibre we are seeking, some have indicated that they are already fully committed to other projects. We are in the process of finalising a shortlist comprising a number of excellent candidates who have indicated that they would be willing to commit themselves to this challenging task if appointed. We hope to be in a position to announce the names of the high-level experts soon, once the Executive have been consulted.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his answer. I am assured that the expertise will be drawn from the widest field of international expertise. However, can we have some assurance that attention to the equality issue and gender balance will be ensured in the appointment of the experts, whilst respecting merit as the primary criterion?

The Deputy First Minister: We are happy to give such assurances. We recognise the need for well-balanced, independent input, and it is one of several considerations in reaching conclusions about the composition of the high-level group. In trying to identify people with the best range of skills and expertise, we have cast our net widely. We are considering experienced individuals from Ireland, North and South, Great Britain, other parts of Europe and the United States. We have specifically tried to identify individuals who are recognised for their expertise and experience in governance and organisational change.

We also confirm that there are men and women among the names being considered, but I would stress the point made in the question that the experts are being appointed on merit. Equality means appointing the best person for the job regardless of gender, race, religion or any other attribute.

Mr B Bell: Will the experts be truly independent, and will they be encouraged to take a radical approach to the review of public administration?

The Deputy First Minister: The experts will be independent, and they will be encouraged to take as independent an approach as they can. We must be careful as to how far we encourage them while trying to respect their independence. The Executive, the First Minister and I will not be trying to set up any no-go areas for the work of the independent review and in particular for the contribution of the independent experts.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Deputy First Minister assure us that the choice of the panel of experts will reflect new thinking and not merely be made up of the usual suspects — the great and the good who have benefited from public appointments in the past?

The Deputy First Minister: Given the scope of our trawl for members of the high-level panel of experts, there will, of course, be people who will not necessarily have appeared on many public appointment lists here previously. Our trawl includes people from well outside this immediate jurisdiction. Some people will be from here; some will be from across the water; some will be from the South; and some will be from Europe and the United States. We are talking about people with a range of insights and expertise to offer. Members will be impressed with the high-level panel of experts. Those who are not impressed may change their minds once they meet the experts and deal with them during the course of the review.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There will always be some background noise, but there are several private conversations going on, which are making it difficult for the Deputy First Minister to be heard.

Appointments to Public Bodies

6. **Mr Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made in relation to new arrangements for making appointments to public bodies as contained in sub-priority 7.3 of the Programme for Government 2002-2005.

(AQO 1199/01)

The First Minister: We are considering a public consultation exercise to inform a review of the arrangements for making public appointments. We wish to determine whether current arrangements, which were put in place under direct rule, are suitable for use by the devolved Administration and meet the expectations of the Northern Ireland public. The planned review will address a number of issues including ways of ensuring that applications to public bodies are as representative as possible; procedures for making appointments to public bodies; and the need for, and remit of, a separate commissioner for public appointments.

Mr Maskey: The Programme for Government said that this would be done by the summer of 2002. Many rumours abound that the First Minister's day job is as a plane-spotter or plane-hopper, and perhaps that is the reason for the delays. The First Minister's response does not really answer the question about the steps that have been taken in pursuit of the Programme for Government's commitment. After all, it is now quite late into the spring.

The First Minister: As I said in my answer, we are in the process of designing a review. We are going to consult to get a picture of the extent of the problem. This is a perfectly reasonable way to proceed with the review's design. We are committed to doing this, and we hope that we achieve the objective in the Programme for Government. Most of the targets in the Programme for Government have been, or will be, achieved. Members should wait.

It is some time since I engaged in any plane-spotting, but it used to be a hobby of mine. Unfortunately, I have not had time for it recently.

Mr McClarty: Has the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister met with the Commissioner for Public Appointments? Can the First Minister clarify the Commissioner's role in Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: There was a meeting on 22 March 2002. Unfortunately I was unable to attend, but the Deputy First Minister and officials met the Commissioner, Dame Renee Fritchie. It was a useful meeting. As the Member

knows, Dame Renee is the Commissioner for appointments in GB. We are delighted to have the read-across to ensure that the same standards are applied here as there. As to the future, the question of whether there will be a separate Northern Ireland commissioner for public appointments will be explored during the review that we are about to launch.

Mr S Wilson: Now that the Deputy First Minister has confessed to accepting the fundraising skills of the Prime Minister, does the First Minister agree that such an arrangement smacks of desperation on the part of the pro-agreement parties? I am getting to the part of the question that is relevant.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Indeed you will, Mr Wilson.

Mr S Wilson: Will the First Minister confirm that the Prime Minister has not attached any conditions to this arrangement, such as: awarding public contracts without going to tender; exemptions from restrictions on advertising in sport; well-paid chairmanships of quangos; and the offering of knighthoods to those who may make such donations to the pro-agreement parties?

Mr Deputy Speaker: First Minister, there may be a question in there.

The First Minister: Your view that there might be a question in there is more of an expression of faith than anything else, if I may say so.

Having listened to that long farrago, it appeared — in as far as it had any substance — to include several criticisms of appointments made by the Prime Minister. That is an entirely different matter, which has nothing to do with anything done by way of a public appointment here. I defy the Member to point to any public appointment in Northern Ireland in which there has been any element of impropriety at all. *[Interruption]*.

My Deputy Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: The Member concerned is well known for making jocular comments and behaving in a comical fashion, but there is no substance in anything that he said today.

British-Irish Council

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to provide an update on the activities of the British-Irish Council where the Northern Ireland Executive takes a lead role.

(AQO 1216/01)

The First Minister: Our Executive is the lead Administration for progressing work within the British-Irish Council's transport sector. Recognising the benefits to the people of Northern Ireland, in the absence of co-operation from the Minister for Regional Development, the then Deputy First Minister and I took the lead in the

British-Irish Council's sectoral transport meeting on 19 December 2000.

At that meeting it was agreed that senior officials would examine options and prepare detailed recommendations for work on several initial priority areas. Those included: exchange of information and experience, particularly on public-private partnerships, including the consideration of a possible mechanism to facilitate such exchanges; regional air links; the potential for co-operation on road safety; and integrated transport. Officials have been working on these matters for some time and are scheduled to meet representatives from the other participating Administrations on 22 May to advance the issues.

Mr Beggs: The Northern Ireland Assembly has identified key transport corridors. Some £40 million from Executive programme funds has been allocated to upgrade the Belfast to Newry road and the Belfast to Larne road. That work has commenced.

Efficient transport routes to central Scotland, England and Europe are important to the Northern Ireland economy. In the light of that, will the First Minister raise at the British-Irish Council the need for the Scottish Executive to identify and invest in their key transport routes, such as the A75 and the A77, so that the trans-European network (TEN) can be upgraded to the benefit of Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: Mr Beggs is correct to recognise the Administration's work in identifying, and providing for, an upgrade of routes that are crucial to businesses wishing to access markets outside Northern Ireland. The Administration's commitments to upgrade the A8 to Larne, the Belfast to Newry road, the Newry bypass and the road beyond the town, are clear examples of its work. Mr Beggs was correct to highlight the need to assist businesses here to deal with those outside Northern Ireland. The problem no longer exists inside Northern Ireland, but at our points of connection with other jurisdictions. That is particularly the case with regard to docking facilities at ports, especially at the Mersey docks, on which we hope to make progress.

I agree — not only as a member of the Administration, but personally — that the A75 needs to be upgraded. I have driven on that road often, and I still await even the planning stage of the bypasses at Crockettford and Springholm to enable progress by those with more leisure-based activities in mind.

Travellers: Republic of Ireland Legislation

9. **Mr Hussey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether it was consulted on recent legislation passed in the Republic of Ireland allowing local councils to move travellers on after 24 hours.

(AQO 1207/01)

The Deputy First Minister: There was no consultation with the Executive on that matter. The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill, 2001 has been approved by the Oireachtas and President Mary McAleese. It is likely to become law later this year.

Mr Hussey: I am disappointed, but not surprised, by that response. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should be aware of the fear, especially among councils in Northern Ireland's border areas, that there may be a resultant influx of non-indigenous travellers, especially traveller traders. Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that it is unacceptable that the Republic should export its problem in such a way? Will it ensure that representations on the matter are followed up at meetings of either the North/South Ministerial Council or the British-Irish Council?

The Deputy First Minister: Legislation already exists that can be used to deal with illegal encampments, especially when public health issues arise. It is for district councils to decide whether to close an illegal encampment. A working party considered whether Northern Ireland's legislation was adequate to deal with illegal encampments. The party's recommendations, which have been cleared by the Minister for Social Development, will be issued for consultation after a decision is made on transit site provision. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will consider any matter that Members suggest we raise at North/South Ministerial Council meetings, in plenary or sectoral format.

Mr McMenamin: Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister support the Housing Executive's having responsibility for transit sites?

The Deputy First Minister: It is for the Minister for Social Development to decide who is responsible for transit sites. However, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister welcomes provisions in the draft housing Bill, which is out for consultation, that would enable the Housing Executive to provide sites for travellers. It is important that a sufficient number of sites, which meet travellers' needs, be provided.

Mr C Murphy: Does the First Minister recognise, a LeasCheann Comhairle, that travellers, by their very nature, do not recognise borders? There was a slightly racist overtone to the Member's remarks. Can the Deputy First Minister assure us that, rather than pursue further measures to harass travellers, the Executive will concentrate on fully implementing the report of the promoting social inclusion (PSI) working group on travellers?

The Deputy First Minister: I have already said that work in that area has been informed partly by the consultation exercise that is taking place on the housing Bill, and the Executive remain committed to following through the findings of the PSI report.

3.00 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10, standing in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Special Needs (Library Access)

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans for widening access to library facilities for people with special needs. (AQO 1222/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): One of my Department's strategic goals is to increase participation in culture, arts and leisure through enhancing access to, and the quality of, facilities and services. That includes increasing access for disabled and socially disadvantaged people.

Libraries have a long history of providing for specialist needs through a selection of large-print and spoken-word materials, materials for people with learning difficulties and physical access to premises. Adaptive technology, designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities has been introduced recently and is available in some libraries and, as part of the electronic libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) project, will be available in libraries across all five boards. However, I recognise that there are still physical access problems in some areas, and I will seek to address those problems through a bid in Budget 2002.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for that very positive answer. Will he undertake to ensure that all library material made available for people with special needs — especially in adult centres — is appropriate for their needs? Apart from the need to make books available in Braille and large print, which the Minister has acknowledged, does he agree that providing children's books to adults with special needs requires an urgent review and that books dealing with adult interests should be made available in a form that people with special needs will understand?

Finally, does every library employ someone who is trained in sign language and has skills in dealing with customers with special needs?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister that he need answer only one question.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; there were many questions there.

The ELFNI project provides new technology in libraries. A contract was signed at the end of January 2002 for computer technology and software worth £36 million. The projected completion date for installation is July 2003. That will include a full range of adaptive technologies.

Currently 101 of the 126 libraries have some adaptive technology, and it is anticipated that after the ELFNI project that will cover all libraries. Staff will be skilled and trained in touch screens, adaptive keyboards, screen magnification software, Braille readers, embossers and translation software, and so on, and they will be able to help people. The technology will be available and will be adapted for the benefit of those with disabilities.

The material is a separate issue and not entirely within my control. I agree with the sentiments behind the question. Our system concerns access and participation for everyone. However, I am not in control of the way in which material comes forward.

Mr Shannon: The Minister said that widening access and the provision of Braille are important for any library. However, some areas, including Newtownards, do not have libraries with disabled access and Braille facilities. When will work start and finish on the new library for Newtownards? Where will it be located, and what are the costs?

Mr McGimpsey: When ELFNI comes on board in July 2003, all libraries will benefit from the new technology. That includes the anticipated Newtownards library. There has been serious underfunding in the library service over the 25 years of direct rule. I made that point before in answers to the House. It is no secret that the South-Eastern Education and Library Board hopes to replace Newtownards library, as well as those in Bangor and Lisburn. It is looking at all potential sites in Newtownards, and it will conduct an economic appraisal. The new facility in Newtownards has an estimated cost of some £3 million.

E-Government

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the progress that has been made on the introduction of e-government methods and programmes into his Department; and (b) the plans that are in place for further development in the next three years.

(AQO 1217/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department took delivery of its e-business strategy at the end of 2001. The strategy outlines services that have the potential to be delivered electronically for the benefit of every citizen of Northern Ireland. With support from the Executive programme funds, the implementation of four of the services identified in the strategy is under way. Those are: the electronic libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) project; the common address file project; the Culture Northern Ireland project; and the Northern Ireland records management standard and electronic catalogues project.

The e-business strategy also proposes several other projects which, when taken together, would cost some £4.5 million over the next three years. I am considering

how best to address the strategy and the funding requirements to develop those projects.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his full and open answer. I am not sure whether the fourth project that he mentioned is related to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). GB Government Departments are required to make all their records available electronically by 2004. Given that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has responsibility for PRONI, will the Minister introduce a similar target for Northern Ireland Departments?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not recollect whether 2004 is the correct deadline. However, I will take Dr McDonnell's word on that, and I assure him that we are governed by the same legislation as other parts of the UK and that that standard will be met. The purpose of the Northern Ireland records management standard is to integrate information management across the public sector, and Dr McDonnell is correct in saying that PRONI will play an important part in that. The management standard will cost £1.8 million and will be developed over the next five years.

Mr McCarthy: What targets has the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure set for the take-up of electronic services? What steps are being taken to monitor progress? When does the Department expect to publish the comparative cost of electronic service delivery against the cost of a paper transaction for the same service?

Mr McGimpsey: I refer Mr McCarthy to the Department's service delivery agreement, which outlines targets, and the Department's public service agreement, which was presented to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, of which he is a member.

Electronic delivery provides the benefits of 24-hour service and a mechanism for new services that cannot be delivered by any other means. I do not have projections of comparative costs to deduce whether there have been savings, and I have no plans to make such comparisons. The intention is not simply to replace the current paper-based systems; it is to enhance the quality and range of services that the Department offers. In that sense, it would be inappropriate to compare costs.

North West 200

3. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to promote this year's North West 200, in the light of its being cancelled last year because of foot-and-mouth disease. (AQO 1204/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I have been helping to promote this year's North West 200 in several ways. At the invitation of the organisers, Coleraine and District Motorcycle Club, I participated in the official launch of the North West 200 in Belfast on 29 January 2002. Since then, my Department, through the Northern Ireland Events Company,

made £75,000 available to the organisers of the competition to help them to attract high-profile riders and teams. Furthermore, funding of over £32,000 has been provided by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure over the past year towards the implementation of safety improvements on the circuit in accordance with the recommendations of the task force report of December 2000.

For those Members who are not aware, the North West 200 is the largest sporting event held annually on the island of Ireland, and I encourage people to show their support by attending this spectacular event on 18 May.

Mr Kane: Has the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure liaised with Coleraine Borough Council to run an event such as last year's North West festival in conjunction with the North West motorcycle-racing event?

Mr McGimpsey: The North West 200 is the responsibility of the motorcycle club, but it receives support from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and strong backing from the local council. An increase is planned in the number of events in the week leading up to the race, so that it is not simply a Saturday event. As part of the road racing safety requirements, there is a practice on the Friday night. The economic benefits from the North West 200 are immense for the area. It is the only week in the year when every bed is booked up in the hotels and guest houses there.

Similarly, during the recent Circuit of Ireland car rally that began in Enniskillen, it was impossible to book a bed in any of the hotels and guest houses in County Fermanagh. That illustrates the economic generator such events can be, never mind their value as spectacles.

Sports Lottery

4. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps have been taken to influence the sports lottery in its allocation of funding. (AQO 1223/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The National Lottery is a reserved matter under the functional responsibility of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure acts as an agent of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for the receipt and distribution of the proceeds of the National Lottery by the Sports Council. Decisions on the allocation of the sports lottery fund are a matter for the Sports Council, based on recommendations from its lottery committee. Such decisions are also made against set council criteria regarding policy directions issued to it by my Department on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Funding decisions by the Sports Council are made independently of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I do not seek any input to the process before decisions are made. My role and my Department's role is in agreeing the strategic context for such decision making, whether in respect of capital or recurrent grants.

Mr Poots: In previous replies to other Members, the Minister has outlined where the funds have gone. Is it of no concern to the Minister that around 50% of the funding is going to one sport, a minority sport that is virtually a single-identity sport — namely Gaelic games? Most Unionists do not participate in that sport because it is a cold house for them. Is the Minister concerned that so much of the National Lottery sports funding is going to that sport and not to other sports that cater to all sections of the community?

Mr McGimpsey: The National Lottery revenue is broken down: 28% goes to good causes; 50% goes to prizewinners; and 13% goes to the Treasury. So far, £12 billion has been raised for good causes in the United Kingdom. That is broken down into a variety of funds, one of which is sport. Since its foundation, the sports lottery in Northern Ireland has received £60 million. Mr Poots said that 50% has gone to one minority sport, but I am concerned about the accuracy of that figure.

3.15 pm

I am not aware that £30 million has gone to one sport, whether it be a single- or multi-identity one. The suggestion that half of the figure of £60 million has gone to one sport, if not accurate, is mischievous. This is unfortunate, bearing in mind that we received this money from the lottery and that it is money that we would not have but for the lottery. Currently we receive 2.6% of the national sum and, under the current review by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, I am arguing strongly that that figure should rise to 4.5%, together with arts. That is a more realistic and reasonable figure. The argument that I hear today will not help the arguments that I will be making about the benefits of the lottery money to sport in Northern Ireland, and they have been considerable.

Mrs Courtney: I listened carefully to the Minister's response to Mr Poots's question, and the question I want to ask is more to do with the Northern Ireland Events Company than with the sports lottery application. Nevertheless, perhaps the Minister can give me a response. I recognise the amount of money put into the community and how it benefits the community. However, can the Minister use his influence to ensure that the application for the annual Foyle Cup in the Derry City Council area, which is due for a decision next week, is given consideration? It encourages the youth of the area and has an economic impact, given that 68 teams will take part over five days this year.

Mr McGimpsey: I can refer to the Foyle Cup, although it is not a part of Mr Poots's question. I welcome lottery funding, but the Foyle Cup application was made to the Northern Ireland Events Company in December and did not meet the criteria. The company had discussions with the organisers of the Foyle Cup and, as I understand it, they have amended their application, and it may now meet the criteria. I do not interfere with the decision-making

process of the Northern Ireland Events Company. It has a robust evaluation process and a board that governs decisions. The decision will issue shortly.

Mr Hussey: I want to return to the original question about lottery money for sport. I realise the limitations that the Minister declared in his original answer. Is he aware of under-representation in the allocation of lottery funding to sport in the rural west, particularly west Tyrone? Will he at least use his influence to persuade the Sports Council to be more proactive in redressing the imbalance?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not necessarily accept the premise behind that question. The Sports Council's lottery committee responds to the applications it receives, and it is for that committee to treat everyone equitably. The committee is governed by the rules that every other part of Government is concerned with, including those to do with equality and TSN. The committee assured me that treating disadvantaged areas — or any area — unfairly is not part of its remit. Rather than getting suggestions like this, I wish that I could have some sort of evidence, because then I would be in a position to act. As I have said, although I do not have or seek any influence in the day-to-day making of decisions, I agree with the strategic context in which those decisions are made, and part of that is that all Northern Ireland is treated with equity.

Odyssey Centre

5. **Mr J Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the financial support given to the Odyssey centre, Belfast. (AQO 1244/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As one of the major funders of the building project, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure provides agreed funding for the capital building programme. That funding is 18.55% of the cost of the project, up to a maximum of £16.9 million. To date, the Department has given a sum of £16,775,394 and has also agreed to provide funding to support the W5 science centre. That funding is channelled through the Odyssey Trust Company. For the financial year ending 31 March 2002, my Department has released funds totalling £352,000. That figure can be divided into deficit funding, which totals £300,000, and product renewal, which is a sum of £52,000.

Mr J Kelly: I do not wish to sound as much of a spoofer as Mr Poots, but I thought that the figure was £87 million — the Minister can correct me if I am wrong.

Will the Minister explain why members of the public feel that they are being ripped off every time they go to the Odyssey? For example, a packet of popcorn costs £6, and Coke, bottled water and items such as burgers are outrageously priced. People have paid for tickets and may have travelled long distances only to find themselves being charged exorbitant prices for items that

they need. If that is the case — and perhaps my figure on public funding is wrong — how can it be justified?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am unsure how relevant it is to ask the Minister about the price of popcorn, but he may wish to answer. *[Interruption]*. Order.

Mr McGimpsey: I must tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I cannot remember the last time I had a bag of popcorn. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McGimpsey: As I understand it, the total cost of the Odyssey project was £91 million. That can be broken down as follows: the Millennium Commission provided lottery funding of £45 million; the Sports Council for Northern Ireland provided £2.5 million; Laganside Corporation gave £9.25 million; private finance provided £16.9 million; and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure gave £16.9 million. That is a tremendous investment for all the citizens of Northern Ireland, and as a facility it equals any comparable centre anywhere in Europe.

I cannot comment on the prices of Coke and popcorn, but I know that the Odyssey Trust Company, which is the charity that is responsible for running the entire complex, takes its responsibilities seriously in ensuring that all sections of society have access to the arena. There may be extra charges for items such as popcorn and Coke at certain events. I do not know the size of the bag, bucket or carton that the Member talks about because he did not tell me, but the rate of spectators going to events speaks for itself, and any surveys that have been carried out show a positive response to the Odyssey from Northern Ireland citizens.

Lord Kilclooney: Does the Minister agree that the Odyssey centre is one of the most successful millennium projects in the United Kingdom and that it has given great pleasure to people not only in Belfast but across Northern Ireland and, indeed, to thousands of people from Donegal, Monaghan and Louth? Will he confirm that, leaving aside the science centre, no public funding is made available for the ice bowl?

Mr McGimpsey: Apart from the W5 centre, no public funding is made available for any other part of the Odyssey.

I agree with Lord Kilclooney. It is important to reflect that several millennium projects were undertaken around the UK, most famously the Millennium Dome. Several of those have run into financial difficulties, but the opposite has happened to the Belfast project. It has been successful, and long may it continue to be, because of the type of resource that it provides for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I cannot top the “free popcorn for workers” question. Will the Minister comment on the fact that at a concert at the Odyssey last week, Irish tricolours were flown and flaunted while another concert-goer

who had an Ulster flag was denied admission to the same concert?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Paisley, your point is not relevant to the question.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am coming to the question, which is to do with financial support.

Will the Minister tell us whether there is a neutral environment policy in the Odyssey?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister may use his discretion on whether to reply, but I query the relevance of the question.

Mr McGimpsey: One of the hallmarks of the tremendous success of the Odyssey is that it has adopted a policy of neutrality and is open to all sections of the community. That is the correct policy. I am not aware of the incident that the Member mentioned, but it is a matter for the management of the Odyssey. However, my Department and I would view the matter seriously because it would be a departure from the policy of creating a neutral venue for all to enjoy. I shall make enquiries about the concert and the suggestion that tricolours were flaunted, because that would be against the neutral policy of the Odyssey.

Northern Ireland Events Company

6. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make an assessment of the use of public money by the Northern Ireland Events Company.
(AQO 1243/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Governments throughout the world compete for major international events as vehicles for securing social and economic benefits and for projecting positive images of their countries. In September 2000, an external consultant undertook an independent assessment of the work of the Northern Ireland Events Company. Between July 1998 and December 1999, the consultant examined 10 events that were supported by the Northern Ireland Events Company. The findings show that an investment of public funds of £1.6 million in these 10 events generated about £12 million in benefits to the Northern Ireland economy, mainly through bed nights and other spending by events promoters and spectators and through the value of positive international media coverage.

The business targets set for the Northern Ireland Events Company required the generation of a return of 6:1 in quantifiable benefits to the Northern Ireland economy on the Northern Ireland Events Company's expenditure on events. The company is also required to secure private sector sponsorship of at least 50% of Northern Ireland Events Company spending on events. Over the past few months, my Department has been restructuring the board of the company, and I will be

making appointments to the new board soon. The board will be appointed for three years, and a further assessment of the work of the company will be undertaken at the end of that time. That will address value for money and structural issues to determine whether the Northern Ireland Events Company continues to be the most effective vehicle for development and implementation of a major events strategy for Northern Ireland.

Ms Ramsey: I accept the Minister's figures. However, given that there is a perception among the public that public money is being used for private profit, will he assure me that public money is not used for that purpose and that the criteria to access the money are not only fair but proper? To follow on from a previous question, why did the Foyle Cup tournament not meet the criteria?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said in answer to Mrs Courtney's question, I do not make the decisions; that is a matter for the board of the Northern Ireland Events Company. The reason that the Foyle Cup tournament did not meet the criteria is for the Foyle Cup tournament organisers and the Northern Ireland Events Company to discuss. Those discussions are under way. A decision will be issued at the end of May.

Public money is a precious resource, and the Northern Ireland Events Company's strategy creates real economic benefits for Northern Ireland and provides value for money. It also improves the image of the Province. Public money is not being used to support private promoters.

Robust procedures are in place. Money can be given through grants, as in the case of the successful Foyle Cup, the North West 200 and other local events. Alternatively, a portion of the anticipated losses may be underwritten, as in the case of concerts at Stormont, for which losses of up to £100,000 are underwritten, with losses of over that sum to be covered by the promoter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time is up, Minister.

3.30 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10, in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

All-Ireland Animal Health Policy

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress was made at the recent North/South Ministerial Council agriculture meeting on the establishment of an all-Ireland animal health policy. (AQO 1228/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): At its meeting on 15 April, the North/South Ministerial Council endorsed a progress report on the development of closer co-operation and joint strategies for the improvement of animal health on both sides of the border. The Administrations share a commitment to taking a common approach to controlling the internal movement of animals. In addition, substantial progress has been made in aligning the controls that are applied to the import of animals and animal products by both Administrations at all points of entry to the island.

Joint initiatives have been developed to raise awareness of scrapie among flock owners and to promote common codes of good practice for those involved in agriculture and related industries. In addition, concrete results are beginning to emerge from the sharing of information, closer co-operation and the development of joint projects on brucellosis, tuberculosis and salmonella, for example. I have no doubt that, over the forthcoming months, progress will be made in developing the all-island animal health strategy, which I expect to be completed by the end of 2002.

Mr Gallagher: What progress has been made on the development of an all-Ireland programme for scrapie eradication?

Ms Rodgers: Minister Joe Walsh and I are committed to the eradication of scrapie from the whole island. Given the nature of the disease and of the island's sheep population, a joint approach makes sense. We agree that greater awareness among flock owners, enhanced testing, depopulation and the continued assessment of genotyping can contribute significantly to eradicating the disease. Although the detail of the approaches in each jurisdiction may differ, each involves all of the four elements that I mentioned.

The Departments, North and South, will share and evaluate practical experience and findings and, where appropriate, will undertake joint initiatives in pursuit of the common goal. The first joint initiative is under way. It is aimed at raising the level of awareness of scrapie among flock owners throughout the island of Ireland and involves the preparation and issue to farmers of a common advice leaflet on the disease. That approach will ensure that, ultimately, scrapie will be eradicated from the island of Ireland and that, in the meantime, normal trade may continue in accordance with European Union regulations.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: How many cases of brucellosis, tuberculosis and botulism have occurred in the Irish Republic? I am sure that the Minister will admit that those diseases pose serious threats to Northern Ireland's agriculture industry. Does she agree that in addition to an all-Ireland animal health policy we need to include the rest of the British Isles, because the most recent

threat did not come from the Irish Republic, but from another part of the United Kingdom?

Ms Rodgers: I do not have the brucellosis figures for the South to hand, but I will try to get them for Dr Paisley. The incidence of brucellosis is decreasing in the South, whereas it is on the increase here. Dr Paisley will know that the Department has taken measures to deal with that.

The all-Ireland animal health policy is extremely important because — as was demonstrated last year during the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak — animal disease does not recognise borders. Some animals had a way of getting across the border without the knowledge of the Department. Therefore, if the spread of the disease is to be contained, it must be dealt with through an all-Ireland strategy.

Part of the all-Ireland strategy is to have co-ordinated controls in all the ports. That is an important factor that has the full backing of the industry, as Dr Paisley will be aware. The Department is examining that issue, and it hopes to have common controls in place in all the ports, North and South, by the end of 2002.

Lord Kilclooney: Is the Minister aware that a dreadful disease is affecting bees in Northern Ireland and that 75% of them could be killed this year? That may also have an adverse affect on the apple industry in Northern Ireland. Since bees cross the border, will the Minister take the matter up urgently with her counterparts in the Republic?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware that varroa has affected bees in Northern Ireland. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials have contacted the relevant people. The Department will do everything it can because this is a serious disease.

Mr McHugh: Will the Minister inform the House whether action has been taken on the recommendations of the Centre for Cross Border Studies — in particular recommendation 6.2, which refers to animal and plant health on an all-Ireland basis? It refers to a comprehensive, objective examination of the all-Ireland approach to animal and plant health, but it has yet to be attempted. What will the Department do to address that in the near future?

Ms Rodgers: I assure the Member that several groups are working towards an all-island policy. One area that is being considered is animal and plant health. Working groups of officials on both sides of the border are examining that issue.

Nitrates and Pollutants

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she is proposing

to assist farmers in their efforts to reduce the amount of nitrates and pollutants entering the soil. (AQO 1200/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is actively involved in assisting farmers to reduce the risk of pollution, especially from nitrates and other pollutants, which leach from the soil into rivers and other waterways. 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 contributes to water quality problems. It will be targeted at those watercourses most severely affected by agricultural pollution and will provide assistance towards the cost of building and repairing waste handling and storage facilities.

I have also secured £0.9 million for a nutrient management scheme. The proposed scheme is aimed at encouraging farmers to plan the application of nutrients to their land systematically in order to minimise the contribution of agriculture to the phosphate overload in soils that contributes to the eutrophication of freshwaters 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 European Union is obtained. Until then, I cannot give a date for the opening of the schemes or announce the first catchments to be targeted.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister has almost read my thoughts. Will she outline the main measures that her Department proposes? When will those measures take effect? Members know that farmers are thoughtful when they are spreading nitrates and other waste products on the land. They do not want to put pollutants in waterways. What are the main aspects of the measures that she is thinking of putting forward?

Ms Rodgers: The farm waste management scheme is aimed at minimising the farm-sourced pollution that contributes to water quality problems in the most adversely affected catchments. The scheme will give capital assistance, most likely for repair of slurry tanks and silage-holding facilities, in order to deliver a beneficial reduction in the risk of effluent escaping into watercourses.

A total of £6.1 million over the next three years should ensure that about 1,500 to 2,000 farmers will benefit from the farm waste management scheme. The scheme is subject to the Department's obtaining EU approval. Subject to a favourable uptake and achievement of its objectives, it is hoped that the scheme will be extended to further catchments in subsequent years, as funding provisions permit.

Mr Douglas: If the pilot pollution control scheme is successful, will the Minister undertake to roll out the scheme to cover the rest of the Province? Facilities need repaired and replaced throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Rodgers: Is the Member referring to the farm waste management scheme?

Mr Douglas: Yes.

Ms Rodgers: As I said to Mr Armstrong, I want to roll the scheme out further in the future. It will depend on obtaining resources, but a scheme that is seen to be working and having an impact on the water problem should clearly be a good candidate for future resources.

Mr O'Connor: I congratulate the Minister on obtaining money from the Executive programme funds for those schemes. They are another example that devolution is working. The public are concerned about the amount of pollutants going into rivers and the water table in general. Does the Minister agree that stricter penalties must be enforced against those people who are causing pollution?

Ms Rodgers: Penalties are a matter for the Department of the Environment, not for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. With the waste management scheme, and the Erne catchment scheme that is already in place, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is doing everything to enable farmers to ensure that, where the problem arises from farm pollution, they can deal with the issue in a helpful manner.

Some people think that farmers are responsible for everything, but farmers do not cause all pollution in Northern Ireland. I want to make that point. However, the Member's specific question is a matter for the Department of the Environment.

Implementation of Rural-Proofing Policy

3. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 632/01, to detail progress within the Executive on her proposals for procedures to implement a rural-proofing policy effectively. (AQO 1214/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am pleased to let the Member know that the Executive have approved the establishment of an interdepartmental steering group, chaired by myself, to oversee the implementation of the policy. The steering group has had its first meeting, which proved helpful and constructive.

My officials are now drafting further proposals to develop the necessary machinery to enable all Departments to implement the policy effectively. Once finalised, the proposals will be submitted to the Executive for formal agreement. I shall be happy to share them with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and with Members, at that stage.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the establishment of the steering group. However, like other Members, I am concerned about the length of time that it is taking to establish a proper rural-proofing policy. It has been talked about in

the Chamber since the Assembly was set up, but only now are we hearing about the steering group.

3.45 pm

Is the Minister aware that some time ago I tabled a written question to all 11 Departments, requesting their definition of "rural"? I received nine separate definitions. Is it not time that the Executive, at least, had a common definition of "rural"?

Ms Rodgers: In relation to the time factor, the Member will be aware that at least six months of last year were taken up by my officials fighting foot-and-mouth disease. Other matters, such as rural proofing, were therefore delayed. However, that does not mean that rural issues were not to the fore. The fact that the rural-proofing scheme is in the Programme for Government means that my officials have been in contact with others to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration.

With regard to the definition of "rural", I do not pretend that that is not a problem. For that reason, at our first meeting last week we took a decision to define precisely the meaning of "rural proofing". That will be considered at our next meeting. It does not mean that every single policy of Government will be based on a need for rural proofing. There will be other considerations, such as resource and environmental implications, but it does mean that in making policy the Departments must have regard for the impact — particularly a negative impact — on rural communities of any policy. That will be discussed at the interdepartmental group, and officials of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will monitor policies to ensure that we attempt to address any difficulties and problems that are pointed out.

Ms Courtney: I welcome the Minister's response. However, the availability of a public water supply still concerns rural dwellers. My constituency of Foyle has a rural population of some 25,000, and a high percentage of those people cannot avail themselves of such a facility. Can the Minister assure me that she and her officials will ensure that that situation is investigated?

Ms Rodgers: That matter can be discussed at the interdepartmental group, as will all issues affecting rural communities. Departments must, using their own budgets and resources, address the issue as best they can, but it can — and will be — highlighted, as can such issues as health and accessibility to health services.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Progress in establishing a rural-proofing mechanism has been slow. Can the Minister confirm that there is no rural proofing of the substantial policies currently going through the Government? For example, is there rural proofing of the Burns inquiry into post-primary education? If so, can the Minister say what consultation has taken place and what changes have been brought about by the rural-proofing process? If not,

can she indicate when exactly those major policies will be proofed to reflect the needs of the rural communities?

Ms Rodgers: At this stage there is no policy on Burns. It is merely a report for consultation, and I am sure that it will be discussed by the interdepartmental group, but no policy has yet been decided.

Cross-Border Rural Development Partnerships

5. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in establishing cross-border rural development partnerships.

(AQO 1230/01)

Ms Rodgers: My officials have been working closely with officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and the Special EU Programmes Body, through the steering committee on cross-border rural development, to finalise a rural initiative measure under the INTERREG IIIA programme. The measure will provide support for the establishment of local partnership groups in four or five small geographically defined cross-border areas. We expect that the partnership groups will begin meeting by autumn 2002.

Additionally, under the Peace II programme, the rural community network in Northern Ireland has formed a partnership with the Irish rural link in the Republic to deliver an agriculture and rural development cross-border community development measure.

Ms Lewsley: What work will the partnerships undertake, and what funding will be made available to them?

Ms Rodgers: The partnerships will provide support services for rural communities. They will support disadvantaged groups, such as women, the disabled, small farm households and minorities so that they can participate fully in the enhancement of their rural communities and economies. Rural tourism, crafts and sustainable natural resource initiatives will be supported also.

Approximately 13.5 million euros have been allocated to the rural initiative measure. Additional national funding, from Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, will bring the total funding to 18 million euros, which is approximately £11.5 million.

Organic Farming and Farm Markets

7. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of her budget is directed towards encouraging organic farming and the development of farm markets.

(AQO 1250/01)

Ms Rodgers: In 2001-02, the Department's total spend on the promotion and development of organic farming and on the development of farm markets was £585,000.

That expenditure represents 0.16% of the Department's total gross expenditure of £366 million in the past financial year.

Mrs Nelis: In view of concerns about the use of pesticides in food growth and about levels of cancer, and given the importance of the development of niche markets and quality, safe food, are we being overcautious by setting such low targets for organic production when compared with other EU countries?

Ms Rodgers: Other niche foods, apart from organic produce, are being developed. I have commissioned a review of organic production so that it can be developed in a strategic way, and the report is out for consultation. There are five key strategic objectives: to increase significantly the organic production base in Northern Ireland by 2006; to promote the orderly development of a diverse range of market outlets; to increase the competitiveness of all organic producers in Northern Ireland by increasing their technical and managerial capacity; to develop the capacity of appropriate agencies and organisations to service the needs of the organic sector in Northern Ireland; and to secure greater collaboration between organisations to achieve appropriate and coherent action for sector development.

The vision report contains a recommendation for the development of the organic sector, and the action plan will consider what can be done in that area. The fact that we must import organic food from other places shows that we are not supplying the growing market for it. I am aware of the concerns that Mrs Nelis raised, and I will consider them in conjunction with the vision report and the action plan.

Mr Savage: Last year, funding was set aside for housing of livestock in the organic sector. When will that money be released?

Ms Rodgers: I believe that it is awaiting state aid approval. As the Member will know, these plans can be very slow to reach fruition.

Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office

8. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many field staff in the Newtownards divisional veterinary office are dedicated to the eradication of brucellosis.

(AQO 1225/01)

Ms Rodgers: As I explained in my recent letter to the Member, there are seven animal health and welfare inspectors and five veterinary officers headquartered in the Newtownards divisional office. These staff are not dedicated to any specific disease-control programme but rather implement the disease-control priorities in the division. This is the most flexible and efficient way to use our staff.

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for her response, and for her letter, which I received on Saturday.

Is she aware that brucellosis is a particular problem in the Lagan Valley constituency, which is served by the Newtownards veterinary office? Veterinary officers there have not had time off for the last four to five months because of work pressure. Is the Minister concerned that brucellosis is not being dealt with quickly enough because there are too few field personnel?

Ms Rodgers: I cannot comment on the time off that vets have had in that division. It would certainly concern me if they had not had time off for five months. I know that last year, because of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, divisional veterinary officers were under great strain, and I compliment them on the way they lived up to it, as they had very little sleep and very little time off.

As regards staffing, we are conducting a review of our brucellosis and TB controls. We have already taken steps to deal with the vets' increasing workload. Additional brucellosis assessors have been brought in to get reactors moved more quickly and to work through the backlog; in fact, the backlog has now been dealt with.

Rural Communities

9. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she is assisting in the development of rural communities and countering the many pressures that are contributing to the closure of rural schools, post offices and retail outlets, given the importance of such facilities to rural communities. (AQO 1251/01)

Ms Rodgers: The rural development programme for 2001-06 will assist in the development of rural communities throughout Northern Ireland. It is a broad, flexible programme that aims to identify and respond to the widest possible range of opportunity and need in rural areas.

I am well aware of the many pressures facing rural schools, post offices and retail outlets and of the significant role that they play in the rural community. The Member will be interested to know that my Department has developed a measure under the Peace II programme for the development and retention of retail services in rural villages. The rural intermediary funding body that will deliver the measure will consider the potential for rural post offices to deliver a broader range of services to rural communities. It may also assess the potential for other community buildings in rural areas to house post office functions.

Another rural development programme measure, to be delivered by the Rural Development Council, has the potential to allow rural communities to bid for the delivery of more innovative rural retail services. That may also assist rural post office provision.

Mr Beggs: Despite the decision not to introduce the rural rates relief scheme, does the Minister acknowledge that rural rates relief remains an important aspect of encouraging outlets and sustainable facilities in the rural community? Has her Department made any representations to the Department of Education to make allowances for such things as pre-school playgroup minimum numbers and primary school funding for isolated rural communities?

Does she acknowledge that such children's facilities are vital to sustain a rural community, never mind to enable its development?

Ms Rodgers: There were difficulties with, and anomalies in, the rural rate relief scheme. A review of rating policy is under way, and there may be other ways to deal with the problem.

I recognise that small rural schools are an important part of rural communities. Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have made that clear to officials from the Department of Education. However, other issues must be considered when decisions are being made on rural schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister must draw her remarks to a close.

4.00 pm

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Special Adviser (Speaker's Office)

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Assembly Commission why the post of special adviser to the Speaker was advertised publicly. (AQO 1198/01)

Mr Fee: The Assembly Commission is absolutely committed to equality of opportunity in employment. To achieve that, the Commission decided that it would use fair and open competition for all full-time vacancies in the Assembly Secretariat and that all positions would have to be filled through public advertisements.

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Fee for his commitment to the equality legislation. Is he confident that the full provisions of the equality law can be applied in the recruitment for a post such as a special adviser? Has the Commission discussed with Ministers whether they too should advertise such posts openly?

Mr Fee: The Commission has taken advice from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. It will be designated for the purposes of providing an equality scheme, which is being prepared. We are committed to ensuring that every post complies fully with equality and fair employment legislation. With regard to Ministers, Mr Ford will understand that I will not take responsibility for what the Executive do.

Advertisement of Assembly Posts

2. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Assembly Commission what the stated policy is on the advertisement of Assembly posts. (AQO 1241/01)

Mr Fee: For posts at mid-management level and lower, that is to say those up to and equivalent to the level of Assistant Assembly Clerk, the Commission advertises in the 'Belfast Telegraph', the 'News Letter' and 'The Irish News'. For more senior posts, that is those above the level of Assistant Assembly Clerk, the Commission uses the three regional daily newspapers, 'The Times' and 'The Irish Times'. On occasions, if the post is considered to be of a specialist nature, the Commission will advertise in specialist publications. All vacancies are also advertised on the Assembly web site.

Mr C Murphy: Why was the specialist post of Irish language translator not advertised in an Irish language newspaper on the grounds that it was published in only one language, despite the fact that it was advertised in newspapers that publish in only the English language? Can Mr Fee assure me that this discriminatory policy has been reassessed and that that will not happen again?

Mr Fee: The Member may not be aware that that issue was raised on 19 March. The Assembly Commission decided that, in future, all specialist posts would be advertised in the relevant papers and specialist publications. I cannot explain fully why the advertisement was not placed in 'Lá', because the level of the post was such that the Assembly Commission was not involved. We are conscious of a failure in this case, and we are aware of our responsibility. We have taken steps to ensure that we do not repeat this failure.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member assure the Assembly that in advertisements for Assembly staff, the days of age discrimination are well and truly over?

Mr Fee: We are conscious that we are subject to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission and I have raised the issue of the compulsory retirement age for public servants working for the Assembly. Work is being done on the consequences for people who work here, whether on short-term contracts, as secondees or as full-time employees. That has not been resolved completely, but the issue is certainly a live one. When we get a resolution it will be reported to the Assembly for its consideration.

STATUS OF THE IRA CEASEFIRE

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise Members how I propose to conduct the debate, which has been allocated one and a half hours by the Business Committee. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. Speaking times will be as follows: the proposer of the substantive motion will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up. The proposers of each of the amendments will have seven minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes each.

The amendments will be proposed in the order in which they appear on the Marshalled List, and the round of Members to speak will follow that order. When the debate has been concluded, I shall put the question that each amendment be made in turn. If amendment No 1 is made, I shall not put the question on amendment No 2. If this is clear, I shall proceed.

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

Mr Trimble: I beg to move

Recalling the acceptance by all parties of the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence and the requirement in the Belfast Agreement for a commitment to exclusively peaceful means and being deeply concerned by recent violence, including murders and paramilitary actions, in Northern Ireland, England, the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere, this Assembly calls on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, following his recent determination on the status of the UDA/UFF ceasefire, to make a determination on the status of the IRA ceasefire and to make a statement indicating the consequent measures he considers appropriate.

At the outset it is worth recalling our present situation. We should never forget that Northern Ireland is clearly a better place to live in today, and we do not debate the motion at a time of heightened fear. Members of our new Police Service do not have to check their cars every morning. Shoppers are not stopped every time they pop into a high street store, whether in Belfast, Ballymena or Banbridge. Some may try to exploit the fears of ordinary people, but Northern Ireland is unquestionably a better place in which to live. It is the Ulster Unionist Party that has delivered this situation, despite the risks and the legacy of lawlessness and carnage inflicted upon us by the IRA and other paramilitaries.

However, we recognise that the Republican movement has taken some major steps. It has started decommissioning; its elected representatives sit in the Northern Ireland Assembly — a partitionist body; and it claims to have put its violent past behind it. Unfortunately, that claim is belied by events, and those events have given rise to the motion. The motion refers to recent events in Northern Ireland, England, the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere. A crucial point is that the motion calls on the Secretary of State to make a determination and to deal with it.

Two amendments have been tabled, and I should say something about them. I understand why the Alliance Party has tabled its amendment. It is right that we should be balanced, and the motion refers to Loyalist paramilitaries as well as to Republican ones. If the issue arises, I should be happy to tell my party to support the Alliance amendment.

As regards the DUP's amendment, I must point out to its members that there is a serious issue here. I got the impression last week that they understood the issue, which is that rushing in with an exclusion motion is fruitless. An exclusion motion requires a cross-community vote, and we know from experience — because it has happened — that the circumstances in the Assembly mean that such a motion would not be carried.

On the other hand, our motion puts the responsibility where it ought to rest — on the Secretary of State. I thought that the DUP had realised that when it withdrew its exclusion motion. Unfortunately, the DUP amendment, instead of putting the issue at the Secretary of State's door, puts it back at our own.

Peter Robinson was in error in his interview this morning when he said that if the Secretary of State made a determination on the IRA ceasefire, so what? It means so very much. If there were such a determination, the position of persons released under the early release scheme would be different. If the Secretary of State made such a determination and if the stories about Mr Padraic Wilson at the weekend, for example, were proved to be true, the Secretary of State would have the power to return him to prison. That is a point that the DUP missed.

However, I want to turn to the recent events and violence. We must acknowledge that there have been serious breaches of the IRA ceasefire, and the motion does that. Some people talk about evidence; others suggest that there is no evidence. There clearly is evidence on the Colombian front. I must pay tribute to the US Senate Committee on International Relations for the work that it has done on this issue. Some of the Northern Ireland media reporting of that work misreported the position seriously.

Clear evidence emerged in the course of the hearing that linked the IRA to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) the training given by the IRA to FARC and to the change that took place in the nature of FARC's activities after that. It would be nice if I were in the position to go through the detail of Gen Fernando Tapias's evidence. For Members' sake, it might be good to bear in mind that the IRA's friends on the US Congressional Committee — it has some friends on that Committee, such as Congressman King and others — accepted the standing of Gen Tapias at the hearing. They acknowledged that Gen Tapias is the man who professionalised the Colombian army — a man with a good human rights record. That man said clearly that the IRA

has been involved in the training of the FARC organisation, and he produced evidence. He produced statements made by former members of FARC, which clearly involved the IRA.

For example, Geovanny Escobar Polanía gave a statement to the effect that in August 2002 a group of approximately 15 Irish citizens arrived in Bogota and mobilised via buses and private aircraft to various points throughout the FARC demilitarised zone. The purpose of their visit was to train FARC members in terrorism, explosives and military tactics.

In his statement, John Alexander Rodriguez referred to having participated in training directed by them. He also referred to flights of light aircraft with a shipment of 30 boxes of material, the instruction, production and handling of mortars, bombs, gas cylinders and intelligence and the handling of missile launchers. Mr Rodriguez even referred to himself as launching some of them.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr Trimble: Another person referred particularly — *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Trimble: Another person referred particularly to the training given by what he called "the three blondes", whoever they might be. I thought that might interest Members. He referred to their giving comprehensive training on the subject of Semtex. He said:

"Semtex is very interesting. It is something very important and they have it and know how to use it."

There is clear evidence on the operations in Colombia. That evidence was given, and was thus only available from, last week. We also have other material that one could go through in detail.

4.15 pm

Members will be anxious about the concerns over Castlereagh, and the suspicion about the killing in the Dungannon area. If anyone tries to suggest otherwise, I recommend that he reads the letter in 'The Irish News' today from a County Tyrone Republican who made it clear that he has no time for the attempt by some Republicans to suggest that they were not responsible for that murder. People should look at that carefully. Furthermore — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Trimble: — we have the question — *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Trimble: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker, I did not recognise Mr Hussey. *[Interruption.]* I will give way. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Hussey: I do not want to take up too much of Mr Trimble's and the Assembly's time. However, there is something else that we should be aware of regarding an incident in west Tyrone recently. I have a copy of the follow-up security report on the device used in the incident, and I quote:

"With the exception of the TPU and the Yugoslavian detonator, which are common types used by the Real IRA, all other component parts were assessed to be types used mainly by the Provisional IRA."

If dissidents were responsible for that attack, where did they get the materials used mainly by the IRA? Why are the dumps not sealed? Whether by intent or otherwise, are the Provisionals co-operating with the dissidents, or are they really one and the same? To put it in country terms, "the same sow's pigs".

Mr Trimble: The Member's point is very well made.

The important point to bear in mind about Castlereagh and the Dungannon killing is that there is suspicion, and it is based on intelligence — we do not yet have hard evidence. However, the Secretary of State can act on intelligence. His determination about the UDA ceasefire was made on the basis of intelligence. That is another good reason for putting the issue before the Secretary of State. It is his responsibility, and that of the Government, to maintain the integrity of this process.

It is now eight years since the first ceasefire and four years since the agreement. That is enough time for everything to be settled and enough time for Sinn Féin to demonstrate that it is genuinely committed to peaceful means and not to be continuing with this sort of activity. I hope that the Assembly will support the motion, and I challenge the DUP to support it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Delete all after "this Assembly" and insert:

"noting the Secretary of State's determination on the status of the UDA/UFF ceasefire, resolves that the IRA ceasefire is no less flawed and determines to consider appropriate consequent measures."

Every time the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party indicts the IRA, he is indicting himself. He has accused it of crimes that we know it is guilty of. In his manifesto he asked the following question:

"Will paramilitaries be allowed to sit in the Northern Ireland Government?"

His answer was:

"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."

He has indicted the IRA as still being engaged in terrorism today. He should be telling the Secretary of State to get on with the job by letting the Assembly do what it is entitled to do.

I do not need to repeat the indictment already made against the IRA. I advise Members to get a copy of 'Terror International' and read page after page of substantiated evidence — some in the courts — of the fact that the IRA is still engaged in violent acts and terrorism.

I welcome the fact that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party has awoken to the fact that IRA/Sinn Féin is engaged in intelligence gathering and murder. According to Mr Nesbitt, the Official Unionists now accept that the IRA is replacing old weapons with new ones from Russia. That is sad to state, when we have made attempts to remove the IRA. Mr Trimble tells us that he takes credit for the good things. Nothing can be good for Northern Ireland when the Minister of Education is an IRA/Sinn Féin man who was once the leader of the murder gangs across the Province. The Minister of Education comes from the same litter.

We must face the fact that the Secretary of State has no power. It is no use appealing to him, for he has no power to do anything. This is the House in which the power lies. I refer Mr Trimble to his own party president, Rev Martin Smyth, who spoke in the House of Commons on Thursday 25 April. He said that

"it is significant that, since 1998, senior members of the IRA, after signing the Belfast agreement, have been involved in international terrorism and continue to murder Roman Catholics in Tyrone and to target and threaten people in this House".

What did the Government spokesman say? What did the leader of the Secretary of State's party, the party to which Mr Trimble is appealing, say? *[Interruption]*.

With the Prime Minister beside him, and with his full authority, Robin Cook said that Mr Smyth's comments did not "have a direct bearing" on this matter.

The Government have already decided on the matter referred to in the motion. They have decided that the IRA will stay in this Government.

In the Ulster Unionist Party manifesto for the 1998 Assembly elections, Mr Trimble said that there must be

"a clear and unequivocal commitment that ceasefires are complete and permanent; that the 'war' is over, and violence ended.

That targeting, training, weapons procurement and so-called punishment beatings cease forthwith.

That there is a progressive abandonment and dismantling of paramilitary structures.

That use of 'proxy' organisations for paramilitary purposes cannot be tolerated.

That disarmament must be completed in two years."

Those two years have now passed. Mr Trimble also asked

"That the fate of the 'disappeared' will be made known immediately."

On any one of those points, the IRA has not measured up to what Mr Trimble said they should do. The time

has come, therefore, when the people of the Province must remove them from this Government and from this House, as far as executive power is concerned.

A Member: Why do you not take the lead? *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mr Trimble, I will be very happy to resign when you resign, Sir. However, you will not resign, because you have bigger fish to fry.

Mr Trimble: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I will not give way. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Members must resume their seats when the Deputy Speaker is on her feet. Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The leader of the Unionist Party decided that the debate would last for only an hour and a half. There is no time for me to — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Trimble: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mr Paisley has alleged that I decided that the debate would last for an hour and a half. I appeal to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make it clear that Mr Paisley's statement is totally untrue. It was agreed — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I thank the Member for raising the point of order. The Business Committee decided the timing of the debate. Please be silent for the Member to resume his speech.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Members of the august body that did that were Mr Trimble's parrots, and if he does not like his parrots, he should shoot them — but evidently he loves them. A few days ago, Mr Trimble was wagging his finger saying "Who are the fools? We have got decommissioning." I say today "You are the fools?" Mr Trimble told us that no Unionist in Northern Ireland could believe a Republican. He believed them, and he tried to fool the people.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David Ford to propose the No 2 amendment on the Marshalled List of amendments.

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 2: Delete all after "IRA" and insert:

"and UVF ceasefires." *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the right to be heard.

Mr Ford: I welcome the support given to the Alliance Party's amendment by Mr Trimble. We accept that there was some justification behind the original motion, but it clearly went over the top. It implied that guilt had already been decided while clarification was still being sought and that the UUP had the answer to the question it was asking. That did not seem entirely

correct, and it was also partial. It ignored the threat to society from Unionist terror groups, and it concentrated solely on demands for action against Nationalist terror groups. I have sympathy with some of Mr Trimble's views — clearly all the parties that assented to the agreement should live up to their obligations.

There are many concerns centring on Colombia, the Castlereagh break-in and other matters. There are many questions that the Republican movement has yet to answer. There are many conspiracy theories about Castle-reagh, nearly as many as there are journalists working in Belfast, but no one can say whether they involve Republicans or rogue groups in the system.

Similarly, with regard to Colombia, some Alliance representatives went to Washington in March and met people from the House Committee on International Relations. It is absolutely clear that concerns were developing there and that evidence was being compiled for last week's hearing. There were serious concerns about international involvement in Colombia in which it appeared that the IRA was implicated along with the FARC. Republicans must live up to their side of the Good Friday Agreement. They are contributing massively to the declining support for the agreement, because they are simply not being seen to deliver on their obligations.

There are far too many questions still around — questions over acts of violence, murders and international connections. I am concerned at recent suggestions that Palestinians may be using IRA-style pipe bombs, but, as a Member of the Assembly, I am much more concerned about Loyalists and Republicans using pipe bombs on the streets of Belfast. When the IRA has made moves on decommissioning, I have welcomed them. They have been a serious step towards promoting a culture of movement in favour of the agreement. They have been significant — at least in Republican terms, if not in the terms in which others have viewed them — and the IRA has expected people to have confidence in the process because of that. However, it needs to do more, and it needs to be seen to be doing more. It needs to be more open and transparent about the process because it is not just the Unionists who are concerned. There is widespread concern across the community, and that concern must be answered. Unionists cannot have it both ways.

I was interested in the line of questioning that was put to Dermot Nesbitt on 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning. He was asked "Isn't the Alliance Party right to say that your motion is over the top?" He replied "No, we have the information." He was then asked "Well then, isn't the DUP right?" He replied "Well no, actually, we do not have the information."

I paraphrase, but that was the way in which the motion was produced for the House. That is why it needs to be worded more satisfactorily.

4.30 pm

Fundamentally, Unionists — specifically Ulster Unionists — have to decide where they stand on the agreement. What is their attitude to the Belfast Agreement? If the Assembly wishes to make an honest attempt to find out information from the Secretary of State, that is fine. However, if it is a halfway house to appeasing not just the DUP but also the anti-agreement elements within the Ulster Unionist Party, it is achieving nothing and is contributing to destabilising the situation. It is somewhat reminiscent of the attitude, as first adopted, on the day that Sinn Féin entered the talks in 1997. My party had discussions with Sinn Féin before it came into the talks, and we sought to involve it in the process and to assist it to move towards democracy. At that time, the Ulster Unionists complained about parties with paramilitary links, and then we saw them arrive in the talks accompanied by the PUP and the UDP.

If the amendment is accepted by Mr Trimble and backed by his Colleagues in the Division Lobby, it will at least be a sign that they are starting to move away from the notion that there are “good terrorists” and “bad terrorists” or “our terrorists” and “their terrorists”. I do not believe that that was their position when they tabled the motion, and the whole group needs to make that clear by its actions in the Division Lobby. There have been many incidents recently. They have gone from the Lammas Fair, through south Antrim to the streets of north Belfast nightly, raising questions about the actions of Loyalists, their attitude to the agreement and their attitude to their ceasefires. There is widespread acceptance that that needs to be looked at. I welcome the fact that Mr Trimble has joined in that today.

The motion, as it was tabled, bore the signatures of Mr Trimble, Mr Leslie, Mr Davis and Mr McGimpsey. However, I believe that it bore the fingerprints of Messrs Burnside and Donaldson. It is time that the Unionist grouping in the Assembly began to get away from those influences. The amendment gives the opportunity to do that. It gives the opportunity for Ulster Unionists to stop looking over their shoulders at the anti-agreement elements within their party. The amendment changes the motion. It seeks genuine clarification of the situation from the Secretary of State. I welcome the acceptance by the First Minister, and I look forward to seeing him, his Colleagues and other Members of the Assembly uniting around a reasonable policy. I commend the amendment.

Mr Attwood: The SDLP will be opposing the DUP amendment because, in reality, it is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is an exclusion motion in the guise of softer words. It is a wrecking attempt that is based on party needs and not on compelling grounds. We could see that from the exchange between the DUP leader and the UUP leader.

In addition, we will not be supporting the UUP motion for various reasons. We have already seen on the Floor of the House this afternoon why we will not be supporting it. Is this a place where, amid all the sound and fury, there can be a proper debate and a proper conclusion to this serious issue? Will we have any more clarity at 6 pm than we had at 4 pm? Is this the best time and place to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: Where else?

Mr Attwood: I will come to that. Is this the best place, enabling some in here to grandstand and others to point fingers? The SDLP does not think so.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I have only five minutes. Our approach is to try to protect what has been achieved in the Chamber and through the Good Friday Agreement, to advance legitimate concerns about the integrity or otherwise of ceasefires and to develop outcomes that develop confidence in ceasefires and the political process. That is why it is appropriate to make an assessment about IRA and UVF ceasefires and to seek assessments of the integrity or otherwise of those ceasefires from Governments. It is appropriate to determine, from police services on this island and elsewhere, whether ceasefires are being maintained.

Mr Hussey: Where did the security report that I have come from?

Mr Attwood: I will come to that. It is appropriate to raise any issue, including this one, with the recently established implementation group through which the Governments and the pro-agreement parties have outlined mechanisms whereby issues can be properly discussed, considered and resolved.

The issue must be addressed with rigour, whether by Governments, parties, people, or by police services. If paramilitary organisations are active, we need to know their full nature, details and intentions. What we need is not speculation, but substance; not story telling, but evidence gathering. Only with rigour can we prove that ceasefires, wherever they may be, are being demonstrably dishonoured.

We must not fall foul of those who brief, leak and, perhaps, lie for self-protection. Elements in paramilitary organisations, British security agencies, the darkest places of Government offices and special branch have all done that in the past and are all capable of doing so now. In making a judgement in these matters we should not fall foul of these agendas. We must bring rigour to the process to ensure that our achievement — a new political and policing order — is not unduly damaged. Organisations that renege on ceasefire commitments must be called rigorously to account. What is known must be seen to be known, and what action is taken, seen to be taken.

I will consider current events using Colombia in its IRA context and the break-in at Castlereagh in a wider context. Gerry Adams claims that his non-attendance at the US Congressional hearing was vindicated. Is that really the case? The Congressional report concluded that the IRA had well-established links with the FARC. It stressed that it was implausible that the IRA would not have known about the links with FARC, adding that the IRA contribution has markedly enhanced FARC techniques. It is quite proper to challenge the reasons behind the Congressional report and its evidence, but it is not vindication. People here deserve more respect from political leadership. They want accountability, whether it is for the actions of the police in the North; of politicians in the South; or what illegal organisations do internationally or at home. Warm words cannot evade that requirement — be they from Gerry Adams, the IRA, the UDA, the UVF, the state, or anyone else. We need assessment and accountability for past and present activities. However, this is not the place or the time.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is obvious from the debate so far that it has more to do with an argument in Unionism than with anything else. To people who are not sitting in the Assembly, the background is one of constant Loyalist attacks — in my constituency of North Belfast, for example — over the past 18 months. In the past couple of days death threats have been issued to Sinn Féin councillors and elected representatives and an attack on an ex-Sinn Féin councillor's home has occurred, and four people have been killed by Loyalists in the past 18 months. Yet on the Benches opposite no motions have been proposed — there has been absolute silence.

I will go further. When there was some debate that there should be a determination on the UDA's ceasefire, if my memory serves me right, members of the UUP argued against it. They said it would be a bad idea for the Secretary of State to take such a course of action. Add to that ongoing collusion, undercover surveillance and the bugging of houses. It is ironic that at the weekend there were leaked reports that Republican houses were being bugged as well. The recruitment of informers is ongoing — I know of a case where a vulnerable young boy of 14 was recruited and has been used for the past five years. There are beatings in North Queen Street and other places that we have seen in the media. When houses in South Armagh are raided, people like Peter Carraher are beaten up on the basis that there was a protest at one of the barracks. Plastic bullets are still being used. The last three kids who have been struck by plastic bullets were a 10-year old, a 12-year old and a 14-year old.

A Member: What about blast bombs?

Mr G Kelly: The UDA are at that too.

All the evidence and the circumstances of what happened in Castlereagh, which was mentioned in the

debate, point towards the involvement of other intelligence agencies. We are in the ironic position whereby those who carried out the raid are briefing Members on the other side of the House, who are using that information as a reason for the debate. That is ridiculous, especially when one considers the death of William Stobie, an agent who was killed in mysterious circumstances, and that of Stephen McCullough, who was found dead at the bottom of Cave Hill after trying to give information. One could be forgiven for asking where is the Crown forces' ceasefire.

Where are the stories coming from? I used the word "stories", and people are calling them leaks, but it is disinformation — and it comes from the securocrats in the system. That is not a new development, because those are the people who were against the peace process from the start and who have tried to undermine it ever since. Yet the people across the Chamber — and some on this side — take as gospel these intelligence reports, which have been used against the peace process from the start. Those who went into Castlereagh and took the alleged documents are the same people who are giving briefings and winding up the Unionists and other political parties so that they will hold this debate to try to undermine the peace process.

Against that, the IRA is now in the fifth year of its ceasefire; it is fully engaged with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD); it has allowed the involvement of international inspectors; it has agreed schemes; it has twice put arms beyond use, most recently on 8 April; it has said several times that it is no threat to the peace process; and it has proved its commitment in actual deeds as opposed to the nonsense of the other side of the House. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr G Kelly: The Nationalist community is asking what is the intent of the Unionist leadership, which has stalled the institutions and subverted the all-Ireland bodies. David Trimble has undermined Ministers in the Executive and insulted people in the Twenty-six Counties and elsewhere. He has not used his influence with regard to arms. The UUP cannot "out-Paisley" Paisley; it cannot "out-DUP" the DUP, and it should forget any idea of doing so. We heard about decommissioning and are now hearing about the issue of IRA disbandment.

This process is about people on the ground; it is about making politics work, and the pro-Good Friday Agreement parties should work towards that. There should not be trial by media — that is the evidence that was produced — nor should there be trial by Unionism. If books, papers and programmes are to be relied on, a book entitled 'The Committee' was published, which attacked David Trimble and others, so we should not take such matters too seriously.

Mr C Wilson: Many in the Unionist community are asking what is the real purpose of the motion that Mr Trimble and his Colleagues tabled and what would it achieve if it were accepted?

Mr Trimble wants the Secretary of State to determine the status of the so-called IRA ceasefire and to take “appropriate action”, whatever that means. Mr Trimble has already heard the Secretary of State and is well aware of Mr Reid’s view that the ceasefire is intact. However, Mr Trimble has a different view. He made it clear when he emerged from a meeting with his friends in Sinn Féin/IRA last Friday that he had, in no uncertain terms, told Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness that nobody in the Unionist community believed a word that Republicans said when they denied the involvement of Sinn Féin/IRA in recent terrorist events. That is Mr Trimble’s assessment of the situation.

Mr Trimble is right, but he should be aware that no one in the Unionist community understands why the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP have Ministers in a power-sharing Administration, who govern the very people that Mr Adams, Mr McGuinness and their colleagues terrorised for the past 30 years. Why are the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP having this exchange concerning who is to blame for this sorry plight, with one saying to the other “after you”?

4.45 pm

Mr Trimble knows that the Unionist community has had a bellyful of that nonsense. The message from that community is that he must lead the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives out of the Assembly. Whether the Ulster Unionist motion succeeds or the DUP proposes a motion next week to exclude Sinn Féin, the support of the SDLP is required to remove Sinn Féin from the Government. However, Mr Durkan calls the activity of Sinn Féin/IRA and the acts of terrorism “turbulence”. It might seem like turbulence to Mr Durkan, who views it from a distance, but to those who have been murdered or terrorised or had their loved ones buried in unmarked graves it is more than turbulence.

It is a disgrace that those who say that they believe in democracy dismiss the activities of gangsters in such a fashion. Mr Durkan will meet his day of reckoning when they gobble up his party. He gave them oxygen when they were on their knees. When the RUC and the army had the IRA hounded into their corners in west Belfast like the rats that they are, the SDLP and Mr Hume brought them back, gave them credibility and brought them into the democratic process. The SDLP will regret that when the electorate deals with it.

Let us remember that Mr Trimble was the guarantor of the Prime Minister’s promises. Mr Blair promised that there would be no question of those who were not completely committed to the democratic process remaining in government in Northern Ireland. Mr Trimble knows

that the Prime Minister has lied to the people of Northern Ireland. What is he going to do about it? He can try to pass the buck to the Secretary of State. Mr Trimble has assessed that IRA/Sinn Féin’s so-called ceasefire is not worth a tuppenny candle, yet he is prepared to continue to sit in government with its Members.

The people of Northern Ireland will tell Mr Trimble that that is not sufficient, because they know the true purpose of Mr Trimble’s new approach to those he has cosied up to in recent years. He realises now. He said that not a single Unionist out there supported what was happening in this process. Sooner or later he will be faced with an election. If the DUP’s challenge in the House of Lords succeeds, an election might be called before the end of this year. I say to Mr Trimble and his Colleagues, and even to those in the so-called anti-agreement wing of his party, that it will do no good to say that the party is under new management, change its leadership and attempt once again to sell policies that repeat the lies of its last manifesto. They told the public that they would not sit in government with those who were armed and were carrying on the violence.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr C Wilson: You have broken that pledge, Mr Trimble; now let us see you squirm.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Order.

Mr Watson: I support the amendment tabled by Dr Paisley and Mr Peter Robinson. I am encouraged that the Ulster Unionist Members have deigned to attend such a debate at last. One could ask whether they have had a road to Damascus conversion at this late stage, but I doubt it.

Let there be no doubt that the pro-agreement element in the Ulster Unionist Party has closed its eyes and ears to what the anti-agreement Unionists have been saying for months. They will get little salvation when they go to the electorate having hardened their stance at such a late stage.

Had that party been present in the Chamber in March, when the anti-agreement Unionists called for the removal of IRA/Sinn Féin from government, they would have heard plenty of evidence to question the validity of the ceasefires. The month before that, the media was filled with accounts of the IRA’s involvement in the murder of Matthew Burns in Castlewellsan in February. Since then there have been many more chilling reports of the latest discoveries of the IRA’s murky, underworld deeds. A trigger-happy gunman in Tyrone murdered a man on his taxi run. As the story unfolded, it became apparent that the Provisional IRA was the prime suspect for the planning and execution of that operation. Furthermore, it followed confirmation that the IRA was involved in co-operation with Colombian terrorists — despite earlier denials by Gerry Adams — and that its organisation has been importing weapons from Russia.

None of those events takes note of the daily gangsterism in which the paramilitaries are involved. We see the writing on the wall at Bawnmore, “White City will burn”; a man with strong IRA connections being questioned about the break-in at Castlereagh, and — surprise, surprise — found to be in possession of intelligence on the details of politicians and a list of security bases to be targeted for attack. That man was released from prison under the terms of the Belfast Agreement.

Four years on, the Assembly must question whether anything has changed. Time prevents my outlining further examples. However, how much more evidence is needed to prove that IRA/Sinn Féin has peace on its lips but war in its heart? These people are in Government by day and involved in terrorism by night. Can the Assembly be expected to believe that the ceasefire is intact, despite cynical, token acts of decommissioning for the sake of political gain in the South? The evidence of the past month suggests not. What now of Mr Trimble’s assessment? He has, once again, been foolish in his analysis, while anti-agreement Unionists have been steadfast and true.

In what has been proven to be an inaccurate analysis of the Belfast Agreement, Mr Trimble and his pro-agreement Colleagues have been guilty of abandoning every election pledge. Clearly, the serious questions that he was going to ask Gerry Adams last week came — once again — to nothing. That is no surprise. However, the Ulster Unionist Party does not appear to learn from its mistakes. The motion is weak — typically weak. It merely calls upon the Secretary of State to make a determination on the status of the IRA ceasefire and to indicate the consequent measures that he considers appropriate. The Secretary of State has already declared the ceasefire intact. Therefore he will, no doubt, declare that nothing need be done.

Where does that leave the so-called peace process? The answer is where it has always been: at the whim, mercy and service of those for whom violence has always paid. I remind the members of the Ulster Unionist Party that they have already heard what their Colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour Party have said and how they propose to vote. I urge Ulster Unionist Members to support the amendment in the name of Dr Paisley and Mr Robinson and to present a united Unionist front. The United Unionist Assembly Party supports the amendment.

Mr Ervine: It strikes me — watching the demeanour of the Democratic Unionists — that they would have had quare fun in the air-raid shelters. They are the type of people who get happy at the thought of a crisis. The fun and laughter in the Chamber today does not portray the true picture. The Assembly is on the cusp of a crisis — one that is probably deeper than any we have had.

However, I have difficulty with the amendment. The Progressive Unionist Party is not a party of exclusion; it does not believe that excluding people is the answer. It

certainly does not believe that it is wise to table an exclusion motion in the knowledge that it cannot work. It is ridiculous to ask the Secretary of State to give a repeat determination. The Assembly must instead identify the problem.

The Progressive Unionist Party entered into a partnership in the full knowledge that the partner had told lies previously and did not have substantially bona fide intentions to accompany — in the view of my community — the process. However, the Progressive Unionists were prepared to take a risk and accept the challenge. The partner, on the other hand, is behaving with great infidelity. It is not a jibing or laughing matter. It is more than just the stunt of 30 names that cannot achieve anything. Parties must look into their hearts.

If you genuinely, truly, really, believed that someone was besmirching the process so much, you —

Mr P Robinson: You would go to court.

Mr Ervine: You would probably walk out and not afford the process any oxygen. In doing so, you would precipitate a crisis that would force the circumstances to be looked at again. It is simply the case — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ervine: The Member who heckles is very legalistic and can clearly interpret what would happen in the event of a complete walkout by the Unionist family. He fully understands — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Ervine: Nevertheless, we could bandy about all the issues that have already been raised. However, the simple reality is that, for me, there was the IRA. Sinn Féin likes to call it “the army”. For 30 years, the army was undoubtedly in the ascendant in its relationship with Sinn Féin. Many of us in the negotiating process struggled with and wondered about whether Sinn Féin would achieve the ascendant in its relationship with the IRA. Many of us believed, in the historic days of the Good Friday Agreement, that that had, indeed, happened.

The events that others have related show that that is not the case; that Sinn Féin is hidebound to the army, not the other way round. Therefore, those who propagate Republican opinion via the mouth are telling us how reasonable and decent the future can be and what fine democrats they will be. However, the IRA, or elements thereof, is undoubtedly doing something completely different. That is intolerable. It is not acceptable. My party will review its position in relation to this Assembly and the peace process.

The exclusion of Sinn Féin is not the issue, because any agreement that we create in the future — and some day there will be an agreement that works — will be of a similar style and nature to the one that we have. The question is, if there is a next time round, will those who

operate it do so with greater honour and integrity? I know, perhaps better than most, that it is not easy to be in Sinn Féin's position, but I will require some convincing that Sinn Féin did not, and do not, know what details the leadership of the IRA is placing on the activities of the IRA.

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

Ms McWilliams: From what I have heard so far, it seems that the debate is one where rumour is fast becoming fact, and spin is being traded off as substance. We are in grave danger of spinning ourselves round and round in yet another crisis. Unlike others, the Women's Coalition tried to avoid the knee-jerk reactions of the past two weeks and the jumping to conclusions time and time again. We do not know the facts.

It is rather worrying to see Mr Hussey reading from a "security report" on the Floor of the House. Often that is what raises the concerns. If we are to implement this agreement, we should share such information and not just pull it out because of a particular liaison with one part of the police in Northern Ireland. I am certain that the police have tried to avoid that in the past. That is why they have kept many documents to themselves, lest any political party make them its and its alone. It was a rather worrying introduction to the debate.

Mr Hussey: It is an official document.

Ms McWilliams: Indeed, that is why I said what I said, and why an implementation committee is urgently needed. We put forward the idea of an implementation committee right after we had signed the Good Friday Agreement, because we knew that, while doing a deal and making an agreement was easy, implementing it was going to be the difficult part.

5.00 pm

If a party has access to information in official documents, let it share that information with us. Let us all engage in factual discussion.

Some irresponsible journalism has presented rumour as fact. A headline in the 'News Letter' last week read "Last days of peace?" David Ervine is probably correct: if a question mark is placed after "Last days of peace", what are we to think? Will we go round and round in this circle? Let those who remember the 1970s reflect, please, on what we now have and on what is precious. Part of the agreement concerned inclusion, and we must work hard at that to reassure those on either side that we are serious about our reasons for being here and for sharing power. If that has not been the case to date, we must rectify it urgently.

The Secretary of State should get his finger out. It is not enough for him to report to the media and expect everyone to be satisfied. He should call on every one of us, including the British and Irish Governments, even if the Irish Government are engaged in an election. This is

more important. There should be truth and hard talking. Can any of the pro-agreement parties say that that did not happen at the last meeting? That meeting was scheduled to last one hour; instead, it continued for the best part of two and a half hours, because people began to challenge one another to see others' viewpoints. Perhaps that is why so much confidence has drained away.

Some Unionists have said that they are 100% certain that the IRA was behind the break-in at Castlereagh. Others, however — including the police — have said that it was an inside job. If a criminal investigation is ongoing, surely we must wait for the report of its findings. Have we not done that in other criminal investigations? We damage the process by not waiting.

The Women's Coalition will not vote on the motion, because it does nothing to advance serious discussion on how to resolve the issues or to get to the bottom of what has happened. Dissident paramilitaries and those who have been against the agreement from the beginning —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Ms McWilliams: — are probably clapping their hands in delight at the debate.

Mr McCartney: Let me put Gerry Kelly and Monica McWilliams right on fact and fiction. It is a fact that three eco-tourists with established IRA connections, and in some cases records, travelled on false passports. The IRA's engaging with Gen de Chastelain is a fact. It is a fact that Paddy Wilson, who is their engager, is also engaging in Colombia. The photograph of Paddy Wilson travelling under a false passport as a Mr Walker is a fact.

The terms of the motion highlight the hypocrisy of the Ulster Unionist Party. On 7 June 1996 Mr Trimble declared in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that he would stop the talks if decommissioning of all arms did not start right away. Exactly one year later he was suggesting in the 'News Letter' that decommissioning should be pigeonholed.

He takes the biscuit for political hypocrisy, because he became First Minister only with the help of whom? — the PUP, also known as the UVF.

Why has this motion been tabled now, when the IRA has been in almost continuous violation of its ceasefire over the past few years? Murders of alleged drug dealers by Direct Action Against Drugs (DAAD) — an IRA alias — have simply been ignored.

Murders of claimed informers, such as Charles Bennett, have been dismissed as internal housekeeping. Executions of so-called dissidents, such as Joe O'Connor in west Belfast, or former activists, now disapproved of, such as Eamon Collins in Newry, have been swept under the carpet. Those who had the personal courage and physique to challenge the intimidation of the local IRA commander, such as Andrew Kearney, have been shot and murdered in their homes.

Beatings, shootings, forced exile, murder, organised crime, racketeering, targeting, training, recruitment and rearming have been going on for the past four years. Yet, until now, none of those caused the Ulster Unionist Party, which has suddenly become politically fastidious, to cease political habitation in Government with Sinn Féin, with whom the IRA is inextricably linked. The real reason for this unprincipled political opportunism is the possibility of an early election if the House of Lords confirms that Mr Trimble's re-election as First Minister last November was indeed a pantomime, with Mr Ford performing nobly as the rear end of the horse.

Mr Trimble's current political lunacy, in claiming that the IRA's second historical stunt amounts to a process of decommissioning, coupled with his having given credence to Gerry Adams's assertion that Sinn Féin and the IRA are separate by asking Gerry and Martin, as democrats, to restrain those with whom they are inextricably linked as terrorists from behaving badly, raises questions as to the balance of Mr Trimble's political mind. Grass-roots Unionists will recognise this charade as another performance by the purple turtle — a burst of assumed red-faced political rage before he rolls on his back to surrender. Sinn Féin should have been removed from the Executive long ago.

However, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP have a vested interest in keeping Sinn Féin here. The SDLP, which suggested via Mr Attwood that this is a battle between Unionists, ignores the fact that it has a battle with Sinn Féin. The SDLP has become even greener than the green, and it will never ever treat with democrats while it is in an unholy union with Nationalists who are committed to terror.

The motion is a fraudulent farce.

Mr Davis: My remarks are addressed to the Sinn Féin Members; I do not intend to attack fellow Unionists as others have done today. Today's question is simple: do Members ignore all that has happened in the past few months and pretend that nothing is wrong? Or do we, as elected representatives, reflect the deep concerns of the people of Northern Ireland and demand from the Secretary of State a clear determination on the status of the IRA's ceasefire?

We must question the ceasefire status of a group that has gathered and stored information on political figures and has targeted people for the past few months. Those are hardly the actions of an organisation committed to purely peaceful and democratic means. Are we supposed to accept at face value the explanations and excuses that have been given for the presence of three senior Republicans, including Sinn Féin's Cuban representative, in the jungles of Colombia? As Congressman Henry Hyde said, the reasons given are little short of an insult to our intelligence. We are told that they travelled to Colombia on false passports to study the flora and fauna

of the region and to discuss the peace process with FARC, the world's leading eco-terrorists. Is it purely coincidental that FARC has killed numerous people recently using IRA-style urban terrorist methods? FARC has developed those tactics and methods only since the Republican visit. I do not believe for a minute that that is a coincidence.

We will be failing in our duty as elected representatives if we do not call on the Secretary of State to make a determination on the break-in at Castlereagh. As he did with other ceasefires, he should make an honest assessment and then say what consequent measures he considers appropriate.

What credibility will the Assembly have if it does not endorse this motion? We can support the UUP motion and show that Unionists are united. Do we want to be seen to turn a blind eye to everything that has happened? What message would that give to paramilitary groups? It would suggest that they can do what they want and that the Assembly will take no punitive measures.

In addition to all the democratic rights about which we hear so much, we have responsibilities. Republicans have been ignoring their responsibilities for too long, and it is time that they faced up to them. Shipping in guns from Florida or elsewhere is incompatible with maintaining a ceasefire, as is killing or maiming people who happen to disagree with them. A commitment to purely peaceful and democratic means is more than a collection of words. It is a solemn promise which everyone in the Chamber, including the Republican movement, gave regarding the way in which they would conduct themselves in the conflict resolution process. Others have been held to account for failing to live up to the promises that they made; Republicans cannot be exempted from their responsibilities.

If this process is to flourish we cannot have one group of people playing by different rules. It is not possible to be partly democratic. A person is either committed to democracy, with all the responsibility that it entails, or he or she is not. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Davis: There are no halfway houses.

Bertie Ahern says that he does not believe that Republicans were involved in the break-in at Castlereagh because he has found them to be honest in the past. He must have a short memory. How honest were Republicans when they initially denied murdering Det Garda Jerry McCabe or when they denied responsibility for the Enniskillen atrocity, the disappearance of Jean McConville or the Birmingham bombings? How many drug dealers have been murdered by Direct Action Against Drugs?

Despite the honesty of Republicans, Bertie has made it abundantly clear that he will not form a coalition with them after the election in the Republic. However, people

on this side of the border are expected to swallow everything —

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

Mr Davis: We are told to ignore the evidence of our own eyes and ears. The trouble is that there are too many doctors on this side of the House who can diagnose the illness but cannot provide the cure. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Deputy Speaker is on her feet. Order.

Mr Dodds: This is the first time that the hon Member Mr Davis has spoken on Sinn Féin/IRA's breach of its ceasefire. I have not heard the Member talk in that way in the past four years, and some of his Colleagues will be amazed to hear the views that he expressed. He cited the IRA's breaches of its ceasefire and said that we cannot turn a blind eye to it or trust it. The Member will have no difficulty resolving that the IRA ceasefire is flawed and considering the appropriate measures to take. The hon Member is nodding. If he truly believes in what he said, I expect to see him in the Lobby with the DUP to vote for its amendment. If he is not in that Lobby, we will know that his words were hot air designed to distract attention away from the fact that everything that he said is true this week, was true last week, last month, last year and has been true for the past four years while he and his Colleagues kept Sinn Féin/IRA in the Government of Northern Ireland — *[Interruption]*.

5.15 pm

I hear the Member for East Belfast, Sir Reg Empey, chirping from the Back Benches. If he has something to say, perhaps he will get to his feet and say it as a man in a debate instead of leaving it to his Colleagues. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Dodds: The hon Member is keen to speak now, but he did not take his chance to make a contribution to the debate. At the time of our exclusion motion, he, along with other Members, came to the Chamber briefly and then scurried off. They criticised the DUP for being engaged in stunts when we were in the business of moving the exclusion of Sinn Féin/IRA for many of the same reasons that they are now putting forward to support their motion in the Assembly today.

In relation to the so-called decommissioning event or stunt that the IRA carried out, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party — who, by the way, spent most of his time attacking fellow Unionists — asked only two weeks ago where the anti-agreement Unionists were, and who was looking foolish now. Now who is looking foolish? He was praising the IRA and criticising Unionists two weeks ago, and now here they are coming to the Assembly reading out a litany of crimes that were all in existence two weeks ago. Colombia is no recent invention of the media. This party and others, and the press, have been exposing

what has been happening in Colombia for a considerable time.

Mr Trimble said two weeks ago in a speech in London that the IRA was still killing people in Northern Ireland. If he really believes that, why is he asking the Secretary of State to make a determination? He knows that the IRA is killing people. The SDLP knows that the Provisional IRA is killing people, because the hon Member for South Down, Mr McGrady, stood up in the House of Commons and named the Provisional IRA as the murderers of Matthew Burns in south Down.

We have heard from several Members that the IRA and the Republican movement, on numerous occasions, have denied involvement in events, only to admit them later, as identified by the widow of Garda Jerry McCabe amongst others. There is a whole list of these types of events. Therefore, given the involvement of IRA/Sinn Féin, why should we wait until the Secretary of State makes a determination? Why does the Assembly not take responsibility? Why do the Members on the Ulster Unionist Bench want to shuffle this responsibility off on to the Secretary of State when we have the power to table an exclusion motion and say to the Secretary of State that the majority of Unionists — the majority of Members in the House — do not believe that an organisation engaged in murder, violence, intimidation, gunrunning and promoting international terrorism should be in the Government of Northern Ireland?

As far as the PUP is concerned, I listened to Mr Ervine talking about not being a party of exclusion, yet his party put its name to an exclusion motion just a few months ago in the Assembly. He talked about walking out. He walked out of Weston Park, but he soon walked back into the process. He is in no position to lecture anyone about the process.

If people on the Unionist side of the House really believe that the IRA is involved in Colombia, really believe that gunrunning from Florida has taken place, really believe that the IRA is engaged in murder, really believe — unlike Mr Cobain, the Member for North Belfast, and the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Mr Rodgers, who both denied that the IRA was involved and put the blame entirely on the security forces — they will join us in the Lobby and vote for the amendment and against the motion.

Mr Durkan: Alex Attwood has already said that the SDLP will not be supporting the main motion, even as amended. Our reason for not doing so is that the Secretary of State does not need a resolution of the House before making a determination. A party does not need to bring a motion to the House to call on the Secretary of State to make a determination on the status of any ceasefire. The SDLP previously called on the Secretary of State to make a determination in relation to the UDA ceasefire, and we did not trouble the Assembly with it. We were

quite open and public in our calls for it, and pursued it on those terms. Some people who are calling on the Assembly to back this motion opposed our call then.

I will make it clear that we do not oppose any call by any party for a determination to be made by the Secretary of State, and any party is free to make that call. As some Members suggested, the Secretary of State, in his comments and observations last week, hinted at how he would respond to a call for a formal determination. If people believe that it would be helpful to have a determination by the Secretary of State on the ceasefire of the IRA or the UVF, and if Mr Reid were so persuaded, the SDLP would not oppose his decision to do so.

People, rightly, have many concerns about the nature and the level of ongoing paramilitary activity, including that of groups such as the IRA and Loyalist paramilitary organisations. They are also concerned about what certain members of the intelligence community are up to. We read in the newspapers about leaks and spins, with documents apparently being handed to MLAs, and so forth. That does nothing to reassure people that there are not wheels within wheels as regards the activities of the paramilitaries and the intelligence services. Let us be clear: there are also spins within spins in this exercise.

Many of us have legitimate questions about what is happening and about the implications of such activities. That is one reason that I agree with the comments of Mr Attwood and Ms McWilliams that the implementation group that the Governments established would be a suitable forum in which to air and share those fundamental concerns. The implementation group should not be convened as a crisis measure to deal only with the issues that we discuss today; it should deal with other matters. The recent report of the Oversight Commission for Policing Reform and that of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), on the second act of decommissioning, are among the plentiful material that could form that group's agenda. There is plenty of material to provide the basis upon which parties could share their fundamental concerns about what is happening.

I do not give great credence to IRA denials. I am as aware as other Members are of previous instances of IRA denials that were subsequently contradicted by admissions or evidence. Equally, I do not place much credence on the spin of selective briefings by some members of the intelligence services. Therefore, we are all caught: we hear different claims from the "unbelievables" in different quarters of the conflict. Those of us who are unsure of whether to believe the claims of paramilitaries and intelligence services should concentrate on what we believe ourselves. Although others are back doing what they know best, we should do what we know best — protect the political process. We listen to the IRA's reassurance that it poses no threat to the peace process. However, I am as frustrated as anybody else is by the IRA's apparent belief that it alone is the arbiter of what

defines the peace process and of what is good or bad for the process. We are the arbiters of the political process; we are here to guarantee it, and I will not allow paramilitary activity from any quarter to veto it. I will not allow the shenanigans of the intelligence services to handicap the operation of the political process.

Mr Ford: Over the past hour and a half, we have had examples of too many armchair generals giving their opinions and exerting their spin, whether inside the Chamber or being quoted from outside it. Therefore, it is reasonable that the Assembly, in the present circumstances, should request, as a corporate body, that the Secretary of State make a determination on the state of the IRA and UVF ceasefires. We may be the arbiters of the political process, but we can advance that process only in an atmosphere of honesty. If we attempt to cover matters up, we will not make that advance.

The debate was not difficult to summarise: I discovered that Nigel Dodds, Cedric Wilson, Denis Watson and Robert McCartney do not like the Good Friday Agreement — well, that is really amazing. I was interested in Gerry Kelly's comments when he criticised the original motion, though he made little reference to the amendment. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: Some of the criticisms that Gerry Kelly made of Loyalist and Unionist paramilitaries were similar to those that I made earlier in the debate. However, ideas should not be denigrated on the basis of those who hold them, so in that respect I welcome Mr Kelly's contribution.

We had a contribution from Monica McWilliams, which was thoughtful in highlighting the danger of building up a crisis. There is no doubt that we are in great danger of talking up the crisis and making too much of it. We must also recognise that we had a meeting of the implementation group, which failed to achieve anything significant in paving the way forward. If we do not find a better way of making those systems work, we will continue to be in the same kind of crisis as we have been.

I noticed that Alex Attwood felt that this was not something for the Assembly today, that it was all to do with the battle within Unionism. I said what I thought about the battle in the Ulster Unionist Party and the difficulties that appear to afflict Mr Trimble — the fingerprints of the MPs that are on the motion as well as the signatures. However, there is no doubt that when we look at the overall package, it is simply not acceptable for the SDLP to say that it would sit on its hands and ignore the issue.

Mark Durkan said that we do not need the Assembly to deal with this matter, that individuals could take their own counsel on it. That is true, but would it not send a powerful message if there were a vote across the breadth

of the Assembly to put forward a simple and balanced request — not a loaded and biased one — for clarification from the Secretary of State, because the Assembly, as a body, was prepared to unite around such a call? If we were to do that, it would show that the Assembly was uniting to defend the integrity of the agreement and to ensure that we make progress together. Otherwise, we will simply dissipate our energies in a series of nugatory votes over the next few minutes, which will achieve nothing.

Mr P Robinson: Throughout the debate, and before it, I have attempted to discern the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party's thinking when he tabled the motion. He knows only too well that the impact of the motion is to avoid doing something rather than to do something. It is an attempt by him to kick up the dust and pretend to be the tough man taking action. In fact, it is buck-passing at its cynical worst.

The people who have the power to take action are the people on the Benches in the Assembly. We have the power to take action, if we had the courage to do so. I call on all who want to take action against those who are involved in violence to ensure that they are no longer part of the Executive. I call on them to go to the Business Office and sign the exclusion motion, and then we can deal with the issue.

There is no need to take it up the hill to the Secretary of State and ask him to examine the issue and make a determination. Why on earth should they ask the Secretary of State to make a determination when they have already reached their conclusions? Why have they reached those conclusions? It has not been evidenced over the past number of weeks, months or years that they had done so.

When the leader of the UUP went on 'Good Morning Ulster' to indicate why he was proceeding with this type of motion and not the exclusion motion of the DUP, he gave only one reason, and I quote:

"I think the motion that we tabled is much more likely to produce progress and to provide an opportunity to pull people together within the Assembly, rather than drive them apart."

I have not seen much evidence of people being pulled together, because the SDLP, who no doubt he wanted to pull towards him in the debate, has not been prepared to take the action that it should.

When SDLP Members wanted a determination from the Secretary of State on the UDA/UFF, they were on their feet, here and outside, calling on him to make that determination. However, when the finger is pointing towards their own Colleagues in Sinn Féin/IRA, they are strangely silent. It is the most sectarian decision that SDLP Members have taken, and they should be ashamed of themselves in taking that position.

5.30 pm

The Provisional IRA has been involved in violence. That is not a matter of conjecture. It is not guesswork,

spin or rumour; it is fact, and every Member in the House knows that. It is a fact that can be seen through convictions in the courts. Dead bodies are not rumours. The people on those Benches are in an organisation that is responsible for the death of all of those people, for the 250 shootings and punishment beatings — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr P Robinson: Madam Deputy Speaker, the Colombian incident is not a matter of rumour, it is a matter of fact. The gunrunning from Florida is a matter of fact, and everybody knows that. Members in the House need to face up to that reality. That organisation is not on ceasefire — it is getting itself ready for war. It is about time that the House realised that the Members sitting on those Benches are not peacemakers; they are people using a so-called peace process to get concessions from weak Unionists who are prepared to give them those concessions to keep the peace.

I read carefully in 'The Sunday Times' what the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party had to say after his meeting with Mr Adams. Mr Trimble said:

"I told them we were being seriously damaged by all of this and the way things are at the moment we would not be able to sustain the administration for very much longer. All you need is one more thing like Colombia or Castlereagh coming out and we will be sunk."

There you are. That is why the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is concerned. He is not concerned about the duplicity of the Provisional IRA or the impact of the actions taken by the IRA; he is concerned only with his own position and how it affects his Administration. He is practically saying to the IRA "Cool it boys, or we are all sunk". That is the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party's message to the Provisional IRA.

We all recognise that there is one reason why the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is strutting around the Province beating his chest, and that is the proximity of an election. He fears that the case going before the House of Lords will expose him as an impostor and a cheat.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. *[Interruption]*.

Order. I will have dignity in the House.

Mr McGimpsey: There has been a huge amount of emotion expressed in the debate, not least from Unionist ranks. There has also been a huge amount of criticism coming from those Unionist ranks, and most of it is not against Republicanism but against David Trimble and the UUP.

It is important, in between the chanting from that corner, that we try to deal with the issues. We should not deal with them in an emotional manner — and we heard Mr Peter Robinson speak in that emotional, plaintive voice of his — but rather in a fashion that promotes some

form of political analysis and some form of logical way forward.

As far as the IRA and Sinn Féin are concerned, the Colombian evidence is clear. Ms McWilliams said that there was no evidence. The evidence comes from the Committee on International Relations in the United States House of Representatives, chaired by Henry Hyde. *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: Mr Bob-a-job.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr McCartney's remarks are beneath him, as they always are.

The Committee's evidence states that

"two members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), along with a representative of Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing, who was known to be stationed in Cuba and reportedly on the payroll of the Cuban Communist Party, were arrested ... carrying false identification documents (passports) and were found to have traces of explosives on their clothing and on items in their luggage. Two of the Irish nationals were the IRA's leading explosives engineer and a mortar expert."

It goes on to talk about the IRA involvement in training FARC, which it describes as

"the most dangerous international terrorist group based in this hemisphere".

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

It is clear that there is a case to answer. There may or may not be a case to answer about Castlereagh; I strongly believe that there is. There are claims that it is the work of securocrats. However, we are well versed in the way in which Republicans have conducted their debates and their arguments, where everything is deniable.

It seems to me that as far as Colombia, Washington and Castlereagh are concerned, a determination by the Secretary of State is the proper way forward. I have listened to the arguments about signing up to exclusion motions — we shall all have a vote next week, and we shall have another emotional rant, which is what we have been hearing. That vote will serve no purpose under the rules of the process.

I value that process. However, Republicans, the IRA and Sinn Féin have placed it in peril. Look at where we came from and the chaos that we left behind in trying to move to a future for the next generation and for ourselves. That future is now imperilled. We must use the process to move forward. A determination by the Secretary of State is the way forward.

If people are convinced that the IRA has broken its ceasefire, they should not have a problem with a determination being made by the Secretary of State. On the other hand, if Sinn Féin has no worries, why does it oppose the motion? It seems to me that both arguments are illogical. If that determination shows that the IRA has broken its ceasefire, there are consequences for all of us. The evidence and the facts are there.

In order to protect what we have achieved, as someone said, this is the way forward. The SDLP cannot walk away from this. It cannot all be blamed on securocrats. It is not deniable. It will not go away because Gerry Adams could not be bothered going to Washington, or because he was afraid to go. It will not be solved by Gerry Kelly's simple attack on Unionism and Loyalism, and a failure to offer any explanation. The motion is about confidence in the process. The way forward is for all of us to take the decision that the motion requires as a first step. Nobody should have a problem with that.

Both the DUP and Sinn Féin's views, it seems to me, offer a logical argument for that next step. We shall then hear from the Secretary of State, take the next step and deal with this matter. We shall deal with it logically and unemotionally, because that is what society has charged us to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall.

Question put, That amendment No1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 59

AYES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Reg Empey, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Sam Foster, Tommy Gallagher, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Derek Hussey, Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, James Leslie, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenemy, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Sean Neeson, Mary Nelis, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Ken Robinson, George Savage, John Tierney, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

5.45 pm

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 10

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, David Ford, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Ken Robinson, George Savage, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Alex Maskey, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr C Murphy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you inform the House that, since the motion has now been amended, the Secretary of State will not be called on to make any statement — appropriate or otherwise — or to indicate any action that he intends to take?

6.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is correct.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 38

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, David Ford, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Ken Robinson, George Savage, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Bairbre de Brún, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Alex Maskey, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Francie Molloy, Maurice Morrow, Conor Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Sue Ramsey, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 7 May 2002

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

CARERS AND DIRECT PAYMENTS BILL: ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Carers and Direct Payments Bill has received Royal Assent. The Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 became law on 2 May 2002.

REINVESTMENT AND REFORM INITIATIVE

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement regarding the reinvestment and reform initiative announced on 2 May 2002.

Ms Morrice: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The statement is not available outside the Chamber. Is it not normal practice for copies of a statement to be made available beforehand?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is quite right to point that out. Standing Order 18(1) states:

“A Member of the Executive Committee shall make statements to the Assembly on matters for which the Executive Committee is responsible. He/she shall where possible make a written copy available to Members as early as possible before delivering the statement in the Assembly. Where this has not been possible he/she should state to the Assembly the reason or reasons.”

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): With permission, the Deputy First Minister and I will make a statement. Regarding the point of order — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: It is my understanding that the text is being made available as I speak. The delay arose simply because the text was not finalised until about 10 minutes ago.

Last Thursday, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer visited Belfast. The Deputy First Minister

and I will this morning provide the Assembly with details of the major new reinvestment and reform initiative that we negotiated on behalf of the Executive with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, and explain its purpose.

Those negotiations have been undertaken over recent months but were only concluded last week. Members will appreciate that it was not possible to consult earlier. However, I assure the Assembly that as we take this work forward we will consult widely. That is essential, because this initiative opens a significant new stage in the development of our Administration, a new means to make a real difference to the people of Northern Ireland and, in particular, to turn around the major deficit in our infrastructure and modernise some of our key services.

Devolution hands responsibility for providing good government to Northern Ireland's politicians and people. People want good services, fairly and efficiently administered, and they look to the Assembly to provide them. We will work together to deliver reform and reinvestment in public services. The Executive have placed that at the centre of their programme. We need a new debate about services and the necessary hard choices. We must all accept that good services must be paid for, planned and expertly managed. Resources and reform must go together.

The last time locally-elected representatives were able to debate and take decisions was some 30 years ago. Then there was a strategy for public investment. Since then, temporary arrangements and decisions by those with no organic connection with society here saw years of underinvestment, leaving huge infrastructure problems in water, health, transport and education. Now we must prioritise. We must decide how best to close the gap, what can be done now and what must wait. We must look strategically at our asset base, take stock and set a new direction. We must be open and explain those choices to the Assembly and to the people.

The five core elements of the initiative are £200 million available for investment over the next two years; a new borrowing power for the longer term; the transfer of some strategic military and security assets to the Executive; the creation of a new strategic investment body; and a major programme of public service reform to secure greater expertise and effectiveness.

It is clear that reinvestment and reform in our public services are essential. For decades investment in public service infrastructure fell well short of what was required to meet the needs of our community. Under direct rule, priority was given to allocating resources to security. That inevitably meant that, over time, capital investment for services was neglected. We see evidence of that plainly today. The scale of the problem can be seen in hospitals and schools and in the state of our roads and transport systems. Many, however, do not realise that our

water and sewerage infrastructure, hidden from view, is also in a poor state and needs major work urgently.

It is calculated that £6 billion extra will be needed over the next two decades to address the deficit inherited by the Executive and the Assembly. With devolution we have the opportunity to do something about it. The Executive have explored possible ways of addressing the problem. In our first year, we established the infrastructure and capital renewal Executive programme fund to support strategic projects, such as rail, road, energy and telecommunications projects. That includes the use, where appropriate, of public-private partnerships (PPPs). We have so far allocated £79 million from that fund, topping up the resources allocated from mainstream Budgets.

Last year we also launched a major review of the opportunities for PPPs and other sources of funding. Our aim has been to identify whether, and how, we might make progress in improving our public services by drawing on other sources of capital and, equally importantly, other sources of managerial expertise. The PPP working group established by the Executive has completed its work, and the Executive will shortly seek views on its report.

Although we have made some progress, it is also clear that more radical ideas are needed to address the backlog of investment, given the pressing demands for resources. It was in that context that the Deputy First Minister and I set out to negotiate additional forms of support and finance. Many in the Assembly and outside have urged us to explore alternative sources of funding, and that we have done.

With assistance from the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, we now have a package that will accelerate the work that is so badly needed. Using it in conjunction with other sources of finance, we should be able to replace old assets with new. Indeed, we can now start to consider other opportunities for investment across our public services that previously we would not have had the resources to contemplate.

The key to the initiative is that we have been able to gain the Prime Minister's and the Chancellor's agreement to the Executive's being able to avail of a new borrowing power. That will enable us, if the Executive and the Assembly so decide, to launch a multibillion pound programme to improve our assets. The Executive will be able to borrow from the Treasury at highly advantageous interest rates, going directly to the gilt market. Interestingly, access to such borrowing has been an issue that many, including the Committee for Finance and Personnel, have pressed on us. Therefore, I am pleased that we have achieved this breakthrough. It provides the opportunity to significantly increase the pace of investment in Northern Ireland.

We do not want to depend solely on the borrowing power. We must consider also how other sources of funding may be used to enhance it. The scale of the task means that we must consider too how we can lever in resources through public-private partnerships. However, we will ensure that, where that approach is taken, it represents the best way to serve the public interest. If used properly, public-private partnerships could be of real benefit. That is especially so because they can bring to bear expert management of contracts and assets to which the public sector has not previously had access, and the theme of expertise is one to which we will return.

The new borrowing power could be used to finance projects in all the public services for which we are responsible. In parallel with the proposed changes for local government finance in England and Wales, we must satisfy the requirements of the new Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy code. The borrowing will also be subject to a limit set by the Treasury.

As legislation at Westminster is required, the new borrowing regime will not be available until 2004-05 at the earliest. It will only proceed on the basis of funding priorities established by the Executive and the Assembly. However, as the Deputy First Minister will explain, we have also negotiated a short-term borrowing arrangement that can be put into effect now, without a change in legislation, to set in train a major programme of investment.

It is a fact of life for all of us who have mortgages or who take out loans that borrowing must be repaid. Since last week we have seen and heard ill-informed stories about huge hikes in rates to pay back the borrowing. There are several points that must be emphasised. The Executive have made it clear that they will not propose increases above the pattern of recent years unless the present rating system has been reviewed and we have an acceptable local revenue system. Any changes that arise from the review of rating policy must be phased in over several years so that we can avoid any sudden changes in the bills required of any sector, business or individual.

We have agreed a borrowing power with the Treasury. It will be up to the Executive and the Assembly to decide whether to borrow to pay for new assets and, if so, by how much. That provides a real opportunity to invest in our infrastructure, and the Executive have agreed that we should pursue the proposed new arrangements with the Treasury.

We must work within the Treasury's strict rules on the control of public spending, which preclude the use of efficiency savings or asset sales to service debt. We will make fresh efforts to secure efficiency gains as part of the reform dimension of the initiative. We will also require a radical look at the assets held by Departments to free up any spare resources.

The issue of the revenues that we raise from the domestic sector was inevitably going to arise in the

spending review. It has been said many times that it is impossible to expect the Treasury to accept our arguments for money to sustain the same standards of public services as in England if our revenue levels are much lower.

10.45 am

Without this initiative, we might have had to increase rates in the longer term to make ends meet for basic services. The reinvestment and reform initiative has given us an opportunity, and we can use additional revenue to lever in major investment in infrastructure.

As the title implies, the initiative is also about public service reform. We must increase resources, but we must not focus solely on the quantity of projects and the number of supporting staff. We must focus also on the quality of project implementation and subsequent service delivery. As an Executive, we are committed to improving delivery and value for money. We underlined the importance of modernising Government and of improving its efficiency and effectiveness in the Programme for Government. The introduction of resource budgeting, public service agreements and service delivery agreements means that much of the information necessary for that change is available. That should enable us to get better information about the true costs of services and about what is being achieved, and we have added to that by commissioning evaluations of the needs and effectiveness of major policy areas. Those cover approximately three quarters of the expenditure that we control.

With the work on a new procurement system that is taking place across Departments we should also see improvements. The major review of public administration in the coming months will examine all aspects of administration, including the quality of service, and it should provide a good opportunity for improvement. Likewise, the new investment body should be an important vehicle for helping to deliver public service reform. However, reform must go wider. We must focus more on delivering services and on placing customer service and the needs of front-line staff first. Technology can play a vital role in improving services and information, increasingly allowing the public to use services when it is convenient for them. Technology must become more significant in the Programme for Government, and integral to the work of all Departments.

We have already seen signs of significant development. The creation of Invest Northern Ireland and the joint development of our welfare and employment systems are examples of where new approaches that are aimed at better meeting the needs of the public have been developed. However, we must go further. I do not wish to see public service budgets increasing in future unless reform is a key condition. The public deserve that and need to know that the best management techniques are being used to provide a service, and that internal administration is using minimum resources. We all want

improvement in the delivery of public services with the resources and the expertise that are available to help us. We must change how we do things rather than continue with previous practice. We believe that we have a better opportunity than ever to further that objective.

This reform package is the largest that we have had. With the strategic investment body and our ability to borrow, it has wide ramifications for the public services. It will change style and mindset and put new thinking and energy into the Government. We are eager and determined to have real change. We are taking seriously our responsibility to the public, and we are determined to transform the quality of services. We want our new democracy to deliver real benefits to the public.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I join with the First Minister in apologising to the House that the continuing work on the statement meant that it was unavailable for Members before its delivery.

The initiative presents a challenge to us all. We must consider our priorities and, in particular, what should be addressed in the short term. We must consider whether there are new ways of delivering services. Much that was previously impossible should now be possible. The First Minister and I will work with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and with all our ministerial Colleagues, to develop a programme that brings substantial benefits to the people.

I stress that because, although we will be setting up a new strategic investment body and must use the best quality expertise to assist with the implementation of that work, choosing the direction of the programme rests with the Executive working with the Assembly.

Through the Programme for Government, we will agree which areas of deficit will be addressed first. Those political decisions must be settled on the Floor of the Chamber.

The First Minister explained the opportunities to increase resources through longer-term borrowing and to revitalise public services. The other threads of the initiative are to take a more strategic approach to investment through a new body; to use former military and security assets; and to use the facility to borrow money in the short term.

The adoption of a more strategic approach to the infrastructure and public service investment is a key element of the initiative. In that way we will deliver the best investment programme for the region. Before the launch of the new institutions, infrastructure investment in public services and utilities, such as hospitals, schools, roads, transport, water and sewerage, was characterised by a piecemeal, departmentalised, non-strategic and largely reactive approach. Expertise and resources are currently spread across 11 Departments, each of which is responsible for delivering its own programme. The Programme for

Government emphasises the importance of improving the way in which we work together across the Departments.

We have already consulted widely on how to improve public sector procurement generally. A new central body that will draw in the best private sector expertise is already planned. In responding to the need to improve the infrastructure, there is potential to improve co-ordination and to ensure that the available expertise will result in better service delivery. Therefore, we propose that a new organisation be created to work with, and on behalf of, the Executive and all Departments to deliver infrastructure programmes in a more strategic way.

The proposed new body would be able to use a mixture of sources of finance, including the new borrowing power, traditional public sector finance and public-private partnerships. The body would link the finance to the best procurement methods, whether those involve the public or private sectors, or a combination of both. Using those, it would produce much better solutions than would be possible if the resources were spread across all the services, with each Department left to develop its own expertise and deliver its own projects. Therefore, it should be possible to take a more strategic approach to public-private partnerships.

Many of our Departments are relatively small and would experience difficulties in developing and maintaining the expertise and drive required to make the projects work. Ministers will decide what projects, buildings, and so on, will be required, so there will be a clear political responsibility for prioritising and planning. However, delivery and financing will now be overseen on a strategic basis.

The strategic investment body represents a new and highly innovative approach. We wish to examine closely examples elsewhere, drawing on the best expertise. The initiative is about reinvestment and reform, but it is also a major step towards the normalisation of our society. During the troubles, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) made use of extensive assets. A process of normalisation should bring about a reduction in security requirements. Normally, the NIO and the MoD would sell their surplus assets, and the Departments would have the opportunity to purchase them. However, for several years, we have been arguing that the Government should take a more positive approach and accept that the resources should be used to strengthen the social and economic fabric.

In 2000, it was agreed that we would be consulted on the use of the sites as they became available for disposal. I am delighted that a significant part of the new initiative is the Government's agreement to transfer to the Executive, at no charge, some of the exceptionally significant assets that are, or will shortly become, surplus to requirements. The sites, which the Chancellor mentioned at the Odyssey last Thursday, are: Ebrington

Barracks; the Maze Prison, including the base adjacent to the prison; the bases at Magherafelt and Malone Road; and Crumlin Road Prison.

Those are significant assets, and should help support a major programme of economic and social renewal for the whole community — a community that has been through a long period of conflict.

We need to take the opportunities of a stable and peaceful society, and those sites present tremendous opportunities. It is particularly important that sites and assets that, up to now, have been associated with militarisation and conflict should be transformed into engines of peaceful economic and social regeneration. We are now considering how best their potential can be developed to fulfil the needs of the community.

The Government have also agreed that as further sites become available, it will be for the Executive to address how they may be used to promote economic and social regeneration on a strategic basis, although we cannot necessarily infer further transfers without charge.

The major programme of infrastructure investment will take some time to develop. The new borrowing power, on which that depends, will be subject to the passing of new legislation through Parliament. More importantly, as the First Minister has just stressed, we need to radically review the system of local revenue, and establish, as a first condition before increases can be considered, a system that is fair and acceptable.

However, we need to make an early start with the implementation of the initiative, and we have agreed with the Chancellor that the Executive will be able to borrow £125 million in the next two years. The Executive wish to maximise the impact of this new money, and they will be adding £75 million of resources that have become available from Departments, enabling a more strategic use of those resources than would otherwise have been possible.

When we were negotiating this shorter-term boost to investment, the new regional cancer centre was among the significant projects that we had in mind. We will also consider how the £200 million should be used in conjunction with the Executive programme funds to maximise the investment impact. We will be looking at renewal and purchasing of important new equipment, improving our roads, and other investments that we can pursue in the short term.

The £125 million borrowed from the Treasury will have to be repaid through existing revenue income, which will be available from the regional rate. There have been reports about major increases in the rates. The First Minister has explained the position in relation to the longer-term borrowing power. However, we should also be clear about the short-term borrowing arrangement. The £125 million loan will be repaid from revenue

income currently planned, and will not require increases in the rates.

Much work now needs to be done to implement the initiative, and the First Minister, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and I will be working with our ministerial Colleagues in the coming weeks and months to realise the full potential of this important package. We will keep Members informed of developments, and I am sure that Members will wish to offer views and ideas on how the community could most benefit from the changes.

The establishment of the strategic investment body will be a major task, and we wish to start work on it right away. The parties on the Executive will be invited to nominate members to a project board, chaired by OFMDFM nominees, to develop the proposals for the new body. An Executive subcommittee is to be established to oversee the work. We wish to call on expertise from the Treasury, 10 Downing Street, the South and further afield to help develop our ideas. We also propose to fully involve the Assembly through the Committee of the Centre and the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

We have given details today of the initiative — an initiative that promises substantial additional resources for Northern Ireland through short- and longer-term borrowing, and from the transfer of exceptional security and military assets to the Executive. We believe that this initiative should help provide a welcome boost for our economy, and improved services for our community, for this and for future generations.

11.00 am

We also have other work to do. The Treasury spending review is under way and is due to be completed in the summer. Our agreement with the Treasury on the reinvestment and reform initiative is separate from our negotiation on the spending review. We and the Treasury are agreed; the two are not connected.

The recent Budget announcement of large increases for health funding brought home the difficulties of matching expenditure increases to comparable programmes in England while the Barnett formula continues to be applied. We will continue to press for a fairer system of allocations across the UK, which better recognises Northern Ireland's higher needs. However, the Treasury will undoubtedly continue to focus on the level of local revenues in Northern Ireland relative to England. The Executive and the Assembly will need to consider this issue further, particularly in the context of the rating policy review. The Executive will not propose increases in rates above the patterns of recent years to the Assembly until we have had the opportunity to consider the outcome of the review.

Irrespective of the outcome of the UK spending review this year, we will not have all the resources we will need. Later this year, the Executive will need to

consider priorities for spending across programmes, taking account of needs and effectiveness in the context of the Programme for Government. To initiate this process, the Executive intend to present their position report for this year's development of the Programme for Government and Budget to the Assembly early next month.

When presenting their Programme for Government to the Assembly, the Executive said that it was about making a difference. The process is different: a local Administration is responsible for making decisions on local issues and for addressing local needs. We also want a different outcome: quality of services and quality of life for all people in Northern Ireland. That difference justifies all the work of the Executive and the Assembly. The reinvestment and reform initiative, which the First Minister and I have described, provides everyone with an additional opportunity to make a real difference.

The initiative is not a magic solution: there are no soft options. Political life is about hard choices — the ones that the public look to us to make. However, the initiative opens up new ways of dealing with those choices and new ways of drawing in expertise and better management. If we make the right choices, we will be helping to invest for the future, improve our public services and provide real benefits for local people. Everyone should work to realise the potential of the initiative. I commend it to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I doubt that the wordsmiths of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister had any opportunity to get away over the bank holiday, but given the amount of spin that has been put on the statement, they did not need to take their families to any waltzers.

I wish to comment on several matters that were raised. The First Minister said that rates will not rise more than they have over the past two years. The public must be aware that that is already four times the rate of inflation.

When will the current rating review be completed? Given that we cannot use the borrowing powers until 2004-05, the review should be completed by then, and the outcome should be put in place. Today's promises that rates are not going to rise significantly seem to be somewhat hollow.

Can we be assured about the local government Exchequer grant? Will it be reduced over the next few years, or will it be done away with? Will the derating of industry, particularly manufacturing industry, cease? Are we going to stop derating charity shops?

With regard to the sites that are being allocated back to the devolved Administration —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Poots, please conclude your question.

Mr Poots: — will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consult with local communities and public representatives in those areas and take full account of the proposals made by local people?

The First Minister: I thank Mr Poots for emphasising that over the next couple of years the existing pattern of rates increases will continue without dramatic change. The existing pattern involves increases, but we do not intend to move sharply away from that pattern over the next two years.

The review of rating will be launched very soon, and we hope that it will be completed within a year. However, it could take longer than we would like, for we intend to consult fully. A whole range of local interest groups is keen to be involved in the rating review. We realise how sensitive the issue is, so there will be full consultation. Decisions will then have to be made. The review opens up the possibility of considering other ways of financing local government. While there is a focus on the rates, the door is not closed to people coming forward with fresh ideas about structures of local government finance.

Mr Poots raised several detailed questions about derating for charities, industry, and so on. All aspects of the rating system will be re-examined. When the review of rating is published, Members will see that those issues have been raised. We will see what views are put to us before coming back to the Executive and to the Assembly to find out how we should proceed.

Ideally, the review will be complete and implemented in time for the new arrangements that will kick in in 2004. Whether that ideal is realised is a matter for ourselves and for society as we proceed over the next two years.

Mr McClarty: I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on securing this package for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. Can the Ministers confirm that the short-term package of £200 million will be available to the Executive without any additional burden being placed on the ratepayer?

The Deputy First Minister: I am happy to give the Member that assurance. The £200 million package comprises a loan of £125 million from the Treasury, and that borrowing can be covered from existing rate revenues. We do not have to add to the patterns of increase that we have projected to fund that short-term borrowing power. The other element of the package is £75 million of our own resources, using money available from Departments' under-spends and end-year flexibility. Applying the money in that way to create the £200 million spending boost represents the best value for money and the best strategic use of the money. The £200 million will be spent in a way that combines and complements the further spending that we have to undertake with regard to the Executive programme funds.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the statement and congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the negotiations that brought about the package. Members, myself included, have frequently and urgently called for additional resources for schools, colleges, hospitals and roads. The initiative gives us the opportunity to make positive choices for better quality services.

There has been a good deal of speculation about rates. Will the First Minister assure the House that decisions about rates, whether in the light of the package or as part of the rating review, will not be taken without fully consulting the Assembly?

The First Minister: Full consultation with the Assembly will take place. Any decisions to be made will come through the Executive to the House. However, even before decisions are taken, there will be a full consultation on the question of local government revenue and forms of finance.

Choices must be made. It is an uncomfortable fact that revenue from rates in Northern Ireland runs below the level of revenue collected through council tax and other analogous methods across the water. It is difficult to draw exact comparisons. Some of the figures bandied about in the local press are unrecognisable. However, there is a difference. When arguing for additional money from the Treasury, the issues of equality and the taxpayer's interest must be addressed. That matter arises irrespective of this exercise. The question of the comparability of local revenue will have to be addressed.

As long as we can show the Treasury that the Assembly can conduct its business in a responsible fashion, we shall be able to manage changes without making sudden increases. That is a general principle, regardless of the new initiative. The initiative presents the prospect of significant borrowing power, which will give us greater flexibility in the planning stages. In the course of life, people regularly borrow in order to handle major investments in a more convenient way. We can look at that issue over the next year or two before decisions have to be taken.

Mr Close: I thank the Ministers for their statement. However, the Deputy First Minister said that

"The initiative presents a challenge to us all."

It certainly does when one has not had the opportunity to read it and to do it justice by asking the Ministers probing questions. I would have preferred that the statement be delayed until this afternoon to give us the chance to read it.

Will the assets — in the form of military establishments — that have been transferred to the Northern Ireland Executive attract an annual 6% charge under the resource accounting regime? If so, what impact will that have on our block grant and departmental expenditure limit?

I am delighted to have the categorical assurance of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that rates will not be doubled in the next four to five years. However, I welcome even more the fact that minds are now open to other ways of raising finance. I assume, therefore, that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister now have an open mind on the concept of local income tax. Do they share with me the idea that that is a much fairer way to raise revenue than the current iniquitous rates system?

11.15 am

The Deputy First Minister: I accept that Mr Close has not had time to read the statement. However, in my experience, regardless of what I say in a statement, or of how much time the Member has to read it, he pays little attention to it, and does not rely on it anyway. Perhaps the Member is making a new departure in that regard.

The assets will be transferred to the Executive; therefore, they must be accounted for in the same way as are other assets. When I was the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I emphasised that resource accounting and budgeting would involve a significant change in how assets are treated. In addition to controlling the flow of spending, the Assembly now controls the stock of assets, which we must account for and treat in the manner that Mr Close described. That is why it is imperative that we put the sites to best use, enable others to do so, and make the best decisions about those assets. We will be working to that end.

A review of rating policy began some time ago, and the first stage is now complete. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will soon issue a public consultation document based on the work that was carried out during the first stage of the review. That document will set out all the issues on rates. We do not need Members' scare stories about the removal of relief from charity shops or a massive increase in business rates. I was criticised — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: When I was the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I was criticised by several councils because I would not withdraw relief for charity shops. The matter will be included in the rating policy review for Members and the public to see, so that a fairer system of generating local revenue can be achieved. All the necessary facts will be included in the review; we do not need scare stories. We will examine the issues, make decisions on them and move forward. Anyone is free to argue that a local income tax would be better; however, that is not on the agenda of the rating policy review. There is no ulterior agenda; we need to consider honestly and hard-headedly the need to raise local revenue, and we must ensure that we do so fairly.

As regards scare stories about business rates, the Executive have increased business rates by 3·3% in the past few years, which was as close as possible to the rate of inflation. They did not increase it further, nor did they increase it at the same rate as domestic charges, because they recognised and emphasised that businesses in Northern Ireland already pay rates equivalent to those paid by businesses across the water. Neither the Treasury nor anyone else could argue that we have a gap to close in business rates — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Mr Poots.

Ms Morrice: I welcome the new strategic approach. The ability to overcome the departmental bottlenecks that have blocked progress for so long is important and long overdue. However, the package from the Chancellor should bear a large bright label that reads "handle with care", because much small print must be read, and clarification is needed.

How much will it cost to borrow the £125 million that we have already agreed to accept? I do not want to know where it is coming from; I want to know how much it will cost. Secondly, how much will it cost us to borrow £1 billion, or other larger amounts? Has an interest rate been fixed?

Thirdly, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister made an announcement containing much spin about investing in future generations. Is it not rather the case that we are asking future generations to pay for our debt?

The First Minister: I agree that we need to handle these things with care, and I wish that commentators would do so also. We see remarkable stories in the media about what this will mean. As was stated openly and clearly, this is a matter of taking on power, and the question arises of how and when it is to be used. In our lives we purchase major capital items such as cars and houses, and rather than save the cost from income, we usually borrow. The costs involved will depend on the rates available and how they are drawn down. Crucially, we can cover the cost of borrowing £125 million initially with existing departmental budgets.

Ms Morrice: How much will it cost?

The First Minister: The cost will depend on when it is drawn down. For example, if £1 billion is borrowed, the cost depends on the interest rates at the time. The rates available at the moment are around 5·25%, so that would mean expenditure of around £75 million, which is a competitive rate.

Ms Morrice: Five per cent?

The First Minister: Yes. The current rate is 5·25%, and it is better than floating a bond. The Member will note that we intend to create a strategic investment body. The body will maximise available public finance expertise and explore a range of possible sources of finance, which includes borrowing from the Treasury, using assets more

effectively and raising funds through public-private partnerships.

One must not assume that the cost of all the investment infrastructure will be met by borrowing. There is the possibility of exploring public-private partnerships and using them to lever in more finance. Borrowing can provide funds, which can be used to bring in similar or greater funds. While we cannot use the proceeds of the disposal of assets to fund borrowing, we can use them to fund investment, so infrastructure investment can come from a number of sources. Those who see a need for several billion pounds to be spent on infrastructure and assume that it will all come from borrowing are wrong. Some of the figures that I have given are within our resources, even if we borrow. Our Budget is in excess of £5 billion, and it should be possible to find £30 million, £40 million, £50 million or maybe £75 million a year to fund substantial borrowing. However, that would be on the basis of our agreeing the detail with the Treasury, and we are still in discussion on how we should handle longer-term borrowing.

I did not give the Member a specific answer about the cost of borrowing £125 million in the short term. I understand that the loan is likely to cost less than £10 million a year, based on repayment over 25 years.

Mr Hay: I suppose we will know soon enough whether Santa Claus has come early to Northern Ireland.

We must find out the finer details of the financial package, and how it stacks up economically. Will the Committees have opportunities to fully discuss the package and its financial implications?

I welcome the recent developments concerning Ebrington Barracks, which is in my constituency. High-level discussions have been taking place for some time to try to secure public ownership of the site. Will there be wide consultation in the Foyle constituency — particularly in the Waterside area — on the future use of the site? Many useful discussions have been held with various bodies in the city about that. However, now that the Executive have control of the site, many people in the community are worried about whether such consultation will continue.

The Deputy First Minister: I accept the Member's point that people will want to appraise the package. Any future use of borrowing power by any Executive will be subject to the full scrutiny of the budgetary process, not least because additional borrowing would be resourced through additional revenue raised from rates. Nothing will bring about more transparency in the use of borrowing power than that.

For that reason, the Executive want to make it clear that future borrowing power will be used solely for strategic capital investment. Borrowing will not be used to fund running costs, pay wages or cover other expenses;

it will be used solely for strategic infrastructure and public service investment. The Executive are conscious that the payments will be spread over time, and we want to ensure solidarity between generations. This Assembly will provide the necessary public service infrastructure for future generations. All the Committees will know how those matters are being handled.

The existence of the strategic investment body, and the qualitative difference that it makes to our capital expenditure profile, will enable the public to see the additional benefit of new investment, so that the added value will be obvious. That is part of the transparency that is important for the public and its representatives in the Assembly.

The Member also referred to Ebrington. I am aware of, and have been involved in, many discussions about the site, because I too represent the Foyle constituency. Having made the case to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor for the transfer of the sites, the Executive want to ensure that they are put to optimum use in the public interest. We will continue discussions involving a range of sectoral interests to decide the best use of that particular site.

Many people urged the Executive and Departments to buy some of the sites that have now been transferred.

Members told us to buy Ebrington Barracks and to pay £10 million for it. Instead, through this package, the Executive have acquired the sites free of charge. The Executive can use the money that Members told us to spend on buying the sites to fund £125 million of borrowing power for short-term investment.

11.30 am

If Members listened to what they have advocated, they would realise how good this deal is. They wanted the money to be spent on buying those sites, and additional money would then have had to be found to develop them. Instead, the sites have been acquired free of charge, and the money that would have been spent on buying them can now be put towards infrastructure and public service investment.

Mr Savage: I welcome the statement and the package that goes with it. This is mature politics in action, which is long overdue in Northern Ireland.

Can the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister confirm that the investment needed for water services alone is around £3 billion, or £6 million a week for 10 years? If that investment were not made, what would the consequences be? The Assembly and the public want to know whether the Minister for Regional Development has made any suggestions on how to meet the responsibility and the enormous backlog. I hope that he does not take the same attitude as his Colleague Mr Poots, who sits back and complains and lets other people do the work for him.

The First Minister: The information that we have received from the Department for Regional Development is that a substantial investment of around £3 billion is needed for water services. We cannot sit on that issue. It must be dealt with.

A point was raised earlier about the charges that would be incurred on the bases that have been transferred: those charges come under the new regime of resource accounting and budgeting and involve a charge of some 6% for held assets. Water services have considerable assets. Under resource accounting and budgeting, we would be charged for those assets. Consequently, there would be significant additional charges.

There is also the issue of how the Administration is funded. Funding increases come with per capita equivalents to increases in England in Wales. There are no longer any increases in public expenditure on water in England and Wales. No additional money is available in that way. If we are to deal with the investment that is needed in the water sector, additional sources of finance must be found. That is an important matter.

European Union Directives are a source of concern for water services. Those Directives will require expenditure, and if they are not implemented, penalties will be incurred. That is an important issue that must be addressed urgently. We understand that the Minister for Regional Development is considering how to deal with those problems, and he may soon introduce proposals. Those proposals may address the raising of finance, if finance is to be raised at all. I do not know whether that matter is on the Minister's mind. However, we will consider with interest his proposals for water services.

The Department for Regional Development has significant problems. Other Departments also have problems with infrastructure. We hope that the package will benefit all Ministers and will enable matters to be dealt with strategically without displacing the interests and responsibilities of individual Ministers. That is why, as the Deputy First Minister said, we will invite other parties to associate with the operation of the strategic investment body.

Mrs Courtney: I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on taking the steps that secured the package. Everyone agrees that more resources should be put into public services, and all parties have, in one way or another, called for such investment. The package offers a chance to accelerate investment in vital services. I also welcome the response given to Mr Hay regarding public consultation on Ebrington Barracks.

Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that the initial package will be spent on strategic investments such as the new cancer centre, so that people can see that devolution does make a difference, and that we advocate quality public services to meet society's needs?

The Deputy First Minister: As I said, the First Minister, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and myself raised issues that would be significant elements in the shorter-term when we negotiated the short-term spending boost as part of the overall package. The cancer centre was the primary significant project that we thought could be funded from a short-term package. All Assembly parties know how important the regional cancer centre is to the regional health strategy. Achieving the regional cancer strategy will make good the work of the important new cancer units.

We are determined — and we are sure that our Executive Colleagues are determined — to support the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in realising the regional cancer strategy. We regret the different things that have prevented progress being made, and it is for such reasons that we believed it important to secure a short-term dividend, and not just to rely on longer-term borrowing power. Decisions and announcements on precisely how the money will be used will follow.

I am happy to reiterate the reassurance about public consultation on Ebrington Barracks and other sites.

Mr Gibson: Last week, I was tempted to hijack a plane that was supposed to be arriving laden with millions of pounds. However, the roads infrastructure in west Tyrone was so bad that there were no white lines to guide the plane down.

First, have Government bonds been ruled out? Is that a good financial manoeuvre in view of the fact that loans would be long-term? Are we talking about a fixed-term contract with an interest rate of 5.25% for 20 or 30 years?

Secondly, other means of raising money were mentioned. I welcome that the Deputy First Minister said that he would inflation-proof the business rates. Could there be a tremendous hike in domestic rates to compensate for that? What are the other means of raising money, and will they be put into the public domain for consultation?

The First Minister: The prospect of issuing bonds to finance infrastructure investments has some attractions, but all bonds would ultimately have to be guaranteed by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Treasury has made it clear that it would not support a bond-financed approach, nor would it be prepared to act as ultimate guarantor — that would probably be sought from financial institutions and investments if a bond were to be floated.

Significantly, the Treasury's rates are better than those that would be gained from the market on floating a bond. It is therefore not simply a matter of the Treasury's difficulties with the concept of bonds. Some of those difficulties are not related to Northern Ireland but rather to other areas. The arrangements offered are better financially, and that is significant.

With regard to other sources of finance, we hope to set up public-private partnership (PPP) deals through the strategic investment body. PPP partners could raise finance through bonds, and they would carry the risk. Other ways of raising finance may be available, some of which were referred to earlier. The objective of the strategic investment body is to bring in expertise and to focus the existing expertise in the Administration on examining what is available and what can be done to provide the finance to achieve progress in the best possible way.

Business and domestic rates are not connected with this initiative. Rates are already a problem, because of comparisons between local taxation and taxation across the water. The increase in business rates was kept low because there is no significant disparity between business rates here and business rates across the water. There is, however, a disparity in domestic rates, and there have been significant arguments on that issue. We must show that there will be equality with regard to tax, rates and council taxes across the United Kingdom. That has been happening. I hope that the message is getting through that there will be no sudden or dramatic change.

Mr Davis: I congratulate the Ministers on securing the free transfer of security sites and prison sites to the Executive. Those named so far are of major strategic and monetary value. There has been much speculation, in the Lagan Valley constituency, for instance, about the possible use of the Maze site. Will the Ministers consult fully with local authorities and responsible community groups in the areas concerned before the use of those sites is determined?

The Deputy First Minister: I am aware that in different localities there are different levels of interest in the sites, and there has already been some debate on the issue. Now that we have the sites we must ensure that best use is made of them. In determining the best use for the sites, it is important that they relate directly to the benefits of a transformation to a peaceful situation. They must be symbols of reconciliation, and they must be used for regeneration. If the sites were sold, the money raised would have to be used for similar purposes. That is fair in the context of the normalisation dividend that we started to negotiate before Christmas.

All relevant local interests must be involved and consulted. Strategic interests must also be considered. Given that the transfer of particular bases as part of the package has been a matter of luck, circumstance and negotiation, it would be appropriate to involve the strategic investment body.

11.45 am

Mr Weir: Members will have a mixed reaction to the news that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister negotiated the package jointly, and, with their respective records of success at negotiation, we must be glad that the Deputy First Minister had a large input.

Given the restraints that have been imposed on borrowing, which are outlined in the statement, do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that a large percentage, if not all, of the borrowing would be unnecessary if investment were made as a result of reductions in public expenditure? In the light of that, what plans do they have to examine the number and cost of Government Departments, the size and cost of the Assembly and the amount of money that is allocated to the North/South bodies and the Civic Forum?

Finally, what comfort can ratepayers take from the fact that the increases over the next four years in domestic rates are anticipated to be only four times the rate of inflation rather than more?

The First Minister: It is not our intention to change existing patterns for rates increases over the next couple of years. I have stated the reasons for the above-inflation domestic rates increases several times. I will not speculate as to why Mr Weir has not quite understood the point about comparabilities with other parts of the United Kingdom. Normally, the Member is enthusiastic about bringing us into line with the rest of the United Kingdom, and it is strange that in this case he is not. Perhaps, though, it is not surprising. Is he willing to accept the benefits but not the burden of such matters?

There is some substance in the Member's comments. We are keenly interested in reducing expenditure where possible, and that is an element of the review of public administration that will be advanced quickly. We hope that it will be implemented in the course of the next year, and, as is necessary, it will run in parallel with the review of the rating system. We will consider whether significant savings can be made in the management of public bodies outside the central Departments. The Member may not have appreciated that the creation of the strategic investment body to centralise expertise on finance and rating and financing projects through PPPs may itself involve a reduction in expenditure at departmental level.

The cost of the Assembly is not a matter for Ministers; it is entirely for the Assembly Commission. However, I am confident that the people of Northern Ireland are glad that they have an Assembly that enables them to influence the decisions that are taken on such matters. The people of Northern Ireland are glad that the Assembly exists, and they can put value on the carping that comes from people who contributed nothing to the creation of the Assembly or to society's progress here in recent years.

Sir John Gorman: I join Members who have congratulated the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on a wonderful achievement. It is a strategy for Northern Ireland that I hope will help to pay for what we need. At times, our attitude is awful. We demand and beg for this, that and the other thing, believing that, somehow, the money will fall from heaven. I do not know from

where people get that idea, but the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have made it clear that heaven will not be so easily persuaded to pay for us.

Members may have heard the Confederation of British Industry's economic expectations for UK regions in this morning's news. Northern Ireland was excluded, and I am worried about that. Could this be connected with the serious leak that occurred prior to the Chancellor's announcement last Thursday, particularly as the focus of the leak appeared to be on a doubling of rates, even though that has proven to be wildly inaccurate? Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister concur with that viewpoint?

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his observations on the package that we negotiated. It is important to set the matter in context. The First Minister, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and I have listened repeatedly to people saying that more money and more borrowing power were needed to ensure that spending outside the departmental expenditure limit could be made. That is precisely what we have negotiated. Most people encouraged us towards bonds, but we have negotiated a spending power with a better interest rate than we would have been able to achieve by using bonds. I hope that everybody — and many Members asked us to use bonds to secure a borrowing power — would have the same honesty as the Member in congratulating us.

We are trying to create, in the strategic investment body, a central driver to improve the quality and rate of investment. The Committee for Finance and Personnel touched on that point in its excellent report on public-private partnerships and alternative sources of financing. The Committee identified such a need precisely, and that need is being made good. I hope that the people who were ready to talk about that need will welcome the fact that we have acted on it.

Unfortunately, much public understanding and perception about the initiative was marred by many false conclusions and misinterpretations about the rates. In so far as that information came from leaks, we must try to correct those wrong impressions, while finding out exactly how the leaks occurred. The Executive have already asked the head of the Civil Service to make enquiries about that. It is most important that people are assured that we have a borrowing power that will be used wisely, not wildly. The arrangements in the Chamber mean that there will be no massive hiking of the rates while the rating system remains unreformed and while its anomalies and inequities are in place. People will not vote for significant rate increases without knowing what the significant additional benefits will be.

Mr Ford: I welcome this morning's statement and the initiative announced last week. The Deputy First Minister talked about the strategic investment body. The

important discussions on the functions of that body will take place not once my Colleague Mr Close has managed to read this morning's statement but when Ministers come to the House with a detailed package and say exactly how the body will operate and what its role and functions will be. Ministers should not use the generalities that we have had so far. The Deputy First Minister said that parties in the Executive would be invited to make nominations to a working group. That seems to be a new constitutional arrangement. Did he mean that Ministers will make nominations, or do the Executive plan to be inclusive and suggest that parties that participate in the Assembly will get such an opportunity?

I welcome the fact that the First Minister went some distance in his response to Mr Close's question on the unfairness of the rates. In recognising that that is a legitimate concern, the First Minister went considerably further than his Colleague Sir Reg Empey did in discussions with me last week. Are there plans for the rates review to be extended into a review of the raising of public finance, or will it merely pretend that tinkering with the existing system is all that is required?

The First Minister: The consultation paper on the rates review will be published shortly. It will concentrate on a review of rating policy because, in revising the existing system, we must begin by considering that system. The current system contains inequities and anomalies. The big problem with rates is that it is a tax that is not related to people's ability to pay; it is superficially attractive, therefore, to create a system that is. Mr Close mentioned a local income tax. We look forward with interest to the proposals for such a tax. I hope that they will be properly developed and carefully considered.

It is not surprising that the Scottish Parliament has not used its power to vary income tax rates. That shows what those who have the capacity to consider the matter think about it. There is the possibility, as I have already said, of replacing the rates with a different form of local taxation. I do not imagine that anyone will suggest that we introduce a poll tax, although someone could, and, under the terms of the rates review, it is theoretically possible that that could happen. If that is what the Member has in mind, we look forward to it. The other possibility is a tax similar to the council tax that exists across the water. Other taxes may be introduced, but all possibilities must be considered within the limits of what the Assembly can do. We may consider the introduction of new local taxes, but income tax is a reserved matter, and the Member's party's suggestion of changing it would have to be dealt with elsewhere.

The strategic investment body is intended to centralise expertise and the capacity for managing assets, raising funds and dealing with infrastructure investment matters. The Deputy First Minister said that limited capacity for those matters, and a certain degree of expertise, is currently scattered across 10 or 11 Departments. It is

more efficient to centralise and develop the capacity and expertise through a single body that can coherently study the whole range of public sector investment and the management of public assets. That will be done within the Administration, and it will be appropriate, therefore, to bring together people from within it who represent it as a whole.

That is why it was an obvious first step to turn to the parties that participate in the Administration. To go beyond that and look to other Assembly parties that do not participate in the Administration would run counter to the thrust of the initiative, which is that the body will operate within the Administration to enable the most efficient asset management.

We have taken a decision in principle to establish a strategic investment body, and we will work out the detail as quickly as we can. We will be happy to share our decisions with the Assembly as we go through the process. It is a new concept, although the idea has surfaced in other jurisdictions. Quite a few people in government are moving towards it because of the desirability of ensuring that the public administration's assets and capacity to raise finance are used in an efficient and effective way.

12.00 pm

Mr Morrow: I will make my question brief. The Deputy First Minister intimated that there might be other sites, referring to security bases that are going to be closed down, and said that when other sites became available, they would utilise those also. Does he have any particular sites in mind that he would like to tell the Assembly about?

The Deputy First Minister: I did not say that as other sites became available, we would utilise them also. What I did say was that as other sites became available, it would fall to the Executive to consider whether we wanted to intervene on the strategic use of those sites. In saying that, I was not implying that additional sites would come free of charge. Many Members anticipated that we were going to have to pay for the Ebrington site, for example. They said that it would be a good site to buy, and a good use of our budget. We have got it free of charge. In relation to other sites, we might have to decide whether to purchase them — that is the arrangement and the understanding that existed prior to this package.

We have done well to get these sites free, and we must make the best use of them. We must all consider responsibly what to do in relation to future sites. I would like to think that we could persuade the Treasury to give us future sites free of charge, and our ability to do that might be related to whether we do anything with the rest of this package — that is, the strategic reforms that we are talking about and our approach to revenue issues.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 7/01] to make new provision for the payment of general and other grants to district councils; to confer new powers on district councils in relation to economic development and community safety; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of pending business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

CHILDREN LEAVING CARE BILL

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

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

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 26 June 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Children Leaving Care Bill (NIA 5/01).

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is examining the Children Leaving Care Bill, which overlaps the Committee's ongoing consideration of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill. Although the Children Leaving Care Bill is relatively short, it contains important provisions for this vulnerable group of young people. It will establish a basis for new and improved leaving care and aftercare services, including pathway plans and personal advisors for these young people. The Committee warmly welcomes this Bill in the light of its recent inquiry into residential and secure accommodation for children.

It is important for the Committee to devote sufficient time to scrutinising the provisions of the Bill, especially in relation to the ability of trusts to provide assessments and meet identified needs in a uniform and consistent manner, with proper accountability. In order to be satisfied that the Bill can deliver fully on its intent and provide safeguards for vulnerable young people once they leave care, the Committee asks that the Committee Stage of the Bill be extended to 26 June 2002. I ask Members to support the motion.

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 26 June 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Children Leaving Care Bill (NIA Bill 5/01).

DRAFT AMENDMENTS TO THE FLAGS REGULATIONS (NI) 2000

Mr Morrow: I beg to move:

That this Assembly take note of the proposed changes to The Flags Regulations (NI) 2000 as set out in the Draft Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) 2002.

The Secretary of State wrote to the Speaker on 26 April 2002 formally referring draft amendment Regulations to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, as required under the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000. Article 4(2) of the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000 says that

“The Assembly shall, within such period as the Secretary of State may specify, report to the Secretary of State the views expressed in the Assembly on the proposed regulations.”

On this occasion, the Secretary of State has specified the period until 8 May for a response.

Normally, a business motion would be tabled by a member of the Business Committee requesting that an Ad Hoc Committee be set up to consider the matter and report to the Assembly. Given the extremely tight deadline set by the Secretary of State, the Business Committee agreed on 29 April that the only viable way of getting the Assembly’s view on the proposed amendments was by way of a debate, and this motion fulfils that purpose. The Speaker will write to the Secretary of State, attaching a copy of Hansard, to inform him of the Assembly’s views.

The Secretary of State has advised that the amendments are minor and bring about no change in the principle that underlies the legislation. The amendments have two main purposes. First, following the deaths of The Princess Margaret and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, it is sadly necessary to make an amendment to remove the requirement to fly the flag on official buildings to celebrate their birthdays in the future.

Secondly, the legislation was originally drafted to ensure that flag flying in Northern Ireland replicated the policy on flags elsewhere in the United Kingdom. To celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Her Majesty, it has recently been decided that flags will be widely flown from official buildings. Consistent with the original approach, the Secretary of State intends to add the Jubilee weekend at the beginning of June to the list contained in part II of the schedule to the Regulations for this year only, so that flags will be flown in Northern Ireland from the official buildings covered by the Regulations. The Secretary of State has apologised for the short notice, but the proximity of the Jubilee weekend makes the matter quite pressing. After consideration by the Assembly today, the Regulations will go to Parliament.

Wearing my party hat, the DUP’s position on flag flying is well known — flags should fly when the

Assembly is sitting. The DUP will try to find days to compensate for the loss of these two days.

Mr Davis: I support what Mr Morrow has said. It is unfortunate that we have to deal with this because of the deaths of The Princess Margaret and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother. However, in contrast to those sad occasions, we are also celebrating the year of the Golden Jubilee, in which we can look back and be grateful for the reign of Her Majesty The Queen. It is important that we in Northern Ireland are consistent with the rest of the United Kingdom in flying the flag of our country throughout the Queen’s Golden Jubilee celebrations.

I hope that we will not see the controversy which usually follows the flags issue, but rather that people will have respect for those who hold the monarchy dear to their hearts. Parity of esteem does not impact on just one community in Northern Ireland; it should apply equally to all communities.

The Union flag represents the broad and natural constituency of the British Isles. It is not — or should not be — a flag of hate for some people, used for sectarian or tribal purposes. It should be a flag for all people, symbolic of the importance of democracy and the fact that we live in a multicultural British society. The sooner that opponents of Britain and all things British realise that, the sooner we will begin to achieve a mature and stable society in Northern Ireland.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mr Morrow outlined why it is necessary to have a debate, rather than an Ad Hoc Committee, on these amendments. A debate on the amendments to the Flags Regulations is a side issue. The real issue is that the Secretary of State continues to abuse a power that was originally devolved to the Assembly and that was seized from it by his predecessor, Peter Mandelson, at the behest of the Ulster Unionist Party.

The negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement recognised that the issue of flags and emblems was sensitive and problematic, and needed to be dealt with in a way that reflected the new political dispensation, rather than the dominance of one community over the other, which was the hallmark of previous Administrations here.

The guidelines for dealing with flags and emblems are set out in the rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity section of the agreement:

“All participants acknowledge the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division.”

The task of agreeing a policy on flags and emblems was rightly given to the Executive, who duly set up a subcommittee to consider the issue. However, unknown to the other parties in the Executive, the Ulster Unionist

Party had already reached a private agreement with Peter Mandelson that its position on flags would be enforced in the event that no agreement was concluded by the Executive.

The existence of that private deal was not only a disincentive for the Executive to reach agreement on the issue, but an incentive for the Ulster Unionist Party not to reach an agreement with its Executive Colleagues, as its position was already guaranteed by the Secretary of State. It is not surprising that the Executive subcommittee did not agree a policy.

However, despite the fact that the Executive did not come to a conclusion on the issue, as correspondence from the then Deputy First Minister revealed, the Secretary of State acted on his private commitment to the Ulster Unionist Party and unilaterally removed the power to decide on this issue from the Assembly. In doing so he usurped the power of locally elected Ministers over their own departmental headquarters on what are termed “designated flying days” and produced a set of Regulations that flew in the face of the agreement that his Government had signed up to. Arguably, his Regulations also contravened the Fair Employment Code of Practice, which states that

“Employees do not have to tolerate reminders or suggestions that particular religious beliefs or political opinions have a special place in their workplace.”

Sinn Féin and other parties objected to the Regulations when they were submitted to the Assembly. The former went on to challenge the authority of the Secretary of State to arbitrarily remove powers from the Assembly at the whim of a single political party.

The current Secretary of State should recognise that the power to set policy on this issue should rest with the democratically elected representatives of the Assembly. Rather than giving us minimal notice on the proposed removal or addition of a couple of “designated flying days”, he should legislate for the return of those powers, so that a policy for the use of flags and emblems for public purposes can be agreed by ourselves in a manner consistent with the agreement that the vast majority of Members have signed up to. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs E Bell: The Alliance Party supports the amendment of the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. I hope that the amendment will rationalise the situation, so that during the Jubilee weekend this year the Union flag will be flown with dignity and as a sign of respect to The Queen, and not be left to fly until it is in tatters, with neither respect nor dignity. I also hope — perhaps in vain — that local politics will not besmirch that event.

It is encouraging that other organisations have advised the flying of the Union flag only on a time-restricted basis. I hope that the whole question of flags and emblems can be agreed as quickly and as sensitively as possible, although again I suppose that that hope is in vain.

Once again, we extend our sympathy to the Royal Family on the deaths of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother and The Princess Margaret. However, we support the amendment.

12.15 pm

Dr Birnie: This is a take-note motion, because, at the time of devolution, that settlement provided that matters relating to the Crown, including the flying of the national flag — the Union flag — would remain at Westminster. On that basis, I disagree with Conor Murphy. The powers to regulate the flying of the national flag never properly lay with the Assembly in the first place. Therefore, there was no surreptitious snatching-away of that power through a back-door deal.

Mr C Murphy: Will the Member explain why it was necessary for the previous Secretary of State, by Order in Council, to take back from the Assembly the power to regulate the flying of flags, if that power never rested with the Assembly in the first place?

Dr Birnie: The point is that there was no previous legislation; that is why it had to be established. It is clearly set out in the devolution settlement that matters relating to the Crown, including the flying of the Union flag, would not be devolved and would rest with Westminster.

Furthermore, Conor Murphy misinterprets page 20, paragraph 5 of the Belfast Agreement where it refers to symbols and emblems. The national flag, according to good legal interpretation, does not fall into those categories. The Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 were subject to consultation by the Secretary of State with the Ad Hoc Committee of the Assembly. At that time and since, the Ulster Unionist Party has welcomed those Regulations, because, for the first time in the existence of the Northern Ireland state, they put the official flying of the national flag on a legislative footing, which it never had throughout the previous period of devolution between 1922 and 1972. It also establishes a degree of comparability between official practice by Departments here and their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The draft amendments, with which the motion is most directly concerned, have been made necessary by the recent sad deaths in the Royal Family, and on a more positive note, by this year’s Golden Jubilee. I support the motion, as it continues the practice established by the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 of properly regulated and, therefore, dignified flying of the national flag. That contrasts markedly with the mass of varied flags put up on all too many lamp posts.

Mr Foster: I support the motion. I am not a flag flaunter. Flaunting demeans the flag; it belittles its dignity and what it stands for. Those who wave the flag in a

taunting and provocative fashion are often the first to waive what it stands for.

Having said that, I find it most provocative and offensive that this state's flag is not allowed to be flown from council buildings where Sinn Féin are in control. That is happening in Fermanagh District Council, where an attempt has been made to remove any hue of Britishness from the council buildings. Even a plaque in honour of Captain Oates of the famed Antarctic expedition has been removed. Sinn Féin says that it is "a neutral environment". I say that such actions do not create a neutral environment. Rather, for thousands of others and myself, they create an environment which is hostile, highly insulting and grossly offensive.

The national flag — in this instance, the Union flag — should be flown from all Government and local government buildings in Northern Ireland on, at least, designated days. If we have all acknowledged the Belfast Agreement, which states that we are part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland so long as the majority of the electorate indicate that that is their wish, there should be no problem with the flying of the national flag.

The issue must be resolved soon, because we cannot remain in limbo, demeaning this state's flag of sovereignty and almost apologising for flying it. Any objection to the sovereignty of Her Majesty and her flag is inconsistent with the fact that everyone accepts coins that bear an image of the Queen's head.

The Belfast Agreement confirms that there is only one sovereignty here, and those who wish to cherry-pick cannot ignore that point. I support the motion.

Mr O'Neill: The SDLP recognises that this take-note debate relates to the broad issue of flags and emblems, not just the specific recommendations of the motion. The SDLP wishes to be careful when debating the matter, and point scoring has been taking place, so we waited until the end of the debate to comment.

Although the Ad Hoc Committee failed, after considerable work, to reach consensus on the flags issue, it produced a report. If the Secretary of State requires information on, and evidence of, the SDLP's position, I refer him to the party's lengthy submission in that report, in which the SDLP advocates that the issue of the display of flags should be kept under periodic review. That is consistent with, and a requirement of, the Good Friday Agreement. A more consensual approach to the display of flags on Government buildings may emerge in time, and a periodic review of the matter may create some impetus. I hope that everyone aspires to that position. In addition, the SDLP submitted that the application of the proposed Regulations should be time-limited to one year only in the first instance. We look forward to development that creates progress for everyone without

resulting in confrontation. Each time the issue is considered, party political point scoring takes place.

Mr Morrow: I have listened carefully to all the contributions, and, although most Members grasped the spirit of the motion, we heard the usual rant from Sinn Féin, a party which sees merit in nothing. It is sad that Sinn Féin should use the opportunity to carry out a divisive political stunt — that will not go unnoticed. I take the point that when Sinn Féin has been in control, it has quickly demonstrated its intolerance for anyone with a differing opinion, which is regrettable. I wish to say nothing more, because I recognise that most of the comments were constructive and were made in the spirit of the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed changes to The Flags Regulations (NI) 2000 as set out in the Draft Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) 2002.

The sitting was suspended at 12.24 pm.

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

1.30 pm

GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise Members how I propose to conduct the debate, which has been allocated one hour by the Business Committee. One amendment has been selected and has been published on the Marshalled List. Speaking times will be as follows: the proposer of the substantive motion will have 10 minutes for proposing the motion and five minutes for his winding-up speech. The proposer of the amendment will have seven minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes for his winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes each.

Mr P Doherty: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this fundamental motion. No one in the House or outside could argue that we in the Assembly have not created many opportunities to debate the Good Friday Agreement. It was in that spirit that I introduced the motion.

It is sad that the UUP has had to put forward an amendment. I have no problem in talking about policing, if that is what it wants to debate. However, the purpose of the motion is to focus on the fundamental principles of the Good Friday Agreement and to bring forward and query the reasons why we are not using the Chamber to debate and exchange views on that subject.

Our society has emerged from conflict lasting more than 30 years, against the background of a previous 50 years of division. We must find ways, means, mechanisms and debates for resolving that conflict. We only have to look at the Middle East to see how conflict returns when a peace process goes wrong. There is a huge onus on all of us to never allow that to happen.

Mr Roche: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it permissible for a person who is closely identified with IRA/Sinn Féin to use the Assembly to issue threats of a return to violence if they do not get their way?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. Next time, I would ask the Member to state the Standing Order to which he refers.

Mr P Doherty: One of the fundamental principles underlining the Good Friday Agreement is that of inclusion

and equality — *[Interruption]*. There are some smart alecs over there. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr P Doherty: If we are to follow through on inclusion and equality, there should be no reason why we cannot have thoroughgoing debate on the concepts contained in the Good Friday Agreement. At Weston Park we were promised an implementation group, which would allow that debate, yet it has met only once. No one can deny that, and we have had no regular exchange of views. Unionists must ask themselves why they do not want to debate those issues in the Chamber.

DUP Members are afraid of their shadows, but what are the Ulster Unionist Members afraid of? Surely nothing in the Good Friday Agreement would cause them concern. Plenty in it would concern the DUP, because it favours inequality and the divisions that caused mayhem for previous generations. Why is the UUP so reluctant to debate the fundamental elements of the Good Friday Agreement? Let us debate the issue.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Did Pat Doherty not request that only 60 minutes be allocated to the debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee allocates the time for each debate, and it agreed that this one should last for 60 minutes.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: At the request of Sinn Féin.

Mr P Doherty: That is not true. Dr Paisley would be better off attending his other duties today, rather than raising false points in the House.

Sinn Féin is committed to the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, to equality, inclusion and dialogue with Unionists to find ways to overcome any outstanding issues that they feel must be addressed. If Unionists want to address policing, let us consider that although the Good Friday Agreement promised a new beginning for policing, we have not had that. The Patten Commission's recommendations were decimated by Peter Mandelson's Bill in Westminster. The British Government promised that they would introduce new legislation, but we have seen no sign of that. Sinn Féin is not afraid to debate policing, but I am concerned by the Unionists' reluctance to debate the fundamental components of the Good Friday Agreement. What aspects of equality and inclusiveness are they afraid of?

Madam Deputy Speaker: One amendment is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr McGimpsey: I beg to move the following amendment, standing in my name and those of Mr Nesbitt, Mr Cobain and Mr McFarland: Delete all after "Assembly" and insert:

"endorses the Belfast Agreement with its promise of a new beginning based on exclusively peaceful and democratic means and

accordingly calls on all parties to support the police in the present difficult circumstances.”

Pat Doherty said that he was sad that the amendment was tabled. Although he referred in his motion to supporting the principles of the Good Friday Agreement — or the Belfast Agreement, as it is properly called — he did not say that he supported the agreement itself. That relates to the fact that around four years ago Sinn Féin debated whether it supported the agreement, but we are still waiting to hear whether it does. Pat Doherty supports the principles of the agreement, but only selectively. The motion is not an explicit endorsement of the agreement. It is dishonest and a sleight of hand to talk about supporting the principles without supporting the agreement.

Although Mr Doherty said little that allowed Members to get their teeth into the substance of his argument, he is well aware that Sinn Féin and Republicans have walked away at every opportunity from a key part of the agreement: the right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their constitutional future. That implies that the inhabitants of the island of Ireland do not form a nation in the political sense and that they have no right to national self-government, no right to unity of the national territory and, above all, no right to national self-determination. Those are key elements.

Another key element of the agreement is the support for exclusively peaceful and democratic means, without the use, or the threat, of force. That is a stark paradox, given the tenets of last week’s debate in which Members discussed the situation in Colombia and the investigation into the “Bogotá three” by the Committee on International Relations in the United States House of Representatives, chaired by Henry Hyde. That Committee’s evidence stated that two of the Irish nationals being held in Colombia were the IRA’s leading explosives experts and that another was Sinn Féin’s representative in Cuba, who was probably funded by the Cuban Government. It seems to me that those events contradict the principles of the Belfast Agreement.

We reflect on the report that those found guilty of gunrunning in Miami have been endorsed as IRA prisoners of war. We also reflect on the situation in north Belfast. A Sinn Féin councillor in north Belfast blames everything on the UDA, no matter what happens — whether it rains, or whether there is violence. However, Republicans have a strong case to answer regarding the orchestration of violence in that area, particularly in relation to the argument that in Ardoyne — where Loyalists represent 20%, and Nationalists 80%, of the population — Loyalists are constantly picking on the overwhelming majority in that area.

That contradicts the efforts that Mr Pat Doherty made to convince the House that he endorses and supports the principles of the agreement. There is a long way to go before the Assembly can accept what Mr Pat Doherty

claims to represent, and agree with his view that Sinn Féin and Republicans are fully behind the agreement. There are strong suggestions that Sinn Féin is often far from happy with the agreement and with what we all consider to be its principles — the commitment to exclusively peaceful means, democracy, and non-violence.

Ceasefires are about more than simply an absence of so-called military activity. Everybody in Northern Ireland who signed up to the agreement and the peace process believes in an exclusively peaceful and democratic society. That means a complete absence of violence. What those associates of Sinn Féin orchestrate is far from that. However, they are not alone in the “paramilitary constituency” — if I can call it that. There are movements towards violence throughout that “constituency”.

Sinn Féin and Mr Pat Doherty are hypocrites who talk about Unionists being frightened of the debate and of not being prepared to take part in it. We had this debate many years ago. As far as I am concerned, it is over. The agreement was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland. We move on from that. We are all in the House working the process, no matter what we say.

The bottom line is that Sinn Féin and Republicanism are the main threat to the Executive, the Assembly and the entire process. They must do better than simply point the finger at something they claim Unionists are frightened of. Unionists are not frightened of the process. We know exactly where we are going, what our targets are and what our strategy is in this. We will continue to pursue that strategy. Sinn Féin and Republicans are currently the biggest threat to the process.

Mr Attwood: There is a fundamental flaw in the debate and in the contributions so far. Sinn Féin talks about how others dishonour the principles and substance of the Good Friday Agreement, but not about how it might be doing the same. Likewise, Unionists talk about how others dishonour the substance and details of the Good Friday Agreement, but do not talk of themselves.

That is the fault line in this debate. In talking about how the Good Friday Agreement is being honoured and dishonoured, it is incumbent upon each party to talk about how each party is honouring and dishonouring the spirit and substance of the Good Friday Agreement, and not simply to point the finger at other parties in the Chamber.

1.45 pm

I welcome Pat Doherty’s belated commitment to the implementation group. The SDLP, along with other parties, argued for an implementation group. The SDLP argued for it and secured it at the Weston Park negotiations. I welcome the belated enthusiasm of Sinn Féin for this key mechanism of the Good Friday Agreement.

I hope that the implementation group will meet soon, and regularly, to discuss all aspects of the agreement, not least policing. Pat Doherty said that he wants to discuss policing. I look forward to that debate and to his realising that, rather than nobbling the powers of the Police Ombudsman, as he recently alleged it did, the Policing Board endorsed the Police Ombudsman as a result of its actions after the Omagh report.

I look forward to the debate with Pat Doherty, so that he can recognise that when the Policing Board agreed a new symbol for the Police Service it did not include the British Crown but symbols that reflect the diversity and traditions on this island. I look forward to that debate with Pat Doherty, so that, rather than having a slogan about the disbandment of Special Branch, we can discuss a strategy to deconstruct and reconstruct Special Branch in an open and transparent way.

I look forward to meeting Pat Doherty at the implementation group where we can show how the Policing Board and the SDLP are getting policing right, and Sinn Féin can show why it still says that policing is wrong. I look forward to telling him how the Policing Board is facing up to its responsibilities on behalf of the citizens in the North, unlike Sinn Féin, which shirks those responsibilities. I suggest to Pat Doherty that it is past the time that Sinn Féin should recognise the policing challenge. Having missed the boat, his party should get in a dinghy and start rowing.

I also look forward to debate with the Ulster Unionist Party at the implementation group and to its explaining to the people of the North and the parties in the Chamber how it is honouring the agreement when it insults the citizens of the Republic of Ireland, as its leader did some weeks ago. I look forward to the Ulster Unionist Party's explaining to the people of the North and the parties in the Chamber how parity of esteem is being recognised — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member accept that as he mentions Mr Trimble's insulting the people of the Irish Republic, he himself insults the majority of people here when he uses terms such as "the North"?

Mr Attwood: I am of the North and from Northern Ireland. That is sufficient rebuttal of that last comment.

What have we gained from this debate and last week's debate? What have the people of the North gained? What have the kids in the Gallery today gained from it? Are people any more confident that some of those who seek to defend the Good Friday Agreement in the Chamber will live out its true meaning outside? Will those who speak with such conviction inside the Chamber be any more respectful of the convictions of the people who

endorse the Good Friday Agreement outside it? I ask that question because it has not been answered.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley:

"I have ... always made it clear that we regard Sinn Féin and the IRA as inextricably linked."

Who said that? The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

"We said that we want the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations ... meanwhile, it would obviously be a travesty of democracy if parties associated with paramilitary organisations held Executive office in the assembly while they continued to be engaged in or to threaten terrorism."

Who said that? The Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

Who had the following words written as graffiti on the walls of Northern Ireland?

"No change in the status of Northern Ireland without the express consent of the people of Northern Ireland. Power to take decisions returned to a Northern Ireland Assembly, with accountable North/South co-operation. Fairness and equality guaranteed for all. Those who use or threaten violence excluded from the Government of Northern Ireland. Prisoners kept in unless violence is given up for good."

It was the Prime Minister again, and what happened? All those things changed. Today, Northern Ireland has seen the Royal Ulster Constabulary destroyed and terrorist prisoners released. It has seen unaccountable all-Ireland bodies set up and IRA/Sinn Féin in the Government of Northern Ireland. The Union flag is banned from Government buildings for most of the year. Security installations have been removed, on-the-run terrorists have been pardoned, and there has been discrimination against victims in funding. There has been no substantial and credible IRA decommissioning.

Mr Attwood spoke of what he got at Weston Park. However, there was one thing he did not get, as his leader said. Officials of the United Kingdom said "You have no guns; therefore, you cannot get what you desire." That is the very cradle of the matter that we deal with today.

I am glad to have had the opportunity today to table a motion that will give the House the opportunity that the deputy leader of the IRA here shouted about — an opportunity really to discuss the police in Northern Ireland. The Official Unionists' amendment could not be more hypocritical. It mentions endorsing the Belfast Agreement. The majority of Unionists in Northern Ireland do not endorse it. Furthermore, it calls on parties to support the police. The police have been destroyed by the agreement. The hatchet of Republicanism now hangs over the heads of the Special Branch and the full-time Reserve. The opportunity will shortly be given to the House to have a real debate. We will not ask for an hour. Let us have a full debate, in which every man elected to the Assembly can give a full answer to the question of where he stands. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The time has come for the House to face up to the fact that the majority of the Unionist population is opposed to the agreement and does not want it. Until that is recognised and there is a fair election for the people of Ulster to decide the issue, we can only move forward to more of the underhand violence and murder orchestrated, as it is in north Belfast, by IRA/Sinn Féin.

Mr Ford: Four years on from the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the Good Friday Agreement, or whatever we call it, it is rather sad that today's motion looks merely at its principles. I had hoped that we would be looking more at the practice — the collective ability of this institution and others to bring to fruition all that we expected to see, and ensuring that the agreement works for the good of all the people of Northern Ireland. However, the fact that the motion returns to the issue of principles, rather than the practice of four years' experience, suggests that the agreement was the ceiling of some people's ambitions. It suggests that once agreement was reached, people could scurry back to their corner to look after their self-interests, rather than its being the foundation on which we could build a united community and move from the notion of managing a divided society.

All parties have obligations under the agreement — few parties have lived up to all of them. Therefore, we should not debate support for the principles of the agreement only. We should consider how the Assembly, and the other institutions of the agreement, should work to bring it to fruition.

There have been countless examples of failure to implement the agreement on the part of all who worked on it. The establishment of the institutions has been too slow. We have failed to establish a proper legislative programme here. We have hardly had a single meeting of the British-Irish Council. Decommissioning has been slow, but at least there have been two recent episodes of Republican decommissioning — there has been none by Loyalists. I fail to see how we can suggest that it is a matter of discussing principles rather than practice.

Mr Doherty referred to the amendment. He suggested that the Bill that Peter Mandelson introduced in Westminster had decimated the Patten Report. That is an erroneous interpretation, and it is noticeable that Sinn Féin has produced little other than niggling examples of how it fails to seize the opportunity in relation to policing. Sinn Féin appears to be scrabbling for every excuse possible to avoid taking its places on the Policing Board — and, presumably, on the local district partnerships, when they are established later this year.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland is fully built on the principles of Patten and, in almost every respect, on the fine detail of Patten. It should be seen by all that

it is capable of working for all, and it should be supported by all. The PSNI is working for the good of the entire community. It is not, as some would have alleged in the past, representative of one group only.

The amendment deserves support because it gives a more balanced picture than the motion does. I noticed with some amusement that when Mr McGimpsey said that Republicans were the biggest threat to the agreement he faced no disagreement from the DUP. I thought that the DUP hoped that it was the biggest threat to the agreement, but it is clear that it is comfortable working in the Assembly and the other institutions in which it participates. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: I have no doubt that the DUP will continue to be comfortable in doing so. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: The threats to the institutions do not come from those who proclaim their opposition to the agreement, but from those who reached the agreement four years ago only to spend all their time, on whatever side they are, running back to their own tribes and ignoring the needs of the wider community. The Assembly must move away from those party games. We should support the amendment. We should then cease to discuss such issues and implement the agreement.

Mr Roche: The principles of the agreement fall into two categories. They are those that legitimise terrorism and those, contrary to Mr McGimpsey's opinion, that legitimise Irish Nationalism and undermine the legitimacy of the Union. That latter set of principles has never been the subject of proper public debate.

The agreement legitimises terrorism by placing the representatives of terror in the Government of Northern Ireland without any requirement for the IRA to decommission. The principle there is that Northern Ireland's citizens should be governed by those who terrorised them for 30 years. That principle is an affront to democracy and common decency.

The agreement also legitimises terrorism by releasing terrorist prisoners. In order to be released, a person must be convicted of a terrorist crime and be a member of an organisation that is on ceasefire. Again contrary to Mr McGimpsey's opinion, the courts have ruled that that ceasefire cannot be broken by either murder or gunrunning. Dr Reid recently ruled that a ceasefire cannot be broken by engagement in the development of the technology of terror at the heart of international terrorism. Therefore, a ceasefire that cannot be broken under those circumstances is no ceasefire at all.

2.00 pm

"The idea that people who have committed appalling crimes should be released from prison because they have

committed those crimes and because they are members of an organisation that directed that sort of criminality is a legalised corruption of the rule of law that is without precedent in any democratic or civilised state. When you reach the position of legitimising terrorism to the extent of putting the representatives of terror into Government and letting terrorists out of jail, what you have actually done is that, on one hand, you may concede that the terrorist organisation actually committed some horrendous acts, but what you are really saying is that that organisation cannot be held culpable — cannot be held blameworthy — for committing those acts.”

That raises a fundamental question about the core nature of the Belfast Agreement. Where is culpability mentioned in the terms of the Belfast Agreement? The amazing, indisputable answer is that the ultimate culpability for what the Patten Report referred to as “the tragedies of the past” lies not with those who perpetrated those appalling criminal acts but with the legitimate forces of law and order that stood between the terrorist and the citizen. According to the remit given by the Belfast Agreement to Patten, the ultimate culpability lies with the RUC. For example, the Patten Report stated that the RUC is

“at the heart of many of the problems that politicians have been unable to resolve in Northern Ireland”.

That clearly states that somehow the culpability lies with the RUC. At the core of the report is the statement that we must

“reorient policing in Northern Ireland onto an approach based on upholding human rights and respecting human dignity”.

I do not need to take time to spell out the core implication there. Having made the RUC culpable, the report proceeded to lay the foundation for a new so-called police force that would integrate terrorists into the heart of policing. Patten argued that without the recruitment of Republicans — not just Nationalists — the new police force could not operate effectively. Terrorists are elevated by the agreement into Government and into policing those citizens whom they terrorised for 30 years.

Where did those ideas come from? I do not have the time to elaborate, but the fountainhead of the legitimisation of terror can be found in the Mitchell principles. A key factor about those principles is that they have nothing to do with decommissioning. This went undetected by the media, who can hardly read a report. Decommissioning is not required, but those principles require a political settlement that would take the gun out of politics. When one argues for a political settlement to take the gun out of politics, one has elevated the terrorists to arbiters of the content and implementation of what is required to remove the gun.

From where did this Mr Mitchell, who should have been chased out of this country, get all of that? He got it from the Sinn Féin submission to the Mitchell Commission, because taking the gun out of Irish politics by an agree-

ment is central to that party’s terminology. Therefore, Mr Mitchell elevated terrorism and its legitimisation into the Belfast Agreement. Nobody can support that agreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order, order. The Member’s time is up.

Ms McWilliams: It is rather sad that just after a debate on the future economic confidence of this country, we have a debate on our lack of political confidence.

The agreement should not be used in the Chamber or anywhere else in Northern Ireland to shame the other side. I have said repeatedly that nobody has a monopoly on the agreement. Listening to some of the debate, including Mr Roche’s contribution, one could almost forget some of our achievements on constitutional questions. The agreement accepts that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland will be determined by the will of its people. That principle is important to the agreement. Most, if not all, of us agree with that major principle. I would like to be shown the person who does not agree with that principle.

Secondly, articles 2 and 3 were removed from Bunreacht na hÉireann — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: Big deal.

Ms McWilliams: I find it amazing that we hear the words “big deal” from those on the anti-agreement side of the House. It was a big deal when we were in negotiations — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms McWilliams: The removal of articles 2 and 3 was a big deal during the negotiations.

There is a devolved Administration at Stormont, which Members around the Chamber are involved in, or they would not be here. The British-Irish Council was established, and it was recognised that all aspirations and identities carry equal legitimacy. Power sharing was introduced, and a commitment was made to democracy and peaceful means of change. The list goes on and on. We once had such confidence in the agreement. What can we do to re-establish that?

I am glad that Alex Attwood said that the negotiations in Weston Park resulted in a round table meeting of the pro-agreement parties. They have met only once, and the meeting may as well not have happened; it was so good that I am beginning to believe that the Secretary of State has decided that that was all that was needed. That is not how we implement agreements. We must continue to restore people’s best intentions, rather than reinforce their worst fears, which is all that we are hearing today. Let us give some life back to these institutions.

I will support the Ulster Unionist Party’s amendment because we have gone a long way towards restoring confidence and establishing the kind of police service in which Northern Ireland can have confidence — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Ms McWilliams: I say to Dr Paisley that I would be glad to participate in that debate. I would be glad —

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member should address her remarks through the Chair.

Ms McWilliams: Through the Chair, I will be glad to respond —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Paisley Jnr has a point of order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: You should call your own party Colleague to order, Madam Deputy Speaker, because she is addressing comments directly to another Member. You are showing favouritism.

Ms McWilliams: I am pleased that I did not score party political points when Dr Paisley referred to the ability of only the men in the Chamber to participate in the debate. I decided to let that remark go, but given that that side of the House has turned into a playground, it is important to say that I — and I assume all parties — will be glad to participate in a debate on policing.

If we have forgotten the principles to which we signed up, it is time that the implementation committee restored some confidence in the process to the people who watch debate after debate and wonder what has happened. Patience and perseverance are required, not fatigue and failure, which are all that that side of the House ever promises.

Mr McCartney: When is a document not an agreement? It is not an agreement when all the parties to it do not subscribe to any of its contents. Any fool would realise that the parties agreed little or nothing of what is alleged to be the subject of this document. There was no meeting of minds, which is essential to any agreement. In 'The Daily Telegraph', the First Minister said that the implementation process was not implementing the agreement that he thought he had signed. If the leader of that party is not sure about what he signed, we can be fairly confident that no one else is.

The consent of the people in a referendum to the approval of this document was induced by a wave of propaganda that would have done justice to Joseph Goebbels. It was also induced by the lying, mendacious, duplicitous behaviour of a Prime Minister — one Anthony Blair. He told the people of Northern Ireland, in his own handwriting, what those pledges were and has resiled and reneged on every single one of them.

This alleged agreement was never intended to be an agreement or political settlement between democrats. It was never more than a schedule or scheme for conflict resolution between the British state and violent Republicanism. In order to keep the bombs off the mainland, the

British Government were prepared to enter into an agreement. *[Interruption]*.

Yes, the only man in cloud cuckoo land is the First Minister — the king of cuckoos. And what did Mr Trimble do? So greedy was he to become the First Minister, that he entered into an agreement without any provision for making good the deficit in infrastructure of the previous 30 years. He did not even have the wit to say to the British Government, which was absolutely hanging its tongue out to get rid of Northern Ireland to a devolved Administration: "Here is our price". Instead, he and Mr Empey have engaged in a brazen con over the last few days. They are going to get £5 billion on loan and, over 25 years, repay £10 billion. At the same time they are spending £1.2 billion out of the grant on an absolute welter of bureaucracy, which they have done absolutely nothing to reduce in the last two and a half years.

Then, of course, we have Sinn Féin/IRA and their partners in harness, the SDLP. We have Monica McWilliams talking about the great principle of consent. The Unionist people have been given consent to pass the legal title deeds of Northern Ireland over to the Republic of Ireland, when, in fact, it has already got, *de facto*, an actual possession of the place. As for her suggestion of the great amendment of articles 2 and 3, whatever else she is and whatever expertise she has, it is certainly not that of a lawyer. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: We also have the gunrunners, the non-police people, the trainers of terrorists — the people who have really decommissioned nothing, though the king of cuckoos now tells us they have done it twice. If he can get the people of Northern Ireland to believe that, he can get them to believe anything.

The truth is that, increasingly, pro-Union all classes, even the middle-class yuppies, are beginning to get the message that this agreement has totally shafted them — in education, health, sewerage, water and every conceivable aspect. More accountable, more sensitive, more efficient government for Northern Ireland — that must be the biggest joke of the century, perpetrated by the cuckoo king.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to make a few points. Some comments were made earlier about the time available for this debate. All Members will be aware that it is open to any Member or party to propose a motion to the Business Committee and to argue for whatever time they want for it. It was noticeable that at this afternoon's meeting of the Business Committee the DUP sat quietly and did not propose anything for next week. In fact, we have only one plenary sitting next week. Tuesday was available, and if the DUP had wanted to put forward any proposal for debate, it was free to do so. Either it was not prepared, or it was not able or not interested. Then DUP Members come into the Chamber and make noise

about wanting longer debates, yet they sit on their hands at the Business Committee.

2.15 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, you will be able to inform the House that the motion has only just been tabled and therefore could not be debated next week.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, is it in order for the Member for West Belfast to tell tales outside the Business Committee? The proceedings of the Business Committee are supposed to be held entirely in confidence. It is improper for a Member to divulge discussions held at those meetings.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is quite correct that the proceedings of the Business Committee are confidential, but the minutes are published on the Internet.

Mr Maskey: I am happy to have my knuckles rapped. The essential point remains — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Maskey: The essential point remains that next week we will have one plenary meeting. That left another day for any of ten or twelve pages of no-day named motions, which could have been tabled by the DUP or any other Member. They chose not to do so.

I support the motion and oppose the UUP's amendment. This motion is essentially aimed at the Ulster Unionist Party — there is no question of trying to convince the DUP and its cohorts on the Benches opposite. They are entitled to their opinion, but they are avowedly anti-agreement and wait with bated breath until it collapses. That is their choice, and they are entitled to that.

However, the Ulster Unionist Party is supposed to be a pro-agreement party. I am disappointed with Michael McGimpsey, a Minister in the Executive who should be more responsible. I will stand corrected, but I think he said that Sinn Féin never really endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. Michael McGimpsey should know that we negotiated the agreement, went away and considered it, embraced it and then went to our constituencies and sold it. We have been working hard on its implementation ever since.

Without giving a litany of examples, the Ulster Unionist Party, in ongoing negotiations here and in the British Parliament itself, has sought to restrict, minimise and subvert every element of legislation that emanated from the agreement. The Ulster Unionist Party is formally a pro-agreement party, but it has worked hard and assiduously to undermine it.

I would prefer to have a discussion on the Good Friday Agreement and its principles. As David Ford said earlier, it is important to go back to the principles of the agreement. There have been many failures and fault lines in its implementation during the last four years. Whether it is through an implementation body meeting or any other

forum, we all welcome the opportunity to ensure that the agreement is implemented properly and fully.

Policing was mentioned and is included in the UUP amendment. Alex Attwood said that he looks forward to having debates. We have had debates with him and other party members in several venues. For the life of me, I cannot understand why he wants to have more debates because at any that I attended, the SDLP did not seem to do too well.

This motion is more important. It is supposed to be a reminder that we are four years on. There are many serious difficulties emanating from the non-implementation of the agreement. Michael McGimpsey again mentioned north Belfast. I listened to the media this morning and heard people talk about being bored by news of north Belfast. It is disgraceful for leading journalists and other commentators to talk about being bored by the events in north Belfast. Anyone with any insight into or knowledge of what has happened there knows that a kernel of the Good Friday Agreement is its ability to bring us out of a conflict situation to better times for all. Michael McGimpsey should know better. His Colleague, Fred Cobain, Billy Hutchinson and others who have been talking with party members and others throughout north Belfast know that there is a need to quell the disturbances in that part of the city.

This morning we produced a video, and I challenged the PSNI to produce its evidence of who was firing guns at it this weekend, never mind the last 12 months. Who was throwing the pipe bombs at the weekend? It was not football hooligans; it was not people coming from football matches or those annoyed at one team or another losing. There are serious difficulties in that area, so the conflict is not over for many people here.

Mr McFarland: I am amazed that Sinn Féin introduced the motion. Despite what we have just heard, Sinn Féin has not accepted the agreement; there was no acceptance of it at the party's Ard-Fheis. There is no sign that they support peaceful and democratic means. Society is in chaos as a result.

Mr Paisley Jnr: What are you doing in Government with them?

Mr McFarland: How do they square their words and actions in the community over their acceptance of the consent principle — that Northern Ireland is British until the people vote otherwise?

Mr Pat Doherty gave a list of grievances, which consisted of problems with the implementation of the agreement. The Republican movement has been the biggest obstacle to the implementation of the agreement, particularly with its reluctance to start decommissioning. We have heard a complaint from Sinn Féin about the implementation group. That is such hypocrisy. Sinn Féin was the biggest obstacle to the implementation group.

They were petrified that the other parties might gang up and give them a time-scale for decommissioning. It is only after the second act of decommissioning that they now express some urgency for the implementation group.

Our amendment carries support for the police, and Sinn Féin oppose that. What type of society do Sinn Féin want? Nationalist and Republican areas have problems with crime, and are no different from other areas. Sinn Féin must realise that the Martin Ferris school of justice is not the way forward.

One only has to drive through north Belfast, Toomebridge or Draperstown to see enormous posters urging people not to join the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin cannot afford to stay off the Police Board. How will Sinn Féin square the anti-PSNI circle when they join the board and expect their people to join the police service?

Such is the present level of crime that I urge all Members to follow the amendment and support the police. I call on the DUP not to run under Sinn Féin's skirts and vote with them again this week. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McFarland: I urge Members to support the amendment. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr McFarland: I urge all Members to vote for the amendment. *[Laughter]*.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Dr McDonnell: The Speaker should not be shouted down.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that helpful clarification of procedure.

Mr P Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. There were several inaccuracies in Michael McGimpsey's statement. Sinn Féin is not the IRA, and Unionism needs to get its head around that fundamental fact. Sinn Féin does not speak for the IRA. While Michael McGimpsey continues to con himself by thinking that that is the case, he will never be able to handle the situation. He spoke about north Belfast, and ran away from the issue once again. The fundamental problem in north Belfast is that the UUP in particular has abandoned a whole section of its own community and left them leaderless and in the hands of the idiots in the DUP.

Michael McGimpsey also said that he has a strategy. If he has, I wish he would share it with us, so that we could debate it. We have no sign of what that strategy is about.

Alex Attwood spoke passionately about the implementation group, saying that it was the SDLP's idea. He totally ignored the fact that Sinn Féin has been arguing

for inclusion in all aspects of politics for years. Mr Attwood said that he is looking forward to a debate on policing with Sinn Féin. I remind him that we have already had one round of debate in Strabane where he was soundly beaten. He has not come forward with a date for the second round, which we agreed was to be in Omagh. The people know that the SDLP have sold them short on policing.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley's position is understandable, even though it is continually clouded with his bigotry. He is against the Good Friday Agreement. He campaigns and rallies against it. The UUP position is different, however. They say that they are for the Agreement and then keep dodging the issues that would move the situation forward.

David Ford said that the remaining policing issues are only minor matters. I remind Mr Ford that there are still some serious issues to be dealt with in the area of policing.

Mr Roche rants and raves on. However, he would not be here today if it were not for the Good Friday Agreement that he so despises. Then we have Bob McCartney, who is eloquent and passionate, but cannot get past the simple fact that the people of Ireland, North and South, democratically endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. He laughs at democracy, because it does not suit his argument.

I largely agreed with Monica McWilliams's position, although I do not agree with her support for the amendment. I remind her that articles 2 and 3 were not removed from the Irish Constitution. They were amended and rewritten. I argue that they were rewritten in a much more inclusive way than previously.

Alan McFarland worries about the Sinn Féin position on consent: let me explain it simply. Sinn Féin consented to all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, including the all-Ireland dimension, the Assembly and all the issues that deal with justice and equality. We have no problem with any of that. We consented to all of the Good Friday Agreement, not to one small, narrow aspect of it.

I say to the UUP that we must continue the debate outside the House. Let us pursue it and find a way forward, because these idiots are going nowhere.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Doherty: Rev Dr Ian Paisley was afraid to go to Derry today to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He cannot even face that. These people are leading Unionism nowhere. This debate is only beginning — it will continue.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly proceeded to a Division.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I would normally take a point of order after the vote is declared.

Mr P Robinson: It concerns the validity of the vote.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order on that basis.

Mr P Robinson: My understanding is that there was no pro-amendment teller in the “No” Lobby. According to Standing Orders, the vote is invalid. I would like a ruling on that.

Mr Speaker: It is difficult for the Speaker to challenge tellers when they come forward on the basis of whether they are voting “Aye” or “No”. We can check afterwards which way they voted. However, I must ask the proposers whether they had someone supporting the amendment as a teller in both Lobbies.

2.30 pm

The Members who proposed the amendment indicate that they are not content that they had a Teller in both Lobbies. *[Interruption]*. Order.

On that basis, the amendment falls.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must vote once more before Question Time, which has already been delayed by some 10 minutes.

Main question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 34; Noes 29.

AYES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Seamus Close, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, Pat Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Alasdair McDonnell, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMennamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Sean Neeson, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

NOES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

2.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Although it is not customary, unless there is a petition of concern or if it is a certain type of vote, to have a breakdown of the Nationalist and Unionist composition of a vote, can you confirm whether there were any Unionists in the Lobbies supporting the Belfast Agreement?

Mr Speaker: That is not something that I can confirm at this moment but, as the Member knows, Hansard will show the names of all those Members who voted, and Members will be able to see for themselves.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Speaker: Question Time has been somewhat delayed by the requirements of the two Divisions, the Question having been put before the moment of interruption. I now direct Members' attention to questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Question 3, in the name of Mr McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Question 10, in the name of Mr Campbell, has been withdrawn but does not require a written answer.

Causeway Centre Funding

1. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in the light of his policy to develop natural resource rural tourism, how much funding is available for the development of the Causeway Centre in North Antrim. (AQO 1294/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I want the Causeway Centre to be adequately resourced to ensure that it meets the standards that we all feel are essential, but it is premature at this stage to discuss what specific level of funding support might be available from my Department, or from Government in general. Naturally, any specific proposal is subject to an application and appraisal process.

Mr Kane: In the early 1980s, Moyle District Council took a risk in building a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. The centre has been successfully developed and operated to the point where it is probably the only visitors' centre in Northern Ireland that does not depend on any operating subsidy from the ratepayer.

In the development and management of a new centre at the causeway, why does the Department require the council to bring in third parties? Has the plan of action for dispensing natural resource rural tourism funding been clearly developed between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Finance and Personnel so that action on the ground is immediate?

Sir Reg Empey: Members will recall that an accidental fire destroyed the centre two years ago, which was a matter of deep regret. I visited the council shortly after the fire, as the Member knows, and expressed my view of the way ahead. It was intended that a state-of-the-art centre be built on the existing site. I understand that Moyle District Council wants to protect the revenue streams that it receives from car parking and operation of the site, which is only to be expected.

I also told the council that I supported what it wanted to do because, like the representatives of the area, I was

paying particular attention to the council's wishes. There are several funding sources. There is the plan of action on rural tourism, for example. The Environment and Heritage Service is interested, as is the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. There may also be a European dimension. A range of potential funding is available. Unfortunately, considerable time was lost because of the best value exercise, which held progress back somewhat.

The council has decided only in the past few weeks that it wants to proceed. Indeed, my officials will meet the council tomorrow. We are anxious to move forward. It is the largest attraction on the island. It has huge potential, and we must make progress. I am very keen that we get it right. Many people are coming into the market with other ideas, and the council should co-operate with the Department in getting the matter started. I hope that it will be possible to commission work soon, and I reiterate my support for the council's intentions.

Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of inward investment companies that have visited Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate in each of the past three years; the number who have chosen to establish factories at the site; and the number of jobs which have been created at the estate. (AQO 1277/01)

Sir Reg Empey: One inward investment company visited Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate in the year ending 31 March 1999. Another visited in the year ending 31 March 2000, with a further three in the year ending 31 March 2001. Two indigenous companies are operating at the park, and they have created 85 jobs.

Mr Poots: I am very disappointed that only five companies visited the site. Of the four available sites, this is the only one that has a 30-acre land bank that could incorporate large-scale business development. In view of the Belfast metropolitan area plan, which will bring more housing into the Lagan Valley constituency, and the possibility of further development at the Maze Prison site, can the Minister assure the House that Invest Northern Ireland will give some real impetus to establishing large-scale companies on the Knockmore Hill site and to creating jobs in the Lagan Valley area?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will know that my Department cannot dictate to investors about where they will locate their businesses. Two companies are due to locate in Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate; one factory is nearing completion, and building work has commenced on a second. When they are fully operational, 79 jobs will be created, in addition to those already mentioned.

As regards the Belfast metropolitan area plan and the Maze, there is a wide range of possibilities. It is frustrating for many Members to see vacant sites, but

we have been fairly successful in filling vacancies. Some of the advance orders for factories that we had — facilities for which I was criticised and put under pressure to let go to make room for carpet warehouses and such like — have resulted in premises being filled in the last year.

I am confident that the location, nature and quality of the Knockmore Hill site will prove successful in the long run. There is an active work programme, and such things tend to gain their own momentum. The Member and I want further jobs to be brought into the area, and I am satisfied that the people already there and the work under construction will achieve that.

Mr Hussey: I am tempted to substitute Dublin Road Industrial Estate for Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate, but I will not.

Mr Speaker: If the Member were to, he would be ruled out of order.

Mr Hussey: Thank you. How many industrial estates formerly owned by the IDB have been transferred to private ownership? What is their status within Invest Northern Ireland? Who is responsible for ensuring that privately owned estates are kept up to standard? There is a difficulty with the Dublin Road estate in Strabane.

Mr Speaker: I would instruct the Minister not to respond to the last question.

Sir Reg Empey: I cannot give the Member a precise answer, but I will write to him. In general, estates owned by Invest Northern Ireland are primarily for the use of former IDB and LEDU client companies.

Those people had first refusal on any site anywhere in Northern Ireland. Client companies still have first refusal. With reference to Mr Poots's question, several people have shown interest in the Knockmore site, but Invest Northern Ireland did not consider their proposals appropriate for a quality site such as that. I shall find the details that the Member requested and write to him. If he wishes to ask me questions on other locations, he will have a future opportunity to do so.

3.00 pm

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

Industrial Derating

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of the impact of industrial derating on the Northern Ireland economy. (AQO 1296/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Derating is a useful marketing tool to attract inward investment, and it provides some compensation to eligible companies for the higher energy costs which apply in Northern Ireland. However, a consultation exercise on the future of the rating system

will take place soon, and any views on industrial derating will be welcomed for consideration.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that the derating initiative is an incentive for business investment? The recent suggestion of abolishing derating for industry has caused real concern and uncertainty among companies. Given our already high electricity, water, transport, insurance and waste disposal costs, and the proposed increase to the National Insurance contribution, it poses a threat to future employment here. The suggestion of derating for industry should be thrown out, thus giving our industries a level playing field, bearing in mind the incentives in the Republic of Ireland.

Sir Reg Empey: I have raised that issue, and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has written to me about it. I am acutely aware of many companies' views. However, if there is a review of rating, all aspects must be open for consideration — none can be excluded.

Derating currently costs £61 million. A sensible review of rating will not take place until light is shed on the rights and wrongs of derating. I am aware of the points that the Member made, and I hope that, when the review commences, he will make his views known. The Committee and my Department make their views known, and the sectors that the Member referred to will have the opportunity to advance their views also. The fact that the matter is being considered does not mean that an outcome has been determined. A range of issues must be considered.

I understand the Member's concerns. Corporation tax comes to mind immediately. People argue that we have a much higher rate of corporation tax here and that derating is a form of compensation both for that and for the other costs to which the Member referred. I hope that those matters will be fully fleshed out during the consultation.

Mr McMenamin: Will the Minister comment on the geographical valuation of the impact of industrial derating? Has it benefited Strabane and other parts of west Tyrone?

Sir Reg Empey: The geographical valuation, as well as TSN and equality issues, will inform the consultation exercise. The Member mentioned Strabane. The process would significantly benefit that council area. There are some substantial industries in the Member's area that would benefit. The geographical distribution of the assistance must be considered.

A significant view must also be taken of the equality aspects of the assistance. My Department has commissioned all of that work, and that will form part of our input into the consultation.

Mr J Wilson: The Minister will agree that industry needs all the help that it can get. Does he further agree that prohibitive rates for renewal of employer's liability

insurance also have a negative impact on companies in my constituency, as demonstrated by last week's announcement by Contex Ltd? What is the Minister doing to address that?

Sir Reg Empey: Several Members have raised questions of insurance with me, and I am sure that it affects everybody in the House. The events of September 11 have clearly had a major impact on that industry. Matters that concern Northern Ireland and its system for compensation, as well as what some employers would describe as a "claims culture", have also had an impact. I am aware that insurance was a contributory factor in the case to which the Member refers. As insurance is a reserved matter, I have been in contact with Ruth Kelly, the Economic Secretary at the Treasury, on several occasions, and my Department is also assessing exactly what is happening in industry and commerce in Northern Ireland as a direct result of insurance issues.

Several Members have written to me in the past few weeks — they are obviously getting feedback from constituents who are suffering. A wide range of subjects are involved; it is not confined to employer's liability. However, you cannot operate without employer's liability insurance. In some sectors, such as construction, few people are prepared to offer cover. I have involved the Northern Ireland Office, as we may be required to look at how compensation is dealt with. It is dealt with differently here than in Great Britain, and we must examine that. I assure the Member that that work is continuing.

Electricity Contracts

5. **Dr O'Hagan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether he plans to consider the issue of public bonds for the buyout of electricity contracts. (AQO 1297/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In line with my statement during the Assembly debate on 5 March 2002 on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's energy inquiry, my officials and the regulator are urgently examining all practical options for inclusion in an action plan for bringing about worthwhile and sustainable electricity price reductions.

Dr O'Hagan: I wonder how thoroughly public bonds have been explored as a way to raise capital, not only for the generation contracts but for other issues. Will the Minister tell the House the position of the British Treasury on bonds? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member may know that the Treasury generally feels that it is private-sector companies that issue bonds. However, we have been looking at bonds for some time, and the Member will know that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and my Department have been examining the matter.

The truth is that as we try to identify issues and areas where we can bring some pressure to bear on electricity prices, we are desperately searching for the right approach. I have spoken to consultants, and held discussions with the Committee, which has done a substantial piece of work on energy in general, and we will reach a conclusion in the next few weeks on the steps that we can take.

Leaving aside the technicalities, the big issue is whether we will effectively be mortgaging the debt to the next generation. We are buying out those dreadful contracts that were signed during privatisation in 1991 and then effectively smearing that debt over the next 30 years. We are now almost halfway through the contracts. We must make our minds up about these matters over the next few weeks. I do not wish to commit myself to an answer in advance of making a statement to the Assembly on the whole picture. However, several events will take place. For example, the regulator is currently conducting a review of the transmission and distribution systems of Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE). He has made recommendations, and after receiving feedback, he must make a final determination. If that is disputed, it may be passed to the Competition Commission. I have been considering every way in which we could put pressure on the market to reduce prices, but I am not prepared to commit myself on this issue today.

Dr Birnie: An increased provision of gas might have a negative effect on electricity prices. Will the net impact of the capital cost of building pipelines in the Province and interconnections to the Republic or Scotland be to raise the final price to the consumer of electricity?

Sir Reg Empey: This is a complicated issue. The report showed that postalisation will cause prices to rise, and we calculated that they would rise by a maximum of 1.64%. However, the Member must also remember that one of the key elements of any electricity bill is the cost of generation. That cost represents 80% of the bill for the industrial market and 60% for the domestic market. One element of that cost is a direct fuel cost. The new gas plant, which will be part of the overall deal at Coolkeeragh, means that there will be a new state-of-the-art generating station, which will be more efficient. Together with the new plant that will be commissioned at Ballylumford by the end of the year, the net effect of the new equipment will be to save fuel and therefore save on price.

The Member will also be aware that the Executive's decision to proceed with the pipeline proposal, which the House and the Committee supported, is being challenged by oil suppliers. Although they have the right to do so, the oil industry is unregulated, whereas the gas and electricity suppliers are regulated heavily. We must be aware of this matter and watch developments closely. The oil sector is trying to refer the matter to the European Commission. If we are not careful, that could significantly delay our proposals and therefore maintain

higher prices for longer. It is unfortunate that an unregulated sector is pointing the finger at a regulated sector.

Mr Neeson: I agree with the Minister about the intervention of the oil distributors' association, but I would go further. Does the Minister share my anger and concern at its outrageous attempt not only to obstruct, but also possibly to wreck, the gas pipeline project?

Sir Reg Empey: I intend to see that the project is not wrecked. It was the will of the House and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and an enormous amount of work went into it. We have not yet determined what source we will use to finance it. We have several options, and European support is one of them. The oil sector considers the project to be anti-competitive. Thirty-five per cent of funding for the electricity interconnector came from Europe, and the Scotland to Northern Ireland Pipeline (SNIPS) also received European assistance.

Those are two major infrastructure projects. I see the gas pipeline and the provision of Coolkeeragh as a major piece of strategic infrastructure, and it is unfortunate that people have chosen to challenge that. Both these industries are highly regulated, yet the oil sector is not, and the public needs to bear that in mind. It is unfortunate that people are attempting to thwart what is clearly the will of people for a strategic decision. Many jobs are at stake, and over £200 million of investment in Londonderry alone is at stake. We have to realise that we are playing for very high stakes.

3.15 pm

Creagh Industrial Development Site

6. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the suitability of the industrial development site at Creagh, in the Magherafelt district, as a strategic employment location. (AQO 1275/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The regional development strategy for 2025 envisages the provision of a limited number of strategic employment locations. An interdepartmental working group has been established with the aim of identifying the actual number and locations, but no strategic employment locations have yet been identified.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister will know that there is a prospective need for this type of employment. Has he instructed Invest Northern Ireland to commence a programme? Will the Minister support the designation of an industrial site at Creagh as a strategic employment location?

Sir Reg Empey: I am well aware of the Creagh site. The Member has raised this with me before, as have other Members. Indeed, I am shortly to see a delegation led by another Member about this site.

The Department has not yet decided to support any site. However, I can say that the site development at Creagh is well under way, with initial site clearance and the enabling contract nearing completion. It is planned that sites will be available from this autumn at Creagh, and a number of business interests have been recorded already. This is one of the issues being considered with regard to the area plan. I will have to withhold giving the Member a categorical assurance until we see the overall picture, and we must also have regard to the local area plan.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I have already spoken to the Minister about this and forwarded initial papers to him. I thank him and his Department for their willingness to meet us. The Minister may not be aware that the Planning Service of the Department of the Environment has already met an initial delegation on this and that the Department for Regional Development has also agreed to a similar meeting.

In the light of all this vital interest among the Departments, can the Minister assure the House that the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will work together on the designation of a strategic employment location at Creagh, which is vital to the development of our community?

Sir Reg Empey: I appreciate that the Member did not press me too hard on the designation, although I know that I would not have to press him too hard to get him to indicate his preference. I can assure him that my Department, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment will have absolutely no difficulty in working together. If we are to make any sense of this, we must work together. There is a regional dimension and a local dimension to the project.

There is growing concern, which Mr Poots obliquely referred to in an earlier question, about plans for housing and other development, and the question is whether we are leaving enough space for industrial development. In some areas it is in relatively short supply, and we are looking at the total sweep of available land. I am conscious of that, and I can give the Member the assurance he seeks.

Step2

7. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps are being taken to find a replacement entrepreneur for Step2 in Coleraine, which recently closed down production. (AQO 1259/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Step2 Company (NI) Ltd was a subsidiary of the privately owned Step2 Company in the United States. A downturn in market conditions and increased competition led to a decision to reduce operations in several locations, including Northern Ireland.

A replacement entrepreneur could not have been introduced in the timescale required, because the decision was made without consultation with officials or local management.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware from his many visits to Coleraine and his meetings with the chamber of commerce and the local council that there is a nervousness about the town's narrow industrial base. Does he agree that there is an absolute urgency to go all out to attract inward investment from the United States, or wherever we can get it, so that there is a more stable economy in Coleraine?

Sir Reg Empey: These are difficult times for inward investment. To give the Member some perspective on his area, Invest Northern Ireland currently has 17 client companies in the East Londonderry constituency, employing almost 3,000 people. Since April 1996, selective financial assistance of £55.4 million towards company project investments totalling £238.6 million has been offered, promoting 1,168 new jobs and safeguarding a further 2,900. Invest Northern Ireland and its predecessor organisations have put much work into the Coleraine/Limavady area, with some considerable success. The decision that the Member referred to was undoubtedly unusual and unfortunate. Discussions took place with the company to try to give it marketing and product development assistance, but decisions were taken without any reference whatsoever to the Department.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Madam Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that questions 5, 6 and 8 in the names of Mr Roy Beggs, Mr Conor Murphy and Mr Eddie McGrady MP respectively have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Student Loans

1. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total funds surrendered from the student loans budget for each of the last three financial years. (AQO 1291/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): The total funds surrendered from the student loans budget for each of the last three financial years are as follows: £7.5 million in 1999-2000; £1.19 million in 2000-01; and in 2001-02, nil was surrendered.

Mr Maskey: I hope that the decreasing figures are a sign of things to come. I presume that they reflect good management as well as other circumstances. Notwithstanding those figures, should there be any such underspends in the future, will any of that money be ploughed back into the budget in order to deal with the ever-increasing levels of student debt? What would be

described generally as inadequate funding for third-level education?

Ms Hanna: The funding for student loans comes from the Treasury; it is not part of the block grant. It is a demand-led service. The Department must provide resources for every student, but if they do not all take up that loan, the resource must be surrendered.

Mr Attwood: What are the current student grant arrangements, given the comment made by Mr Maskey about student need and debt? Has the Minister any plans, or is she aware of any indications, that the money available for student grant aid might be extended?

Ms Hanna: Of course there is student need. Dr Seán Farren's £65 million package is coming on stream in September. Part of that package will be student grants of up to £1,500 for all students from households with an income of less than £15,000. The Minister of Finance and Personnel is aware that I intend to seek further resources for student support in order to widen access and to ensure that financial support goes where it is needed most — to those who are least well off.

Section 75 Obligations

2. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she is satisfied that all organisations funded by her Department meet the required statutory obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQO 1267/01)

Ms Hanna: Section 75 applies to designated public authorities only. My Department provides funding to non-departmental public bodies such as Enterprise Ulster, the Labour Relations Agency and higher and further education institutes, which are responsible for fulfilling statutory equality duties. My Department is working closely with those bodies to assist them and to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken.

Mrs Nelis: The Department for Employment and Learning has the power to extend to the private, voluntary and community sectors the principles that the Equality Commission envisaged. Will the Minister do that? What checks does her Department have in place to ensure that all the organisations that it funds meet their statutory obligations? The board of the Waterside Area Partnership comprises members of every political party except Sinn Féin. Will the Minister address the fact that an organisation that receives funding from her Department is practising blatant political exclusion?

Ms Hanna: I do not know the position as regards the board of the Waterside Area Partnership, so I shall respond to the Member later.

My Department has formed partnerships with bodies to ensure that they fulfil their statutory obligations under section 75. Ongoing informal consultation is taking

place with many organisations to raise awareness of that duty and to promote equality of opportunity.

Mrs Courtney: Has the Minister taken any steps to monitor those organisations' compliance under section 75?

Ms Hanna: Through its programme of equality impact assessments the Department has put in place arrangements for monitoring the impact of its policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity. Those arrangements extend to monitoring programmes and services that are delivered by organisations on behalf of the Department.

Dr Birnie: Section 75 relates to equality of opportunity. What is the position of the Department for Employment and Learning as regards suggestions that were made in Westminster that universities should set lower academic entry requirements for potential students from lower income backgrounds?

Ms Hanna: The debate on that matter is ongoing. The aim will always be to strike the balance between academic excellence and widening access. Dr Birnie will be aware that 1,000 additional higher education places will come on-stream this September.

Individual Learning Accounts

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to replace individual learning accounts. (AQO 1284/01)

Ms Hanna: I plan to introduce proposals for a replacement scheme in the early autumn, in line with the Programme for Government targets. In delivering a new initiative, I will take account of several factors, including lessons learnt from the initial scheme, the considerations of the employability taskforce, and developments in England, Scotland and Wales.

Ms Lewsley: The forthcoming review of the individual learning accounts scheme will show the extent to which people have been encouraged to return to learning.

Ms Hanna: Yes. Although several issues emerged as regards the operation of the original individual learning accounts scheme, the user survey that is now being analysed confirmed that the scheme had many positive effects. Although the survey showed that 90% of people were satisfied with their training and had increased their skills or knowledge, it also indicated that there was some deadweight and that the level of participation by the less well off was only 20%.

3.30 pm

The latter indicates the importance of the next scheme, which will better target the disadvantaged.

Mr Shannon: Has the Department carried out any research on the impact of the withdrawal of individual learning accounts in the Province? When that research is

collated, will a full consultation process with all concerned bodies be carried out?

Ms Hanna: That process is ongoing.

Mr Hamilton: If the Minister takes action to amend her Department's stated plans on individual learning accounts, will she take steps to ensure that that in no way takes away from her determination to fully implement the key recommendations of the Moser Report, since to do so would leave us out of step with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Ms Hanna: It is to be hoped that we will not be out of step with the rest of the United Kingdom. We plan to implement the new individual learning account scheme by September 2002.

Task Force Action Plan

4. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when she will be issuing the action plan for the task force on employability and long-term unemployment. (AQO 1282/01)

Ms Hanna: The action plan is currently being drafted. The task force intends to issue that report to the Executive before the summer recess. As the Member will know, the action plan is essential. I shall continue to drive the task force forward to ensure the implementation of the action plan.

Mr Gallagher: As the Minister said, the action plan is very important. I welcome the news that it is nearing completion. Will the Minister outline to the House some of the issues that have arisen in the consultation process?

Ms Hanna: A few broad themes have already emerged from the replies to the discussion documents and the engagement meetings, including benefits traps and the fear of moving from benefit to employment, the availability and affordability of childcare provision, and transport. Those concerns and many others are being pursued with the relevant Departments through bilateral meetings.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that large areas of Northern Ireland are experiencing a labour shortage and that companies would employ more workers if they could get them? Given that, does she also agree that Government and individuals have a responsibility to promote mobility of potential workers?

Ms Hanna: The issue of mobility came up in the discussions on the task force. There is also the question of skills mismatch. When jobs come to our door, we do not have sufficiently skilled and trained people to take them up. The task force must deal with those issues.

Engagement of Consultants

7. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment she can make in relation

to auditors Deloitte & Touche being engaged as consultants to examine the financial position of colleges of further and higher education when that firm is already engaged as internal/external auditors. (AQO 1264/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department engaged Deloitte & Touche through the Government Purchasing Agency's consultancy framework agreement by means of a competitive tender. The framework agreement was itself established by means of a competitive tendering process, in which tenders are evaluated on each company's past experience, financial standing, technical ability and costs.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her reply and for her interest in the subject. Does she agree that there could be a potential conflict of interest, as Deloitte & Touche acted both as consultants and as internal and external auditors for those further education colleges? Furthermore, is the Minister aware that the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster was scathing in its criticism of the firm, after the role it played in the financial assessment of further education colleges in Wales? Was that information made available before Deloitte & Touche was selected for a similar assignment here?

Ms Hanna: In future, it may be advisable not to appoint any firm to act as both auditors and consultants. It would be inappropriate for me to comment on the second point.

Mr K Robinson: I note the Minister's comments and how circumspect she has been. However, has the Minister made any bids for additional funds to the Executive, under the Chancellor of the Exchequer's initiative for Northern Ireland that was announced last week, to wipe out the budgetary deficits of many further education colleges in a planned and structured way, and to give them a firm financial future?

Ms Hanna: I have not yet made those bids, but I shall make them.

Further Education in East Antrim

9. **Mr O'Connor** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline her commitment to further education in East Antrim. (AQO 1287/01)

Ms Hanna: On 24 April, as part of the future capital programme, I announced that £1.5 million would be made available for the provision of a new facility at Larne. That will greatly improve the capacity of the East Antrim Institute to extend its existing work in serving local and regional business, as well as industry needs.

Mr O'Connor: I pay tribute to the Minister for her announcement. Will she elaborate further on the type of facilities that will be available in the new institute? Will she assure us that the institute will try to meet the needs of the local economy?

Ms Hanna: The institute will decide on the courses for the Larne campus. However, it will take into account what is already available at the North East Institute and the East Antrim Institute. I am keen to see the establishment of vocational courses, such as information technology, construction, electronics and engineering, to meet the present and future demands of the economy.

Walsh Visa Programme

10. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on the Walsh visa programme. (AQO 1278/01)

Ms Hanna: The Walsh visa programme is now in its third year of operation. The US legislation provides visas on the Walsh visa programme until September 2002. The Department for Employment and Learning continues to promote the programme and to recruit participants. Some 26 young people recently completed their pre-departure training, and they travelled to take up jobs in the United States on 5 May.

Mr Poots: Will the Minister advise whether the Walsh visa programme has had any more success in keeping young people in the United States when they arrive there? Will she clarify that 26 people have travelled to the United States in the past year? How much does it cost to implement the Walsh visa programme for each person?

Ms Hanna: Most of the young people have stayed in the United States, but I do not possess the exact figures. It is estimated that £750,000 will be required in 2002-03, which will cover approximately 100 participants. I have not worked it out, but it is roughly £750,000 divided by 100. There may have been a second point; I am not sure.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Was there a second point, Mr Poots?

Mr Poots: The Minister mentioned 26 young people. Is that the figure for all of last year?

Ms Hanna: That is for part of last year.

Mr Byrne: I wish to pay tribute to the Walsh visa programme; it is a worthwhile scheme for those who want to experience work in America. However, what is the Minister's Department doing to redress the under-representation of sections of the community that cannot fully avail of it, particularly the Protestant and Unionist sections?

Ms Hanna: I agree with the Member, and I am hopeful that the Walsh programme will continue. From the outset, the Department has been keen to encourage participation from both sides of the community. Recently we have focused marketing activity on the Unionist community, initially in the Greater Belfast area, through targeted mailshots and invitations from representative organisations to meet with the programme management.

Further steps will be taken to ensure future advertising for recruitment to the programme, which will pay special attention to areas that appear to be under-represented. We must remember that the young people who avail of this opportunity are generally from poorer, disadvantaged backgrounds.

Adult Literacy Strategy

11. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how she proposes to implement the adult literacy strategy. (AQO 1286/01)

Ms Hanna: The essential skills for living strategy, as it is now called, was launched on 17 April, and it is out for public consultation until 21 June. Following the consultation my officials will develop an action plan to implement the strategy, drawing upon the responses received. Members will be aware that an adult literacy strategy is important. A European survey found that almost a quarter of adults have the reading age of an 11-year-old at best, and at worst cannot read a telephone directory, a bus timetable or a label on a medicine bottle. Therefore, it is important that we pursue the strategy, and I shall chair the essential skills committee to ensure that we meet the targets.

Mr McMenamin: What are the key targets of the strategy?

Ms Hanna: The Department's main targets are, by September 2002, to establish an essential skills committee that is representative of all the main interests in the field. I will chair that committee to drive the strategy forward, and to have a regional curriculum in place for essential skills at entry level. By January 2003 we intend to launch a promotional campaign to engage new learners, with a major drive in September 2003. By 2004 we want to have increased the tutor base for learners by 50%. By 2005 we hope to have supported 25,000 learners. The biggest challenge will be to engage with people in the community who, for various reasons, have missed out on their education — people who are casualties of the education system. We have to go where it suits them, as they may not want to go into a classroom situation. If that is the case, we must go to the community and engage with them.

Report on New Deal

12. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment she has made of the implications for Northern Ireland following the recent UK National Audit Office report on New Deal. (AQO 1262/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has just concluded a review of New Deal for 18-24 year olds. The results of that, together with recent independent evaluations, will form the basis of improvements that will be implemented

over the coming months. Many of those will be in line with the National Audit Office recommendations. The National Audit Office published a report on New Deal for 18-24 year olds on 28 February. It examined how effective the programme had been in reducing unemployment and how it might be improved. The overall conclusion was that New Deal had been successful in placing young people in work, although, as with other labour market programmes, its impact in placing young people in jobs that they would not have got otherwise is less pronounced. The report also made several recommendations aimed at improving the performance of the programme.

3.45 pm

Dr Birnie: The Minister's reply almost answered the question. I want to focus on the so-called dead weight problem. The National Audit Office found that in Great Britain a substantial proportion of young people probably would have found work anyway. Is there comparable research to estimate the scale of dead weight in Northern Ireland's New Deal? If there is, what can be done about the problem?

Ms Hanna: The Member is correct in that it is easier to run a scheme with well-motivated participants in areas where the labour market is buoyant. However, such a scheme has less impact on participants who are poorly motivated or face multiple barriers to employment. Those are some of the problems that my Department is tackling through the employability and long-term unemployment task forces.

"University Town" Status

13. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will support the proposal to give Carrickfergus "University town" status. (AQO 1265/01)

Ms Hanna: I am not aware of any proposal for Carrickfergus to amend its town charter to incorporate the title "University town". However, I assume that the Member will enlighten us.

Mr Neeson: Although the main campus of the University of Ulster at Jordanstown is on the border of Carrickfergus's boundary, there have been close working relationships between Carrickfergus Borough Council, the local community and the university, and the university's technology unit is located in the Carrickfergus Industrial Centre. Will the Minister actively encourage the University of Ulster at Jordanstown to reach an agreement with the council to ensure that Carrickfergus becomes a university town based on those close links?

Ms Hanna: I will support continued co-operation, but I ought to speak to the university authorities before committing myself to supporting a particular status for Carrickfergus.

American and Foreign Students

14. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the number of (a) American students; and (b) foreign students who studied at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster in each of the last three years. (AQO 1268/01)

Ms Hanna: The total number of American and other foreign students enrolled at Northern Ireland universities over the last three years is as follows: in 1999-2000 there were 1,511; in 2000-01 there were 1,240; and in 2001-02 there were 1,254. The breakdown of figures in the format requested has been placed in the Assembly Library for the Member's information.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her factual response. Do the American students receive financial assistance from the education and library boards in Northern Ireland to enable them to study here? Do students from Northern Ireland receive financial assistance to enable them to study in the USA?

Ms Hanna: I will get back to the Member if I am wrong, but I do not believe that there is any arrangement for students from Northern Ireland to study in America.

I understand that students from the United States pay more to study in Northern Ireland than Northern Irish students. Some Northern Irish students can avail of grants to study in the United States. However, this is a separate issue. Generally, students from Northern Ireland do not receive assistance to study in the United States. Nor, indeed, do students from the United States receive assistance to study here.

Further and Higher Education Funding

15. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much money has been invested in further and higher education over the past three years. (AQO 1293/01)

Ms Hanna: From 1999 to 2002 the budget for further education was £108 million, increasing to £124 million and then to £138 million. From 1999 to 2002 the budget for higher education was £134 million, increasing to £140 million and then to £156 million. The figures for 2001-02 are provisional, and the Department for Employment and Learning will confirm them when its accounts are audited later in the year.

Mrs I Robinson: I know that there is not much time left. I thank the Minister for her response. However, on the eve of Adult Learners' Week, how can the Minister reconcile her words of 5 March,

"My Department is working hard to achieve easy access to learning for any individual who wants to take up that challenge",

with the closure of the Dundonald outreach centre of Castlereagh College of Further and Higher Education,

which will affect the overwhelming majority of its 1,100 enrolled students, 1,800 places and 40 courses — and not least the 250 students from Ballybeen, which is the second largest estate in Northern Ireland and a targeting social need (TSN) area to boot.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to respond in writing because the time is up.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: Question 2 in the name of Rev Robert Coulter has been transferred to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and will receive a written answer. Questions 4, 9 and 11 in the names of Mr Mick Murphy, Mr Eddie McGrady and Mr Gerry Kelly respectively have been withdrawn and will receive written answers. Question 13 in the name of Mr Mark Robinson has also been withdrawn, but it does not require a written answer.

Funding for the Homeless

1. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide extra funding for the homeless in view of numbers rising. (AQO 1298/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): I fully recognise that the problem of homelessness is increasing. I am determined to address it. In the current financial year funding available to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has allowed an increase of £400,000 to £3.4 million to deal with services specifically for homeless people. In addition, I hope that homeless people will benefit from bids for extra funding made by the Department for Social Development for the years 2003 to 2006. I have no doubt that Members who are interested in homelessness will support those bids.

Mrs Courtney: I am delighted to hear that extra money has been allocated. However, in view of the extra funding that was announced last week by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, will the Minister now make extra bids to address the specific problem of homelessness?

Mr Dodds: As I have indicated, homelessness is a significant problem that my Colleagues and I are determined to address. In conjunction with the Housing Executive, other Departments and agencies that are concerned with the issue, the Department for Social Development will continue to examine ways in which it can improve the services that it provides. Clearly, the Department recognised that there are funding implications.

The Member has raised the specific issue in relation to the announcement that was made last week. The money is available by way of loans and is primarily aimed at infrastructure programmes and projects. Regardless of that, we have submitted, and will be submitting, bids for increased funding to deal with services to homeless

people and housing generally. The Department recognises the social problems but cannot tackle them alone. However, we will be working hard with others to achieve progress on those important issues.

Mr Weir: Homelessness affects every constituency and should concern every Member. What impact will the new housing Bill have on tackling homelessness? When will the new legislation be introduced?

Mr Dodds: I want to formally put on record my welcome to Mr Weir and thank him for his contribution from the Benches behind me. I congratulate him on the wisdom of his move and wish him many happy years on these Benches — or even other Benches.

Mr Weir: It could be said that I have found a home.

Mr Dodds: Yes. The Member asked about homelessness, but he has found his true home today.

There have been some misguided and spurious comments in the press about the homelessness issue and the new housing Bill from people who should know better. The draft Bill, which has been widely welcomed across the board, will impact on homelessness by redefining homelessness and intentional homelessness, the treatment of persons from abroad and those found guilty of antisocial behaviour. The proposals will not detract from the priority for rehousing presently given to homeless applicants who meet the statutory criteria for assistance under homelessness legislation.

The Member asked about the timetable. The consultation period finished at the end of April. I hope to lay the Bill before the Assembly in June, with a view to it becoming law early next year.

I would point out that — and this is where there has been some misguided comment — legislation itself will not impact significantly on homelessness as social problem. Other means must be explored to do that. I will continue to work with other statutory agencies and Departments, along with the Housing Executive, to do precisely that.

Social Security Benefit Fraud

3. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQO 672/01, what plans he has to counter cases of benefit fraud within the Social Security Agency. (AQO 1303/01)

Mr Dodds: The level of social security fraud is totally unacceptable. I am committed to a robust approach to tackling fraud and abuse of the social security system on all fronts. Fraud and abuse are serious problems, but the Social Security Agency's management and staff are tackling them with great determination. The agency has a comprehensive fraud strategy that contains an extensive programme of initiatives designed to ensure that claims entering the system are legitimate; that, once in the system, claims are maintained properly; and that, where

fraud and error enter the system, they are detected and appropriate action is taken.

The agency works closely with several other bodies to maximise effectiveness. The approach is paying off, and I plan to continue with it. For example, in the last 12 months, fraud investigations were carried out into nearly 13,000 cases, and the rate of benefit was changed in over 5,500 cases. A total of 753 cases were referred for prosecution or sanction.

Mrs I Robinson: How much money does the Department estimate has been lost to benefit fraudsters across Northern Ireland over the last five years? How much does the Department expect to claw back from those criminal elements over the next number of years?

4.00 pm

Mr Dodds: Benefit cheats defraud not only the Government, but their neighbours and communities. The idea seems to exist that benefit fraud causes no pain, but the perpetrators take money from the pockets of the needy. To abuse the benefit system in that way is to steal from the rest of society. Since the agency implemented the strategy to tackle fraud, an additional £9 million has been invested each year to reduce all benefit fraud and errors. As a result, the agency estimates that the target is to recover £15 million of overpayments during the coming three-year period. That includes all categories of overpayments. It is not possible to estimate the amount that is directly attributable to criminal elements. It is estimated that each year an average of £32 million is lost to benefit fraudsters, and that figure is in the public domain.

New Build Social Housing

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development to specify the number of social housing new build dwellings (a) projected for the years 1999-2000, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002; and (b) whose on-site construction commenced, was completed and made ready for occupation in the same financial year. (AQO 1271/01)

Mr Dodds: In 1999-2000, my Department projected the completion of 1,200 new build social housing dwellings, and 1,241 were completed. In 2000-01, the completion of a further 1,200 was projected, and 1,210 were built. In 2001-02, the completion of 1,500 dwellings was planned, and 1,554 were completed. The majority of social housing schemes are completed within 12 months, but most start in one financial year and reach completion in the next. In that context, on-site construction on only a small number of dwellings was commenced and completed, with the units made ready for occupation, in the same financial year. The figures are as follows: 10 were commenced and completed in 1999-2000, six in 2000-01, and four in 2001-02. However, given the figures that I

mentioned earlier, all those units were completed in each of those financial years.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's reply and his confirmation that the units were finished on target. Does he agree that the time has come to deliver social housing according to need rather than on the basis of targets that bear no real relationship to demand?

Mr Dodds: The Department does not base its provision on targets. Targets are set so that we can measure performance and the extent to which needs are being met. The Housing Executive is responsible for assessing the housing need, and, together with the Department, it sets the targets. However, the Department always considers the level of housing need and the amount of new build that is required. The provision of new build housing should be, and is, based on housing and social need.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has responded well. What are the main problems that the housing associations face when delivering new build programmes? What measures have been taken to improve the programmes?

Mr Dodds: If the Department had unlimited supplies of money, it could build more houses and do more. I am therefore keen to bid for more funding for social housing and the housing budget generally. If we had more money, we could do more. Due to land acquisition costs, the last few years have been difficult for housing associations. There has been a major increase in land prices that affects their ability to compete in the open market. It now takes housing associations longer to get planning permission, resulting in delays. However, despite those delays, they are meeting their targets. It would help if schemes were to start on site earlier in the year. I have created a working party of officials from my Department, the Housing Executive and housing associations to consider ways in which performance can be improved.

Mr Savage: Will the Minister outline the level of homelessness outside the big towns and cities? What action will his Department take to deal with the problem?

Mr Dodds: I refer the Member to my answer to an earlier question on homelessness.

Purchase of NIHE Homes

6. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to speed up the process for tenants to purchase their NIHE homes. (AQO 1288/01)

Mr Dodds: The main published target for house sales is to make an offer within 10 weeks of application in 95% of cases. The most recent monitoring information, available at December 2001, shows performance to be about 73%. Unprecedented demand has been a significant contributory factor. At its meeting on 24 April, the Housing Executive board agreed to several actions to improve performance. Those included giving house sales

priority over other land and property functions; allowing additional staff in its three operational units; and making administrative changes to simplify the processing of historic cost information. The Housing Executive will continue to monitor performance and will consider action accordingly. The Housing Executive will inform applicants that, due to the exceptionally high levels of applications, processing may take longer than the target times in some cases. All applications will be dealt with in date order.

Mr Byrne: Although many tenants agree a sale price with the Housing Executive, its land and property services section can take more than three months to process the legal requirements. Unfortunately, that means that people who have a mortgage offer, which expires after three months, can find themselves in limbo. They have agreed the house purchase price, and they have a mortgage, but because the legal requirements have not been completed they must find a new mortgage.

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

Mr Dodds: If the Member has examples of his constituents being put in such a position, I will investigate them. The problem could be alleviated if prospective purchasers confirmed with the Housing Executive the likely date of the agreement before approaching mortgage lenders.

Mr Kane: How does the house-sales policy affect housing stock and tenancies for those on the waiting list?

Mr Dodds: Generally, tenants who avail of the opportunity to buy their homes from the Housing Executive, or housing associations, remain in those houses. Therefore such houses are not available for allocation to those on waiting lists.

The number of people on waiting lists and their waiting times are influenced by factors such as the number of re-lets that become available; the new build programme; the demand on a particular area; and the tenant's choice of area. There may be areas in which houses are available; but tenants may not particularly want to go there. All of those factors must be taken into account.

Women's Centres

7. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Social Development, in the light of the debate on funding for Women's Centres on 22 April 2002, what plans he has to deal with this issue. (AQO 1280/01)

Mr Dodds: The Department for Social Development does not normally provide core funding to women's organisations. The Belfast Regeneration Office and the Londonderry development office will continue to consider applications from women's centres for individual projects, provided that they meet the appropriate criteria. My officials are discussing the general funding of women's organisations with the gender policy unit in OFMDFM.

Ms Lewsley: Does the Minister not accept that his Department is responsible for funding women's organisations, when it is already responsible for funding some of the community and voluntary organisations, and women's organisations come within that category? Why is he so unwilling to deal with the issue, as evidenced during the debate on the Ballybeen Women's Group proposed by one of his Colleagues on 22 April?

Mr Dodds: As I have said, officials in my Department are in discussion with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the funding issue. My Department has a special responsibility for relationships between Government and the voluntary and community sector. It is not responsible for mainstream funding, either for the women's sector or local projects. I wish that some Members who speak about the matter would go away and read up on some of the responsibilities to which they, as the proponents of the system, actually agreed. When my hon Friend the Member for Strangford, Mrs Iris Robinson, put the matter before the Assembly two weeks ago in an Adjournment debate, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister responded to it.

The Member who spoke to me in the corridor on this and other issues came to the Chamber and made pejorative remarks to the effect that Mr Dodds should have contributed to the debate, and that he might be boycotting the Assembly as well as the Executive. Those remarks are uncalled for. If she were to talk to some of her Colleagues who attended a meeting in this Building, she would know that when dozens of women from various groups across Belfast and the Province came to speak to MLAs, few Members bothered to turn up. I was among those who did. One or two of her party Colleagues were there, but she was noticeable by her absence.

If the Member wants to deal with the issue seriously, rather than score cheap points, it would be more fitting for her to talk to the Department and to others who are interested in it. I remind her and other Members that the issues that the women's sector deals with span the interests of several Departments. Women's health and childcare issues are a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Education, employment and training activities that take place in women's centres meet the interests of various Departments. The core problem of deciding which support structures best equip women to play a full part in the economic, social and community life of Northern Ireland is a matter that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister may wish to consider in the light of its responsibilities for gender equality.

4.15 pm

I take my responsibilities seriously. I meet people; I will continue to pursue the matter vigorously; and I expect the support of Members when I do so.

Citizens Advice Bureaux Funding

8. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to address the funding shortfall being experienced by Citizens Advice Bureaux. (AQO 1276/01)

Mr Dodds: The main responsibility for funding local advice centres, including the Citizens Advice Bureaux, lies with district councils. The Department for Social Development contributes to this funding through the community support programme that enables councils to support Citizens Advice Bureaux. I was delighted to secure additional funding of almost £1 million during 2001-02 for that programme. Although the funding was not directed solely to Citizens Advice Bureaux, the local advice sector is benefiting from the additional provision.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister knows the benefit of Citizens Advice Bureaux and other organisations such as Cookstown Benefit Uptake Campaign. Our community depends on such groups. Will the Minister address the problem so that he can increase the amount of money in the community support programme that is ring-fenced for local advice agencies?

Mr Dodds: I recognise the value of local advice centres, particularly Citizens Advice Bureaux. I regularly meet people from that sector, and I am aware of their valuable work. However, Citizens Advice Bureaux are funded by various sources, including the Department for Social Development, district councils, health and social services trusts, the Community Fund, the Belfast Regeneration Office, the Londonderry Development Office, charitable trusts and European Union funding. Funding for the 24 bureaux and the 109 outreach centres across Northern Ireland amounted to £2,383,581 in 2000-01, which is the last year for which information is available. In addition to funding local bureaux under the community support programme, the Department provides core funding for the regional organisation, the Northern Ireland Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, which will receive £383,216 in this financial year. The sector receives a substantial amount of money.

With regard to the community support programme for local advice services, 80% of the funding is provided by district councils, and the remaining 20% is provided by the Department. The idea of ring-fencing part of that funding is inconsistent with the new planning framework, as it requires councils to decide how best to utilise the resources for the programme.

Townland Names

10. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his Department's policy on the use of townland names in departmental correspondence. (AQO 1281/01)

Mr Dodds: The Department for Social Development's policy is to respond to correspondence using the address supplied by correspondents, together with the postcode and the townland name, where it is included.

Mr McCarthy: I am disappointed with the response, given that the Assembly unanimously supported a motion that asked Departments to initiate the use of townland names on all correspondence, and the Minister's Department is one of the largest, with the most customers. As townland names are now readily available from the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland on Stranmillis Road, will the Minister ask his Department to take the lead in availing of that service, rather than depend on the information on correspondence? The Department should take the lead in using townland names, where applicable, in all replies to customers.

Mr Dodds: I can give the Member a categorical assurance that I will definitely consider that. I have no difficulty with that, but we have to bear in mind cost and other implications.

The Member touched on the fact that the Department for Social Development, through the Social Security Agency, the Child Support Agency, and so on, has a great deal of correspondence with a large number of customers. That is also relevant.

Townland names are part of our heritage, and should be preserved. I congratulate the Member on his assiduous efforts to keep this matter to the fore, and I fully endorse the use of townland names. I will certainly continue with the practice I believe is common throughout Government — and if it is not, it should be — of supporting the use of townland names when used by a correspondent.

Social Housing in Lagan Valley

12. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to provide more social housing in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQO 1279/01)

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief.

Mr Dodds: In answer to the Member's supplementary question in the House on 8 April, I detailed the social housing plans for the next three-year period. In summary, nine new homes are currently under construction, with a further 218 planned for the period 2002-03 to 2004-05 throughout the Lagan Valley constituency. The Housing Executive, as the arbiter of housing need in the Province, assures me that the current housing needs of the area are largely being met. However, it is also aware that there has recently been an increase in waiting lists and housing stress in many areas, including Lisburn. A review and analysis of these trends is currently in progress. The annual roll-forward of the programme is due to take place in December, and my Department, in consultation with the Housing Executive, will look afresh at the information emanating from the waiting

lists in Lagan Valley, and will reprioritise the new-build programme as appropriate.

Mr Poots: I would like to clarify the Minister's information. I received information from the local office that 137 new-build houses were coming on-stream. That indicates that there is a problem with information coming from the central offices to the local council.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time for questions is up. I am certain that the Minister will reply to the question at a later date.

THE HOUSE-BUYING PROCESS

Mr O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the implementation of procedures to simplify the house-buying process and, in particular, to regulate estate agents and to provide financial concessions for first-time buyers.

I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue on the Floor of the Assembly. It is over a year since I first embarked on a fact-finding and information-gathering task to see what we can do to help first-time buyers, in particular, to cope with the problems of making what may be the greatest financial undertaking of their lives.

Nobody in Ireland or Britain can have failed to notice the recent spiralling increase in house prices. That may be a welcome trend here in Northern Ireland. Stability has followed the peace process, and an increase in property prices reflects some kind of economic upturn. However, I believe that it has brought several problems with it, and I have some concerns about what this kind of price rise will mean.

In the first instance, it is eclipsing the increase in wages, and the gap, particularly for first-time buyers, is widening. First-time buyers had no problem accessing a mortgage four or five years ago, but that category can no longer do so. The first-quarter figures for this year show a small drop of 0.7% in house prices, believe it or not, but you get a better picture if you look at the last three years, during which there was a 22% increase in prices. There has been no comparative increase in income levels and salaries to compensate for that. That is where the concern arises. If we are to avoid the kind of situations we have seen recently in London and Dublin, we should try to put together some means of dealing with it.

Co-ownership in Northern Ireland has been one of the more successful initiatives introduced to help people who have difficulty getting into the housing market in the first instance. Uptake in co-ownership has been vastly more successful in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. A total of 16,681 households have taken part in the scheme, and 74% of those have “staircased up” in that they have entirely bought out the part of the house they were renting and have become full owner-occupiers. Of those who have not done so, two thirds have remained in the home-owning market, even though they may still not have bought out the portion they were renting.

Recently there has been an increase in the amount of money available, and there has been an increase in the levels of house prices that can be dealt with. However, I particularly want to draw attention to this today because it is not enough. In April, the scheme had 50% more applications than expected. There is a big demand; people want to make use of this facility in order to enter the first-time buyers’ market. There is an indication that

this trend will increase. There is also a suggestion that the equity margin might be reduced from 50% to 40%. I urge the Minister and his Department to consider whether this is possible alongside the co-ownership scheme and also if it is possible to provide some further funding.

The home buy scheme has been successful in Wales. It differs from the co-ownership scheme in that the Government offers an interest-free loan on a percentage of the mortgage, which in Wales currently stands at 25%. When the property is sold, the owners are required to pay this back, together with the same percentage of the profit made on the property. Even if in Northern Ireland it were a mere 10% to begin with, first-time buyers might be able to use it as an opportunity to get on to the first rung of the ladder towards homeownership.

People sometimes argue for a first-time buyer’s grant and some type of Government intervention. In the South, where this practice has been in operation for some time, evidence indicates that this becomes incorporated into the house price. It pushes up the price of the property and, in the end, is little help to the first-time buyer. Although it would appear to be a helpful suggestion, it has not been proven to give great support to the first-time buyer.

A popular suggestion has been to scrap stamp duty for first-time buyers. We hope to see the first benefits of that when the legislation comes into force in January next year.

However, the motion is not simply about affordability per se; it is also about making the process of buying a home more efficient. There are several streams in the motion, all of which will be helpful if they are examined and advanced.

One of the main recommendations of the report published in 2000, ‘Improving the House Buying Process — Recommendations of the General Consumer Council for NI’, was the establishment of a seller’s pack along the lines of the prepared legislation in the United Kingdom. This pack would contain relevant information on the property, including property certificates, warranties and, most importantly, details of a house condition survey.

4.30 pm

There is debate about the effectiveness of the seller’s pack. I hope that when that important issue is looked at, we will look at the needs of Northern Ireland and adopt that excellent idea to suit the needs of Northern Ireland, and there are reasons for that.

All buyers — not just first-time buyers — find themselves having to pay for more than one survey each time they are interested in a home. It is not unusual for several different surveys to be commissioned for one house, and those surveys may all have differing results depending on the standards of the surveyor. That is

simply a waste of money, and the people who benefit are not the buyers or sellers.

The Government in Westminster have put the surprising figure of £380 million wasted annually on a process that is not completed. When a house-buyer is interested in a house he has a survey carried out, and if the sale is not completed the money spent on the survey is lost. The house-buyer could also have legal and other fees, and if the deal is not completed, that money is also lost. That is a huge amount of money.

How many millions of pounds are wasted in Northern Ireland each year on aborted transactions? That includes money spent on surveys that tell buyers that they cannot afford to buy, money paid to solicitors for carrying out wasted work, and weeks or months wasted in trying to purchase a house, during which time house prices continue to rise.

As most sellers go on to buy another property, an outlay on a seller's pack would balance itself out. The pack is formulated upfront, but it does not need to be paid for upfront. It could be incorporated into the whole process. There would be great benefits in having a seller's pack.

To further simplify the process it has been suggested that buyers should have access to information prior to and during the house-buying process. At present the buyer must buy advice from a professional body. The General Consumer Council (GCC) identified difficulties in accessing written quotations to enable the buyer to shop around, and it recommends that clear information should be available to buyers.

Many people entering the property arena have no idea of what to expect, what costs are involved or what the pitfalls are. A totally independent, Government-regulated buyer's information pack would save time, money and unnecessary inconvenience for the independent buyer.

The motion calls for the regulation of estate agents. Many buyers and sellers are unclear about what to expect from estate agents, what costs are involved and what their rights are. I have seldom met any buyers, particularly first-time buyers, who were completely satisfied that the process had been open and transparent and that everything had been done correctly. Other Members could bear me out on that. Even if that is only a perception, it should be removed.

There is an ombudsman in England, and the introduction of an ombudsman service in Northern Ireland would make people more secure in the transactions that they undertake. It would leave the process more open and examinable.

Contrary to some suggestions, many estate agents in Northern Ireland have voluntarily become involved in the English system and have become members of the

club that makes use of the ombudsman service. The estate agent in my town is one of the few in the area to have become involved, and that is to be commended. However, it should not be voluntary; it should be mandatory, and through that service we could gain confidence in the house-buying process.

The ombudsman service in Northern Ireland would dictate that estate agents must make a consumer guide available, thus committing themselves to a fair and stringent code of practice. The buyer would be able to access internal complaints procedures and have a legal right of access to bidding books so that they could see the bidding on a house. It would wipe out the possibility that estate agents have the ability to push up prices for their own benefit.

The process of buying a house must be overhauled, particularly in the light of what we have learnt from our counterparts in Dublin and London. This is a detailed matter, and I have touched only briefly on some of the issues. I am glad that the Minister for Social Development is present and taking an interest in the debate. I hope that he will take the issue to his Department and see what he can come up with.

Sir John Gorman: My party supports the general thrust of what Mr O'Neill has advocated. It is worth making the point that several large planning applications are being made for housing estates in Northern Ireland. It would be in the interest of the less well-to-do or first-time buyers if part of the planning application ensured that they could afford some of the properties on the estate.

Mr O'Neill's words about the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association were wise and timely. The acquisition of 16,000 new homes for people who might not otherwise have been able to afford them is a great achievement. I am happy to say that that occurred at a time when I had a fair amount to do with housing.

Another way to help the less well off was the self-build scheme, which got off to a good start in Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive paid for advisers to ensure that people did not embark on the scheme without knowing what was required to build a house, and that it did not fall down or turn out to be a useless property. It may be worth looking at that scheme again. There is no doubt that people need to get their feet on the first rung of the housing ladder. If we do not enable them to do so, it will cause disruption for the rest of their lives, whether they are married or not.

As Mr O'Neill pointed out, there is a degree of naivety among those who have never embarked on anything that approaches the required sums of money that are being talked about. One hears of figures in the region of £70,000 or £80,000 as if they were throwaway prices. Imagine two young people attempting to visualise that amount of money in their hands. We must ensure

that a sufficient amount of social housing, which the Minister for Social Development is eager to have, is made available. We must also ensure that when people are thinking of buying a house, they get all the help possible. The seller's pack — or even a buyer's pack — would be a sensible way to do that. The Council of Mortgage Lenders Northern Ireland might be prepared to put money into that, because it would suit that body.

It would not be too difficult to reduce the co-ownership quotient from 50% to 40%. If we do not tackle that matter, we shall have many disgruntled and unhappy young people who will never be able to achieve what nearly all of us have achieved.

Mr Shannon: I support Mr O'Neill's motion. This is an opportune time to try to address some of the issues of concern, not just to Mr O'Neill as an elected representative, but also to me. People have visited my advice centre with the same problems that have been reiterated today. If we cast our minds back to the first time that we purchased a house — presumably all Members have done so — the process of borrowing the money and working out the system of repayment was simple. Today it is not. We are trying to address that.

I want to make a couple of points about some relevant issues that my constituents have raised. From time to time estate agents hand out personal telephone numbers. Perhaps the Assembly cannot make a ruling on that, but it does happen. Those numbers then become the method of contact between the vendor and the purchaser. However, that system bypasses the estate agent. In many cases, it can cause heartache. Disagreements can arise over the completion date, for example, all because the estate agent gave out the telephone number. That point should be taken on board at an early stage.

I also hear many complaints about bidding wars. I use that terminology because that is exactly what they are. In the past month, people have told me of cases where the person who put in a higher bid has suddenly backed out and the estate agent has come back with his tail between his legs to ask if they will still hold firm to their earlier bid. Bidding wars and the role that some estate agents play in them is a matter that must be addressed. It is ridiculous that house prices should soar simply because some estate agents are acting in that way — presumably higher prices mean more commission.

We are not only highlighting the issues here; we are also seeking solutions. An independent third party should monitor the process. That party should not be in receipt of commission on completion of the sale. That is one way to address the issue. It would guarantee the vendor and the purchaser complete impartiality, and the sale could go ahead. The third party would not be concerned about selling at a higher price to get more commission or about delaying the sale to see what happens.

I also want to highlight the issue of fixed interest rates. It is important that first-time buyers get a foothold in the market. They are penalised for the housing market's rise and fall, and they are being priced out of the market by mortgage rates. The mover of the motion mentioned that some people are unable to get mortgages because they are impossible to bring together. The Assembly is in the business of giving first-time buyers the opportunity to purchase houses, but to do so we must ensure that they have a mortgage that they can pay back in a time that they can cope with. We must also ensure that they are given all the help they need to ensure that the process runs smoothly.

First-time buyers should know all the options available to them. They should be presented in a clear and simple way. They should know about co-ownership, about social housing and about all the different aspects of the house-buying process, so that they can make a decision based upon all the available information.

4.45 pm

There should be a level playing field in the housing market, so that people who buy to invest do not monopolise the market and therefore reduce the number of homes available to young couples starting out. I make that point because it has happened to some people that I have been involved with, and those concerns come directly from my constituents. Those who are buying to address their need or buying for the first time should receive help; not those who are buying houses to sell later on and make a profit. I am not against property investment, but it is unfair in that it penalises those buying for the first time.

I wish to suggest a way of trying to address some of the heartaches and problems that arise in house-buying, especially for first-time buyers. Estate agents could publish a booklet that would explain the whole system. It could detail what is available; where the help is; the types of housing available; and the terminology involved. It should also detail the fees involved, such as stamp duty and search fees, because people need an idea of what the process of buying a house costs so that they can budget accordingly. It should detail all the moneys involved so that there are no hidden add-ons or costs that they are unaware of. In many cases first-time buyers are on a finite budget, and they need to know how far their money will have to go.

The booklet should outline the responsibilities of the sellers, the buyers and all others involved in house purchase. We must get the details down, safeguard the first-time buyer and give them the protection that they need. It should not be a rule book; it should be a guideline or Highway Code for first-time buyers.

I suggest the use of an independent negotiator, who can resolve issues around such items as completion dates. Many people approach us about problems with

completion dates; they are annoyed at being put off month after month and the process becomes laborious and awkward. It would be helpful to have someone to negotiate on that type of problem. The negotiator should not have a vested interest — like an estate agent's commission or a solicitor's fee — in the completion of the contract. The negotiator should be independent.

Many people are frustrated, angry and bewildered with the paperwork involved in buying a house, and they need help. The motion gives us the opportunity to bring the issues forward. I am sure that the Minister will be able to respond to our constituents' concerns and, it is to be hoped, able to bring forward ideas to address those concerns.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and the people who are trying to buy their first home. I declare an interest, as I have been an estate agent. After the next Assembly election I may return to that type of work. I have two children who will potentially become first-time buyers in the not too distant future.

The motion calls for the implementation of procedures to simplify the process, and we must identify all the bodies involved in house purchase. The motion deals specifically with estate agents, and I will return to that. However, there is a range of professionals and institutions involved in the house-buying process that the first-time buyer has to deal with.

First-time buyers face a major challenge in dealing with estate agents, banks, building societies, financial institutions, conveyancers, solicitors, financial advisers, life assurance companies, insurance companies, valuers and surveyors, all of whom have two things in common. First, they cost the purchaser money, and, secondly, they use esoteric, incomprehensible terminology that would put anyone off.

Often estate agents are the first professionals with whom a first-time buyer comes into contact. Although many transactions with estate agents take place without problems, buyers can experience difficulties in their dealings with them. Although a first-time buyer might have viewed a property, decided to buy it, made an offer, paid a deposit, reached the "sale agreed" stage and dealt with the other professionals who are needed to secure the purchase, the estate agent may later tell him or her that someone else has bought, or agreed to buy, the property, or that the price has increased.

I agree that the activity of estate agents must be regulated to prevent gazumping, in particular. The Assembly should consider introducing a requirement that estate agents issue an offer-acceptance certificate when a deposit is paid for the purchase of a property. That certificate should identify clearly the property, the price that was agreed, the deposit paid and the fact that the sale was agreed. At present a "sale agreed" sign

means nothing, and, until the contract is signed and completed, the estate agent or the vendor can withdraw from the sale. The estate agent, the purchaser and the vendor should sign the certificate so that when a purchaser pays a deposit, the vendor will be bound to a sale, subject to the finance and property title being in order.

The real challenge begins when first-time buyers go to see a financial adviser. They are bombarded with financial and insurance terminology. They must choose between capital repayment or endowment mortgages; fixed-rate or variable-rate mortgages; one-year discount mortgages, with or without payment protection; and term assurance, with or without critical illness cover, and with or without accident cover. Then they will hear a spiel about endowment policies, unit-linked funds, trust-managed funds, index-linked premiums, loan-devalue percentages and indemnity premiums. After that they must choose home and contents insurance, with or without accidental cover, with or without voluntary excess, and with or without an annual value adjustment. That is off-putting to all but the strong-hearted. I imagine that most people leave their financial adviser's office knowing much less about the house-buying process than they did when they arrived. A message must be sent to financial advisers and everyone involved in the process that they must speak in plain English, especially to the first-time buyer.

Solicitors must also speak in simple language. They use terminology such as title searches, way leaves, rights of way and encumbrances. Often they will talk about everything except their fees, and there is a wide disparity in the charges of different solicitors for doing the same basic job. Someone once told me that an expert is an ordinary man away from home. However, an expert in any field is someone who can explain a difficult, complicated concept or procedure in plain English. All the professionals involved in a house purchase must speak to their clients in plain English or *nó as Gaeilge más mian leo*.

The proposer of the motion mentioned some of the possible financial concessions that could be made for first-time buyers. The South operates a scheme that provides a grant to genuine first-time buyers. The Assembly should consider the provision of such a grant for genuine first-time buyers that would at least cover the fees that they face when purchasing a house.

Stamp duty is a significant bill. In the current housing market, £75,000 is considered a fairly modest price for a property. However, a property at that price has a stamp duty of £750. As Sir John Gorman indicated, that is a significant bill for a young married couple who are venturing into buying their first home. Stamp duty should be abolished for first-time buyers.

Most financial institutions require a mortgage applicant to be in full-time permanent employment for a period of time prior to making the application, which is usually

three years. Many people are employed on 12-month contracts. They may be employed by the same body and may be doing the same job for several years, but technically they are not in full-time permanent employment. It is extremely difficult — sometimes impossible — for them to be accepted for a mortgage. Indeed, some local authorities, Government Departments and agencies employ people, directly or indirectly, on 12-month contracts. The Assembly must examine the terms and conditions of people in that type of employment so that they can engage in the house-purchasing process and be eligible for a mortgage.

I support the motion.

Ms Morrice: I would like to join with other Members in welcoming the motion. Mr McNamee spoke “from the horse’s mouth”, as an expert. It was valuable to hear about the problems that are associated with the housing-buying system that he, as a former estate agent, understood.

The major issue concerns the host of organisations that are involved in the process and the associated problems. Mr McNamee mentioned all the different interests — estate agents, banks, solicitors, financial institutions, surveyors, and so on. There are also problems with the process: the type of mortgage — endowment or capital repayment; completion dates, which Mr Shannon mentioned; and the definition of fixtures and fittings, which has not yet been mentioned. People are unsure about the definition of fixtures and fittings. Carpets and curtains form part of the parcel that few people understand fully, even those who buy houses and move regularly, and more especially first-time buyers.

Gazumping can happen after a prospective buyer has agreed a sale, had a survey conducted, waited four to six weeks for legal issues to be resolved, and signed a contract. The prospective buyer will have spent money on the survey and on paying for lawyers for either party. At any time until the end point, before the transaction is binding, there is little to stop the seller from accepting another offer. Every Member who has spoken in the debate has mentioned that issue. The procedure is not clear and it must be made more transparent. A buyer should not have to risk so much before the transaction is binding.

It is important that the seller’s pack, mentioned by Mr O’Neill and advocated by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, is investigated because it could protect the consumer. The onus would then be on the seller to provide standard information and a house condition report.

It would reduce financial risk and the time between agreement and sale. Estate agents will be interested in that, because they see themselves as having a pretty bad reputation in the marketplace and would like it to be enhanced. It would be very valuable if the four- to six-week period — or longer — could be reduced.

5.00 pm

Éamonn O’Neill made an interesting point about the right of access to bidding books. Jim Shannon mentioned bidding: who bids against whom, and whether there are fictitious bidders. The facility to examine bidding books would be valuable. The seller’s pack must be reliable and regulated so that it meets the standard, and house condition reports should be objective.

The regulation of estate agents is important because of their growing number. New estate agents have been springing up all over the market in recent years. I do not know how important it is that houses can be bought on the Internet. Nothing should stop that new form of transaction, but online buying must be regulated.

The industry is policed by the Office of Fair Trading, but is largely self-regulating. There must be some sort of independent complaints procedure. The UK Ombudsman For Estate Agents is a voluntary scheme, and 36% of UK estate agents subscribe to it. The possibility of requiring all estate agents to subscribe to an independent complaints procedure, such as an ombudsman, is worth exploring. If Northern Ireland is to have its own procedures, do we need an ombudsman, or would the UK ombudsman take Northern Ireland estate agents under his control?

The Assembly or the Department may have a role in monitoring and regularly reviewing the effectiveness of any complaints procedure. If the industry cannot regulate itself to the satisfaction of the consumer — which is the ultimate objective — we must create some type of complaints system, perhaps on a statutory footing, to give the consumer confidence.

I am grateful to Sir John Gorman for raising the issue of social mix housing, which is very important for first-time buyers. The fact that Housing Executive property is being sold off should not be neglected. Sir John talked about having estates and new developments with a social mix, with houses that are accessible to first-time buyers and to the less well off. They have no opportunity to get into the market otherwise. I support the motion.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): I congratulate Mr O’Neill on initiating the debate. It has been very useful, and some issues highlighted are of concern to constituents. The motion is wide-ranging and involves several Departments: not just the Department for Social Development. Members who contributed to the debate will appreciate that I am wearing my ministerial hat and do not have all the answers — I would never claim that anyway, but it is particularly true for this subject. I will ensure that any points that fall to other Departments are responded to in writing.

The motion covers three topics: the home-buying process, the regulation of estate agents and the need to assist first-time buyers. As several Members noted,

buying a home is a stressful event. For most people, it is the single biggest financial transaction that they will ever carry out. In Northern Ireland, where home ownership stands at approximately 70%, many people have first-hand experience of buying a house. It has been pointed out that buying a home is not only stressful, but time consuming and complex. For that reason, my Department and the Housing Executive jointly funded the General Consumer Council's report 'Improving the house buying process'. That report, which was launched almost two years ago to the day, made several recommendations. I commend the report to those Members who have participated in the debate. Those recommendations were aimed at enhancing the buying process, and at protecting buyers and sellers. The report contained recommendations addressed to Government, to the professions and to the industry in general. My Department actively encouraged other Departments to embrace the report's recommendations and, where possible, to adopt them as policy. I am pleased that many proposals were taken on board.

Several initiatives have been introduced to speed up the home-buying process. For example, the Department of the Environment's Planning Service has computerised and centralised its property certificates section. Before that, a request for a property certificate took at least six weeks to process; 95% of all transactions are now completed inside 10 working days.

Needless to say, Land Registry has a vital role to play. It is currently involved in a PFI project to computerise its systems and archives. That project, LandWeb Direct, will transform the agency's entire operation, and will include the digitising of maps into a geographical information system, providing image retrieval and workflow processes, building computerised archive services and integrating the management of customer telephone calls, faxes and e-mails.

Ms Morrice mooted Internet use, et cetera. The LandWeb Direct service marks the first stage in providing land registry services online, and will become available later in 2002. It will enable accredited users, such as solicitors and estate agents, to access Land Registry information electronically from their own offices. The service will also be available outside normal working hours, and it will be of particular benefit to customers in more remote areas.

The General Consumer Council's report recommended that the seller of a property should assemble a pack of such standard documents and information for prospective buyers as title documents and a house condition report, to be known as a seller's information pack. Several Members mentioned that. That recommendation was based on developments in Great Britain, where the idea was the subject of a major pilot study in Bristol. Since the study's completion there have been mixed reactions. One major area of concern was the house condition survey, which, it was felt, might not be of sufficient

detail to satisfy the potential purchaser and — perhaps more importantly — the potential purchaser's lender. There were also concerns about the price of the seller's information pack, which could cost more than £500. Since the seller's information pack for the Bristol study was produced at nil cost, it was suggested that that did not give a true reflection of its advantages or disadvantages.

We continue to monitor developments in Great Britain, where the specific details of the proposals for the seller's information pack are now being developed. Publication of a consultation document in the summer of 2002 is proposed.

Several issues must be considered before the seller's information pack can become a legal requirement. Therefore, it makes sense for us to maintain a watching brief in order to learn from the experience of Great Britain. Meanwhile, I am confident that the changes already made, and those that are proposed, will considerably improve and simplify the house-buying process in Northern Ireland. It is important to bear in mind Mr O'Neill's point that account must be taken of Northern Ireland's specific needs. We must learn from practice and experience elsewhere, while addressing specifically what must be done in Northern Ireland.

There is a difficulty in the seller's information pack with the surveyor's report. Can a potential purchaser have confidence in a surveyor's report prepared for the seller? We do not want a situation in which both buyer and seller feel compelled to have a surveyor's report.

The second aspect of the motion calls for the regulation of estate agents. It has been suggested that an ombudsman for estate agents be established. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is responsible for enforcing the Estate Agents Act 1979 and the Property Misdescriptions Act 1991. The Estate Agents Act 1979 gives enforcement powers to the Director General of Fair Trading, and its purpose is to ensure that estate agents act in the best interests of their clients and that buyers and sellers are treated fairly, honestly and promptly.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is responsible for ensuring that estate agents comply with certain financial transactions between estate agents and house buyers and in particular ensure the safe keeping of deposits.

Under the Estate Agents Act 1979, the Director General of Fair Trading can issue warning and prohibition orders that can stop a person working as an estate agent. A warning order can also be issued if an estate agent breaks the law by, for example, making misleading statements, giving false information on charges or providing clients with misinformation about offers. A prohibition order can be issued if an estate agent breaches a warning order or is convicted of a serious offence such as fraud, other dishonesty or violence.

The Property Misdescriptions Act 1991 prohibits the use of false or misleading statements, made in the course of estate agency business, that relate to certain matters such as location or address, aspect, view, outlook or environment and fixtures and fittings. That legislation gives the Director General of Fair Trading much stronger powers than an ombudsman would have.

In the past three years, fewer than 1% of the complaints received by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's consumer affairs branch related to estate agents. In the same period, no estate agent was prosecuted, nor were any warning or prohibition orders issued to estate agents in Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, that Department's view that the present legislation to regulate estate agents is sufficiently robust, and it has no immediate plans to amend it. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will read Members' comments about that.

Members commented on the need to make financial concessions available to first-time buyers. As the Minister responsible for housing, my vision is one of a society in which everybody has a home that is safe, affordable, in the area of his or her choice, of an acceptable quality and designed to meet the needs of its occupants. The media regularly report on the rising house prices here and the difficulty that that causes first-time buyers. Much of that reporting is fuelled by recent problems in the South of England and the Republic of Ireland, where house prices increased dramatically in a short time.

House prices in Northern Ireland have risen. In recent years, those increases have been considerably higher than the increases in other parts of the United Kingdom. However, it must be borne in mind that our increases started from a much lower baseline. For many years, house prices here were significantly lower than in the rest of the United Kingdom, so in some respects there is a catch-up process.

The ratio between house prices and wages remains relatively healthy in Northern Ireland. Although some areas have localised affordability issues, particularly in parts of Belfast and north Down, home ownership remains a viable option for most prospective first-time buyers.

5.15 pm

Sir John Gorman mentioned the idea of making planning applications conditional on the provision of affordable housing. That is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, and was addressed in the regional strategic framework.

I am aware that the situation must be monitored carefully, particularly with regard to first-time buyers. I want to do whatever I can to ensure that those who wish to become homeowners have the opportunity to do so.

The co-ownership scheme was mentioned, and I agree with Mr O'Neill about its popularity, value and usefulness. Since becoming Minister, I have made co-ownership one of my top priorities. I have made available considerable additional funding to ensure that the scheme can meet growing demand, and in the last financial year, I doubled the allocation for co-ownership — from £5 million to £10 million. I have made a commitment in the Programme for Government to continue to fund this important programme.

The Housing Executive sales programme is an important method of getting people into the housing market, and that also applies to Housing Association tenants. Financial and lending institutions have a major role to play, and I have built up close contacts with their representative body, the Council of Mortgage Lenders.

At the end of the day, we have a free market, and we must recognise that there are limits to what the Government can do. We are conscious of the situation and will continue to monitor it closely.

Mr O'Neill: I thank Members who participated in and gave their attention to this debate — some good points were made. Regrettably we had only an hour, and Members who may have wished to participate but did not have time. However, the quality of the contributions reflects the concern that Members have about this serious situation.

John Gorman, with his wealth of experience and wisdom, drew attention to several important issues, and I welcome his comments. When we studied the situation with the Minister in the South, he explored a policy that he had of zoning certain land for social housing, although not necessarily for affordability. He said that regardless of what he did, there were problems, such as developers wanting to maximise the best part of the site and not use the rest. Although there are difficulties with that approach, it is a sound suggestion. It is important that we get the right mix and ensure that all developments offer a range of housing and house prices.

Jim Shannon dealt with a large number of important issues. He expressed concern about the bidding process. Access to the bidding book, which Jane Morrice also mentioned, is important, as it ensures that people have confidence in the process. That is part of the policy of transparency that I hope an ombudsman would propose.

Jim Shannon also referred to the delay and problems people experience in agreeing completion dates, and the fact that buying a house can be a long-drawn-out process. Along with Pat McNamee and other Members, he hinted at the delay that the legal process can cause. We must help to simplify that process, particularly for the first-time buyer. The long-drawn-out process is difficult for them, as they have to negotiate to put together the financial package and loans that they need.

We must consider how to reduce the time that that takes and put a better formulation together.

I was interested in Pat McNamee's practical comments. He emphasised the effect of jargon on first-time buyers, for whom that language is totally alien. He painted a picture of a jungle of jargon, and he is right to say that we must reduce it. That is exactly what I was trying to get at in the motion.

Jane Morrice came up with a good point about Internet selling, which I had not thought of. This is actually growing, and I came across some information on the growth of Internet sales in the work I was doing. Like other things, it is quite difficult to control Internet buying and selling. I know of emigrants wishing to return home who are using the Internet to purchase properties in Northern Ireland. There is a real problem there, and Ms Morrice made an important contribution.

I also thank the Minister for becoming involved in this. I recognise that not every issue here falls within his particular bailiwick, but as the lead Minister I can depend on him to expedite those points that do not belong to him through the various agencies. The Minister gave a good rundown on what has been done in support for the General Consumer Council's proposals and the simplification of the house-buying process.

He expressed some concerns about the seller's pack that have emerged from the pilot scheme in Bristol, and he is right to do so. Indeed, there are some other points about the seller's pack that we need to take into consideration — not least its shelf life. That could actually accrue an extra cost because there is only three to six months before another valuation is needed. I welcome his emphasis on the need for Northern Ireland, which he did in his summary. I still think that there is sufficient merit in the proposal of a seller's pack and in this simplification of the process that we are all trying to achieve.

My final point is about estate agencies. I welcome the Minister's comments about financial support and control. To a large extent he may be right about professional, inbuilt safeguards — but it is in-house. We are looking for a more independent agency, such as an ombudsman or an ombudsman-type service. People would have confidence going to the ombudsman because they would not be baffled by jargon and science. People would know that they would get satisfaction with an established, transparent procedure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for the implementation of procedures to simplify the house-buying process and, in particular, to regulate estate agents and to provide financial concessions for first-time buyers.

Motion made:

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

CLOSURE OF LIMAVADY COURTHOUSE

Mr Douglas: When I first put in for this Adjournment debate, my voice was a bit stronger. I hope you will forgive me if I take a drink of water now and again to clear my throat. With that in mind, perhaps my comments will be brief.

I bring forward this debate on the closure of Limavady courthouse following publication of a consultation document titled 'Court Accommodation in Northern Ireland 2001-2010', which deals with the accommodation needs of the Court Service for the next eight years in Northern Ireland. More specifically for people in the Limavady area, it proposes the closure of Limavady courthouse. This recommendation has caused great consternation in the borough of Limavady. Indeed, a petition bearing over 1,000 signatures and expressing opposition to this proposal has been presented to officials in Downing Street. The people of Limavady believe that this facility is vital.

A proposal to close the courthouse would contradict the comments of Rosie Winterton, a parliamentary secretary at the Lord Chancellor's Department, that appear in the foreword to the consultation document. She said that the Northern Ireland Court Service wished to address the needs of everyone who used the courts, especially those with special needs, disabilities and children, and vulnerable or intimidated witnesses. Such people would be better served by a court in an area that they know well and in which they feel comfortable.

Londonderry courthouse is the alternative venue that is offered. Although that courthouse's merits are in no doubt, given its recent refurbishment, Limavady courthouse also served the people of Londonderry during many years of sectarian strife, when the IRA targeted constantly Londonderry courthouse at Bishop Street, frequently rendering it unusable. If the Northern Ireland Court Service had consulted before publishing its document, solutions could have been proposed, at minimal cost, to provide the amenities that the Limavady facility lacked. The document seems to leave little room for manoeuvre; its authors seem to want it rubber-stamped even as it is published.

The other considerations for the Court Service are rationalisation and value for money; however, raw figures often do not give the true picture. The increased cost to the public of making the longer journey to Londonderry for court hearings, combined with the increased cost of

legal aid and higher levels of policing, must also be considered.

The estimated saving of £300,000 in running costs, which would be made as a result of the closure, must be put into context. People should balance that saving against the costs of the many public inquiries that are taking place in the Province, which could fund the entire Northern Ireland Court Service many times over. Moreover, the expenses that will be paid to the Sinn Féin MPs at Westminster, despite their not taking their seats, could offset those court savings with £100,000 to spare. We must be realistic, and we should emphasise those points to the Government as often as possible, despite their current policy of placating and appeasing the lawbreakers at the expense of the decent, law-abiding citizens of this country.

Given that the Borough of Limavady has above-average unemployment levels, high levels of deprivation, many single parent families and low levels of educational achievement, many of the increased costs that would result from the closure would be intolerable. The Limavady area has felt a cold wind blow through it due to the so-called "peace dividend". Over the years, it provided vital court services in a reasonably safe venue. It also provided a home for many Court Service and police personnel. The town is feeling the effects of the loss of vital funds from those sources, along with the loss of traditional industry from the town. The further loss of the courthouse gives local people the impression that they are being treated as second-class citizens — that is disgraceful. Over the years, the people of Limavady have been among the most law-abiding citizens in the Province, making up much of the silent majority of decent people here. Consequently, it is fundamentally wrong that they should be subjected to wave after wave of public and private service closures that further downgrade the town.

The Assembly and the Executive have put in place a policy of rural proofing, which is being disregarded in the centralisation of many court facilities in the Province — not least the facility in Limavady, which is predominantly a rural borough. Many Members have pressed for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, which would result in rural invigoration by bringing more money into country areas. Although rationalisation is being carried out under the control of central Government, regional variances should be considered when formulating policies.

Those factors should be considered in conjunction with the fact that the natural affinity of the people of the area is more in keeping with the rest of the rural county of Londonderry rather than the city itself.

5.30 pm

Many are loath to go to the west bank under normal circumstances, and more so when they are anxious about an impending court appearance. The fear and

trepidation are such that people from the Waterside area of Londonderry would rather go to Limavady for their service than travel to the west bank of the city. Those are real concerns for decent people, and they should be addressed rather than ignored because it is inconvenient to do otherwise.

The Court Service must re-examine the proposal, and come to Limavady to view the facility to see if the unused accommodation can be upgraded to meet people's needs. That might have already happened.

The document shows that the Magherafelt facility, which is also poor, will be upgraded due to its position. That should happen in Limavady because of the fear of travelling to Londonderry.

We must not have an inadequate, unjust evaluation imposed upon the people of the Borough of Limavady simply because that is expedient. There would be additional delays in hearing cases if they were moved to Londonderry courthouse. The court at Bishop Street is already working to capacity, and people from the whole area would face even greater delays and attendant worries.

Such a situation would be totally unacceptable and must not be allowed to happen. The Limavady facility should be upgraded and used more effectively to ease court time in Londonderry, thus speeding up the system in the division.

Mr McClarty: I support the motion. It has been tabled as a result of the Northern Ireland Court Service's consultation document 'Court Accommodation in Northern Ireland 2001-2010', which was launched in December of last year with the aim of charting the future of court accommodation in Northern Ireland.

The strategy proposes the rationalisation of courthouses, with the closure of several courts that are deemed to be inadequate. Venues to be closed include the court facilities in Banbridge, Larne, Clogher, Kilkeel, Cookstown and Limavady. It is envisaged that business will transfer to adjoining venues. Limavady's business will be transferred to Londonderry courthouse.

The review of court accommodation in Northern Ireland by the Court Service aims at improving the quality of court accommodation for court users. A press release issued by the Northern Ireland Court Service on 7 December 2001 stated that particular emphasis would be given to

"those members of the community who have special needs including persons with disabilities, children, and vulnerable and intimidated witnesses."

Other Members may wish to speak about court closures in their constituencies; I shall highlight the imminent closure of Limavady courthouse.

Limavady courthouse is one of three court complexes in the Londonderry county court division. The others are located in Magherafelt and Londonderry. There are

seven county court divisions in Northern Ireland, and the nearest major court complex to Limavady is Coleraine courthouse, which is within the boundary of the Antrim court division.

There are compelling reasons for rescinding the decision to close Limavady court. First, the closure of the courthouse would result in discrimination on the grounds of geography. Limavady lies in the north-east of the Londonderry court division. Transferring court proceedings to Londonderry would increase journey times unnecessarily and would be excessively expensive. Some of those who use the court system are among the less economically privileged. Financially, many of them would find it a strain to travel the extra 20 or 30 miles. What about the people mentioned earlier — parents with young children, the disabled and the vulnerable? How will the closure of Limavady courthouse affect them?

Secondly, Limavady is not a blink-and-you-have-missed-it village. It is a thriving town, which has grown substantially in recent years. It has a busy commercial core, with good tourist facilities and international branding, and it is getting a major infrastructure improvement, a bypass, to accommodate excess traffic.

The town has a distinctive identity and catchment area. It is bounded geographically by the Roe Valley to the west and a mountain plateau to the east. By virtue of its geography, Limavady has a distinct catchment area and rural hinterland, and people living there would find it alien to have to use court services elsewhere in the Londonderry county court division. The fact that the town is in the county court division is a good reason for repelling the threat of closure.

The courthouse, which is sited in the centre of Limavady, has provided the town with a *raison d'être*, a sense of purposefulness, character and employment for many years. Surely small funds could be channelled to any refurbishment programme deemed necessary to provide the judiciary and the public with modern facilities.

The Northern Ireland Court Service has stated that its aim is

“to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland have the highest possible quality court accommodation that meets the needs of everyone who uses the courts.”

That is a worthy aim, which I fully support. However, that ought not be at the expense of ill-judged rationalisation. Small town courthouses have provided a sense of justice to communities for decades, if not centuries. Closing Limavady courthouse would be to misinterpret community needs and perceptions, and it would contradict the objectives of ensuring equality of access and quality of provision.

I appeal to the Northern Ireland Court Service not to rationalise for the sake of expediency.

“Overall, we need to provide facilities that reflect the dignity of the law and its importance to everyone in the community.”

Those are not my words. They come from the Court Service's accommodation strategy document. Limavady courthouse fulfils that criterion. I support the motion and urge others to do likewise.

Mr A Doherty: I commend Mr Douglas for tabling the motion. We are Colleagues on Limavady Borough Council as well as in the Assembly, and although we differ widely in our political beliefs and aspirations for the future of this country, we share a desire to do everything we can to protect and promote the well-being of our constituents. That well-being will be seriously compromised if the threat to close Limavady courthouse is realised.

I accept the case made by Limavady Solicitors' Association for retaining the wide range of services currently provided at the courthouse as well as for much needed improvement to its facilities and an expansion of services to include a family proceedings court. The case is made not just to allow the solicitors to continue to provide an efficient and cost effective service to their clients but to target the social needs of a mainly rural community, thus sparing those in need the cost and inconvenience of travelling a considerable distance to a large, unfamiliar and intimidating court that is already extremely busy.

I shall add another dimension to the issue with some trepidation, and I shall tread delicately, for I must introduce the controversial subject of symbols and symbolism. I am not referring to the use and misuse of flags and other emblems. This is a matter of great concern to those with a genuine commitment to civil rights and responsibilities. However, it is something criminally abused by the sad, bad, mad and dangerous, who exploit the fears and passions of people whose quality of life is so tragically disturbed and deprived. There is something abysmally evil about a society in which a young person can be killed for wearing a football jersey, or gangs claim some sick allegiance to extremists who are creating such misery in the near east.

The symbolism I am referring to is that which is created by some structures of the state, particularly those relating to justice and the law. It is a rather unfortunate coincidence that the possible closure of a courthouse comes at a time when predictions are rife about the shutting down of prisons and military installations. Prisons and courts of justice are at opposite ends of the spectrum. I stress the word “justice” rather than “law”. Justice is an absolute, but the law is sometimes an accident — sometimes a bad accident.

The over-prevalence of prisons, H-blocks and houses of correction symbolise the failure of a society — Government and people — to be civilised. The shutting down of prisons and armed camps is an indication that society is, at least, struggling away from barbarism. The economic impact of that on workers and the community

will initially be drastic, but with proper insight and planning that may be temporary. A healthier and more normal economy is possible when conditions are right for the attraction of inward and indigenous investment. That is particularly so in areas such as Limavady and the north-west with regard to tourism development.

The symbols of prisons and militarism are all negative. That is not so for courts of justice, so long as true justice is being administered. True justice drives out bad laws. Circumstances must exist, or be created, in which people can be convinced that they will receive justice from their courts. Courts must be close to the people; they should not be remote and threatening. The symbolism of a court is that of a society that is, at least, aspiring towards civilisation in its truest sense. People must have a sense of ownership of the system of justice that exercises a measure of control over how they relate to one another in society. The preservation and enhancement of petty session courts, such as that in Limavady, can give them that sense of ownership and can be a positive influence in civilising this confused and unhappy place.

Mr Campbell: I support the motion. Mr Arthur Doherty referred to the closure of prisons, and I hope that he will be able to support the campaign to retain Magilligan Prison, which the Limavady area is heavily dependent on to keep the economy buoyant, but we will come to that on a future date.

5.45 pm

The Limavady Solicitors' Association is to be highly commended for the way in which it has taken the campaign to retain the courthouse to the people. I want to place on record that the association has carried out an assiduous campaign. I was glad to be able to use my offices at Westminster and, in my capacity as Member of Parliament for the area, to ensure that the petition was delivered to Downing Street.

The issue has been well aired and well supported in the locality. The Limavady Solicitors' Association and the greater public have rallied behind the campaign to retain the courthouse, and Members have spoken at some length about the necessity to retain it, so I do not

want to duplicate what has been said. However, during the campaign two months ago I met with Rosie Winterton, the Parliamentary Secretary at the Lord Chancellor's Department who is responsible for the issue.

Even though the matter will be decided at Westminster, it is right that it be discussed in this appropriate forum. However, in discussions with Ms Winterton it became clear that, despite the list of courthouses earmarked for closure, she would be prepared to take a fresh look at the courthouse. To encourage that, there was a recent meeting between Limavady Borough Council and officials, which I had requested. The Northern Ireland Court Service has carried out a survey, the results of which will be released this week; the solicitors' association also conducted a survey. Both surveys concur with the views of the area's Members: people in Limavady do not wish to travel excessive distances to the nearest courthouse. In some parts of the constituency, as Mr Arthur Doherty will know, people would have to travel 25 miles to the nearest courthouse.

A chill factor affects parts of the community, and Mr Douglas mentioned that. However, an issue that has not been mentioned is that the small claims court meets in Limavady. Small claims cases by individuals or small businessmen can go either way, and the benefit may be offset against charges if the claimant loses. Solicitors in Limavady think that the number of small claims will fall. The burden of travel on top of the possibility of not winning the case will make people reluctant to go to the small claims court. In that case, justice would not be done and would not be seen to be done, because it is not available to people in the area.

Other issues came up in the Court Service's survey. The most important is that three quarters of the people surveyed in Limavady felt that they would be affected if court business were transferred to Londonderry. Ms Winterton and the Court Service cannot set aside a survey that states that three quarters of people would be adversely affected. That must be allied with the unanimous views of the local borough council and other public representatives, MLAs and the MP. I hope that the campaign to retain the courthouse in Limavady succeeds.

Adjourned at 5.48 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 13 May 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FUR FARMING (PROHIBITION) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 8/01] to prohibit the keeping of animals solely or primarily for slaughter for the value of their fur; to provide for the making of payments in respect of the related closure of certain businesses; 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 is determined.

LIMITED LIABILITY PARTNERSHIPS BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 9/01] to make provision for limited liability partnerships.

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 is determined.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Change of Membership

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That Mr Arthur Doherty replace Mr Joe Byrne as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. — [*Mr Tierney.*]

That Mr Alban Maginness replace Ms Patricia Lewsley as a member of the Committee for Education. — [*Mr Tierney.*]

Mr Speaker: Two motions concerning Committee membership stand in the Order Paper in the name of Mr Tierney. However, Mr Tierney has advised me that he is unable to attend this afternoon's sitting due to untoward circumstances. The two motions will, therefore, not be moved.

ESTABLISHMENT OF AD HOC COMMITTEE ON THE UPDATING OF SCHEDULE 1 OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY DISQUALIFICATION ACT 1975

Resolved:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 48(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the updating of Schedule 1 of the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975 referred by the Secretary of State and to submit a report to the Assembly by 24 June 2002.

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

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

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

SOCIAL SECURITY (DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

Prayer of Annulment

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Social Security (Disability Living Allowance) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2002 be annulled. — [*Mr Ford.*]

Mr Speaker: I do not see Mr Ford in the House. That being the case, I am afraid that the motion falls.

NORTHERN IRELAND ENERGY AGENCY

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls for the urgent establishment of a Northern Ireland energy agency to assess, plan and actively manage all aspects of energy procurement, supply and conservation in Northern Ireland. — [Dr McDonnell.]

Mr Speaker: I do not see Dr McDonnell in the House. However, in all reasonableness and fairness to the House, the Member would not have expected the motion to come at this time. Therefore, I propose that the sitting be suspended for five minutes to enable the House to gather itself. The House will now, by leave, suspend. The House is suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.06 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

NORTHERN IRELAND ENERGY AGENCY

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the urgent establishment of a Northern Ireland energy agency to assess, plan and actively manage all aspects of energy procurement, supply and conservation in Northern Ireland.

I am perhaps a little unprepared, as I anticipated speaking in an hour and a half. Nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity to speak, premature though it is.

The supply and use of energy is one of the biggest issues that affects us all. It affects everything from the personal cost of living to the costs of major industrialists, whether in service or manufacturing industries. It adds a considerable amount to the bills and overhead costs of any establishment, and, indeed, it adds a considerable amount to the Executive's expenditure because the Civil Service Departments probably consume large amounts of energy and, therefore, large amounts of money — that energy costs perhaps 25% or 30% more than it should.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, of which I am a member, spent months working hard on a range of energy issues and presented its report to the Assembly earlier this year. It was well received and, some weeks ago, Sir Reg Empey produced initial proposals for consultation.

During the preparation of the report, it became evident that there is very little stability, cohesion, certainty or security in the energy market. It is bitty, scattered and disorganised. I hope I am making my points in a non-contentious way. The island of Ireland is relatively small in energy terms. Indeed, we probably need a much more open energy market in these islands, including Scotland, Wales, England and the other regions involved. In the short term, I want the various aspects of energy to be opened up and joined up on an all-island basis.

I could go into the major debate about gas pipelines at length, but it is fairly obvious that gas connections are needed, both North/South and east-west with Scotland and England. Gas is opening up, and the electricity market needs to be opened up very quickly too.

12.15 pm

I do not intend to go into the details of the generator contracts, which the House has debated at length before and which were also considered in the energy report. I know that the generators' contracts — [Interruption].

I cannot hear myself, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: Is Mr Weir finished?

We will debate at length whether we should buy out the generator contracts over the next eight years or leave them to fizzle out. Leaving them creates problems, because we must ask what will happen after 2010 or 2012. Will we end up with no locally generated electricity? Are our stations stable enough to produce electricity beyond 2012, or will their owners let them chug on inefficiently and switch them off in 2012?

A range of questions must be answered, and again I emphasise that they must be examined in an all-island perspective. Some people in Fermanagh have discovered that it is more efficient and effective to buy their electricity from the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) than from NIE. I suggest that the Southern Irish electricity market should be opened up and the ESB's monopoly reviewed, but that is a matter for investigation by the North/South bodies.

It is not a question of our taking a daily or weekly look at the energy market or, as prices fluctuate, being chancers and buying cheap gas or a bit of cheap coal. If we are to produce stable energy for the twenty-first century, we must produce a 35- to 40-year plan for the direction in which the energy debate should go. Generators will not invest, because the life of a power station is 35 to 40 years, and no one will invest unless the outcome is known.

In a domestic situation, no one will invest in an oil-fired boiler if the price of oil is to go through the roof in two years' time. Equally, if coal is to be out of date in three years' time, no one will invest in a solid-fuel boiler. Gas is popular, but many people have no access to gas. The discussion and perspective must be balanced by what works in rural areas without gas and by what works in urban areas where gas is. I represent an urban constituency, and all too often matters are viewed from an urban perspective. The energy situation is just as important in Newtownstewart as it is on the Newtownards Road, and the needs of both must be addressed.

Although I welcome the efforts of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and his Department over the last couple of years to work with the regulator to create some kind of stability, we must go further. To some extent, energy can be seen as being added on to, or piggy-backed by, a much bigger Enterprise, Trade and Investment job-creation agenda. Energy is like a motorbike sidecar — it is there when it is needed, but most of the time no one pays much attention to it. Primary concentration and a stronger group of people who are organised are needed to make a real difference in the energy market by finding supplies of energy — gas or whatever — and ensuring that those supplies are delivered at an affordable price.

I am concerned at the scatter of interests beyond those vested in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a major responsibility for renewables. That includes the energy potential of biomass from willow and other rapidly grown softwoods. It also includes the potential for biogas production, whereby pig slurry can be used to produce copious methane gas that can then be used efficiently and effectively.

That was an outline of the agricultural issues. I could go on at length, but I do not want to delay the House unduly.

The issue should interest the Department of the Environment because of the potential to create considerable amounts of energy from much of the waste that is dumped in landfill sites, where it causes other problems. However, from the perspective of the man or woman on the street, most of the responsibility for energy conservation and fuel poverty, which results from houses being badly designed and built, lies with the Department for Social Development. The Department of the Environment is also responsible to some extent through its building control measures.

A plethora of energy issues permeates every Department. There are major contentions. The energy inquiry failed to resolve the debate on the burning of Orimulsion at Kilroot power station. Orimulsion is a tarry substance that can be burnt efficiently and effectively and, with the proper controls and chimney-washing measures, it is cleaner than either coal or oil. That issue must be resolved.

Unless energy prices come down by 25% to 30%, the local economy will be affected. Our economy is not as efficient, effective or welcoming as others are, and in a few years' time, when grants and other incentives are tighter, investors will consider criteria such as energy prices. Although our well-trained, work-friendly workforce can be promoted in Europe and North America, the fact that our energy prices are excessive will rapidly counter our efforts.

Would it be worthwhile to buy out the contracts now, or would it be worthwhile to take the pain now in order to avail of the gain later? We must ensure that in the future we do not fall into the trap that the contracts created. Nevertheless, the contracts and the regulator must be considered. When the contracts expire in 2010, we must ensure that we have not created a free-for-all market, because we could be subject to either the fluctuations of the market or the power station being switched off by the operator if it did not like the price that it was receiving.

There is a long-term need, which must be thought out carefully, for the regulation and control of energy. Therefore, we must consider how best we can pull together all the components and interests that the Assembly has in energy issues. Those issues mainly involve the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the

Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development are also involved.

I have no great sympathy for quangos, and I am not proposing that another quango be created simply for the sake of it. However, in this case, it is prudent to consider the formation of a twenty-first-century quango with the remit to either produce the goods or to be wound up after a set period.

I do not want to go on too long; I have probably talked for long enough. However, I would like to mention fuel poverty. I remind Colleagues that the last statistics showed that approximately 170,000 of our households — 28% — are in fuel poverty. I hope that the number has been reduced a little since then.

Fuel poverty is when people cannot afford enough energy or fuel to keep themselves and their homes warm. It is a scandal that, in this day and age, 28% of our population are in fuel poverty. Although I have not dwelt on energy conservation at length, it is a big part of the equation. We must tackle fuel poverty, and, in order to have the teeth necessary to do so, we need an energy agency. The agency must cover all aspects of energy, from the beginning of the energy production process to its ultimate consumption, with the customer switching on an electric kettle or other appliance.

There is great excitement about gas at the moment, and for people in the Belfast region and some other towns who can access it, gas seems to be clean, efficient and cheaper than oil and other fuel sources. We have been promised large supplies of gas from the Corrib gas field off the west of Ireland, and that may last for 10 or 15 years. In 20 or 25 years' time we, or those who succeed us in the Chamber, might return to the debate, because it may be necessary to procure gas supplies from places such as Siberia and pipe it across Europe. That would be a major task, and it is why this issue is too big for the present structure to handle.

We need a dedicated team under the structure of a special agency, which would report regularly to the Assembly or to the appropriate Ministers, to pull the fragmented energy framework together. Such an agency would co-ordinate the existing structure and set us up strongly for the future. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin broadly welcomes the objectives of the motion, but with some reservations. This debate, and the establishment of an agency, might bring about a much-needed examination of our energy situation. Major long-term structural problems with energy arrangements must be addressed.

The proposed energy agency has merits, since it could bring much-needed co-ordination and planning to the generation and supply of energy. The motion further

proposes that conservation — energy efficiency — be included in the agency's remit, and that suggestion is welcome. There are stringent targets for the control of energy consumption in the North of Ireland, and electricity generation from renewable or sustainable methods has been proposed. Such an agency could provide the necessary clout and co-ordination to meet our needs. Too often we hear about the barriers that people generating electricity from renewable or sustainable methods encounter when they attempt to spill their extra capacity onto the grid. The proposed agency could streamline that process and support electricity production from those means.

It has been suggested that the agency's remit would include assessing the energy needs of the Six Counties in the medium and longer term, and it could build on the British Cabinet Office's recent energy review. The agency would need to examine the expansion of the gas network and the impact that lack of access to natural gas might have on the competitiveness and economic development of our rural community. It should be further tasked with proposing plans to overcome that disadvantage.

Any such agency must also have a pivotal role in the development of the all-Ireland energy infrastructure, and its remit would need to be expanded to encompass the whole of Ireland or any other reciprocal arrangement when the all-Ireland infrastructure is established.

However, I am concerned because the Administration does not need another quango. Given that we wish to curb public administration, we must think long and hard about the financial liability and the implications of such a body. Will the public bear the burden of such an agency, and will its effectiveness and efficiency make the expenditure worthwhile?

12.30 pm

My final reservation is the most significant. There are long-term problems with the energy infrastructure in the North of Ireland, as evidenced by high electricity prices and the lack of access to natural gas. The proposed role and remit of the energy agency may help by tinkering at the edges but will not begin to address the fundamental problems of fuel poverty and commercial competitiveness, which must be dealt with.

Sinn Féin believes that it is time to explore fully all possibilities for solving the problems created by the expensive and archaic energy infrastructure that we inherited. Westminster has retired from the picture, happy in the knowledge that it has reaped millions of pounds from the sale of the North's generation and supply industry. This has resulted in high prices for consumers and high profits and dividends for shareholders. It is time for a full and open debate on all potential solutions. Consumers will pay through their electricity bills for the Moyle interconnector with Scotland. However, only the shareholders will benefit from

the profits of electricity trading on the interconnector, which is socially and economically unjust.

An energy agency might help to deal with the immediate issues of co-ordinating generation, supply and energy efficiency. However, for Sinn Féin to support such an initiative, the agency would have to be more than a quango: it would require a radical agenda for mapping and planning energy issues throughout Ireland for the next 50 years. The proposed agency does not go far enough to address the real energy issues in the North of Ireland, and Sinn Féin believes that it is time to open the debate fully. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I thank Dr McDonnell for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. Energy is of great interest to me and to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, which presented its report to the Assembly on 13 March 2002. The inquiry was expected to last a matter of weeks but took almost a year. The subject is of great interest to me because 20 years ago one of my predecessors appointed me as the Alliance Party spokesperson on energy, and I have had the remit ever since.

I agree in principle with the motion, but we must give further consideration to what Dr McDonnell is trying to achieve. There is an overlap in the work of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and that of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. It is important to clarify what the proposed agency's role would be.

Once again, I must express my disgust at the Oil Distributors' Association's interference. It is trying to create obstacles to the extension of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. It is disgraceful that an unregulated sector should do that. The price differential across Northern Ireland is outrageous, particularly for domestic consumers. If an agency were established, it would be important that it examine all aspects of energy consumption in Northern Ireland, including petrol. One need only look around Northern Ireland to see the major price differentials and the unacceptable levels of the importation of illegal petrol and diesel. Therefore the remit of the agency should be shown in greater detail.

We all want to see a level playing field for all consumers in Northern Ireland, and that is why the Committee and I have been so keen for as many areas of Northern Ireland as possible to benefit from natural gas. The Department will introduce its energy Bill soon, and I look forward to that. Although I am not speaking as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, it also looks forward to the publication of the Bill. One of the issues to be addressed is the strengthening of the role of those with responsibility for consumer affairs. In the Committee's report, which was presented to the Minister and the Department, we outlined the need to ensure that there are adequate resources to deal with consumer affairs.

Finally, such an agency would have to take the European dimension into consideration. When the Committee

visited Denmark and Brussels last September we became aware of the impact of European Directives on the energy market throughout an expanding European Union. I agree with Dr McDonnell when he talked about the possibility of using natural gas from as far away as Siberia. We can look forward to some exciting opportunities in the future, and I look forward to the enlargement of the European Union, which will provide other major opportunities. In principle, I accept the spirit of the motion, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Ms Morrice: I declare an interest, as my sister is involved in the gas business in the Fermanagh/Sligo area. I have a great interest in energy issues, particularly the renewable sector, from my work with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee.

I will begin by thanking Dr McDonnell for bringing the matter to the Floor of the House. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee certainly had lengthy debate on the issue when compiling its report on energy, but it is valuable to keep the issue alive in our minds and in the minds of the public and the press. Having said that, I agree with Sean Neeson when he said that he agrees with the spirit of the motion. I am slightly concerned — and this also applied to a previous motion proposed by Dr McDonnell — about any suggestion to set up agencies, given the possibility of duplicating work. However, the value of this motion is to concentrate minds on the need to do something better. I totally agree that there needs to be a streamlining of the joined-up government approach to energy issues.

That is vitally important, because energy, as we have discovered, takes in many different departmental responsibilities. These include social, economic and health issues ranging from fuel poverty to energy conservation and energy efficiency. We desperately need some form of streamlining. I wonder whether there is justification for an agency, but some sort of team, task force or joined-up government approach would certainly be valuable.

We must consider the importance of the all-Ireland approach — the North/South approach — to energy programming. Although the North/South dimension is important, I agree with Members that we cannot deal with the issue by having an island mentality. There must be an east-west approach, involving the British-Irish isles, and a European dimension. That would cover not only the examples of best practice we saw during our trip to Denmark, when we learnt about the energy market there, but also tapping into energy in Europe and countries beyond the former Iron Curtain. The global aspect must be included, but it will be difficult to achieve that if we have a single unit in Northern Ireland. The onus is on the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council to see this as a priority for work in infrastructure.

Last, but by no means least, is my bandwagon — the renewable energy sector. We are lagging too far behind

in that area. Nevertheless, good, healthy momentum has been achieved. There has been great progress on wind farming. I welcome the plans for the wind farm off the north coast, but I wonder about them. I would appreciate a progress report outlining what the potential delays might be.

This is definitely the energy source of the future. We must move away from fossil fuels. We do not even have to keep up with the demands of European Directives; we can go further. Why can we not develop the technology for the new energy markets using wind, wave, tides, and biomass? Why can we not use our agriculture industry to provide us with renewable energy? This is the way forward for our economy. It would allow us to use our university research to develop new technologies, and it would be good for consumers. We are talking about healthy social and economic development — renewable energy is about that.

Mr A Doherty: This is the twenty-first century — however, we are inclined to forget it, as many people are still deeply rooted in the late seventeenth century. Some people are trying to solve our political problems using seventeenth century methods marked by appalling bigotry, superstition and violence. Despite the greatest efforts of our best people — our active visionaries — the Enlightenment has passed by too many of our leaders. The vision enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement is beyond their understanding: so much for Dark Ages politics.

Things become a little better when we look at social, economic and technological thought and achievement. As an SDLP Back-Bencher, I blush prettily, but modestly, at the knowledge that the SDLP is at the forefront of progressive political thought and because it has so much to offer in the social, cultural and economic fields.

I welcome Dr McDonnell's initiative. The provision of economical, reliable, safe energy is essential for economic prosperity and the health and well-being of the entire community. It is scandalous that the neediest and the most vulnerable have the greatest dependence on the most expensive and least healthy fuels. For their sake and that of the economy and environment, the generation and supply of energy must be brought out of the early twentieth century and into the twenty-first. We have the power sources and the technology; all we need is the will and a great deal of co-operation from many people and organisations. That would include involving those who are concerned about protecting and improving the environment. It would involve the quickest possible move away from fossil fuels.

We all know about the "polluter pays" principle, and most would agree with it. The harsh reality is that we pay the polluters to heat and to light our homes and to power our factories and vehicles. The cost is not only monetary; we pay with our bad health, the desperate pressure on our social services and the poorer quality of our lives.

12.45 pm

We need a body with substantial independence from the power producers and providers. That would be the only way to emphasise energy production from our plentiful renewable resources, which Jane Morrice highlighted. We have endless supplies of wind, water, and, unfortunately, waste. I thoroughly approve of wind farms. Concerns about their visual impact on the environment could be eased through sensitive management.

I will devote the rest of my precious time to Sandy Bain, whose letter to the 'Sunday Herald' in Scotland was published on 17 March 2002. Like a good Irish politician, I was in Scotland on that day.

The letter reads:

"It is disappointing that so much of the debate about Scotland's energy needs 10 or more years in the future is being conducted with reference to 20th century technology. The coming pollution-free fuel is hydrogen. ... More importantly, however, using electricity from renewable sources to produce hydrogen will give a much greater degree of flexibility.

Electricity derived from wind, wave and tidal power at locations along the northwest coast and in the Western Isles should be used to produce hydrogen from sea water. This hydrogen would then be transported by sea in gas tankers to the existing coastal thermal power stations at Peterhead, Inverkip, Cockenzie and Longannet, adapted to use hydrogen as fuel. The electricity produced would be distributed to consumers through the existing national grid, removing the need to lay an expensive subsea cable or despoil our scenic areas with overhead lines. The unreliability of renewable sources of electricity will be overcome too. Ideally Clyde shipyards would build the gas tankers required and Scottish engineering companies would become market leaders in building the hydrogen production plants and doing power station conversions. Any surplus hydrogen could, of course, be exported worldwide."

Sandy, quite naturally, speaks for Scotland. However, our scenario is so similar that what would be good for Scotland could be equally good for us, by which I mean everyone on this island. That is why I wanted Sandy's words to be recorded in Hansard and to be food for thought when Dr McDonnell's agency is set up, as I hope it will be soon.

Mr Beggs: I support the concept of a greater co-ordination of energy supply and conservation in Northern Ireland to protect our environment and to reduce electricity prices for residential and industrial consumers. Northern Ireland suffers from some of the highest prices in Europe, and those key issues must be addressed so that we can remain competitive, continue to protect our environment and respect it more.

Is the proposed agency needed or will it simply duplicate other projects? Would it try to draw strands together and form another layer of bureaucracy in this small part of the United Kingdom? That must be considered carefully. Should we examine how we could restructure our present system? The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has an interest in willow biomass and electricity production through the

farming industry. Should responsibility for those matters be transferred? In addition, the Department for Social Development is interested in energy conservation. Should that role be transferred so that one area deals with the supply and conservation of electricity?

Perhaps the Department for Social Development's role in identifying those suffering from fuel poverty should become a key aspect of its work. There may also be scope for the issue to be included in the review of public administration. The restructuring of Departments is not the issue; subject to agreement, some sections of Departments might logically sit somewhere else.

I have not heard much about how OFREG will fit into this plan. Will it become defunct? I value OFREG's independence and believe that its powers should be increased. It is disappointing that OFREG has not been as successful as we would have liked in driving down electricity prices in Northern Ireland.

Improvements are necessary. The electricity contracts that were handed out during direct rule were a licence to print money, and that was of no benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. NIE is moving towards electricity generation through the Huntstown power station in the Republic of Ireland. The grey area is becoming larger. Is NIE an independent distributor or a generator? Does it give greater priority to the profits of its shareholders than it does to the interests of the people of Northern Ireland? That question must be answered.

OFREG's powers should be increased to favour the consumer. Considering the initial investment in their shares, the private companies have made healthy profits. Increased downward pressure on prices should now be applied. There have been benefits by way of improvements to the generating equipment, but that has been transmitted into their profits.

Nationalist Members have emphasised the all-island aspect. However, we must fit into the United Kingdom structures of electricity production and regulation. The Kyoto agreement provided for that, and we must abide by it. There are two sides to the coin. There is a United Kingdom and a European aspect as well as the all-Ireland aspect. We must ensure that any benefits are delivered to the consumer. A sizeable electricity interconnector is now on-stream, which is also applying downward pressure on electricity prices in Northern Ireland.

I consider Dr McDonnell's proposals to be at the early stages. It would be premature to jump now. Further consideration is required, and I look forward to hearing what Dr McDonnell and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have to say in reply.

Mrs Courtney: I support the motion. However, other issues must be highlighted. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's energy inquiry concluded that if we were ever to get an efficient system, it should

have as wide a remit as possible, possibly on an all-Ireland basis, and it should conform to EU Directives.

It has been obvious for some time that the energy industry needs an all-Ireland remit if it is to have a stable future. After the storms in the winter of 1998, when lines came down and many people suffered a miserable Christmas and new year, the industry invested in greater volume, modern installations and upgraded lines. However, the problem remains that NIE has a monopoly, with Belfast being the only area that has the alternative of British Gas.

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

This system has proved effective — it is more economical and it provides consumer choice. Renewable energy is becoming more effective, but it still falls far short of Government proposals. The recent decision to install a North/South, east-west gas pipeline throughout Ireland will be a real boost for the north-west of Northern Ireland and for Donegal. The Oil Promotion Federation has taken the matter to the EU to try to prevent that, and that says more about the federation than anyone else could. The Oil Promotion Federation is not controlled, and it is regulated by providers and consumers. The federation calling “foul” brings to mind the pot and the kettle. I support the call for a Northern Ireland energy agency to assess, plan and actively manage all aspects of energy procurement, supply and conservation in Northern Ireland.

Members supported the report produced by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I agree that, in the short term, a Northern Ireland energy agency would ensure that our aims are achieved sooner rather than later, and it would provide consumer choice to more people.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Ms Morrice said that she welcomed the fact that the motion was keeping the issue alive in our minds and that it was allowing us to remain focused on a matter that was important to everyone. I entirely agree that the debate achieves that objective. I have listened carefully to Dr McDonnell calling for the establishment of a Northern Ireland energy agency. However, I point out that his proposal goes much further than the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's recommendation in its report on the energy inquiry. It simply said that the agency idea should be considered. There is no suggestion in the Committee's report that the wider proposition was seriously examined. However, I intend to respond fully to the Committee's report in the near future and to deal with some of those issues.

I agree, to some extent, with Mr Neeson, Ms Morrice and Mr Beggs that the call for an agency is somewhat premature. We must remember that the energy sector in Northern Ireland is privatised. All the generation is in private hands, as is the distribution. However, in the

Republic the generation is primarily in the control of the state. The Committee visited Denmark to look at its model. The Danish Energy Agency is responsible for climate change negotiations, oil and gas exploration, research programmes and bilateral programmes with Eastern European countries. In other words, it is a significant body that interfaces with powers far and beyond any that devolution would have. It is responsible for oil and gas exploration, for example, so it is a very different animal. Many Members have referred to the desirability of greater co-ordination, and I have no difficulty with that. It is entirely common sense that where several Departments have at least some degree of interest in a subject they should co-ordinate. However, it is impossible to get every subject matter that has a cross-departmental activity gathered together in one place.

1.00 pm

Many issues and themes in Government are cross-cutting. I accept what Members have said about fuel poverty. However, I recently attended the opening of a scheme in my East Belfast constituency. A home had been fitted with gas central heating, insulation et cetera under a pilot scheme that the Department for Social Development was carrying out in Belfast. Insufficient applications had been made to use all the money available on the pilot scheme, although it was fantastic to see what had been achieved. For example, hundreds of home helps in Belfast spend hundreds of man-hours lighting fires for people, yet those facilities could be installed cheaply and efficiently, and would prove less hassle for someone who is unable to get around easily. It is a terrible shame that the scheme is not receiving the level of support that we would like. I sympathise with the objectives to which Dr McDonnell and other Members referred.

My Department recently published a consultation paper, 'Towards a New Energy Market Strategy for Northern Ireland', which recognised the interaction between energy and other priorities such as climate change, social inclusion, fuel poverty, health and equality. That echoes my previous point that many energy issues are cross-cutting. The paper posed the question of how an integrated approach to the issue might be secured, and we are currently analysing the responses that we received.

I cannot say with absolute conviction that all the energy concerns that have come before the Assembly would have been solved more easily if an organisation of that kind existed; we must remember that we deal with a privatised industry. The energy issue is in no way "bolted on" to the Department's activities; I view it as a mainstream part of my work. I was surprised in that I underestimated the amount of time and effort that that would take, all because the energy sector is a privatised industry. I spend much of my time on the issue, as do my officials. A division of the Department is dedicated to energy.

Members will be aware that, in the current session, I intend to introduce a utilities Bill to deal with a range of issues, including the consumer arrangements and the situation with regard to the regulator, which Mr Beggs mentioned. I accept that a range of issues must be dealt with.

Mr Neeson referred to the European dimension. We hope to achieve more market opening, as that is the trend in the European Union, and we hope that that will bring down prices. It is frustrating that we have been unable to bring proposals to the House that will achieve reductions; however, I hope that those proposals will emerge in the coming weeks. I do not despair, because the situation has been changing for the better in the past couple of years. A new combined-cycle power station is under construction at Ballylumford. That will introduce state-of-the-art generating equipment, which will produce electricity more efficiently than the current station does. As the consumer will pay fuel costs directly, electricity will be produced more efficiently, which will have a downward impact on prices.

A project, which includes the extension of the gas pipeline, has been earmarked for Coolkeeragh. However, I share the anger of some Members at what has been happening there, and the attempts that have been made to frustrate a strategic decision. As Dr McDonnell said, Coolkeeragh has had a power station for 30 or 40 years and someone is making decisions on the basis of what may happen to the plant's profits in the next six or 12 months. We must plan strategically for energy production for future generations, given that the infrastructure is so expensive.

If the Coolkeeragh power station developments take place, they will result in a state-of-the-art, highly efficient gas turbine. Mr Beggs referred to the Moyle interconnector, which has come on-stream and which will help to bring competition into the market in the long term.

The renewable energy sector has potential, but there are limitations to the use of renewables in Northern Ireland. For example, the geography here does not enable us to create meaningful amounts of hydroelectricity. My Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are interested in biomass, anaerobic digesters and other new technologies, and we will be pursuing those options. However, such technologies have a long way to go before they can deliver electricity at commercial prices.

Wind energy is one area in which we may have made more progress. However, Members must understand that there are lessons to be learnt from privatisation when dealing with renewables. Although we may be anxious to introduce renewables into the mainstream energy system, we must plan carefully and be cautious about the cost. There is no point in producing renewable energy that is so expensive that no one can buy it.

Apart from wind energy, the renewable energy technologies have a long way to go. My Department will wish to discuss those matters further with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment as we move towards introducing policies concerning renewables.

Jane Morrice and Arthur Doherty mentioned offshore wind farms. That method of energy production has potential and, as Members may know, my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Public Enterprise in the Republic, prepared a report on the options for wind energy production, particularly offshore production, around the island. The Tunes Plateau site, situated off the north coast of Northern Ireland, emerged as a strong possibility. Discussions between the Crown Estate and a possible applicant are at a delicate stage, and I cannot predict the outcome. If the project were to proceed, a substantial period of public consultation on the environmental impact would be required. I am not in a position to say whether it will proceed.

I welcome the fact that energy management is being kept on the agenda, because it is an area of activity that has been neglected. Reference was made to the unfortunate contracts that were entered into several years ago. Those contracts have now run for over half of their allotted time, and we have spent much time examining the matter.

I accept the spirit of the motion, but I am not convinced that setting up another quango would add to the sum of knowledge on the issue. I am not trying to pour cold water on the motion, because I fully understand the Member's concerns. The spirit of the motion is going in the right direction, and I accept that there needs to be a joined-up approach. However, bearing in mind that we are dealing with the private sector, I am concerned that another body might not achieve better results than those that can be achieved by adapting existing systems and ensuring that there is the sort of cross-departmental activity that already exists in other areas. I want to discuss the matter further with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I hope to be able to say something on this when making a formal response to the Committee's valuable report.

Action has already been taken on the matter that Mr Beggs raised about different Departments having bits and pieces of interest across the subject. For example, the Department for Social Development deals with fuel poverty, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has interests in wider energy issues and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development also has energy-related interests. Following devolution, the Department for Regional Development was considered to have a strategic energy role. In fact, that Department did not have the statutory basis or the staff for such. It was a kind of anomaly. The proposal is to draft an Order to incorporate responsibility for energy again in my Department. Functions have already been moved around, and that may happen again. From time to time it may be

that functions will not be in the right place and will have to be moved around.

With regard to linkages, while energy is being considered in an all-Ireland context, my Department is considering it in a European context. The island of Ireland is a tiny energy market in international terms. Over the years, Northern Ireland's problem has been isolation from major sources of supply. The Department's objective is to ensure that we do not remain isolated. That is why I am pleased that we now have gas and electricity interconnection with Great Britain, which will progress to a European connection. That will ensure that we have supply reinforcement and do not depend on one source. That was the rock on which we perished in the 1970s when we were entirely dependent on oil. That was ruinous, and I warmly welcome the opening-up of sources of supply. That is the best way to bring prices down in the long term, once contracts are dealt with.

I welcome the debate and appreciate the interest and concern of Members, which I share. I assure them, and particularly Dr McDonnell, that I do not regard the Department's responsibility for energy as a sidecar on a bike. I regard it to be mainstream, and officials will confirm that because they put much time and effort into energy. It is important. I also hope that if the Assembly brings the Bill forward during this session, it will address the range of significant matters that concern Members, particularly on the consumer side, about who operates the system — the transmissions operator — and buying and selling. All of those matters must be considered.

I will respond in detail to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, I cannot yet support the Member's proposal for another body. The Assembly must wait and see and discuss further with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to decide whether the draft legislation will achieve its objectives. We should not yet proceed to create another agency.

I understand the merits of what the Member has said and the need for a co-ordinated, strategic long-term view. However, I am not convinced that another non-departmental public body attached to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment would achieve our shared objectives. I ask the Member to address that point in his summing-up.

When the Assembly votes on the motion it should consider the Cabinet Office's major energy review, which was published in February 2002 and which was mentioned by Mr Conor Murphy. The review considered new institutional arrangements for energy policy-making and delivery. A cross-departmental unit is being created in the Department of Trade and Industry in London with its future position subject to review depending on the roles of climate change, energy policy and transport policy within the Government. That document did not consider removing those critical issues from direct departmental

and ministerial responsibility and putting them into an agency. However, we will watch that development closely because there may be lessons to be learned.

1.15 pm

I am satisfied that the structures of our devolved Administration are capable of ensuring that the Executive's policies are effectively and jointly established and managed without necessarily having a major reorganisation of the type proposed in the motion. The present arrangements ensure clarity of responsibility and accountability and avoid unnecessary cost and disruption. Therefore, while it is not appropriate to support the motion now, I accept the spirit in which it was moved. I also accept without any hesitation the sentiments that many Members expressed.

As we progress this year, we will collectively be able to make progress in the energy field. As has been pointed out, energy is vital to our competitiveness because the higher the cost, the harder it is to be competitive. That, of course, ties in with debates on rating policy, local government financing and other issues. I am keener than anybody to ensure that we get over the hump of high energy costs because they are a direct challenge to our competitiveness and affect jobs.

Dr McDonnell: I repeat my thanks to every Member who spoke. The debate was useful, although it came earlier than expected and was perhaps a little surprise to some. However, we got it together reasonably well, and most issues were aired. I am indebted to Members who took the time to collect their thoughts, to prepare speeches and to contribute to the debate.

The purpose of tabling the motion was to keep the energy issue alive — it is a big issue that is never quite top of the agenda. It is third or fourth on the agenda, and it should be higher. Most Members welcomed the principle and thrust of the motion, which was to do exactly that and create some form of joined-up strategy. It is fairly clear that, from whatever corner of the Chamber, we agree that we must find a more effective mechanism to deal with energy.

I welcome the Minister's comments about legislation that may be coming forward. However, we need some sort of a driver. That was my concern when I tabled the motion. I have seen the good work of the Department and OFREG, and I have the highest regard for the regulator and the many consumer and pressure groups that have been working to combat fuel poverty. However, someone must drive the policy forward because, mostly, it just reacts to a difficulty or shortfall.

We must also make progress on energy procurement, which may be a major issue in the long term, and conservation. Much of that concerns the Department of the Environment, given its responsibility for building control and the quality of buildings.

The report is an excellent document, but it is only fair to say that the issues are so vast and so greatly in need of debate that a permanent committee could have dealt with the subject of energy alone. That is not to do the report any disservice. We had to draw a line somewhere, and, unfortunately, we could not go into every detail. This debate supplements the report. If the Minister does not get the recommendations right, we will come back, and perhaps keep coming back, to the issue. That is a compliment to the Minister, rather than a threat.

I want to thank specific Members. Conor Murphy welcomed the report and made a very good contribution. I agree with all his points. There may be a major need to deal with structural and conservation problems. I was not particularly confining myself, as he seemed to suggest, to Northern Ireland or the Six Counties. I see a very strong all-Ireland dimension in this, just as there is a very strong British dimension. It is not a political all-Ireland dimension; it is purely a business dimension to ensure survival. Overriding all that is the European dimension, both in legislation and in long-term supply. If we adopt gas, we shall be able to obtain it from the Corrib field in the west of Ireland for perhaps 10 to 15 years. After that, we shall have to explore eastern Europe, into Russia and perhaps beyond.

Conor Murphy made a point about this being another quango. We should get rid of most quangos. However, there are some good ones, so we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We should not be averse to creating a quango for tomorrow if a scattered issue such as energy needs a focus and a driver. I return to the concept of drivers because the scatter creates a situation in which we react to emergencies and crises rather than taking a proactive, long-term view.

I thank Sean Neeson for mentioning overlaps and for clarifying who does what. That returns to the driver principle. I am sure that we all agree with what he said about the oil companies, about strengthening the role of those responsible for consumer affairs and about the European dimension.

Jane Morrice agreed with the spirit of the motion and emphasised the need to avoid duplication. I do not want to see any duplication.

Roy Beggs supported the principle of the motion, but expressed some worry about the agency's functions. The agency's functions concern a proactive and aggressive view of the energy situation. I do not suggest duplication, but a much harder and clearer focus on the future is necessary. Mr Beggs queried the all-Ireland aspect. There is such an aspect, and the Minister articulated that much better than I could have done. However, there is also an east-west aspect, with the European dimension overlying it all.

The Minister mentioned that most energy is privatised, and that those private companies are fairly shrewd and

capable of finding ways around regulations. An aggressive organisation is needed to confront them.

I have the highest regard for the regulator. However, he would be the first to admit that his difficulty is that both the legislation and his authority are limited. In many cases he reacts like the rest of us do to a crisis or difficulty. He has no responsibility for the long-term supply of energy; he can deal only with the day-to-day situation and attempt to ensure that tomorrow will be a little better than today, and that prices will be kept under control.

Arthur Doherty spoke of mobilising goodwill and of moving away from fossil fuels. He also mentioned the health issue. Some interesting comments on hydrogen have come from Scotland.

Annie Courtney talked of the gas industry in general and of the gas pipeline for the north-west. That is vital. It does not concern getting gas only to Coolkeeragh, but to every town along the route where it would not otherwise be economical to do so.

I thank the Minister for his kind comments. He may be correct to suggest that the call for the agency is premature, but will it be premature in six months or in a year?

I dealt with the question of energy in private hands. That is not a bad thing, if we take an aggressive approach and are equal to a situation in which those private hands perhaps play games or milk the system.

Those members of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment who visited Denmark were impressed. When the Minister spoke of the Danes, the powers and authorities, I was not sure whether he advocated the setting up of a new department of energy, not simply an agency. The Danes' approach is aggressive. They have taken energy seriously, and that has stood them in good stead. Their energy costs have been considerably reduced and there have been environmental benefits.

The Minister mentioned the fuel poverty implications of renewable energy. The point that I made about the all-Ireland dimension is summed up by the fact that Northern Ireland was isolated previously. Even now, the few electricity interconnectors with the South, and the one with Scotland, are relatively trivial. We need a second interconnector with Scotland, because it is impossible to have an energy market without a supply. Our problem is that all of the energy supply going through the interconnector with Scotland is committed, and that given that the take up of energy in the South is so high, it does not have surplus to send through the cross-border interconnectors. The Minister is frowning. Is my statement incorrect?

Sir Reg Empey: The infrastructure is in place to facilitate a substantial amount of trading through the interconnector with the Republic. However, the distribution network on the Southern side is not sufficiently robust,

and for technical reasons it can only operate at full capacity for short periods of time. Therefore, for most of the time, it operates at substantially less than half of its capacity.

When I attended the recent opening of the interconnector with Mary O'Rourke TD, electricity was being imported to Northern Ireland: given the good weather then, our local power stations decided to close some sets for maintenance. Therefore, current was being sucked through the interconnector to Northern Ireland. However, because of demand, current is exported most of the time. The big advantage is that the process reduces spinning reserve, which is generating capacity that is spinning but not supplying current. It is there in case a breakdown occurs, and that, coupled with the ability to trade nation-to-nation through the interconnectors with Scotland and the South, is the key advantage. There are technical reasons for the interconnector not working to full capacity, and work is continuing to improve it so that it becomes more efficient.

A high percentage of the electricity from the interconnector is traded on the open market — only about 125 megawatts are contracted.

Dr McDonnell: I stand corrected. My brief visits to power stations have convinced me that it is difficult to be an expert on such highly technical matters.

When I proposed the motion, I felt that we needed to create the stability, consistency and confidence in our energy markets that have been lacking. Energy markets have been unstable and, perhaps, that was emphasised most in the 1970s, when we were heavily dependent on oil. Many people who depend on oil are uneasy about the potential for shenanigans in Iraq that would send oil prices through the roof.

We must ensure that energy is supplied at a reasonable price and that people can access it fairly. People who live close to the border may access electricity easily from the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) across the border, but we must ensure that people who live in rural areas such as Belleek or Killeter are not compounded further into fuel poverty or energy poverty. I strongly endorse the message that there should be no duplication.

I am very interested in renewable sources of energy. Wind power could supply 25% to 30% of our electricity requirement. Wave power is interesting, and I appeal to the Minister to consider seriously the mouth of Strangford Lough. I have been told that if we could persuade other interested parties to co-operate, which might be a bigger task than first thought, the mouth of Strangford Lough could produce up to 30% of our energy requirements.

Ms Morrice: I am aware of the strong tide in Strangford Lough. Although the construction of a tidal barrage is a valuable option, many people have serious

concerns about the environmental impact on that part of the lough.

1.30 pm

Dr McDonnell: That exemplifies how contentious and serious the issues are. I sympathise with those who have an environmental interest in Strangford Lough, but in a couple of years we will have to choose between a view across the lough but higher electricity prices, and a perhaps less exciting environment but cheaper electricity.

An energy agency could oversee the introduction of combined heat and power. I am told that Kilroot power station — and Mr Neeson would know more about that than I — could provide Carrickfergus with free hot water and central heating. However, where is the connectivity between the power station and the consumer? The Department for Social Development would not oversee the scheme; an agency is needed to glue the pieces together. Great work is being done, but the bodies that are involved must be pulled together.

When we burn oil, we extract only one third of its energy to generate electricity. The remaining two thirds are released into the air or, as unused hot water, into the sea. The Danes have managed to extract 90% of the energy from the fuel that they consume, and we should try to do the same.

Ten years ago, we began the charade of talking about introducing an open market and privatisation. We cannot have an open market without choice, and, although the Minister's comments about the interconnectors are welcome, that is only a first step. There is not enough choice, and there are big gaps — for example, the failure to develop the combined heat and power mechanism at Kilroot. Such matters must be acted upon, but I am unsure whether responsibility lies with the Department for Social Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, or another body. I tabled the motion to try to clear the bottlenecks for which nobody seems to be responsible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member wish to move the motion?

Dr McDonnell: I would be happy to withdraw the motion in the interests of consensus in the Chamber. The issue is more important than the success of the motion, or any one detail. I beg leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

The sitting was suspended at 1.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Civic Forum and North/South Consultative Forum

1. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the role to be played by the Civic Forum on the proposed North/South consultative forum.

(AQO 1312/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): On 15 January 2002, we made a statement to the Assembly on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its institutional format, which took place on 17 December 2001. The Council had agreed that the independent consultative forum, as envisaged in paragraph 19 of strand two of the agreement, should be based on formal interaction between the structures that represent civil society in Northern Ireland and in the South. We are consulting the Civic Forum to ascertain its views on how such interaction might be arranged.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the First Minister for his answer and the emphasis that he placed on the formal nature of the North/South consultative forum. Will he assure me that its establishment will not be delayed by the review of the Civic Forum? Will he also assure me that the Civic Forum will meet with its counterparts south of the border, and that the North/South consultative forum will be established formally at the next North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting?

The First Minister: We agreed that a formal link should be established between the structures that represent civil society in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The official working group put forward that proposal and is considering recommendations that it hopes to bring forward at the next plenary meeting. The consultation process is focusing on the terms of reference, the composition of the consultative forum, its initial work programme, how it would be chaired and where and when it would meet.

The Civic Forum in Northern Ireland has already submitted some initial views on several of those matters. The official working group is considering those and expects to receive views from the Republic of Ireland shortly. The establishment of the consultative forum is proceeding. I do not wish to use the word “delay”, but

the outstanding matter is the receipt of the views of the civic partners in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that the Civic Forum is a significant disappointment and a waste of time, energy and resources? Can some light be shed on the cancellation of a regional strategy for social inclusion that was to have been launched tomorrow? Was the cancellation due to the fact that the Civic Forum has been unable to agree on the matters that were to have been launched? What was the cost to the Exchequer of the cancellation?

The First Minister: If the Member were fairer in his approach, he would acknowledge that the Civic Forum is remarkably cheap and represents good value for the people of Northern Ireland. It provides a mechanism for aspects of society that are not represented in the Assembly to have a consultative input to socio-economic issues. I know that in the fantasies of some Members in that corner of the Chamber, the Civic Forum is some sort of puppet operated by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I can assure the Member that that is not the case. I cannot answer his questions in detail because the Civic Forum — and not the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister — is dealing with those matters.

Mr Dalton: Does the First Minister agree that it would be best to postpone the imminent review of the Civic Forum until the wider review of public administration has been completed?

The First Minister: I understand the point, but we cannot simply wait. It is hoped that we will soon be able to launch the review of public administration, which will be looking at administrative structures rather than at the Civic Forum. Therefore I do not see that there is any necessary interaction between the review of public administration and the continued operation of the Civic Forum.

The Civic Forum will be under review — that is provided for and is understood. We are consulting the Civic Forum about the nature of the review, and I see no reason why the two exercises cannot proceed on their own terms. The question is what will come out of those exercises, and the review of the Civic Forum in particular. I do not wish to express any view about the review of the Civic Forum, as that might lead some persons to think there is some sort of prefiguring of it. We should await the outcome of the review.

Links with Third-World Countries

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline plans for establishing links with Third-World countries.
(AQO 1310/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): International relations are an excepted matter, and our Department has no plans to establish official or formal links with developing countries. However, although we do not have power in this matter, as a devolved region we do have responsibilities. There is a long tradition of links and a history of support between here and the developing world, which is particularly evident in this Christian Aid week. It is a tradition worthy of all our support.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree with me that during the darkest days of the troubles, and particularly in the lead-up to the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland received much goodwill, encouragement and, indeed, money from other parts of the world? Does he also agree that now that we have political stability there is an opportunity for us to express a direct interest in the affairs of the Third World, particularly Malawi, which is suffering famine?

The Deputy First Minister: I acknowledge the point that the Member has made. Northern Ireland has benefited from significant international attention and goodwill. Now, as we step forward, we should be trying to find ways to help others — not only regions like ourselves that are stepping forward from conflict, but also parts of the world that suffer from long-standing underdevelopment. The ways to do so are not immediately available to us as a devolved region with no formal powers in this matter. However, we can show some lateral thinking. That has already happened in the Assembly in relation to fair trade, and the Assembly has already passed resolutions on the debt issue.

This is appropriate. Too often in Northern Ireland we are good at telling each other that the eyes of the world are upon us. In reality, more often than not the eyes of the world are rolling up to heaven as we yet again create problems for ourselves and try to trap ourselves in the past when we should be showing example by trying to help others.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister give details of the efforts that Invest Northern Ireland has made to foster links with developing countries?

The Deputy First Minister: The trade division of Invest Northern Ireland, as its name suggests, organises trade missions and related initiatives that link Northern Ireland business with developing countries. In recent years, visits have been made to Argentina, Brazil, China, Kenya, Mexico, Oman, South Africa and Tanzania. Over the next year, it is planned to make trade visits by companies from here to Brazil, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey and Vietnam.

Executive Trips Abroad

3. **Mr J Kelly** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the number of

trips outside Northern Ireland made on behalf of the Executive in the last six months. (AQO 1306/01)

The First Minister: During the last six months, the Deputy First Minister and I, as First Minister, have represented the Northern Ireland Executive outside Northern Ireland on seven occasions together. In addition, the Deputy First Minister has made seven visits on his own, and I have made 10 during the same period.

Mr J Kelly: With the lack of Executive business, this is a matter of concern. Is the travelling interfering with the work of the Executive and causing the lack of business before the Assembly?

The First Minister: I am satisfied that the joint and individual visits of the Deputy First Minister and me were made for Northern Ireland's benefit and promotion. They also promoted the good lessons to be drawn from what we have achieved here. They are in stark contrast to the behaviour of the questioner's Colleagues, particularly in Colombia. Last weekend, their activities caused the death of over 60 people sheltering in a church, as what Colombians described as Irish gas cylinders were discharged at them. I would have thought that the Member might have a little concern about his own moral responsibility for his association with a movement that produced those horrific results.

Dr Hendron: What benefits have resulted from visits to Brussels and Washington?

The First Minister: They were of a darn sight more benefit than those I last referred to. During our visit to Brussels in January to open our office formally, the Deputy First Minister and I met President Prodi, five EU Commissioners, the President of the European Parliament and several other leading figures. Meetings provided a welcome opportunity to forge good relations with those at the top levels of European Union policy making and helped to ensure that Northern Ireland's interests were taken into account. Those contacts have been maintained, particularly by junior Ministers who returned to Brussels in April and held several meetings there.

Similarly, we were able to be in Washington for the formal relocation of the Northern Ireland Bureau to its new downtown premises, which are strategically located. This is a significant shift in the operation of the Northern Ireland Bureau, and we hope to see its work further enhanced in the near future.

All-Ireland Approach to European Union Issues

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it plans to develop an all-Ireland approach towards the formulation of a strategy on European Union issues; and to make a statement. (AQO 1315/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The North/South Ministerial Council has agreed the establishment of a working group to consider how to advance the Belfast Agreement's commitment to consideration of the European Union dimension of relevant matters. The working group will identify those EU-related policies, programmes and proposals that might most usefully be discussed by the Council and will also look at the most effective arrangements for developing the role set out in paragraph 17 of strand two.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his reply, which was much better than the disgraceful reply earlier from the First Minister. Does the Deputy First Minister agree — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McElduff: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that Irish citizens, North and South, can only benefit from a closer working relationship with the Dublin Government in the development of a cohesive European policy for the entire island? Does he agree that, particularly in agriculture and other areas, Irish citizens, North and South, can benefit from direct ministerial contact?

The Deputy First Minister: I agree with the thrust of the Member's question. All the people of the island can benefit from North/South co-operation where that is for mutual benefit and the advancement of common issues. That is particularly appropriate in the context of the EU. All the people of this island can also benefit from wider EU co-operation. I wonder whether the thrust of the Member's question means that he and his Colleagues are now more favourably disposed towards co-operation at a European level as well as at an all-Ireland level?

We can use the North/South Ministerial Council to improve co-operation in sectoral matters. We also must improve our approach to issues of common concern that arise at an EU policy level. That is why we have undertaken the work outlined in my original answer.

Dr Adamson: In view of the strategic importance to the European Union of stability in the Near and Middle East, does the Deputy First Minister agree that interference in the internal affairs of Turkey by Sinn Féin members does not promote Northern Ireland's positive participation in the European Union?

The Deputy First Minister: Turkey is not actually in the European Union, although it clearly has ambitions in that direction.

2.45 pm

We are well outside the brief of the Executive or the Assembly in matters of foreign and security policy. It is beyond my competence to give the answer the Member wants on matters of party political and personal activity in Question Time.

Mr McClelland: Will the Minister ensure that special attention is given to the common chapter of the European programme and consider how best that can be used to support key cross-border co-operation?

The Deputy First Minister: I worked on that in my previous post as Minister of Finance and Personnel. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel worked with colleagues in the South on improving our performance with the common chapter.

Our present common chapter is not the first chapter. Experience has shown that although the book was good, the movie was never made. This time we are trying to use the facilities of the North/South Ministerial Council and other initiatives to ensure that we meet the goals and aims in the common chapter. We want to ensure that funding support from Europe is used to achieve sensible North/South co-operation and economies of scale in infrastructural development.

Executive Business

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on business transacted at the last meeting of the Executive.
(AQO 1317/01)

The First Minister: The last meeting of the Executive was held on 9 May. A copy of the press release issued after that meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr McCarthy: I am deeply disappointed, but that answer was not unexpected. I have asked that question twice before. The first answer was that Executive business was confidential, and the second answer was that a press release had been placed in the Assembly Library.

We are living in an era where openness and transparency are the order of the day. People need to know what is going on in the Executive on general issues. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what action is taken on House resolutions? Was the water tax debated on 9 May, as reported in last week's 'Belfast Telegraph'? Was Lord Ouseley's report on employment conditions and retirement for the Northern Ireland Civil Service discussed, and, if so, what were the recommendations? If the Executive have nothing to hide, let us hear from them.

The First Minister: I will gently point out to the Member — perhaps he was not in the Chamber then — that last Tuesday we made a detailed statement and answered questions for an hour on the reform and reinvestment initiative, the most significant matter that we have dealt with recently.

The Member must understand that discussions in the Executive are confidential, and press releases are issued about the business transacted. They do not give details of the discussion; that is quite right, and the Member knows

that. Important matters are brought to the Assembly; statements are made and questions are answered.

Lord Ouseley's report on appointments and promotions to the senior Civil Service and allied matters has not yet come to the Executive. When it does, and decisions are taken, a press release will be issued or a statement will be made in the House, if that is considered appropriate.

Mr B Hutchinson: Would it not be better to bring the business from last Thursday's Executive meeting to the House rather than make a press statement? The press could find out details from the House. Members whose constituencies were affected should be able to debate matters raised in the press last week.

The First Minister: Mistaken impressions get around. While that question was being asked, I saw a Member flourishing a newspaper headline. It is an erroneous headline. The Member concerned will discover that when the consultation paper, which we think it refers to, is published in the next few weeks. The Member will then discover that having things published through the normal channels is much better than relying on rumour and report.

I am aware that the Member who asked the supplementary question has many serious concerns about events in his constituency. We are trying to focus on those concerns and to make some progress. We are happy to deal with those matters as openly as we can. Procedures exist, through statements and the tabling of private notice questions on matters of urgency, to ensure that there is adequate opportunity for the Assembly to express views on those matters. The type of open questioning afforded by Question Time also provides an opportunity to range widely, and we welcome that.

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the next question, I remind the House that it is not in order for Members to use any kinds of devices, to wave newspapers or otherwise. I understand that it is in order to wave Order Papers in approbation, but not newspapers.

Community Relations

6. **Mr Poots** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister how it appraises the benefits of money allocated to community relations.
(AQO 1309/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The benefits of money allocated to community relations are appraised in three main ways: by attitudinal surveys; by research projects; and by independent evaluations of funded groups. The bulk of community relations funding goes to the Community Relations Council and to support district council community relations programmes. That funding amounts to some £4.5 million of the total allocation of just over £5 million. Both the Community Relations Council and the district council community relations programmes have

been subject to independent evaluation in the past 18 months. In both cases, positive conclusions were reached with regard to the impact of their activities and their value for money.

Mr Poots: Over the past 10 years, Departments have spent well over £100 million on community relations. All the evidence on the streets shows that community relations are worse. Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that the OFMDFM-commissioned report by Dr Peter Shirlow also expressed that view? Is that why the report has not seen the light of day?

The Deputy First Minister: In answer to previous questions, I had to correct Members because of their confusion over two different reports. Dr Shirlow carried out work commissioned by the Belfast European Partnership Board. However, a separate piece of work, relating to other areas and times, was commissioned by OFMDFM. I caution the Member not to confuse the two.

A significant amount of money has been spent on community relations, and a significant amount of work remains to be done. It is a huge problem, and nobody is pretending that all the problems are behind us. We must be cautious about making sweeping judgements that community relations are worse, based on anecdotal evidence, on impressions from particular areas or on studies specific to those areas.

Mr J Wilson: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that there could not be a more graphic demonstration of community relations problems than the recent disorder in north Belfast? Is that not precisely the kind of issue that the Administration's community relations policy should be tackling?

The Deputy First Minister: The situation in north Belfast clearly reveals problems in community relations. However, there are also other problems. That is why the initiative that has been undertaken on behalf of the Executive is looking at various issues. The programmes of several Departments are relevant to the work that is being undertaken in north Belfast. We will continue to work to get on top of the problems in that area. We are reviewing our wider community relations policies to ensure that we are alert to all the problems and that we have responsive policy systems and support mechanisms, particularly in areas where problems are manifested.

Mr Attwood: Does the Minister concur that the aim of community relations policies in the North is to light candles rather than curse the darkness, and that that approach is required? Will he comment on the events in east Belfast last weekend? As the Deputy First Minister has travelled many roads over the years, will he concur that our society is now more tolerant?

The Deputy First Minister: I hope that everyone in the House will join me in expressing concern at the events in east Belfast. We do not want violence in any

form, in any location, from any quarter, against any target, be that in north Belfast, east Belfast, east Derry, or anywhere else. We have seen violence in different forms, and I have consistently condemned it all. I hope that everyone in the House will continue to do so.

Although we repudiate and condemn such violence, we should take heart from the fact that new relationships are being built and are growing in this society, and new attitudes are being expressed. People can relate to one another politically, and they can relate to, and with, the shared Administration, albeit at times they may be critical of delivery and the pace of activity. We now have shared political space, and we must find ways to share the streets also.

Programme for Government Targets

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what interim assessment it can make of those Programme for Government targets that it anticipates will be met within the agreed timescale. (AQO 1304/01)

The First Minister: The Executive monitor progress on delivering the actions set out in the Programme for Government regularly. The latest available information from the Departments shows that 28% of the 256 actions contained in the Programme for Government for 2001-02 have been achieved. A further 46% were in line for achievement in the published timescales. We are now collating the information, and we plan to report to the Assembly next month. Where progress has been slower than anticipated, our report will identify the reasons for the delay and the remedial action that the Executive intend to take. We are also working to deliver the commitments in the 2002-03 Programme for Government, which was finalised in December 2001. We will continue to monitor progress on all the actions in our first and current Programme for Government.

Mr McHugh: The Minister is aware of the concern that, because of the modest budget for the Programme for Government, targets will not be met. What action has he initiated to ensure better progress?

The First Minister: I outlined our key action in the lead answer. I emphasise its significance, because we are aware that some of the actions, precise targets and timetables have not been met. In order to deal with those delays, we must identify where and why they happened, and we are publishing information on that. It is worthy of attention, and the Executive ought to be congratulated on that.

We are the first Administration in any jurisdiction that operates a programme for government to publish details of the cases where they failed to achieve targets. Plenty of Governments will publish details of their successes, while trying to cover up difficulties. Many targets

were not met because of circumstances beyond our control, but there cannot be an intelligent debate on that or a full appreciation of the difficulties of achieving change unless people can identify and focus on the problems and our actions to overcome them.

We intend to be as open about this matter as possible.

3.00 pm

Mr Close: In the light of the Executive's continuing failure to meet their own targets, does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that the proposed salary increases for the House are overgenerous? Does it believe that we require greater productivity from the Executive and the House to justify such increases?

The First Minister: It is not appropriate for me to comment on views expressed by the Senior Salaries Review Body or to call into question the actions of the Assembly Commission. Those bodies will take whatever decisions are appropriate. However, the supplementary question was misconceived. It is not appropriate to judge the Assembly's success on whether the Departments and their officials have met all the targets in the Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: I must bring the Minister's response to a close because we are over the time for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 4, in the name of Mr David Ford, has been transferred to the Department of the Environment and will receive a written answer.

Multilingual Signs

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to erect multilingual signs at airports and ferry ports to provide for the safety of foreign visitors. (AQO 1340/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The police have not given the Roads Service any indication that there is a road safety problem associated with foreign drivers leaving the country's airports or ferry ports. Therefore, I have no plans to erect multilingual signs at those facilities.

The provision of signs within ferry ports and airports is a matter for the authorities in those facilities. The majority of drivers visiting Northern Ireland come via airports and ferry ports in Great Britain or by road from the Republic of Ireland, and they will already have experienced the need to drive on the left hand side of the road.

Mr Dallat: On this occasion I encourage the Minister to think positively and to accept that an increasing number of Europeans, particularly from Germany and France, come directly to Northern Ireland and hire vehicles here. Does he accept that he should consider the road safety aspect, as well as the politeness of recognising the German and French languages, as they do for us?

Mr P Robinson: Visitors are very welcome to Northern Ireland, and many of the road signs here will be part of the general harmonisation of road traffic signs in European countries. Road signs, where possible, include easily recognised symbols or pictograms to convey messages. However, there are significant cost considerations for multilingual signs, and at times they can cause confusion.

Mr Gibson: Can the Minister guarantee that his Department will not spend millions of pounds unnecessarily on bilingual signs when there are higher priorities in his Department?

Mr P Robinson: The original question was about multilingual signs; bilingual signs take us into a new area, and I assure my hon Friend that I have no intention of spending millions of pounds of much-needed infrastructure funding on bilingual signs.

Mr McClarty: Following Pat McNamee's promotion of plain English in last week's debate on house purchase, is the Minister satisfied with the present signage in English at the Belfast City Airport, where some key signs are very confusing?

Mr P Robinson: For a moment I thought I was going to get a question about McDonald's restaurant. I am happy to look at the signage at Belfast City Airport. I travel to and from it every week and I have not been confused, but maybe I was not looking at the signs as carefully as I should. I will look at the signs and see if there is any area of confusion.

Roads Infrastructure Around Ballyclare

2. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what proposals he is currently considering to improve the roads infrastructure necessary to support (a) present and proposed housing; and (b) industrial development, in Ballyclare and its surrounding villages. (AQO 1331/01)

Mr P Robinson: The regional development strategy for Northern Ireland, which was agreed by the Assembly, identifies Ballyclare as one of the seven towns that will expand to meet the housing need in the Belfast metropolitan area. However, the strategy also recognises that it will be necessary to require developers to bear the costs of infrastructure works required to facilitate their development proposals, and that the promotion of transportation alternatives to the private car will also play a major role.

As regards current and future transport needs, my Department is developing the Belfast metropolitan transport plan, which I hope will be completed by the end of this financial year. It will inform the Belfast metropolitan area plan, which is being developed by the Planning Service. The transport plan will provide a long-term vision for transport in the Belfast metropolitan area, including the Ballyclare area, and it will co-ordinate the implementation of transportation initiatives until 2015.

The lines of two major road schemes in Ballyclare have been protected under the current area plan, which also identifies housing and industrial development in the town. The first scheme is a proposed link road between the Ballynure to Templepatrick road and the Ballyclare to Doagh road, with the purpose of easing congestion at the lower end of Main Street. The second proposed scheme, which will probably be led by developers, will link Doagh Road to Rashee Road. The schemes will be reviewed by the Belfast metropolitan transport plan, but if either is needed to support a development, the developer may have to contribute to it, in full or in part, depending on the outcome of the transport assessment.

Mr J Wilson: Does the Minister share my view that, where supporting road or sewerage infrastructure is not of an acceptable standard, as is the case in the Ballyclare area, his Department should advise the Planning Service to ban housebuilding in the town and surrounding villages until the necessary infrastructure is in place?

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that my Department consults closely with the Planning Service on such issues. I have experience of the conundrum that the Member referred to. In my constituency, significant land was zoned for development, but the necessary infrastructure was not provided until after the houses were built. Timing is an issue; however, if a development results in additional traffic or requires additional water infrastructure, the developer should provide the necessary infrastructure.

Mr Hilditch: Is the Minister aware of an article on the front page of tonight's 'Belfast Telegraph' about the A8, one of the main arterial routes, and will he comment on the story?

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the inaccurate articles in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. The headline on the front page states:

"Major road upgrade 'futile' claims report."

The report in question claims nothing of the sort. The claim that the upgrade was futile came from the so-called Friends of the Earth. The First Minister referred to inaccurate headlines in the 'Belfast Telegraph' — there are two tonight. The headline on page three states:

"Road upgrade 'is a breach of EU rules'."

The report does not say that either; it says that some might argue that it is a breach of the rules, but it also sets out all the reasons why it is not. The articles contain

a highly selective consideration of the report. It is only a draft report, and, when it is available in full, I will be happy to make it available to the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: I heard several Members remark, sotto voce, about newspapers in the Chamber. I refer the House to the advice on Chamber etiquette in Standing Orders:

"Newspapers should not be brought into the Chamber except for quotation."

and

"Newspapers should not be brought into, or read in, the Chamber, except for brief quotations in the context of a speech."

On this occasion the bringing in of newspapers was in order, as they were quoted from briefly — although I remember other occasions on which that was not the case.

Reliability of Parking Meters

3. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to improve the reliability of parking meters in Belfast. (AQO 1336/01)

Mr P Robinson: Pay-and-display parking machines, which were introduced in Belfast in 1987, have come to the end of their useful economic lives.

The Roads Service is installing new machines in the city centre. To date, some 110 new machines are in place, and a further 50 will be provided by the end of the summer. Each machine has a communications link to a central parking office. That enables the machine to report any faults automatically, thus allowing necessary repairs or maintenance work to be carried out as quickly as possible.

Mr M Robinson: I thank the Minister for his response. I noticed in the media at the end of last week an indication that Northern Ireland is at the cutting edge of technology, with the introduction of new parking meters. Could the Minister outline the benefits that will result following this introduction of new technology?

Mr P Robinson: Northern Ireland is taking a lead, not only in the United Kingdom but much further afield. Many vandalised or broken parking meters remain out of operation for a long time, and revenue to the Northern Ireland block is lost. The scheme uses SIM (subscriber identity module) card technology — as do the mobile phones that are occasionally heard ringing in the Chamber — so that the central office knows automatically when payments are made at a machine. As a result, only small sums of money are ever left in a parking meter, because it can be emptied when required. That removes the incentive to break into it. It also helps the Department to plan its collection of money. In addition, the machines accept credit cards, and therefore they will contain less money anyway.

Mr B Bell: The Minister recently said that he intended to decriminalise parking offences in Belfast and to

civilianise the enforcement of parking regulations. What discussions has he had with his counterparts in Great Britain about their experiences of wheel-clamping in urban areas?

Mr P Robinson: That is not a matter of choice for the Department, because the police have indicated their eagerness to give up their role as regards parking. Some might argue that they gave it up some time ago. Parking offences must be dealt with, so the Department will become responsible for the matter. Legislation will have to be passed by the Assembly. The Department has discussed the issue with the police, and departmental officials are talking to authorities elsewhere in the United Kingdom about their experiences. Northern Ireland is the only region of the United Kingdom that has not already decriminalised parking offences.

Walking Strategy

5. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the draft walking strategy, to outline (a) the targets he is proposing for the promotion of the activity of walking; and (b) the measures that are being put in place to ensure that those targets are achieved. (AQO 1328/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Department's draft walking strategy is still at a preparatory stage. However, consideration is being given to the setting of targets in the draft strategy, aimed at increasing the number of short walking journeys — that is to say, those of less than one mile — and the average distance walked annually by each person. Consideration is also being given to the inclusion of targets linked to the Department's regional transportation strategy as regards the provision of infrastructure and the promotion of walking. It is proposed that the draft strategy will contain around 80 "planned actions"; those are a series of initiatives and practical measures that will contribute to the achievement of targets and will be assigned to key stakeholders with the aim of delivering improvements for pedestrians. The "planned actions" fall under the headings of design, planning, safety, improving existing routes, walking for health, walking for leisure, tourism and marketing. The Department hopes to publish the strategy later this year.

Mr McHugh: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. It is an important subject, especially for those who wish to start walking to work, and for schoolchildren. 'Investing for Health', published in November 2000, and with targets for April 2001, contains the Department for Regional Development's commitments as regards support and investment in health. When does the Minister envisage that those targets will be met?

3.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: I am delighted that Sinn Féin has a walking strategy. I hope that Orangemen in various parts of the Province will gain from the additional miles that they will be able to walk as part of that strategy.

The regional transportation strategy is expected to come to the Assembly before the summer recess, and the Northern Ireland walking strategy will be published later this year. Those two documents will consider the walking strategy and any targets that might be relevant to it.

Mr S Wilson: I am glad that the Minister has noted the change in Sinn Féin's attitude towards walking. It is nice to see that there has been a change of heart, and that Sinn Féin now wishes to promote walking in Northern Ireland.

Given that much traffic congestion, especially in cities, occurs at the start and finish of the school day, what plans does the Minister have for safer walking routes to schools so that schoolchildren can avail of that option as opposed to having to use either public or private transport?

Mr P Robinson: That issue was discussed with officials and interest groups within the past few days. Due to the lengthy period of civil disturbance, many people thought it was safer to leave their children to school by car, even for very short journeys. The community needs to feel confident that the troubles are behind us. Until there is clear evidence of that, it will be hard to convince some people that they should choose walking as an alternative to taking their children to school by car.

Traffic-calming measures are an incentive for walking. The regional transportation strategy envisages a significant increase in the number of traffic-calming schemes, which would reduce the danger for people walking.

Dual Carriageways in Tyrone and Fermanagh

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of dual carriageway miles in Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh; and to make a statement. (AQO 1339/01)

Mr P Robinson: There are 7.9 miles of motorway and 1.7 miles of dual carriageway in Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh. The majority of trunk roads in those counties are single-carriageway roads, which can cope adequately with the volume of traffic on those routes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the fact that the Minister and Sammy Wilson referred to Sinn Féin by its correct title, without any appendage, in the previous answer, and I thank them.

The Minister will appreciate that Tyrone and Fermanagh depend heavily on roads infrastructure, because there is no rail network. The figures of 7.9 miles of motorway and 1.7 miles of dual carriageway speak for themselves and show historic underinvestment. Can the Minister deliver a real commitment to increasing the number of

dual carriageway and motorway miles in Tyrone and Fermanagh? A good start would be the roads from Dungannon to Ballygawley, Ballygawley to Omagh and Omagh to Strabane on the major arterial route, the A5, which carries much cross-border traffic.

Mr P Robinson: One of the first council visits that I made as Minister was to Fermanagh District Council. As someone who represents the east of the Province, I was struck by the feelings of councillors from all parties who were present that the area had been given a very raw deal because money for roads went to where the traffic was heaviest, which is largely in the east of the Province. I said that it was necessary for us to examine the criteria under which we operate and to consider whether those criteria were fair, because funding based on those criteria could mean that there might never be new roads to the west of the Province.

Arising from the draft regional transportation strategy, I tasked my officials with reconsidering how we could start to provide stepped improvements. They will consider issues of affordability, priority and innovative procurement mechanisms with the regional transportation strategy team. In that context, issues such as the road between Dungannon and Ballygawley, which would be the outworking of such a policy, will be examined. I am seeking to do something more innovative than that which was laid out in the draft regional transportation strategy, and when the strategy is put before the Assembly, Members will see that the tweaking has made some difference.

Mr Watson: Will the Minister indicate to the House — particularly for the benefit of the IRA/Sinn Féin Member for West Tyrone — whether criteria exist for the construction of dual carriageways and motorways in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: The manual indicates that, in general, a dual carriageway may be viable where more than 11,000 vehicles per day use a road: a similar volume of traffic applies when the viability of a motorway is being considered. The type of traffic and the extent to which the volume per day exceeds that figure must be examined. The availability of finance to carry out the work is also a factor.

The regional transport strategy will become a central element, and should the Assembly accept the strategy, it will envisage a significant increase in the amount of money available for roads and public transport schemes in Northern Ireland. Only by adopting such a scheme will we be able to meet the expectations of many district councillors and MLAs.

Mr Hussey: The Minister is well aware of my view — through the Committee for Regional Development and the Chamber — that key regional transportation corridors should be dual carriageways. However, I understand the financial constraints.

Furthermore, the Minister will understand that the north-western and eastern areas of Northern Ireland have rail services, whereas the south-west does not. In rural areas, the nature of the vehicles involved is a major factor affecting average journey times. In that context, is the Minister considering the extension of the motorway to Ballygawley, or at least to the edge of West Tyrone? None of the 8.4 miles of motorway or dual carriageway mentioned are in that area.

Mr P Robinson: It is very easy to look at the road infrastructure on a map of Northern Ireland and see where significant improvements could be made. The guiding principle in the regional transportation strategy is that proposals must be earthed in reality: we must be capable of delivering them and, essentially, that means that the funding for schemes must be available.

I agree that strategic road corridors must be investigated first: many of them feed into the west of the Province. Improvements can be made — in some cases that will involve dual carriageways; in other cases different improvements can help. We must pay most attention to strategic road corridors. That principle was enunciated in the regional development strategy, which was the mother document of the regional transportation strategy.

Water Leakage

7. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he is taking to address the level of leakage in Northern Ireland's water supply system.

(AQO 1329/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Water Service has a strategy in place to identify, manage and control leakage in the water distribution system. The main elements are the installation and monitoring of district meters, pressure management schemes and leak detection and repair. Over the past four years, £22 million has been invested in leakage reduction measures. Approximately half of that was invested in setting up the essential leakage management infrastructure, including district meters and telemetry.

A further £25 million will be invested over the next four years. As the leakage infrastructure is well advanced, 80% of that expenditure will go directly to detecting and repairing leaks. The aim is to achieve the economic level of leakage by 2006.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister concede that water leakage of 37% is unacceptable and costly? Given that the water resource strategy identified serious supply difficulties in the western area in 2000, with demand exceeding supply by six million litres a day, what action is the Department taking to address the infrastructure difficulties that are especially relevant to Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh, and the western half of County Derry?

Mr P Robinson: The level of leakage is unacceptable, and that is why the Department has allocated increased

funding. The leakage is the result of the ageing infrastructure, which is the legacy of years of neglect under direct rule. Nonetheless, we must make changes through leakage detection and remedial action to improve the infrastructure. Other changes will result from the water resource strategy, which the Department has submitted to the Committee for Regional Development. I hope to introduce that strategy to the Assembly soon by way of a take-note debate. As part of the water resource strategy, the Department will consider the issues, such as how it can meet any deficits between existing water supply and usage, to which Mr Byrne referred.

Mr Dalton: Will the Minister clarify what the leakage figure is? Mr Byrne quoted a figure of 37%, but I understood it to be more in the region of 33%. Does the figure change between night-time and daytime? Does the level of leakage reduce when the system is used more during the day? What proposals does the Minister have to fill the funding gap that will be left by improving the infrastructure?

Mr P Robinson: It is difficult to be precise about the percentage figure. The Department does not dare to refer to the lost water as leakage, although that is the common parlance. It is known as “unaccounted-for water”, and it is unaccounted for because no domestic metering takes place. Given that the Department knows how much water leaves the reservoirs, but does not know how much is used by domestic consumers, assessments are made. Whether the figure is 33% or 37% — I have even heard it estimated at 40% — is a matter of conjecture. However, the level is unacceptable and the problem must be addressed.

The new telemetry will allow the Department to more accurately assess the areas in which leakage occurs, the amount of leakage and the time of day at which it takes place. I hope to be in a better position to answer the more detailed questions at a later stage.

Mr Byrne managed to ask several questions. To answer his final one, the Department estimates that £3 billion will be needed over the next 20 years for infrastructural requirements for water and sewerage services. A similar amount will be required for roads and transportation. Therefore, there are significant infrastructural requirements, and the Assembly can make a good start towards addressing those by ceasing to spend up to £150 million a year on bureaucratic extravagance. Instead, that amount could be used to service a loan of around £2 billion that could really help water and road services.

Mr Close: I congratulate the Minister on his in-depth knowledge of leaks. After the publication of the Public Accounts Committee’s report, has he reviewed his target of an anticipated reduction in water leakage of between 3% and 7% to the more challenging figure of 15%?

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I regret to say that the time is up. I shall have to ask the Minister to reply in writing to the Member.

ENVIRONMENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 1, standing in the name of Mr Arthur Doherty, has been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development and will receive a written answer. Question 9, standing in the name of Mrs Annie Courtney, has been transferred to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and will also receive a written answer.

Checking of Planning Applications

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to ensure that information supplied by applicants when seeking planning permission is genuine and correct. (AQO 1346/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): It is in the interests of applicants and the public to have the correct details when submitting a planning application; any inaccuracies may lead to delays in processing the application. It is the applicant’s responsibility to ensure that accurate information on the four key areas is supplied, namely: the address of the application site; the description of the proposal; the completion of the P2 certificate regarding legal interest in the application site; and the details of notifiable neighbours. To assist in the correct completion of application forms, explanatory notes on applying for planning permission and notes for completing the main application form, P1, are supplied with an application pack. Further advice and assistance are also available from staff in the divisional planning office.

To further ensure the correctness of the information in the application form, the Planning Service carries out an initial validation to confirm that the forms have been completed properly and the correct fee submitted. Further checks on the information’s accuracy are made during the planning officer’s visit to the site. Representations made by third parties may also raise discrepancies in the applicant’s information. If the information on the application form has to be revised in the interests of accuracy, it will be re-advertised in the press, and neighbours will be renotified.

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

Mr McCarthy: In cases where inaccurate information has been furnished to the Department of the Environment, how determined is the Department to correct those inaccuracies? Are there sufficient enforcement staff in the Department to ensure that everyone gets a fair deal?

Mr Nesbitt: I will answer the second point first. The Assembly knows that the Department of the Environment

has been viewed as somewhat of a Cinderella — funds have not been given to it in the past. However, additional funds have been supplied, there are more Planning Service officials in place, and, we trust, any shortfall has been improved. That is not to say that there is complacency or that we do not need more staff — quite the reverse. More staff may be needed. Indeed, we are looking at the whole process.

The Department of the Environment is determined to correct inaccuracies. All addresses and descriptions of applications are checked for accuracy when they go in the press. As well as that, all the neighbour notification names must be inserted, and if they are not, there will be delays. The forms must be accurate. Last week, a seminar on planning matters was conducted with the construction industry at which the results of a survey carried out by a private consultancy firm were discussed. One of the points that the survey mentioned was that the process was slow because accuracy had to be checked.

Therefore I remain convinced that the Department should insist on accuracy, and that inaccuracies cause delays.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): When an applicant states that he owns a property, and the accuracy of that claim is challenged by the legal adviser of a neighbour, is it proper for the Department not only to consider and process, but to determine and approve an application for that ground?

Mr Nesbitt: Land ownership is important, but the term “legal interest” is more appropriate. Applicants must complete properly a P2 form where they must state their legal interest in the land. An applicant may or may not own the land, but he must declare that information. We do not check the accuracy of every form, but third parties have the opportunity to challenge applications, because they are publicly advertised. We endeavour to confirm the accuracy of the forms, but discrepancies and inaccuracies cause delays.

Mr Hussey: Is the information contained in objections to planning applications also checked and validated?

Mr Nesbitt: All elements are checked and validated, and, more generally, all elements are considered in determining planning applications. That applies across the spectrum of people who are officially consulted. The information provided during the planning process is validated, whether it be for an application or an objection to an application.

Protected Habitats and Unique Biological Communities

3. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the threat to protected habitats and unique biological communities.

(AQO 1350/01)

Mr Nesbitt: A Northern Ireland countryside survey published by the Department of the Environment in November 2000 sets out the main changes in the countryside over a 10-year period up until 1998. It identified a loss of species-rich grassland and wetland habitats as one of the main trends during that time.

Using data from the survey, my Department’s Environment and Heritage Service is developing several biodiversity action plans for important habitats and vulnerable species in Northern Ireland. The main means of protecting habitats and biological communities, as well as sites that are important for earth science conservation, is the declaration of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

To date, the Department of the Environment has declared 196 ASSIs. Although most sites have remained in good condition following their declaration, there is evidence that some sites or parts of sites have been damaged, while others have deteriorated through neglect or inappropriate management. Weakness in the legislation has contributed to this situation. Following public consultation, the Department of the Environment has therefore been developing proposals to strengthen the legislation governing the protection and management of ASSIs. I recently circulated the proposals in the Executive, with a view to bringing a Bill before the Assembly in the next session.

Mr McElduff: Is the Minister satisfied with the level of cross-departmental co-operation aimed at providing the necessary resources to ensure protection — for example, farmers who may have difficulty in affording infrastructure on their farms? Also, will the Minister comment on the level of threat to protected habitats from other Government Departments?

Mr Nesbitt: There are two elements in a cross-departmental aspect to farming. One is the farmers, and the other is the cross-departmental nature. There is cross-departmental co-operation, and I referred to this previously when I talked about working with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Bríd Rodgers. We have written and oral contact about what needs to be done, and when I had discussions with the Ulster Farmers’ Union, Ms Rodgers and I apprised each other.

With respect to the farming community, I am conscious that this aspect needs to be fostered. From the point of ownership of the land, 4,500 farmers or developers are responsible for the ASSIs they occupy, and we need their co-operation to manage ASSIs effectively. In bringing forward these proposals, we are trying to bring a balance in greater regulation and trying to get help in managing the ASSIs better. I am aware that farmers will be financially compensated for managing ASSIs. We must satisfy a Programme for Government commitment, which is to have a policy and a legislative

framework for protecting and managing areas in place by July 2003.

We are always mindful of what other Government Departments do. I have mentioned the example of the Department of Agriculture and co-operation with it.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister detail what action he is planning to take in response to the report of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group?

Mr Nesbitt: The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group presented its report in October 2000 and made 76 recommendations for biodiversity conservation up to and including the year 2016. Other Departments are discussing this document — and therein is a further answer to the last question — and we anticipate publishing the final document in June. We are not complacent, and action is already under way in the Department with respect to the Irish hare and the curlew, because they are rare species. There will also be the implementation of an action plan by the Department between 2002 and 2005 on those recommendations that fall within its remit. We are responding, and we are dealing with other Departments as well.

Mr Shannon: What provision is there in the present system for landowners or farmers who wish to construct a building or a house to ensure the long-term viability of a farm holding that could be subject to protective habitats and unique biological communities?

Mr Nesbitt: The farming sector is important, and it is important for the management of protected landscapes and areas of special scientific interest that farmers agree with what we wish to do. The aspects raised by Mr Shannon are discussed as and when they arise. However, for the third time in answer to this question, I stress that I recognise the importance of the farming community and the contribution it makes to the agrifood industry in Northern Ireland and to the protection of ASSIs.

3.45 pm

There are currently 196, but it is anticipated that a further 200 may be needed when the review is complete. We will need the agriculture industry to work with us and complement our work to protect agriculture and areas of special scientific interest.

Planning Issues in North Down

4. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made in relation to the areas he visited and planning issues he discussed during his private ministerial visit to North Down on Friday 26 April 2002; and to make a statement. (AQO 1356/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My visit to north Down on Friday 26 April 2002 formed part of my ministerial duties. Its purpose was to hear at first hand the concerns of representatives of local conservation and residents'

groups about the Planning Service's decisions on residential developments in Bangor, Holywood, Helen's Bay and Donaghadee. The issues discussed related to concerns about loss of character in high-quality residential areas; the increase in apartment development; unsuccessful enforcement action; and a request for conservation area status from one group. The visit was helpful in highlighting the areas of concern, and I will pursue these in the normal manner.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for his informative reply. It was interesting because other constituency Members have been working on all those areas for years. The information gained from that visit and from the Minister's answer will be worthwhile for all of us.

Will the Minister explain the difference between a ministerial visit and a private ministerial visit? Is the inclusion of publicity a factor, and what protocols apply to that? If that were clear, perhaps interested MLAs from the same area — other than those from the Minister's own party — might also attend. *[Interruption]*. That is true.

Mr McFarland: That is out of order.

Mrs E Bell: It is not out of order.

Mr Nesbitt: I am glad that Mrs Bell has clarified what is probably the true reason for asking the question. Other constituency Members have been working for years on the points that I have been dealing with. There is nothing unusual about that.

Mrs Bell asked about the difference between a ministerial visit and a private ministerial visit. I note that she used the word "private", not I. I keep apprised of what happens in the media. One of the papers said that it was an informal visit. Let me put it clearly on the record: I was accompanied at the meeting by my private secretary and by the planning officer for that area. I have met delegations in my office before — some from one party, some from several parties — and I have dealt with specific issues in a specific area. On none of those occasions were all Members present nor all parties represented. Not only — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: It is all right, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am a tolerant person. I assure the Member that this is not the first time that I have met a delegation on site, nor will it be the last. I go where I can as time permits. I prefer to describe it as an on-site office meeting.

Let me also stress that I will not tolerate the use or abuse of my ministerial position by any MLA. I have written to one MLA and made clear to him the impact of the statement that he issued.

I walk a tight line; I must be fully cognisant of the circumstances before I reach any decision.

Therefore I must decide when, where or how I gather that information. I am satisfied with what I did. I resent the comment that I was dealing differently with a Member from my party. That was not the case.

Ms Morrice: I wish to find out more about that meeting. I would appreciate information on the visits to Bangor, Holywood, Helen's Bay and Donaghadee. The Minister has given us some details; I want more specific information.

It is interesting that the Minister was information-gathering in order to make a decision. The request for conservation area status for Holywood is valuable for the group. Has the Minister made a decision on that, and if not, when will it be made? Did any other action points emerge from the visit?

Mr Nesbitt: Round two, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I may or may not have been information-gathering to make a decision. I said that I was gathering information for when I may make a decision. I was dealing with officials and issues on a site visit.

Ms Morrice asked about conservation areas, and they are important. All settlements in Northern Ireland have their own identity. I was in Holywood, which has its identity. I have visited Hillsborough, which has its identity. I have been to other places that have their identities. Each place has its own distinctive characteristic, which could be based on its architecture, history or layout. We must form an opinion, and if the buildings are listed buildings, they are likely to become conservation areas.

Others areas that would require a certain level of protection would become areas of townscape character. We must bear those important considerations in mind.

There is also the issue of apartments that are being built in towns. The planning process dictates that 60% of dwellings have to be built in towns. We apply a mixture of general principles to particular circumstances.

Mr Weir: As someone who, along with other Assembly Members, was not invited to the meeting, I would be interested to find out more information on the concerns raised, and what the Minister intends to do about them.

What plans has the Minister to give teeth to the concept of townscape character? A major concern in north Down and elsewhere has been that his Department has issued stop notices and enforcement notices, but has not followed them up with court action when they have been ignored. What plans has he to reverse the previous practice of not enforcing those notices and to take the developers to court as an example to others?

Mr Nesbitt: The record may show, or Mr Weir may clarify, that he said that he was not invited to the meeting. How many times must I say that the meeting I held was similar to other meetings that I hold, in that a

Member makes a request about an issue and attends along with other people? That could mean a Member from any party. That was not the only time I was on site, and it was with a Member who did not belong to the Ulster Unionist Party.

I do not like Mr Weir's innuendo that he was not invited to the meeting.

Mr Weir: It is a statement of fact.

Mr Nesbitt: I note that it is a statement of fact. When I have a meeting dealing with planning applications, a general invitation does not go out to all MLAs in whose constituency the area concerned is. That is protocol, and that is what happens.

On the Member's second point about enforcement, we are bringing forward the planning (amendment) Bill, which will have enforcement powers. I wish to see stronger enforcement powers. I want those powers to be implemented for the benefit of all, so that no one in Northern Ireland will be under the illusion that planning can be flouted in a cavalier way.

Apartment Developments in South Belfast

5. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to restrict the opportunity for apartment development on the sites of family homes in South Belfast; and to make a statement. (AQO 1357/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am aware of concerns about the growth of apartment developments on such sites in south Belfast. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the demand for small unit housing, including apartments. My Department has been seeking to clarify the planning policy context for dealing with those proposals.

The Member will be aware that the regional development strategy seeks to promote more sustainable forms of development through a two-pronged approach of encouraging compact urban forms and promoting more housing in existing urban areas. New residential development can, however, threaten local character and identity. The strategy also requires that densification should be achieved without town cramming — the forcing of overdeveloped and unsympathetic housing schemes into established residential areas.

Planning policy for housing is set out in my Department's Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS 7) 'Quality Residential Environments'. That statement requires developers to provide high-quality housing proposals on both brownfield and greenfield sites that are sympathetic to the character of an area, in order to avoid a level of intensification that can adversely affect local townscape character and identity. Sensitive judgements are required so that the correct balance is achieved between ensuring that proposals are sympathetic to their context, and have respect for local amenities, and seeking

to achieve the target in the regional development strategy of increasing housing provision in existing urban areas.

Particular sensitivity is required in the primarily residential parts of conservation areas, and in areas of townscape character, where planning policy is to grant proposals involving intensification of site usage only in exceptional circumstances. PPS 7 also points out that the demolition of property will not create a presumption that permission for far more intensive and high-density development will be granted.

My Department has also issued draft supplementary planning guidance in the form of Development Control Advice Note 8, 'Small Unit Housing. New Development in Existing Residential Areas', which it intends to publish in final form in the near future. That document provides more detailed guidance on proposals for small unit housing in existing urban areas. Although it does not set policy, it gives guidance to developers on the physical form of housing development, including apartments, and on the relationship with surrounding properties.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his lengthy statement; it certainly clarifies many matters. Does he agree that the conservation area announced last year by his predecessor, Sam Foster, does not seem to have stopped the rot? The announcement of a conservation area in such a large area of south Belfast was very welcome. However, developments — and the threat of large developments — are still taking place.

Only last week, there was publicity surrounding a house in Ashley Avenue that was previously occupied by the poet Séamus Heaney. That house appears to have been left to rot and decay to the point where it will be demolished and replaced by an unsuitable block of flats. I am sure that the Minister has seen many of the sites in south Belfast, but I would be glad to invite him to inspect that site, either with or without my being present. There is a major issue to be resolved, as was highlighted by the case of Séamus Heaney's former house in Ashley Avenue last week.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have less than a minute to respond.

Mr Nesbitt: I smile about the invitation to come to south Belfast. As and when my diary permits, I can and do make visits.

I am visiting a constituency on a different matter with someone from the Member's party. That is how life is in politics. The loss of built heritage in the Malone area has escalated, and the Government designated it a conservation area in 2000. Therefore, express consent must be given for the demolition of any building, and new development must comply with PPS 6, which protects the character of conservation areas. That has been the Department's response.

4.00 pm

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has achieved a new record for the least number of questions answered: he got to the fourth question. Will some direction be given to Ministers so that we get more answers and less waffle?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have noted that we managed to deal with only four questions, which is somewhat unfair to those coming behind. I will return to the issue, and I will examine Hansard to see if I was guilty in any way of prolonging the questions and answers, but I do not think that I was. Four questions was not very good.

Mr Beggs: On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I refer to the operational advice notes in the Standing Orders handbook. I have placed two questions for written answer — AQW 2344/01 and AQW 2345/01 — to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Following numerous telephone calls, faxes and promises, I still do not have answers to those questions, which are now two months overdue. According to the handbook, questions should be tabled "ten clear working days" before they are due for answer. How can I get answers to my constituents' concerns?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. It is a matter for the Executive, and I am sure that they have heard your concerns and complaint.

Mr Davis: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like Members to be aware that the Committee for Procedures and the Business Committee are examining the issue of questions, and they have requested input from Members.

Motion made:

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

LACK OF INVESTMENT IN THE A20 NEWTOWNARDS TO PORTAFERRY ROAD

Mr McCarthy: I would like to thank Members for giving me the opportunity to bring this important aspect of our daily lives before the Assembly, and I would also like to thank the Minister for his presence.

Lack of investment in roads means risks for road safety. I offer my deepest sympathy to the relatives of the latest victims of a serious road accident, on the Ballymena to Ballymoney road over the weekend. Recently, there was also a fatality on the A20.

Although the A20 Newtownards to Portaferry road is a main arterial route carrying an ever-increasing number of vehicles every day, its condition, and the lack of funding for maintenance and upgrading, is replicated on every public road south of the floodgates as one leaves Newtownards, throughout the Ards borough and the Strangford constituency.

The deplorable conditions of our roads affect every constituent. Road users are angry and frustrated, and they ask constantly why they pay car tax. There is little or no industry on the Ards Peninsula, which means that constituents have to travel to where they can find employment, and the vast majority of people are forced to use the A20. Some people are employed on the other side of Strangford Lough, and they use the ferry and then travel on to their work.

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

I doubt that the conditions of the roads on the other side of Strangford Lough are much better. However, I offer sympathy to those who live in Portaferry and beyond who must use the main road to Newtownards twice daily to get to and from work. The A20 contains continuous twists, corners, humps and hollows, with a scattering of potholes, utility manhole covers, sunken gratings, sunken verges and flooding when there is heavy rainfall. All those deficiencies contribute to a less safe road environment, and, thus, we are vulnerable to road accidents, and, unfortunately, fatalities.

Although the local Roads Service office does its best with its limited resources, I continue to hear from angry road users who have driven into a pothole and smashed a tyre and wheel, but who find it difficult to get compensation from the Roads Service. This morning I received a letter from a constituent who had lodged a claim for £64·63 against the Department for Regional

Development as a result of damage caused by a pothole. After an eight-month investigation, that constituent was told:

“your claim for compensation has been unsuccessful. As the leaflet enclosed with your claim form explained, the DOE (NI) is obliged, under the relevant legislation — the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 — to maintain the roads to a reasonable standard.

Where it has not done so and a road user sustains damage to their vehicle because of this lack of maintenance, the legislation allows them to claim compensation from the Department.”

On that occasion, a pothole contributed to £64 worth of damage. However, the letter further states that

“where the Department can show that it was carrying out a reasonable system of maintenance of the road in question, it is entitled to defend any claim for compensation brought under this legislation.”

The Department dismissed this genuine claim for 64 quid. The loophole seems typical; ordinary road users are treated abysmally. Other Members may have heard similar accounts.

The A20 has remained largely unchanged despite the ever-increasing volume of vehicular traffic and newer, larger lorries, which undoubtedly contribute to the deterioration of roads. A further concern is the risk of serious accidents involving the many school buses, sometimes overcrowded, on that road.

The appalling condition of the A20 at Main Street in Kircubbin must be brought to the Minister’s attention. As with all busy streets, a pedestrian crossing was needed on Kircubbin’s Main Street to increase the safety of children and senior citizens. The Roads Service denied a request for a crossing, and a concoction of kerb build-outs was provided, to the dissatisfaction of local residents. A request has been sent to the Roads Service for the build-outs’ removal, because they actually caused an accident. Recently, improvements were completed on a small section of Main Street in Greyabbey, which is also part of the A20, leaving the rest of the town in an appalling condition.

I remind the Minister of his recently launched regional transport strategy, in which no forward plan for the Ards Peninsula was considered. In the summary of funding for each area, neither the Ards Peninsula, nor Portaferry, nor Kircubbin was even mentioned. There is not even a line on the map to show that the A20 exists.

As matters stand, the traffic congestion on the A20 can only get worse as more vehicles take to the road. Surely there has been some thought of future investment such as in the provision of a light rail system along the centre of the peninsula or a dual carriageway, or even widening the existing A20. Constituents expect, at minimum, extra funding for a good, even road surface that will allow safe passage without risking lives every day, and the Minister must give us a fair share of funding for better roads and for the A20 in particular.

I am grateful to the MP, Mrs Iris Robinson, who set up a meeting with the Minister and the Roads Service to allow me to discuss the problems on behalf of my constituents.

Mr Hamilton: Many areas of great natural beauty suffer because of their attractiveness, and the Ards Peninsula is no exception. There are constant conflicts of interest between the legitimate economic needs of the local people, the equally legitimate need to conserve the undoubted natural beauty of the peninsula and the right of the population of Greater Belfast to enjoy the scenic resort value of the area, and finding a balance between those conflicting interests will never be easy. Added to that is the increased volume of traffic that is inevitably caused by the expanding towns along the A20, such as Greyabbey, Kircubbin and Portaferry.

The regional development plan envisages building some 7,000 extra dwellings on or around the peninsula in the next 10 years. Existing road traffic volume problems are bound to get worse and are important enough to be addressed, but underinvestment makes them doubly important.

I have been raising the issue of underinvestment in the Ards Peninsula's roads for some time, and the Minister for Regional Development's answer to a question tabled by me on 12 March 2002 revealed its true extent. In 1998-99, 1999-2000 and 2000-01 the amounts spent by the Department on roads in the boroughs of Ards and Castlereagh that comprise my constituency of Strangford tell a sorry tale. In the three successive years £453,000, £204,000 and £297,000 respectively was spent on roads in the borough of Ards. In the same years, £1,431,000, £408,000 and £1,167,000 was spent on the roads in Castlereagh. That means that a total of £954,000 was invested in the Ards roads in the three-year period compared to some £2,500,000 in the Castlereagh roads. Broadly, Castlereagh received 75% of the investment, while Ards received only 25%.

Although I welcome the level of investment in Castlereagh, which is part of my constituency, I am alarmed at the year-after-year disparity between Castlereagh and Ards. Recurring disparities such as that soon build into major disadvantage, and Ards is approaching that situation.

4.15 pm

I am surprised that the Minister is not sensitive about this, as Castlereagh is his home territory and political stamping ground. It is only recently that his family interests have expanded, albeit temporarily, into Strangford. I would have thought that in the interests of the Minister's own domestic bliss and harmony, he might listen to his lady wife, who represents Strangford at Westminster — at least for the time being. I am surprised that the Minister can stand over such a massive disparity in spending on roads in two adjacent borough council areas.

What is even more revealing is the fact, again gleaned from the Minister's answer to my question, that Ards Borough Council receives only 1% of Province-wide spending on roads. That happens year after year. There are 26 district councils, so that amounts to an average spend of around 4% in each council area, yet Ards receives only 1%. When that is compounded year after year, it amounts to disadvantage. The Minister's argument that roads policy is decided Province-wide and is linked to traffic flow, the number of accidents, environmental impact and value for money is all very well. Those are factors in mitigation, but they are not substantive enough to explain the glaring 3:1 disparity in spending on roads in two adjacent borough council areas. I welcome the spending on roads in Castlereagh. However, that disparity between the Ards average and the provincial average and the fact that an adjacent borough received three times as much as Ards must be explained.

Traffic flows on the Ards Peninsula must be addressed strategically before they inevitably worsen as a result of growing populations in key towns. The balance between business traffic, such as prawn and fish lorries from Portavogie, and domestic traffic that uses the A20 as its main route must also be addressed. Patterns of road utilisation — why the A20 is favoured over the Irish Sea coast road, for example — must be investigated. However, nothing beats investment. The Minister knows that, and so does the House. It seems that Ards has been left behind by all the standards of fairness. The Assembly must seek a commitment from the Minister that that will be addressed urgently.

Mr Shannon: I request investment for the A20 Newtownards to Portaferry road. That encompasses several roads along the Ards Peninsula. Those of us who use the A20 several times a day know that the road is notoriously dangerous, with its sharp corners and sweeping bends. Many residents are loath to use the road at night. Imagine one's travel or activities being restricted because the main local road is too dangerous to travel at night.

The road is also dangerous in the rush hours: first thing in the morning and between 5.00 pm and 7.00 pm. A few months ago a car and its lady driver ended up on the lough shore. Luckily for that lady, the tide was out, or there could have been another fatality. In the past few months there have been two fatalities on the A20, and our thoughts are with those families who lost loved ones. The lady's car ended up on the lough shore because there were no defensive barriers. She had to be cut free from the wreckage. The problem is compounded by the fact that the emergency services also use the A20 to reach people who have been injured. The road has received little investment in the past 20 years.

Mr McCarthy has suggested that a pedestrian crossing is needed in Kircubbin. There have also been requests for pedestrian crossings at other locations, such as Greyabbey and Ballywalter.

Greyabbey is on the A20; Ballywalter is on the other side of the peninsula. There have been requests for pedestrian crossings but they have not yet been acceded to, primarily because of legal criteria on pedestrian crossings. Perhaps the Minister could inform us of the position on pedestrian crossings and whether there is any intention of changing those criteria so that the people who have requested, and badly need, pedestrian crossings in Greyabbey, Kircubbin and Ballywalter can have their requests met.

The same thing applies to traffic-management schemes. Local groups and elected representatives have requested that traffic-management schemes be put in place, again for Greyabbey and Ballywalter. Unfortunately, the necessary finance has not yet been forthcoming. The A20 has been given what I call “reactionary repairs”, which usually means patching up potholes and erecting defence barriers at accident black spots.

There has been very little concerted effort to bring the road into the twenty-first century. The volume of traffic is increasing, and as cars become more affordable as they come into line with European prices, it can only be assumed that there will be more cars in the future. Therefore, it would seem impossible for the Government not to spend money on the country’s infrastructure to keep up with the demands of the people. The infrastructure is at least 20 years out of date. The A20 has had little significant investment since the early 1980s. That is evident by the state of the road. The surface has been tinkered with, but there has been no significant work, such as road-widening.

The road floods at many places, and heavy rainfall makes it treacherous. If there is a storm, the road is closed because it is too dangerous to use. Waves from Strangford Lough crash onto the road, and sections of it have been eaten away by the storms, wind and tides that occur at certain times of the year. Closure of the road, as experienced this year, leaves many people stranded, adding at least 30 or 40 minutes to each journey, because drivers must use an alternative road down the middle of the Ards Peninsula. That can cause great difficulties in medical emergencies.

People’s lives have been, and continue to be, put at risk because of the lack of investment in the A20. A delay in the arrival of the emergency services because of the poor quality of the road or its closure could mean that someone who has suffered a stroke, heart attack or seizure, or even someone who has been involved in a traffic accident, does not get the urgent attention that they need.

The situation is compounded by the fact — and this is not the Minister’s responsibility — that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will not set up an ambulance outstation on the peninsula, leaving it to be covered by the Ards depot, which must

use the A20, which is sometimes cut off from Newtownards. If the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not prepared to help the people of the lower peninsula, we urge the Minister for Regional Development to use his Department’s influence to try to ensure that that scheme goes ahead.

Investment is needed to ensure that the A20 is accessible and safe for all. The maintenance budget for the past 10 years has remained almost unchanged. Although the volume of traffic and demands on the road have increased, it is a pity that the money that is needed simply to maintain the road — not to build a new road — has not matched those demands. The road must be made safe and user-friendly and must be able to withstand the increasing volume of traffic not just over the past 20 years, but also over the next 20 years.

The road will carry more and more tourists. Ards Borough Council is committed to a tourism policy, and more tourists are visiting as a result. If more tourists should come to the country, we will try to attract them to the peninsula’s shores. It is therefore imperative that visitors have a safe, modern road when they visit what we believe are some of the most historic and beautiful sites in Northern Ireland. For those of us who live in the area, Strangford Lough is undoubtedly the jewel in the crown of the Ards Peninsula, if not the whole of Northern Ireland.

There are roads dating back to the 1970s and 1980s. More infrastructure investment is needed, especially on the A20, so that we can make the most of the area and improve the overall impression of the country and the area that we represent.

Mr C Wilson: I thank Kieran McCarthy for bringing this matter up. I have clocked up hundreds of thousands of miles on that road over the past 40 years, and I know every corner and every twist and turn in it.

All of us could describe horrific accidents that have occurred on the road. If the statistics were made known, and given the length of the road, it is probably one of the greatest accident black spots in the Province. Many of my constituents refer to it as “the highway to hell” because of the numbers of fatalities that have occurred and the number of people who have been severely injured and who will have to be cared for for the rest of their lives.

Regarding the condition of the road — apart from its dangerous corners and twists — public transport providers have said that vehicles using the A20 require more frequent replacement of suspension and shock absorbers than those on any other route throughout the Province. That is a fair indication of the poor condition of the A20.

The condition of the road, coupled with under-investment in road infrastructure on the Ards Peninsula and the massive development that is taking place along

its length and breadth, makes a very dangerous cocktail. The A20 cannot deal with the current volume of traffic.

It would be interesting if the Department were to examine the number of planning applications that have been approved in the last four or five years, together with those currently coming on stream. Mr Hamilton referred to 7,000 new dwellings in the Ards area, and few people know that many of those houses are being built between the floodgates and Portaferry.

A disproportionate number of houses are being built at the tip of the Ards Peninsula; there are plans to build between 900 and 1,200 dwellings close to my home. If we accept that there are two cars per dwelling — and few families have fewer than two cars: families with growing children sometimes have more — there is the potential for many thousands more vehicles to be thrown onto those roads in the coming years.

The Planning Service needs to address the problem immediately. People in the villages, towns and hamlets on both sides of the Ards Peninsula must demand answers from the Planning Service about why it can continue to approve large-scale building developments when it is known that the road and sewerage infrastructures are not capable of dealing with the current situation. Developers are driving a coach and horses through the legislation.

4.30 pm

All Members, especially those who serve on Ards Borough Council, know that developers deliberately avoid public inquiries into some large-scale developments by submitting their planning applications piecemeal. They apply for planning permission for 100 dwellings or fewer, rather than for the full number of dwellings that they intend to develop. I do not know how, but that must be addressed. It must be made clear that the Planning Service will place a moratorium on large-scale building developments on the Ards Peninsula until the infrastructure has been dealt with. No one is grasping the nettle.

Before anything happens, we shall hear of more fatalities. I appeal to those with responsibility to give top priority to the Newtownards to Portaferry road; it deserves nothing less.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I congratulate Mr McCarthy on securing the Adjournment debate and for raising an important subject that is of concern to all Members from his constituency.

The A20 from Newtownards to Portaferry, which is 19 miles long, is, as Mr McCarthy stated, sinuous in nature, following as it does for much of its length the inside coast of the Ards Peninsula. It is the main route servicing the peninsula, and passes through the villages of Greyabbey and Kircubbin. It carries a two-way traffic flow and is the main distributor road southwards on the Ards Peninsula.

Traffic flow decreases towards Portaferry. Although the most recent data shows that the traffic level just south of Newtownards stands at about 10,400 vehicles a day, at the Portaferry end it decreases to 2,700 vehicles a day. The road is a standard single carriageway on which the 60 miles an hour national speed limit applies — except through the villages to which I referred, where a 30 miles an hour speed limit applies. A large amount of holiday and leisure traffic uses the route at weekends and during the summer months. It is, therefore, an important road and commuter route for those who live on the peninsula. Although passing opportunities are severely limited by the road's alignment, and slow-moving vehicles can cause driver frustration, no specific congestion occurs on the route.

The Roads Service recently carried out several improvement schemes on the route, directed at road safety. They include an environmental improvement scheme, costing £110,000, that was substantially completed in Greyabbey earlier this year. In addition to environmental aspects, that scheme also improved the profile of Lower Main Street and incorporated carriageway resurfacing, street lighting, a short length of footpath at the local primary school and improved signing to show the school's proximity to the carriageway. I have noted some of Mr McCarthy's criticisms, and I shall consider them.

Mr McCarthy also criticised the traffic-calming scheme that was completed in Kircubbin last month at a cost of £18,000. The scheme included the provision of entry gateway features, lay-by central road markers, kerb buildouts, colour surfacing and signing. I shall consider the Member's criticism of the kerb buildouts.

A scheme costing £10,000 to provide higher friction surfacing and a crash barrier at a bend at Ballygarvan was completed in September 2001, and an £8,000 improvement scheme at Kelly's Corner was completed in September 1999. In addition to those improvement schemes, during the past seven years the Roads Service has resurfaced, or surface-dressed, some five miles between Newtownards and Portaferry. That is about a quarter of the 19-mile route. That work cost approximately £300,000.

I was privileged to launch the new ferry, the MV Portaferry II, for the Strangford Lough ferry service last January. That was paid for by the Roads Service budget for the area. The new vessel cost approximately £2.7 million and was essential for the development of social and economic links between the Ards Peninsula and south Down.

As Members are aware, the resources available for the roads programme are finite, and funds for major road improvements are being targeted largely at schemes to upgrade the regional strategic transport network as defined in the regional development strategy. I would point out to Members who criticise the proposed regional transportation strategy — because we have not had that

strategy yet — that there are no specific schemes for the area. The regional development strategy, which was unanimously supported by the Assembly, did not include the A20, so the Roads Service has no plans to upgrade the route significantly. The Roads Service recognised that it had to concentrate on the regional strategic transport network as opposed to other roads.

Resources available for those schemes would not permit a comprehensive realignment scheme, so any changes to the A20 would have to be carried out through minor road improvements or road maintenance schemes. That will require the Department to look at several issues, such as the realignments and accident reviews. We would also look at temporary calming assessment proposals as well as targeting accident sites for possible re-engineering. In that context, the Roads Service is assessing the feasibility of a bend realignment scheme at Ballygarvan. If the scheme is viable, it will be considered for possible inclusion in the future minor works programme. The Roads Service also plans to surface-dress a three quarter mile section of the A20 north of the Cunningham Road and south of the Mountstewart Road later this year.

Considering that it is not part of the regional strategic network, I trust that the investments that I have mentioned illustrate that my Department will continue to be committed to doing what is possible in the area using the available resources.

I would like to respond to some of the specific points raised in the debate. Mr McCarthy mentioned compensation, and that is always a matter of concern for those who seek compensation because their vehicles have been damaged but who do not automatically get it through the Department. However, that is only the first stage of the process, and people can challenge any decision by the Department for Regional Development in the courts. The Department has been severely criticised for paying out directly and without testing claims. It was criticised by the Westminster Public Accounts Committee in one case for meeting compensation claims. The Department is required to have objective criteria to determine whether payments are made.

The Member also asked the rhetorical question about where the car tax goes. However, he moved on quickly because I suspect he knows the answer. The money goes to the Exchequer; unfortunately, not to the Department for Regional Development. However, there has been some talk, although it has not amounted to much, that there will be some direct hypothecation for car tax. That would be desirable.

Mr Hamilton, the Member for Strangford, made a mean-spirited statement that did not relate to the subject, but as he has put it on the public record it is right that it should be answered. It is curious that someone who sneaked into the Assembly through the back door and who

has no mandate to be here would call someone a temporary Member, even though that Member has been elected by the people and has a clear majority at Westminster.

The Member is more likely than any elected representative to be given that label. He was obviously never an accountant and is incapable of understanding statistics, or he would not have made those remarks. Those Strangford electors who live in Castlereagh will be interested to note how little he cares for their welfare. Those who live in Ards will not consider him to have done them any favours when they realise the way in which he mangled the statistics to reach that conclusion. If he had looked at the Roads Service budget for the Ards area as a whole, he would have seen that expenditure over the past three years has been greater in Ards than in Castlereagh. However, the Member managed to exclude parts of the roads budget, such as the expenditure on the Strangford ferry. He should not demean that, because it is only by its inclusion in the budget as a “road extension” that it can be paid for by the Department for Regional Development.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will give way in a moment, but first I will really give the Member something to answer.

In addition, the Member did not bother to mention that I announced my Department’s intention to construct the Comber bypass at the cost of some £3 million to £4 million. If he were to add that to his figures, he might well find that it would be the people of Castlereagh who would be asking why they were getting the rough end of the stick. I will give way to the Member, and I hope that he has more sense this time.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister accept that the figures that I gave were from a written answer, provided by his Department?

Mr P Robinson: No, I do not accept that. Those figures were only part of the answer. If the Member cannot take the information in by listening, he might like to read it in the report of the proceedings. If he had listened to what I said, he would know that the total expenditure is greater than the sum of the figures that he added together. If he were to look at the total roads expenditure — rather than only the items that he decided to take into account — he would see that Ards comes ahead of Castlereagh.

As I pointed out to him, the further expenditure that has been announced by the Department for Regional Development for the Comber bypass will put Ards well ahead of Castlereagh. Therefore when those figures are produced for him, I hope that the Member will show as much interest in the Castlereagh electors of Strangford as he does in the Ards electors of Strangford.

The distribution of expenditure is decided objectively by the Roads Service professionals on the basis of the

needs in the various areas of the Province. If the Member does not like money being spent on the regional strategic transport network, he will have to explain to his constituents why the Assembly unanimously supported it. I did not hear any voice from Strangford saying that it was the wrong policy to adopt.

It is also important to say that there has been a significant increase in the proposals for the Strangford constituency since devolution. I have heard no words of thanks or praise from the Member for the substantial increase since devolution and since I have had responsibility for the Department. It contrasts with the negligence during the years when his party had the Strangford parliamentary seat and, therefore, the responsibility for bringing infrastructural improvements into the area.

Various Members, including Mr Cedric Wilson and Mr Jim Shannon, spoke about road safety in the constituency, and it is a matter of significant concern. Believe it or not, I could quote the professional findings of the comparative road safety record for this area, as opposed to the rest of the Province. The figure is almost exactly the same as the Province-wide average, which is not a particularly high level. However, Members are right to say that it is still high. The road accident statistics for Northern Ireland are much higher than any Government Minister would find acceptable, and, therefore, we must deal with the problem.

We therefore have a policy. Road accidents occur for many different reasons. Road accidents are not always the fault of the road and are not always something that can be dealt with by a Minister. One determines whether it is the fault of the road by looking at road accident clusters. A cluster is a series of accidents that have occurred at the same spot over three years. However, there are no clusters on the peninsula. There have been several accidents, but they have not followed any particular locational pattern, which makes it more difficult to get an engineering response.

4.45 pm

The issue raised by Cedric Wilson with regard to what I would describe as “incremental development” is a sleight of hand and is not restricted to developers on

the peninsula. Many developers across the Province attempt to avoid any major infrastructural improvement by putting in a lower level of houses for development. Although the number they put in might be dealt with by the existing road network or by some minor changes to it, they still have to bring forward their further proposals. Those are then factored into the requirements for the infrastructure. If the two proposals together require major improvements, then the second part of their development must carry that infrastructural cost. Although they may get away in the smoke in the first instance, when they come back for the full scheme they will be caught.

My Department’s Roads Service will always give advice to the Department of the Environment’s Planning Service on these issues. However, as Minister, I am not satisfied with the present arrangements for developer contributions. Changes are required, not just for roads but for water as well. The proposed regional transport strategy has a section dealing with funding through developer contributions, and we need to look at these issues.

Mr Shannon made the point about pedestrian crossings. Both he and Mr McCarthy have raised the issue of a pedestrian crossing in this area with me, and I have agreed to look at this. Even with the technical advice I get, I find it very difficult to unravel the formula for pedestrian crossings, which is almost like an algebraic formula. If we are going to make people believe that we are following objective criteria, we require objective criteria that they understand. We need to get the road-speak out of the formula so that people can understand how the decisions are taken — what is the factor that can cause a change in the decision to put a pedestrian crossing in place or not. I am happy to look at that issue so that we can have a formula that is more easily understood and has greater public confidence.

Finally, I am aware that the Member of Parliament for the area has been seeking a meeting to look at these issues, and I will ensure that this meeting is set up and processed. We can arrange a site visit, as it is always much better to see these issues first-hand. We can then see what steps can be taken beyond those I have already referred to.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 20 May 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

VISIT OF HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

Mr J Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Criticism has recently been levelled at the Assembly concerning the facilities that were made available to the media during Her Majesty The Queen's visit to Parliament Buildings last week. Was that criticism justified?

Mr Speaker: I have noticed criticism in the press, and I have received correspondence from Ulster Television (UTV) about the matter. I am writing to request an apology from UTV for some of the statements that were made. I am not surprised that UTV were embarrassed by the poor quality of the coverage of the event, especially since they were providing it not only for their own viewers but for those of other broadcasting organisations and, indeed, the Assembly. To obviate their embarrassment, they have sought to blame Assembly staff and have made several quite untrue claims.

They claim that it was to do with security arrangements, but it was not. Our staff gave full assistance as to the best place to take shots and discussed where they might have difficulties. They took their own advice, and discovered too late that they were mistaken. The only thing that they requested but did not receive was the right to place a camera in the middle of the floor of the Great Hall, where Her Majesty and all would have had to parade around it.

Assembly staff thought that that was inappropriate. However, UTV staff were permitted to place a camera on a riser at the back of the Great Hall, and they pronounced themselves totally satisfied with all the arrangements — until they saw the outcome. At that stage they sought to make a complaint, and to put blame on the Assembly staff who had co-operated fully with them.

That was not the only blunder on the part of the press. For example, a member of broadcasting staff was speaking so loudly upstairs in the Gallery during one of the speeches that it was thought initially that an intruder was trying to disrupt the proceedings.

Our own contracted staff have provided very competent and helpful broadcasting for almost four years. They are familiar with how to conduct things, and an obvious solution for future circumstances would be to have our

own staff provide a pooled feed that the broadcasters could then take.

The stills photographer, who was offered the same facilities, managed to take excellent photographs that have been used widely and appreciated widely. I trust that that addresses the Member's concern.

Mr P Robinson: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Members were notified of the intention to carry out searches before Her Majesty's visit — as one would expect. Many Members made the necessary arrangements for desks, filing cabinets and rooms to be left open. However, there is an indication that not everyone did so. Can you investigate whether, in cases where people left desks, filing cabinets or rooms locked, they were penetrated in all cases, and can you report to the Assembly Commission on that?

Mr Speaker: I have made initial enquiries on that issue. A few desks and filing cabinets were not opened. The security forces were entirely satisfied that these were well away from any areas where they had any concerns. In all the cases concerned, Members had not been around for some time, and that was why some desks and filing cabinets were not left open. I cannot comment more fully on it, save to say that beforehand, and subsequently when I checked, I was advised that the security services were wholly happy with the substantial co-operation that they received from all sides in the Assembly. As the Member has raised the matter, I will enquire further about it.

Mr Morrow: Further to the earlier point of order, Mr Speaker. You said that you are entering into correspondence with UTV. Is it your intention to report to the Assembly on that correspondence?

Mr Speaker: That would not normally be how I would proceed. It would generally be a matter for the Commission. If Members raise questions, I try to be helpful, but I am simply responding to the question raised. I received a letter from UTV that contained several scurrilous suggestions, and I have no option but to reply to it. The terms in which I will reply are the terms in which I have responded to the point of order this morning.

I will draw the matter to the attention of the Commission, which is the responsible body.

Mr Davis: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. We should thank those members of the Assembly staff and Members' staff who stayed behind for some time to help with the security search.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Member for raising that matter. The Assembly staff, and the staff of all the parties, were extremely co-operative, and some people put themselves out substantially both before, during and after the visit. It would also be fair for the Assembly to record its appreciation of the substantial efforts made by Assembly staff to ensure that an important event passed in what I understand was described as "clockwork order" by some commentators who viewed it.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 20 May 2002. — [*The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson).*]

HARLAND & WOLFF LANDS ISSUE

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the Harland & Wolff lands issue.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on my decision regarding the Harland & Wolff lands issue.

Last week, in reply to a question for written answer tabled by Mr Peter Weir, I said that I expected to be in a position soon to respond to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' application to my Department for approval to enter into an agreement with Titanic Quarter Ltd for the development of some 80 acres of land in the harbour estate that is no longer required for shipbuilding purposes.

Sir David Fell, chairman of Harland & Wolff, first briefed Sir Reg Empey and me on 25 February 2002 about the company's difficulties and advanced the proposal that it might conclude a land deal with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners — the company's landlord — aimed at financing a new business plan.

From the outset, my principal concern has been to safeguard the public interest. As Minister for Regional Development, I was also keen to ensure that those lands identified by the company as being no longer needed for shipbuilding were developed in the best interests of Northern Ireland. Under the terms of the memorandum of understanding between the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and my Department, the commissioners are required to consult with my Department and seek its approval for any proposed disposal or change of use of any harbour lands. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners' proposal to my Department envisaged a partnership with Titanic Quarter Ltd, a sister company of Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd, for the purpose of development of the site. As part of that arrangement, it was envisaged that the covenants in the existing lease, which restricted use of the land to shipbuilding, ship repair and engineering, would be removed to facilitate the commercial development of the site.

On the back of that arrangement, it was proposed that Harland & Wolff's parent company, Fred Olsen Energy, would invest £15 million in Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd, which was based on 50% of the market

value of the site. That cash injection is intended to finance the company's new business plan.

My Department's consideration of the proposal has entailed careful examination of several matters including the market value of the lands involved, the legal documentation relating to the proposed agreement and any state aid implications. Having completed my examination of the proposal put to my Department under the terms of the memorandum of understanding with Belfast Harbour Commissioners, I am able to announce to the Assembly that I have decided to approve the proposal.

I have several reasons to believe that my decision is in the best interests of Northern Ireland plc. It will facilitate the regeneration of a substantial area of the harbour estate, a prime site close to the city centre, which, if left undeveloped, would rapidly become an eyesore. Development of the land offers fresh job opportunities. Both Harland & Wolff and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners accept that the site lends itself to development, at least in part, for light industrial use.

After protracted negotiations, the public interest represented by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners will share capital costs and revenue benefits fifty-fifty. That is the same share for the Harland & Wolff interest, on a lease that expires in 2114, as it is for the Titanic Quarter deal, the lease for which expires in 2019. Taken together with the adjoining Titanic Quarter site and the new science park, the lands promise to become a dynamic new development area of more than 180 acres.

Finally, both the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Titanic Quarter Ltd have undertaken to bear the on-site infrastructure costs and their share of the external infrastructure costs of the development of the site.

12.15 pm

Those reasons alone mean that it is a strong deal that would, on a stand-alone basis, merit approval. There are also additional benefits of which I am aware, but which I could not allow to colour my judgement. They relate more to the responsibilities of Sir Reg Empey, as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, with whom I have worked closely throughout the process. Those are: Harland & Wolff will be given the opportunity to finance and implement its new business plan, and so ensure the survival of shipbuilding operations in Belfast for the immediate future; it will retain jobs and also allow the two roll-on roll-off vessels under construction to be completed; it will give the company the opportunity to improve the yard's prospects in the longer term by making it more compact and efficient; and it will allow the company to develop new market opportunities in the construction of a renewables plant.

In considering those matters, Sir Reg Empey and I acknowledged that no public moneys would be involved in implementing the proposed development agreement

or in financing Harland & Wolff's new business plan. Fred Olsen Energy will be required to bear the commercial risk involved with regard to the latter. Sir Reg Empey and I consulted widely on those issues, because we were keen to secure the maximum political engagement and public support.

The consultation has extended to include Belfast City Council, the Regional Development Committee, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Executive Committee and the trade unions. The process has worked well, and it has demonstrated openness, transparency and public accountability. It has also proved to be a good test of the memorandum of understanding with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The public interest will be safeguarded in various ways in implementing the decision.

The injection of funds into Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd will be monitored by a committee of officials drawn from the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Finance and Personnel. The committee will also monitor the implementation of the company's business plan and will be supported by PricewaterhouseCoopers. The Department for Regional Development will be involved in the master-planning process, and the development proposals which emerge from that will be the subject of the full rigour of the statutory planning process. I commend those arrangements to the House and to the Northern Ireland public.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): The Regional Development Committee has monitored this situation for some time, and it is generally supportive of the Minister's statement. Some members of the Committee are rather doubtful about the long-term viability of the restructured company, but we wish it well. However, we are concerned about the protection of the public interest with regard to the surplus lands that will result from the restructuring of Harland & Wolff. The Regional Development Committee believes strongly that the lands are public assets and should be developed in the public interest. I hope that the plan that is being proposed today will protect the public interest. I note that the development costs will be shared fifty-fifty between the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Fred Olsen Energy. The Committee believes that that is important.

Will the Minister reassure the House that no public funding will go into the development of these lands and that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Fred Olsen Energy will develop them jointly?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Committee for the role that it played in examining the many issues involved. The Committee was able to profile the issues in a way that illuminated public understanding of this complex case.

Alban Maginness is correct that there is no assurance of a long-term future for Harland & Wolff on the basis of the injection of funds as a consequence of the land deal. Members hope that it will be the case. Nonetheless, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can say that only the injection of funds into the company will make it theoretically possible to meet its business plan. The success of the business plan depends entirely on whether the company can secure orders. That is why I have emphasised that we have examined this issue on a stand-alone basis, and we have concluded that it makes sense.

Mr Maginness is correct in saying that the key issue has been the protection of the public interest, and that has been done in several ways. Harland & Wolff, through its Titanic Quarter deal, will be a partner with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, who have considerable experience of development. That secures the public end of the arrangement in an accountable way. I hope that, later today, there will be approval for new harbour Orders that will increase the public accountability of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

The moneys that will meet the requirements of Harland & Wolff's business plan come from the injection of funds into Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd by Fred Olsen Energy as a result of the land deal, and also from a further loan from Fred Olsen, because there was a gap that had to be filled. The only public funds involved relate to the Department for Employment and Learning, which is deferring a loan — although not writing it off — so that it meets the business plan requirements. It is for the Department for Employment and Learning to make any statement on that. It seems to be a common-sense decision, because if the Department did not agree to that — and the deal fell as a result — it would not have had the money anyway, because it is an unsecured loan.

Dr Adamson: I declare an interest as a Belfast City Council appointee to the Greater East Belfast Partnership Board, which has an interest in this issue, and also as chairman of the community enterprise scheme, Heirskip Village. I commend the Minister on his work and his report, and also Sir Reg Empey. Does the Minister think that there is concern in the local community that this is part of an eventual withdrawal of Harland & Wolff from the site? Methinks there may be Vikings about. Can he reassure us by elaborating on the monitoring board that will be established?

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

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to my Colleague from East Belfast for raising declarations of interest, as it gives me the opportunity to say that I do not have an interest, although the Register of Members' Interests might suggest otherwise. Although my interest was minimal, I

donated it to a local charity — of which the Member would approve — before decisions were made on the matter.

I am not sure that any Vikings gave orders to inject funds into Northern Ireland companies. Those who question Fred Olsen's motives must recognise that, if he or any of his companies were interested only in asset-stripping, it is unlikely that they would have reinvested the moneys that were secured from that in Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd.

I am aware of the hon Gentleman's interest in the Greater East Belfast Partnership Board. I hope that we can proceed with the issue relating to the board and the lands known as the Esso lands. I am happy to work with the Member and his Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to secure the matter.

Although people may question the motives, the proposals make sense as they stand. I too have concerns about the future of shipbuilding in Northern Ireland. However, the deal offers shipbuilding a chance, without which it has no future.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has been considering this matter for some time, and before devolution the Assembly established an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with the harbour lands. Modern shipbuilding does not require the huge tracts of land that were needed in the last century.

Does the Minister agree that the lands are not only a Belfast city asset but a Northern Ireland asset and should be treated as such? What input will his Department and other Departments have in drawing up the brief that will lead to the development plan for this site and for the Titanic Quarter? I welcome the fact that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Harland & Wolff will provide the necessary infrastructure.

Mr P Robinson: I remember the days of the Ad Hoc Committee and its work. The question enables me to return to the question that Dr Adamson asked about the monitoring committee, to which I did not respond. The committee will comprise representatives from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Regional Development, which have been involved in the project and which will continue to have an interest in the development of the land and in monitoring the injection of funds and subsequent matters.

The Member for East Antrim, Mr Neeson, is right to emphasise the fact that this is not solely an east Belfast, in its narrowest focus, or a Belfast issue. The development of the site has implications for the whole of Northern Ireland. It is one of the most attractive development sites in the Province, particularly because

of its proximity to Belfast city centre. It must, therefore, be tackled strategically and carefully.

I asked the official in charge of regional planning to leave all his other work aside and concentrate on the preparation of a draft plan to show how the site and the Titanic Quarter might be developed.

12.30 pm

It is important that they are developed as one site.

A reputable Northern Ireland company is representing Fred Olsen Energy, and it is working on development proposals. That company has agreed to work in a body with the Department for Regional Development, and the work will be fed through to the monitoring group. However, the Planning Service will always have the final say, and proposals will be subject to all of its usual rigours.

Therefore, there is a series of "protections" as regards how the site is developed — not least of which is the fact that the partnership between private and public interests is fifty-fifty — which should help to secure public confidence. The public interest will be represented by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, which, under their memorandum of understanding, have worked closely with my Department throughout the process. I expect that to continue through to the end of the process because there is a good relationship between the Department and Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

Mr McNamee: I welcome the positive aspects of the Minister's statement — the positive effect that the deal will have on employment at Harland & Wolff in the short term and the opportunity it provides for the company to improve its prospects.

The deal, however, involves £15 million being invested in Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd, and the Minister has said that there is no guarantee that the business plan will be successful in the long term. The House is aware of competition in the shipbuilding industry that Harland & Wolff faces from Asian countries. Will the Minister elaborate on the business plan and explain why a decision has been taken to invest £15 million in it? Will he state how confident he is about the possible success of the plan?

Mr P Robinson: It would be inappropriate for me to comment on the business plan. That is a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment issue, and it says that the figures add up. The future of the company will depend on its ability to secure work on the open market. That will be the test.

The Assembly would want to concentrate on why investment should be made if public money were being put into the company. In this case, however, the question must be put to Fred Olsen Energy. It is making the investment, and I welcome that. The alternative is for Fred Olsen Energy to put the money in its back pocket. I

would much rather see it being invested in a Northern Ireland company and giving it a chance to survive.

The Department recognises that there is much competition from the Pacific basin. Harland & Wolff must look to contracts that have added value. However, the company will become more competitive by reducing its overheads and contracting the site. It will increase its ability to compete by bringing in modules for areas of activity that it claims are more costly. It will have a better chance if it looks to the niche market that is not covered by Pacific basin countries. However, the odds are no higher than that, and this is a matter for the company. I know that the House will wish the company well in implementing its business plan.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): Does the Minister agree that the existence of Ministers, Committees and the Assembly was vital to the construction of the plan and that had Harland & Wolff's problems occurred before devolution the outcome in relation to protecting the public interest might have been different?

Mr P Robinson: As someone who believes in devolution, I find it easy to answer the Member's question. I have always believed that people who have an intimate knowledge of the issues will make better decisions than those who are not directly accountable to the Northern Ireland people. It is important that the process has been transparent, as it has been the subject of much criticism in the past. The public are aware of the issues involved in a way that they were not before.

The memorandum of understanding agreed between the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and my Department has worked well and, when it is enshrined in the new harbour Orders, will work well in future. Even if no benefits were to be gained by Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd, the arrangement would still be in the interests of Northern Ireland plc. It makes sense to develop the site.

As well as being a Minister, I also represent East Belfast. If no agreement on the land had been reached, I could not contemplate the blight and the loss of potential that would result from leaving the site, so close to Belfast city centre, derelict and overgrown with weeds. All the employment potential would be lost not only for East Belfast, but for the wider area.

Mr Byrne: The issue has been around for several years, and the Minister's definitive statement is to be welcomed. Is £15 million a true reflection of the market value of the 80 acres of land that is to be released for development? Will more land be released for development in future? Is the Minister satisfied that there will be a proper mix of development use? Only light industrial use has been mentioned.

Mr P Robinson: The £15 million is gauged to be only half the value of the land because only half the land belongs to Fred Olsen companies; the other half is held in the public interest by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. I know from working as an estate agent in the early part of my adult life that the value of any property is only worth what a willing purchaser will pay on the open market. Therefore, one can never know the true value of a property until it is sold.

Reputable companies conducted four valuations of the land. The lowest and highest valuations were disregarded, and an average of the remaining two was taken. The Department had the average considered by the Valuation and Lands Agency, which agreed that the average was within its appropriate tolerance level. The experts consider the figure to be reasonable. Of course, as soon as money is invested to improve the infrastructure of the area, the development potential will increase. However, the developers will have to speculate to accumulate on that.

The Member also raised the issue of more land being released for development. In many ways, I hope that no more land is released because that will inevitably mean that Harland & Wolff's business plan has failed. We would have to reconsider the issue if that happened. Taken together with the original Titanic Quarter land, the development is sizeable and will probably take 10 to 15 years to fully evolve.

The land will be developed for mixed use. Ultimately, its use will be a matter for the Department of the Environment's Planning Service. However, the land stretches from the Odyssey to what will be the new, contracted Harland & Wolff site, and it would seem natural to soften the land's use as it draws closer to the Odyssey. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment highlighted his priority that the land be used for light industry, and he and I have pressed for such a use of a significant portion of the land. However, it will be a mixed-use development.

OPEN-ENDED INVESTMENT COMPANIES BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 10/01] to make provision for facilitating the carrying on of collective investment by means of open-ended investment companies and for regulating such companies.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of pending business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Normally, I would move on to the next item of business, the Second Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provision) Bill, but I do not see Mr Dermot Nesbitt in the Chamber. For that reason I will, by leave of the House, suspend the sitting for five minutes. We will then continue with the next item on the Order Paper.

The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.

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

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last week, a motion stood in my name on the Order Paper and, because I arrived in the Chamber one minute after the previous business collapsed, the motion fell, and there was no opportunity for reconsideration. Also last week, Dr McDonnell tabled a private Member's motion, and the House was suspended to give him time to arrive. This morning the House suspended to allow the Minister of the Environment to arrive. In my case, the motion could be taken only on that day last week. Dr McDonnell's private Member's motion, and the Second Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill could have been taken at any time. Given that inconsistency, will you consult with the Speaker and your Colleagues and make a firm ruling on what business collapses and what business can be suspended?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I shall raise the issue with the Speaker and, of course, the issue may be raised at the Business Committee. It was with great reluctance that I suspended business today but, on balance, it was the best course of action.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your forbearance.

I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA 7/01) be agreed.

The main purpose of the Bill is to introduce a new methodology for the distribution of the resources element of the general grant that is payable to district councils. The existing statutory formula is complex and results frequently in wide variations each year, which makes effective long-term financial planning difficult for councils. The methodology aims to address the complexities of the current formula and to provide for regular payments to facilitate good financial planning. In accordance with TSN principles, it will incorporate factors to take account of the relative socio-economic disadvantage of districts.

The Bill will also be used to amend the economic development powers of district councils. The changes were contained in a proposal for a draft Order in Council that the former Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland prepared. The new provisions remove the financial limit on economic development expenditure and extend the existing powers of district councils to promote the economic development of their areas. That will allow them to engage in more diverse activities, such as providing sites for economic development.

In addition, the Bill provides for district councils to engage, if they so wish, in community safety activity through partnerships, which would be established as part of a community safety strategy devised by the Secretary of State.

By way of background to the Bill, article 3 of the Local Government &c. (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 provides for the payment of a general grant to district councils. The grant comprises an element to compensate district councils for a loss of rate income due to the statutory derating of certain properties and a resources element to provide additional finance to district councils whose rateable value per capita of the population falls below a standard that the Department determined.

The Bill will consolidate and replace existing provisions that relate to the general grant. It will introduce a new formula for the distribution of the resources element of the grant to district councils, to take effect from 1 April 2003. The new methodology is aimed at assisting the councils with the greatest need and ensuring a more equitable distribution of the available moneys.

The formula is designed to measure a council's wealth against its estimated needs. Wealth is determined according to the gross penny rate product of a district council, and needs are measured according to a council's adjustment population. If a council's wealth base is greater than its estimated needs, it does not qualify for a grant. However, if a council's wealth base is lower than its needs, it will be eligible for a share of the grant in proportion to the total shortfall. The proposed methodology should be easier to understand than the existing formula.

The consultation exercises focused on underlying issues. Two consultation papers, which dealt with proposals for a new formula for the distribution of the resources element of the general grant, were issued. The first paper outlined a suggested new methodology for the distribution of the grant. Many of the responses to the paper were taken on board, and preliminary proposals were adjusted. On completion of an equality impact assessment, a second consultation paper was circulated widely to fulfil the Department's statutory requirements under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

In addition to those formal consultation procedures, presentations were made to the Committee for the Environment and the National Association of Councillors. A presentation and two workshop sessions were conducted for local government finance officers. Meetings with individuals to clarify the proposals were also arranged. Four of the Bill's clauses were discussed at the most recent presentation to the Committee for the Environment on 9 May 2002. I am grateful to the Committee for raising those points, and I will deal with its concerns when I address the details of the Bill.

The initial consultation with district councils and other interested parties resulted in 22 responses to the paper. Although there was broad support for the proposed methodology, valid points were made about the data and the waiting factors to be applied, many of which have since been addressed.

We received 21 responses to the second consultation exercise. The proposal was generally accepted as a major improvement on the present arrangement. It was recognised that adjustments made to base population figures reflected additional needs relating to deprivation and the influx of population. However, some reservations were expressed about the measures for addressing the problem of sparsity. Those were re-examined, and further adjustments have been made. The Department has noted other suggestions relating to the application of up-to-date data as it becomes available. The Department may revise periodically any of the detail of the formula, as this will be contained in subordinate legislation.

Overall, it was recognised that the proposed formula involves a simpler calculation. It allows for better financial planning by district councils. It was generally

accepted that the proposed method meets the objectives of the resources element of the general grant.

Consultation on the amendment of district councils' economic development powers took place when the Regeneration and Development (Northern Ireland) Order was drafted. District councils have been aware of the proposed amendments for some time, and their responses indicated overwhelming support for the proposed extension of economic development powers.

The Northern Ireland Office undertook consultation on community safety in the context of the Criminal Justice Review implementation plan. District councils and other interests were given an opportunity to comment. Several councils responded positively to the NIO proposals, and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) sought statutory powers to engage in community safety activity on behalf of all councils. No objections were made to the Northern Ireland Office proposals. The detailed community safety strategy devised by the Northern Ireland Office is undergoing an extensive consultation process.

The Bill contains 11 clauses, and I will now briefly outline the key aspects of the principal clauses 1 to 7, and cover issues raised recently in presentations by my officials.

Clause 1 makes provision for the general grant. Subsection (1) empowers the Department of the Environment to make payments of general grant to district councils each year. Subsection (2) sets out the two distinct elements of the grant: the resources element which is payable only to those district councils whose needs exceed their wealth base; and the derating element which compensates district councils for loss of rate income due to the statutory derating of certain properties. Subsection (3) empowers my Department to determine the timing of grant payments. Payments are made every quarter. However, district councils have indicated that they would like to receive monthly payments, and the Department of the Environment will accommodate that with effect from April 2003.

Clause 2 deals with the determination of the resources element of the general grant. Subsection (1) provides for the method for allocations to be determined by Regulations. Subordinate legislation is now being drafted. A new formula has been devised that aims to achieve a fairer distribution of the available funds. The purpose of subsections (2)(a) and (2)(b) is to put in place a formula that will measure the wealth of a council against its estimated needs. Wealth is determined by the gross penny rate product of a district council, relative to that for Northern Ireland. Needs are measured by population of a district council, relative to the total for Northern Ireland. To take account of councils' specific needs — which have been identified as deprivation, the influx of population and sparsity — population data has been refined: base

population data has been replaced with adjusted population figures. Only those councils whose needs exceed their wealth are entitled to a share of the grant.

Subsection (3) clarifies the fact that not all district councils will qualify for the resources element of the grant. Subsection (4) allows the Department of the Environment to amend the subordinate legislation that will contain the detail of the formula. This is to ensure that measures and weightings, such as the Noble index, may be reviewed and updated at any time.

1.00 pm

Subsection (5) provides for supplementary provisions or necessary refinement of the Regulations that may be required after the new arrangements come into operation.

Subsection (6) puts into place arrangements to amend the Regulations and lay them in draft before the Assembly. These Regulations are subject to affirmative resolution.

Clause 3 deals with the determination of the derating element of the general grant. I have already explained the nature of the derating element, which is defined in clause 1. Rating/derating policy is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, the calculation and payment of the derating element of the grant is handled by my Department. The formula for calculating the derating element, which is unchanged, is contained in part II of schedule I to the Local Government &c. (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. This clause is included in the Bill in order that the formulae for the resources and derating elements remain together. The wording of the clause is as before.

I should make it clear that, although the Department of Finance and Personnel has sole responsibility for the rating/derating policy, my Department, like all others, would be consulted on any changes in that policy.

Clause 4 deals with reductions in general grant. This clause enables my Department, in particular circumstances, to make deductions from the amount of general grant payable to a district council.

Subsections (1) and (2) empower the Department to take action in cases where a district council has failed to achieve and maintain a standard of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the discharging of its functions. This might relate to, for example, such failings as: the misappropriation of funds; excessive expenditure; or non-submission of annual accounts. My Department would prepare a written report that would include any concerns raised by the local government auditor and the justification for the amount of grant reduced. The full report would be laid before the Assembly. This provision is currently contained in article 4(1)(a) of the 1972 Order. In the past 30 years, my Department has never exercised this power.

Subsections (3) and (4) provide the Department with the power to make payments to certain bodies on behalf of district councils for services rendered. To recover this expenditure, an adjustment is made to an instalment of general grant in the same financial year. The organisations and bodies to which this arrangement relates are listed in the Local Government (Specified Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001. If any change to this list is proposed, district councils and other interested parties must be consulted before these Regulations are amended. The power to defray and recover district council expenditure is currently contained in article 4(3) of the 1972 Order.

Clause 5 deals with other grants to councils. This clause provides my Department with a general power to pay grants to district councils. That applies to any grant connected with a function of a council, other than general grant. The Department currently makes payments to district councils in respect of food safety, construction products and energy efficiency. The power to pay these grants is currently contained in article 5A of the 1972 Order.

Clause 6 relaxes the present restrictions on district councils in relation to the promotion of economic development. It also enables them to engage in a broader range of activities such as the provision of sites for economic development purposes.

Clause 7 deals with the community safety powers of district councils. The community safety initiative is driven by the Northern Ireland Office in consultation with Departments, district councils and other bodies. The powers provided in clause 7 are in response to the wish of district councils to have statutory cover when engaging in community safety activity. Subsection (1) empowers them to engage, if they so wish, in community safety activity in a relevant community safety partnership, as defined in subsection (4). Subsection (2) empowers my Department to confer or impose on district councils any functions aimed at enhancing community safety, which would be additional to, or complement, any community safety strategy devised by the Secretary of State.

The term “impose” is used here as it may be the will of the Assembly in the future to make these provisions obligatory rather than discretionary under the provisions in subsection (1).

Subsection (3) stipulates that no Order can be made under subsection (2) unless a draft has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly. Subsection (4) defines “community safety partnership” and the terms “enhancement of community safety” and “relevant community safety partnership”.

I want to emphasise that in the Programme for Government my Department is committed to reviewing the existing statutory formula for distributing the resources element of general grant payable to district councils to take account of relative socio-economic disadvantage. There are many difficulties with the existing formula for

distributing this element. The main problem relates to the complexity of the method, the uncertainty of grant allocations each year and the fact that distribution takes no account of New TSN; the Bill addresses those issues. It provides a framework for a new method of distributing the resources element of general grant, and that will meet my Department's commitment.

In addition, the Bill will extend the existing power of district councils to promote economic development in their areas and enable them to engage, if they wish, in community safety activity through community safety partnerships. Most importantly, the Bill will ensure that the legitimate needs of ratepayers and residents are met, and I commend it to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I am sure that the Minister and his officials will apologise to the Assembly for holding up the proceedings. I am happy that we have been able to have this important debate, and I thank the Deputy Speaker for his intervention, which ensured that it happened. Other Members will want to raise matters that they think are important.

In January 2002 the Committee for the Environment considered a consultation document issued by the Department of the Environment on proposals for a new formula for distributing the resources element of the general Exchequer grant. This grant has two elements: a derating element and a resources element. There have been problems with the existing complex formula used for the resources grant, and it is widely accepted that there is need for change.

The consultation exercise related solely to the resources element, and this is the only part of the Bill that has been considered by the Committee. It received a detailed presentation from officials on the proposed new formula, and members were able to question them on some specific points.

The Committee wrote to the Department on 17 January 2002 giving a general welcome to the introduction of a revised formula. However, some representatives in the east of the Province have requested an explanation as to how the Department will deal with the equality impact assessment outlined in paragraph 33 of the explanatory and financial memorandum.

Members may not be aware that the Bill was to have been called the local government (finance) Bill or something similar. However, the title had to be changed to reflect several additions.

As Members have already heard the Minister say, the first major change will involve the introduction of new powers to district councils in relation to what is termed "economic development". At first glance, it would seem that all councils should welcome that as it seemingly allows them to engage in activities from which they

were previously barred. It is important that we have meaningful consultation on the detail.

The second major change involves the inclusion of new powers to enable councils to engage in community safety partnerships. It was hoped that those powers could be included in the Criminal Justice Bill earlier this year, but for some reason that did not happen. Therefore, they are being included in this Bill.

The Minister appeared before the Committee in March 2002, and there was discussion about a proactive approach towards co-operating with him in dealing with five Bills that would be introduced by his Department over several months. The Committee agreed to co-operate fully with the Department subject to being fully satisfied with the specific terms of the Bill. The Committee has already been working closely with departmental officials on the Bill and hopes to continue to do so during Committee Stage.

The Bill is not straightforward. Even if it had related solely to the formula for the resource element of the general Exchequer grant, undoubtedly the Committee would have had questions and concerns to be clarified. However, the addition of two clauses relating to issues that will have a significant impact on every district council in Northern Ireland will add considerably to the Committee's scrutiny remit.

The Committee is already pursuing officials on several concerns, questions and specifics in the Bill and will continue with its scrutiny at Thursday's meeting. I appreciate that it would not be appropriate to raise those specific points during this debate. However, I assure the Minister that the Committee will be diligent and thorough — as he would expect — in examining the detail of the Bill and it will, if necessary, suggest amendments at Consideration Stage.

Mr A Doherty: I used to shy like a startled animal — I will leave it to Members to speculate as to the species — when I heard the word "bill". That was because of the flood of small brown-windowed envelopes that used to flood through my door, which haunted much of married life for me and Mary, and continues to do so well into our present decrepitude.

Now that the discerning electorate has transported me to this Utopia, I have come to realise that Bills can be good if we can come to terms with the contorted language that so often successfully conceals what they are about.

I never had the fiscal agility to deal competently with the bills that emanated from the outside world: I was putty in the hands of hire purchase and credit card companies. Therefore, I will not try to compete with the steering group that devised a new methodology for the distribution of grants to enable district councils to do positive things about economic development and public safety.

What do I know, when my knowledge is compared with the combined wisdom of several chief executives and finance officers of district councils; representatives from the Northern Ireland Audit Office; the Local Government Audit Office; the Equality Unit; the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister; and the Department of the Environment? Therefore, I will leave it to the savants among us to say “bravo” or “boo” to the formula designed to measure the wealth of a council against its estimated needs and to comment, if they wish, on the financial complexities of the Bill.

I will limit myself to a few comments on the powers granted to, and the restrictions imposed on, councils with regard to actions and expenditure on economic development and community safety.

1.15 pm

The Environment Committee has given qualified support to the proposed new formula, although I cannot imagine that there is a single council that believes its wealth base exceeds its needs. The formula will be queried thoroughly by councils that feel badly done by when the formula determines that the amount of the resources element payable to them is nil.

Clause 6 gives councils powers relating to the acquisition, retention, development, management and disposal of land. The explanatory and financial memorandum gives reassurances about the financial and equal opportunity effects of the Bill, human rights issues and the equality impact assessment. There is no mention in the Bill, or the memorandum, of the need for any measure adopted by councils to be compatible with the principles of sustainable development. We need reassurance on that.

Clause 6, subsection (4) states:

“A district council shall exercise its functions under this section in accordance with such directions as may be issued from time to time by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.”

It would be important to have some idea of the type of directions that might be issued, and what recourse councils might have to satisfaction if they believe that such directions are unreasonable in their particular circumstances.

It is difficult to know what to say about the community safety element of the Bill. It is surprising — even amazing — that, despite our awful history, crime figures show that in general we are among the most law-abiding people in the world. However, many communities do not feel safe, and in some areas they have shocking reason not to.

It is horribly true also that certain organisations — some of whom claim to be working to implement the peace process — are exploiting community tensions and encouraging intercommunity violence. Everything possible must be done to create a situation where communities feel safe. It will not be easy to bring that about. It will require partnerships far more sophisticated and honest

than some of the current arrangements. As an individual, and as a member of a party that, with tremendous difficulty, forced the concept of partnership on many reluctant people, that is important to me.

It is good that councils are not just willing, but anxious, to play their full part. However, we must be conscious of the difficulties. Research commissioned by the Criminal Justice Review came to the conclusion that there is a low level of awareness in local government, and among statutory, voluntary and community bodies about the concept of community safety. The general picture of community in Northern Ireland is of modest Government support, ad hoc initiatives, lack of awareness at local government and statutory levels, and poor inter-agency co-ordination. We can only hope that the Bill will do what it is supposed to do.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Bill. It is timely that it has come before the House in this way. Sinn Féin welcomes and supports, and will continue to encourage, the different approaches that can be taken to deal with public and community safety which are led by, and involve, the community. We need to ensure that there are provisions to deal with that.

New initiatives that might lead to that include community restorative justice, a befriending service for the elderly, youth outreach and the services of various other bodies that might come under the provisions of the Bill. The present structure gives the opportunity for councils to become involved and to create their own type of structure for handling such matters.

I hope that the Bill will give us that opportunity, and that it will not be as prescriptive as the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) scheme. The NIO has not yet indicated who will be involved in its envisaged community structure. Community participation is to be welcomed.

As regards the general grant, I must declare an interest as a district councillor in Dungannon, one of the areas affected by last year’s proposed reduction in the general grant, which was reversed. I hope that under the new formula we will not face the danger of fluctuations because of the proposed Budget. If councils can rely on the formula and are not dependent on the Minister’s Budget proposals or the allocation to Departments, they will know that they will receive the money and can plan ahead and deal with the issues that concern them.

As the Minister said, the Bill will take account of TSN and will deal with socio-economic provision in a way that will benefit the community. However, the reduction that was proposed last year would have had a detrimental effect on all district councils. Any new proposals or powers to give or to restrict would be better framed in a comprehensive document dealt with under the terms of the review of public administration, rather than in isolation from it. I hope that this issue will be

resolved with a view as to how it will be affected by the review of public administration, and that it will not become an obstacle to further review. We must examine how councils are funded, and we can do that only when we know what the structure of local government will be. As was the case with provision for economic development in district councils, what we are getting is an extension of powers to district councils without knowing what those councils are going to be or what local government structures will be.

I have reservations about the further extension of local government powers in relation to economic development, because few councils have taken up the 5p limit. We must examine how that economic development assistance is distributed. Would it be better distributed from a general Exchequer fund? Smaller amounts, generated at local council level, have no impact on the economic conditions of an area because they are distributed so finely. However, they do make an impact on the rates, because they are open-ended and can result in 10% increases. That will have a severe effect on what else councils can do.

There are pros and cons to the buying and selling of property and property development. I hope that it will lead to greater accountability, because councils are elected, as opposed to the quangos that have grown up around economic development, over which there is no control in relation to management and distribution of moneys. We must also be aware of TSN and equality legislation.

There are many complex issues, and we must re-examine them in the light of the review of public administration. However, there are also development opportunities for councils, such as the proposed broadband infrastructure, which could be of benefit to the economic prosperity of any district council area. That will need legislation, and this is one way to achieve that goal.

I am concerned that, as the Chairperson of the Environment Committee said, the Bill has been extended to cover other areas, but will not provide us with an opportunity to deal with the infrastructural neglect that has built up in district council areas through successive changes in local administrative structure.

Small areas of land, streets and structures in district council areas have been neglected for years, but no one is accountable for that. The Department for Regional Development is not accountable, and it does not have the authority or responsibility for bringing those areas up to standard. The district council cannot do that because it does not have provision for roads or infrastructure. Neglect continues in town centres and other areas. No one is responsible, but the Bill does not deal with that matter.

This could be a chance to clear up many problems that have been left behind from previous district councils in a way that would provide a better quality of life for

people living in those circumstances. The Committee hopes that it can influence change when it deals with the Bill.

Mr Hay: I welcome the lifting of the restrictions on councils promoting economic development. District councils should be the engines that drive economic development here. Responsibility for local government has been raised. Over the years, Members and councillors will admit that much more work has been thrown on district councils with few resources to do it, and that must be addressed.

I welcome the comments of the Chairperson of the Environment Committee, which will scrutinise the Bill. The Bill will introduce community safety partnerships, but there is confusion over the setting up of those partnerships because district policing partnerships will also be set up soon. There has been widespread debate in the community, and in some district councils, about how the two partnerships will sit side by side. The Policing Board has had lengthy discussions on their implications. The police will be involved in district policing partnerships, and they will also play a key role in community safety partnerships.

Members of the Policing Board have been trying to make sensible arguments to resolve the matter. For example, they have said that there should be one body rather than two bodies to deal with many of the same problems. They are also considering streamlining, but up until now that has fallen on deaf ears. The Policing Board has suggested that there may be a different way of setting up the safety partnerships so that they do not create problems for the policing partnerships.

Has the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) been consulted on the community safety partnerships? Its Members think that their burden will be greater because they will be responsible for the setting up and servicing of the policing partnerships.

They feel that this is an added burden, as they will also have to look seriously at being involved in setting up community safety partnerships.

1.30 pm

It would be useful for the Committee to hear evidence from SOLACE, which represents town clerks and chief executives. The Committee for the Environment could play an important role in streamlining the setting up of the community safety partnerships. Town clerks and chief executives, as well as several councils, feel that there is a better way to set these up. None of us is against the principle; they are a good idea. However, there will be confusion when community safety partnerships are set up, as we are also going to have district policing partnerships.

The community safety partnerships model for Northern Ireland appears to more or less mirror arrangements elsewhere. The problem is that in England, Scotland and

Wales they do not have responsibility for setting up district policing partnerships. Here that is added to district partnerships' responsibilities. The Minister should take up that issue, and if the Committee receives evidence from SOLACE, a clearer picture will emerge of how partnerships could be set up without creating a problem for either body.

Mr Ford: I broadly welcome the provisions of the Bill. Given that the Bill refers much to Regulations that may be made, it is difficult to do more than give it a general welcome. The meat will be when we see the Regulations, and no doubt the Committee will have the pleasure of going through the details of those Regulations with officials in the coming weeks and months.

The measures relating to the general grant are sufficiently opaque at this stage. It is hard to see what may be combined in the Regulations when they subsequently appear. It is surprising that the notes in the memorandum go into considerable depth on what the Regulations may cover, yet those Regulations have not been published. However, I welcome the fact that the Minister seems to have listened to some of the comments made by the Committee and others. In particular, I welcome the fact that under clause 2 (6) the Regulations will be subject to affirmative resolution rather than negative resolution. Perhaps that shows that the Department is now accepting a role for the Assembly. That is also the case in the community safety section. We should recognise and welcome that, but we should expect to see a great deal more detail and much more work done in Committee as the measures are dealt with.

The economic development power has day-to-day relevance, in a way that the formula for the general grant, for many, did not. I was somewhat surprised by Mr Molloy's remarks about being unhappy with the provision for economic development. There is an issue in that district councils can only complement the work of major agencies. However, on a small scale and at a local level, the work has been well complemented to date, and we perhaps have to be careful as to how exactly those functions are carried out. Some district councils have carried out innovative work, and more should be encouraged and supported.

Can the Minister tell me if the power to acquire land under clause 6 (2)(b) includes the power to vest land, and whether that is his intention? If it is not, can he indicate how he sees the question of vesting powers being a potential future development for district councils in this area? Can he explain how the Bill gives authority to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to issue directions to district councils, as stated in clause 6(4)? That appears to be contrary to provisions elsewhere in the Bill to ensure that the Assembly is fully consulted on the Regulations. Directions coming from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment would not appear to be as open and transparent a process as that relating to the Regulations being made under the Bill.

Mr Hay highlighted an important issue in relation to community safety. The general power to engage in community safety, in clause 7(1), will be welcomed almost universally in Northern Ireland. However, the circumstances in which the Minister may start to impose functions on district councils in clause 7(2) suggest a different method of moving forward. That is particularly relevant, given Mr Hay's complaints about how that may impact on district policing partnerships. Will the Minister tell us the circumstances that would lead to clause 7(2) becoming relevant and overriding the more generous and consultative provisions of clause 7(1)? I trust that he will be able to respond, if not today, then during the Committee's detailed scrutiny of that clause.

The Bill should be passed. However, whether it is appropriate for us to spend much time discussing the rating system when that system might be changed is another matter. The general grant formula is long overdue for reform, and we must move quickly on that.

Mr Byrne: I largely welcome the Second Stage of the Bill, particularly the clause on enhancing the role of district councils in economic development.

The Bill provides for the widening of district councils' role in local economic development and the promotion of local enterprise. It enhances greatly a council's ability to help local development, which is a good initiative. It is to be hoped that it will allow district councils to collaborate more with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in helping to promote local enterprise and create local jobs. That could prove beneficial in allowing district councils to be more effective, relevant and meaningful partners in promoting economic development.

Many local enterprise companies throughout Northern Ireland have been very successful in promoting the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, and many district councils have been leading partners in helping those companies to realise job creation and promote local enterprise. Omagh District Council's successful Omagh Enterprise Company has created more than 200 jobs in the Gortrush industrial estate as a result of the increased potential for local economic development that arose from European funding.

There is genuine concern that community safety has been tagged on to the Bill, perhaps at the behest of the Northern Ireland Office, without due consideration of all the issues. Community safety provision is a radical development, and it is relevant to many of our communities, where there is a crying need for better safety. However, I caution against setting up community safety committees as substitutes for district policing partnerships.

The community safety initiative being promoted is based largely on a GB model. Councils in England, Scotland and Wales have been working on the issues for some time. They have been working solely in the com-

munity safety context. However, in Northern Ireland there is a new proposal policy initiative for district policing partnerships that does not exist anywhere else in the Western World. I am concerned, as are others, that imposing two new administrative policy mechanisms under the jurisdiction of district councils could create a bureaucratic nightmare for the management and servicing of both policy initiatives. Those of us who serve on the Policing Board, and who are sincere in trying to bring about better community-based policing, want to see district policing partnerships develop in order to deliver more effective policing in our communities.

That is one example of how the hand-me-down Great Britain model does not exactly suit our needs. I urge the Minister not to be steamrolled along a single track on that. We need further discussion about how district policing partnerships and community safety committees could be merged into a symbiotic policy initiative, which would prove much more beneficial to all communities.

Councils have a major role to play in service-level agreements and in trying to deliver better community safety and community-based policing. I contend that the primary objective should be to try to get community-oriented policing within a safer environment in council areas. There is potential there if we work in a positive, constructive and imaginative way to bring about a model that is viable and can bring about tangible benefits. I urge the Minister and the Department to give due consideration to the complexities that two parallel structures might impose on councils. It would be futile to bring in two new structures — community safety committees and district policing partnerships — and expect council officials to manage and administer both of them.

Mr Nesbitt: I normally receive some warning about how many Members are left to speak. However, I got no such indication. If you allow me time to pull my papers together, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will be ready soon.

Mr Kennedy: There is no rush.

Mr Nesbitt: There is no rush, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you must be paying me back for not being on time for the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I can assure you, Minister, that that is the last thing on my mind.

Mr Nesbitt: The House will believe you without a doubt.

I thank those Members who contributed to the debate. My surprise at being called so soon to make my winding-up speech meant that I needed a little preparation. However, I am ready.

I endorse Dr McCrea's comments and genuinely thank him for his co-operation on this matter. Officials have met with him often to discuss the issues that he has raised, and they will continue to do so. This is an import-

ant matter, and I will be mindful of the Committee's views and take them on board whenever possible.

Dr McCrea has said that he will pursue officials on the details of the Bill and that he will be thorough in his scrutiny of it. I have no doubt that he and the Committee will be. Indeed, Mr Ford said that too. I must not forget about Mr Ford, another valuable member of the Committee.

Dr McCrea raised the equality impact assessment and the concerns of the eastern area of the Province. A key element of the equality impact assessment is the weighted capitalisation formula, and this has been proofed for each of the nine equality categories. The Department is trying to ensure that the formula adjusts need to match wealth. An example of that is refuse collection. In a scarcely populated area a refuse lorry covers a large distance to collect a few bins. The council pays for that high overhead cost — and it is costs such as this that are being addressed. The overhead cost per bin is not as high in areas where there are many bins. All aspects of adjusting the actual population to the weighted population to see whether any councils require more grant aid have been appraised and will be taken into account. The deprivation indicators incorporated in the formula are the Noble indices of income.

1.45 pm

I welcome the Chairperson's comments. If Members are unclear about the formula, or feel that it is either fair or unfair, they should contact officials who will explain it comprehensively. Sometimes ignorance, and I mean this in the best sense of the word, leads to a lack of understanding. If, or when, the Committee, or anyone, does not support what the Department is trying to do, a suggestion for improvement would be genuinely welcomed.

Arthur Doherty mentioned sustainable development, which is a thrust of the entire Administration. We are trying to ensure that economic well-being is distributed throughout Northern Ireland equitably while sustaining the environment. Part of the reason for a resources grant element is to provide a top-up to help people who are more disadvantaged than others. Through the grant, we are aiming for sustainable development throughout Northern Ireland — matching economic benefits with the necessary environmental protection.

Mr Molloy talked about dealing with a single agency and the importance of community participation. I agree — the community must participate. Mr Molloy said that he wanted much more opportunity for the community to become involved, that it should not just be a matter of dealing with the NIO. Those were his words, and I endorse them. The community safety partnership should involve the public, voluntary, private and community sectors to work in partnership to identify local problems and to devise action plans. Those are the key thrusts of community partnership.

Partnership members could include district councils; the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade; Translink; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; the Department of the Environment; the Department for Regional Development; chambers of commerce; and various voluntary and community sectors. A plethora of participation is expected. I endorse community partnerships and hope that they will allay Mr Molloy's concerns.

Mr Molloy's second point concerned the formula for the resources element of the grant to district councils and how that would affect planning. The aim is to enable planning to take place. Although we cannot be sure about the actual amount that will be granted, the relationship based on the application of the formula will remain for three years and will be beneficial. Councils asked for the money to be paid monthly. That will happen from April 2003. We are trying to accommodate short-term and long-term planning through cash flow and projection using a formula based on a three-year cycle. We are trying to take those points on board.

Mr Molloy said that few councils avail of the 5p limit for promoting economic development. He also mentioned the review of public administration. The provision in clause 6 is set in the context of ongoing local government development. We do not wish to be prescriptive — we want to give councils flexibility. The fact that many councils have not availed of the existing allowance does not mean that it should not be provided.

With regard to the point raised by Mr Hayes and Mr Byrne about policing partnerships, it is for the NIO to decide the position on policing.

The prime responsibility of district policing partnerships is to hold the police to account rather than to engage in service delivery. This role is supplementary and complementary to policing. The community safety partnership, however, brings communities together to do things for the good of the community. Its function is service delivery.

I thank Mr Ford for saying that he did not seek a detailed answer today, but hoped that it would come through Committee work. I endorse both statements — he will not receive a detailed answer today, and it will be done through Committee work. I have noted it, and I am glad that he accepts it. However, I shall sketch the probable situation. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may issue guidance to ensure a cohesive approach. The Department wants to ensure that economic development policy does not overlap and is consistent, and it will have an overarching brief.

With regard to vesting, powers for district councils are in the Local Government Act 1972 and must be adhered to. Mr Ford also mentioned clause 7, subsection (2) of the Bill. I am glad that the Alliance Party is

concerned about rigour, imposition and discipline. With regard to clause 7, it is anticipated that councils will engage in community partnership for the very reasons I mentioned in response to Mr Molloy: namely, that involvement in community safety would benefit communities that are working together. However, clause 7, subsection (2) enables a Department to confer or impose on district councils any functions involved in community safety. I stress that any such conferral requires the full approval of the Assembly. The will of the Assembly may at some time dictate that it is obligatory for councils to seek involvement in community safety. In that regard, I stress — and it is in the Bill — that any aspect of that will be subject to affirmative resolution in the Assembly.

I have addressed all of the Members' comments as best I could. Any Member who feels uncertain or unclear about the Bill should not hesitate to contact officials. I look forward to further deliberations between my officials and the Assembly. Again, I request that comments or criticisms be constructive. Suggestions are invited, as we want to get this right.

I appreciate the Chairperson of the Environment Committee's point about adding time, and I ask for his good diligence in processing the Bill. The time for completion of the financial aspect is limited and, if possible, we would like everything done in good order. I thank him in advance for that.

The Department has responded to the representations that were made to it, and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill addresses the needs of the people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Hay: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister provide written answers to the Members' questions that he was unable to address today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise the Minister to do so.

Mr Nesbitt: My officials will review the debate and address any pertinent points. That is what I intended to convey in response to Mr Ford's comment about receiving details in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA 7/01) be agreed.

BELFAST HARBOUR ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

Mr Deputy Speaker: A Statutory Rule that is subject to affirmative resolution becomes law once the Assembly approves it.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That the Belfast Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR40/2002) be approved.

This is one of three similar Orders that relate to Northern Ireland's main commercial trust ports of Belfast, Londonderry and Warrenpoint. I will speak less about the Londonderry and Warrenpoint Orders because my comments on the first Order will address many of the broad issues. The Belfast Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 will provide limited additional powers to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, within the constraints of the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970, while securing improvements in public accountability.

Three years ago, the Department completed a major review of public trust ports in Northern Ireland, which paralleled a similar exercise in Great Britain. The main findings of the Northern Ireland review reinforced the strategic importance of public trust ports to the local economy. However, it also identified a need to extend the powers of such ports and to ease the existing financial controls under which they operate to enable them to compete more effectively and to meet the challenges ahead.

In parallel with that, the review considered what steps should be taken to improve the public accountability of all Northern Ireland trust ports. Since then, several developments, such as the lengthy consideration of the options for the future of the Port of Belfast, and the Committee for Regional Development's inquiry into the Titanic Quarter leases, have influenced the legislative proposals that originated in the review. The Committee's recommendations have contributed much to the final shaping of the three Orders, particularly as regards the public accountability of all harbour commissioners.

The Belfast Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 consists of 11 articles and two Schedules. Article 3 sets out general powers and duties of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. It provides that the commissioners may take such steps, as they consider necessary or expedient, for the improvement, maintenance and management of the port and its facilities. Those include providing port facilities, constructing, demolishing and altering structures in the port, lending money, maintaining reserves, investing surpluses, and anything that is necessary or expedient to facilitate the proper upkeep or development of the harbour.

2.00 pm

However, those powers must be exercised in connection with port operations and do not constitute general powers to lend money or invest sums in unconnected matters.

Article 4(1) empowers the commissioners to retain for such time as they see fit any land that they have acquired and to dispose of any of their land that is no longer required for the harbour undertaking. The commissioners are empowered to effect such disposal under terms and conditions that they think fit. However, article 4(2) has been included in the Order to safeguard the public interest. That will ensure that the commissioners' land disposal powers are exercised in accordance with the arrangements that the Department made and that they are set out in the memorandum of understanding that is already in place. Therefore, the Order will give legal force to that arrangement.

As Members are aware, the memorandum of understanding on the Harland & Wolff lands issue has proved valuable recently. As a result of the existence of the memorandum of understanding, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' dealings have been seen to be open and transparent, and the public interest has been duly safeguarded through my Department's involvement.

Article 5(1) empowers the commissioners to

"form and promote a wholly-owned subsidiary for carrying on any activities which the Commissioners have power to carry on."

Those activities relate to harbour operations. Article 6(1) empowers the commissioners to borrow money on the security of their revenues and property. That brings the Port of Belfast into line with the situation that governs most major trust ports in Great Britain. Article 6(2) provides that the total amount of such borrowings must not exceed £45 million

"or such greater amount as may be approved by the Department in writing."

That figure was determined after professional advice was taken, and is based on the port's profit-earning ratio. Article 6(4) makes it clear that such borrowings can be applied

"only to purposes to which capital money is properly applicable."

That is designed to prevent the commissioners from borrowing for revenue purposes under that article.

In contrast, article 7(1) empowers the commissioners to borrow temporarily for three months, by way of overdraft or otherwise, such sums as they may require to meet their obligations or to discharge their functions under any legislation.

Article 8(1) empowers the commissioners to license pleasure craft to be let to the public for trade or business, or to be used for carrying passengers for hire in the Port of Belfast. There is also power for the

commissioners to license the boatmen or those assisting in the charge or navigation of pleasure craft.

Article 8(2) states that the commissioners may grant such licences for such periods as they think fit and may suspend or revoke licences when necessary or desirable in the public interest. Articles 9(1) to 9(5) make several consequential amendments to earlier Belfast Harbour Acts, which will be required as a result of making this Order. Article 9(6) introduces schedule 1 — the commissioners' constitution — to the Order. That contains new provisions that relate to the constitution of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and their procedures and so forth. Schedule 1 re-enacts the existing constitution of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners but makes some important amendments. Paragraph 2(1) to schedule 1 states that the commissioners shall continue to be appointed by the head of the Department, who in this case is the Minister, but shall consist of not less than 10 and not more than 15 people. Paragraph 2(3)(a) requires that a commissioner

“shall hold office for a period of 4 years or such lesser period as the Department may determine but shall be eligible for re-appointment.”

That has been increased from the previous three-year period to provide the Department with greater flexibility for succession planning and so forth.

Paragraph 3 states that up to four of the commissioners shall be members of Belfast City Council and shall be appointed by the Department after consultation with the council. They shall be eligible to serve for a period that is coterminous with their council membership.

Incidentally, I note that the Examiner of Statutory Rules, in his report, has drawn attention to the need to correct the spelling of “coterminous”. I take responsibility for the idea, but not for the spelling in the Order. The Department has undertaken to make this amendment, and the others, as soon as possible.

The new constitution of the board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners provides for a significant increase in the number of elected representatives serving as commissioners. Previously, only one member of the council could be appointed to the board. The increase reflects one of the main recommendations in the Committee for Regional Development's report on the Titanic Quarter leases. Assuming that the Order meets with the Assembly's approval, the Department intends to secure the increase in the number of elected representatives as soon as is practicable.

Paragraph 5 applies section 18(2) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954 to these appointments. It provides the Department with the power to remove, suspend, reappoint or reinstate commissioners. In my detailed consideration of the legislation, I gave considerable thought to the issue of the Department's power to remove or suspend board members. However, following

legal advice, I concluded that it was unnecessary to make any additional provision in the legislation at present.

I also draw Members' attention to paragraph 6 of schedule 1, which sets out the experience required of persons who wish to be considered for appointment to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. At my request, this has been expanded to enable the Department to attract applicants with a wider range of interests when considering appointments to the board. I discussed the matter with the Committee because I had reached the conclusion that the narrow focus meant that it was almost impossible to appoint anyone who had not previously been a commissioner or who did not have direct interests in the harbour estate. Under the new provisions, relevant interests might include special knowledge of the local community area in which the port is located.

The Department intends to seek further nominations, with a view to filling these two important positions on the board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners as soon as the legislation is in place. Those positions will be additional to the three city council representatives.

Paragraph 7 provides the Department with new powers to appoint an official to attend meetings of the commissioners in an observation capacity. Any such official would not take part in the deliberations or decisions of the commissioners. This is a further measure to improve the public accountability of the trust ports, and it has been in operation on a voluntary basis for some time. I will review the arrangement once the number of elected representatives on each of the boards has been increased.

Paragraph 10(2) deals with conflicts of interest, and has been expanded to make it clear that, where a conflict of interest is identified, the commissioner involved should withdraw from the meeting and take no further part in the discussions about the contract or transaction. This accords with actual practice in each boardroom at present. Apart from those provisions, the constitution and procedure of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners remains as set out in schedule 1 to the Belfast Harbour Acts (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 1979.

Article 10 provides for section 23 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to cease to have effect. I am sure that all Members are acquainted with that legislation. That section restricted the commissioners to granting leases on property for a maximum of three years.

Article 11 of the Order details the statutory provisions that are required to be repealed or revoked to the extent stated in column 3 of schedule 2 to the Order. Extensive consultation has taken place on the Order with the harbour authority and other interested parties, including the city council and the Committee for Regional Development. The Department has incorporated several changes at the suggestion of the Committee. I have the impression that there is widespread support for the proposals.

The Order will secure a modest increase in the commissioners' commercial powers, while providing for a significant number of measures to improve the organisation's public accountability. More extensive change is planned, but that will require primary legislation. To that end, I hope to publish a short harbours Bill later this year. In the meantime I commend the Belfast Harbour Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): On behalf of the Committee for Regional Development I welcome and support this Order and the two further Orders that will be debated shortly. The Minister has explained carefully and clearly the reason for this legislation and has outlined the main powers of the Belfast Harbour Order. The Committee has considered the Order carefully and has agreed unanimously that it is a useful and helpful piece of secondary legislation. It is important that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners can carry out successfully their fiduciary responsibilities to ensure that Belfast and other trust ports are properly and profitably managed.

Many successful commercial ventures require substantial borrowing. The legislation will provide the commissioners with the scope to increase their borrowing for the development and modernisation of operations, subject to the regulation specified in the Order and the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970.

The Committee particularly welcomes the proposed increase in Belfast City Council's representation on the Belfast harbour board. Members will recall that increased representation of local councillors in each of the trust ports was one of the main recommendations to emerge from the Committee's public inquiry on the Titanic Quarter lease — the Minister has already referred to that. The Committee believes that this safeguard improves the public accountability of the trust port, which is important because the Order increases significantly the borrowing limits of the commissioners. The safeguard will also allow for close scrutiny of any commercial transactions to ensure that they are in line with the duties of the commissioners.

The Committee for Regional Development is also aware that public accountability has been reinforced by the memorandum of understanding agreed by the Department for Regional Development and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, which requires the commissioners to consult the Department about any proposed changes to land use. The Minister's statement earlier today on the proposed renegotiated lease for 80 acres of harbour land between Harland & Wolff and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners provides a clear example of the importance of the memorandum of understanding.

The need for clear and open public accountability cannot be understated. The fact that the Minister has made a statement to the House regarding the proposed

land deal between Harland & Wolff and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners illustrates that he recognises the importance that the Assembly attaches to what is an important public asset to Northern Ireland. I do not apologise, therefore, for wishing to see that all our trust ports are scrutinised closely and properly to ensure that those entrusted with managing these valuable assets are acting in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

The Committee for Regional Development believes that the public accountability of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners can be further enhanced. The Minister proposes to introduce a harbours Bill that will strengthen the Department's powers. There has been some slippage in introducing this legislation, and I ask the Minister to give that a high priority.

During the Committee's inquiry into the Titanic Quarter lease it was discovered that many trust ports in Britain are covered by a good governance guide — in other words a code of practice.

In its report to the Assembly, the Committee recommended that the Department should seek to introduce a similar guide. The Committee believed that this would provide a framework, setting out standards of independence, openness and accountability. The Committee also stated at that time that such a guide should specify clear procedures to ensure that both the Department and the Committee are kept informed of all key business activities.

2.15 pm

I am aware that the Department has given a commitment to introduce a code of practice, and it would be useful if the Minister could advise whether that code is already in place, or when he expects it to be introduced. The code, along with the Belfast Harbour Order, the memorandum of understanding and the harbours Bill, will provide an effective and comprehensive framework for ensuring clear public accountability for the Port of Belfast and, indeed, all our trust ports.

I do not want to repeat the points that I have just made when considering the subsequent Orders that will come before the House; they will be taken as read in relation to the other Orders. I reiterate the Committee's support for these Orders.

Mr Byrne: I too welcome the Order presented by the Minister, and, as a Member of the Regional Development Committee, I echo what the Chairperson has just stated. One of the good things to happen since devolution is that Belfast harbour has not been privatised. We know that the previous Northern Ireland Office Administration intended to privatise it. The Assembly has demonstrated its commitment to keeping all the trust ports within the trust port framework. I welcome the fact that the trust ports will now have increased commercial freedom, which will allow them to engage in more port-related

development, particularly because they will now have increased borrowing powers and limits.

The key question that concerned members of the Regional Development Committee, and those on the previous Ad Hoc Belfast Harbour Committee, was public accountability. That aspect has been duly considered, and the provision for increased councillor representation on each of the trust ports — four for Belfast and three each for Warrenpoint and Londonderry — is to be welcomed. I also welcome the fact that the memorandum of understanding has been agreed and implemented in relation to Belfast harbour, which, I hope, will mean better formal mechanisms and procedures with regard to the relationship between the Department and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. In the past there was unease and concern, about how trust port harbour commissioners may have operated as semi-independent organisations. Given that they are trust ports, it is important that public accountability is transparent. I welcome the fact that there will be a tenure of four years' service for those district councillors appointed as commissioners.

All members of the Committee were concerned that Belfast harbour should not be allowed to develop on its own in a monopoly position. It is good that we have proposals for both Warrenpoint and Londonderry harbours today. As someone who lives in the west, 75 miles from Belfast, I am acutely aware of the importance of having more than one viable trust port in Northern Ireland. If we are serious about achieving a balanced regional and economic development throughout Northern Ireland, it is important that Warrenpoint and Londonderry ports are allowed to have the capacity and capability to become more successful and more relevant to their hinterlands.

I largely welcome the proposal by the Minister. I hope that the trust ports will be allowed to develop and contribute to the greater economic development of Northern Ireland.

Mr P Robinson: I need comment only briefly. I thank Members for their positive contributions. I welcome the helpful views of the Committee for Regional Development, which will see its thumbprint on the Order and on some of the changes that it will bring about. The Committee Chairperson, Alban Maginness, was right to highlight the importance of improving public accountability, which he said would become all the more important in the light of the additional powers to be conferred by the Order and the extra borrowing facility that it allows. He also highlighted the importance of the memorandum of understanding. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners can regard positively the existing memorandum of understanding, which has worked well in the public's interest and protects the commissioners. It has been seen to provide a welcome level of transparency in the Harland & Wolff lands issue. Mr Byrne made that point also.

The Chairperson is correct to state that the main purpose of the short harbours Bill is to improve the accountability of the main commercial trust ports by requiring them to adopt a code of practice and to supply information to the Department. The Department also proposed to incorporate in this Bill a power of general direction to safeguard the public interest. I confirm that the code has been drafted; the Department will consult on it later this year.

Mr Byrne highlighted the possibility that if powers were given only to the Port of Belfast, it would fall out of kilter with the other trust ports; that is recognised. I visited the Warrenpoint and Londonderry ports and was impressed by their performance. I wish all three trust ports every success in the operation of the new powers, which I hope that the Assembly will affirm that they should have.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Belfast Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR40/2002) be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that at 2.30 pm we will have to interrupt business for Question Time.

WARRENPOINT HARBOUR AUTHORITY ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR42/2002) be approved.

Many of the provisions in the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order are identical to those in the Belfast Harbour Order. Therefore, I propose to restrict my remarks to the key differences between the two Statutory Instruments. First, as with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, Warrenpoint Harbour Authority has concluded with the Department a memorandum of understanding as regards its harbour land. The memorandum came into effect on 1 March 2002, and a copy of the document has been placed in the Assembly Library.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

As in the case with the Port of Belfast, article 4(2) of the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order will give legal force to the arrangements set out in the memorandum of understanding with the Department. As with the Belfast Harbour Order, article 6(1) empowers the authority to borrow money upon the security of the revenues and the property of the harbour authority.

However, article 6(2) provides that the total amount of such borrowings must not exceed £2.5 million, or such greater amount as may be approved by the Department in writing. That lower amount reflects the smaller scale of the Warrenpoint harbour operation relative to Belfast harbour. The other borrowing provisions are similar.

Article 9(2) introduces schedule 1 to the Order, which contains new provisions relating to the constitution and procedures of the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority. Schedule 1 of the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 differs from the Belfast Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 in the following respects.

Paragraph 2(1) states:

“The Authority shall consist of not less than 8 and not more than 12 persons”.

In the case of Belfast, the range is 10 to 15, reflecting its larger scale.

Paragraph 2(3) requires that

“a member of the Authority ... shall hold office for a period of 4 years or such lesser period as the Department may determine but shall be eligible for re-appointment.”

That has been changed from the previous three-year fixed term to provide greater flexibility.

Paragraph 3 states:

“A maximum of three of the persons appointed [to the Authority] shall be members of the Newry and Mourne District Council [and shall be] appointed by the Department following consultation with the Council.”

That represents a significant increase in the number of elected representatives serving on the authority, as previously only one member of the council could be appointed.

Article 10 of the Order provides for the repeal or revocation of certain statutory provisions relating to Warrenpoint Harbour Authority, as set out in column 3 of schedule 2 of the Order.

Those are the main differences, and as with the Belfast Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002, I commend the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr McGrady. We have a short period only before Question Time, and therefore it is likely that his speech will be interrupted. He will be able to continue after Question Time.

Mr McGrady: I welcome this new initiative by the Department for Regional Development. It is important that the trust port of Warrenpoint should be made as viable as possible. It is an important contributor to the economic well-being of Warrenpoint and the surrounding district for employment and the general commerce engendered by the use of the port.

The three main features of the Orders are in common, and I do not intend to go into detail on each of them. The disposal of land is of academic interest to Warrenpoint Harbour Authority. Its concern is to try to acquire any piece of land in order to create a new deep-water facility, which, if not made available in the not-too-distant future, would put it in a much less competitive situation than at present. The authority has been exceptionally well run, and I compliment the board on the carrying out of its duties.

I welcome the enlargement of public representation on the harbour authority to provide the openness and accountability that has been referred to by other Members. The Minister said that a maximum of three members — presumably elected members — of Newry and Mourne District Council could be part of the new board. The Order uses the word “maximum”. Is it the intention of the Minister and the Department to appoint the maximum number?

The Minister said that the board’s membership would range from eight to 12. It would be appropriate that one third or one quarter, depending on the representation, should be from the publicly elected Newry and Mourne District Council. That openness and accountability is

important for the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority. I recall the difficulty in communication and the misunderstandings between the authority and the community in Warrenpoint regarding the proposed deep-water facility. Had that openness and accountability been there —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must interrupt the Member. However, he will be able to resume his speech after Question Time.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Mr Speaker: Question 2, question 8 and question 9 to the Minister of Education, which stand in the names of Mr Ken Robinson, Mr Beggs and Mr McElduff respectively, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

North/South Centre of Excellence on Autism

1. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister of Education to outline the purpose and remit of the planned North/South centre of excellence on autism; and to make a statement. (AQO 1407/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The centre of excellence for the education of children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) will provide all-Ireland education and diagnostic services for children with ASD and their families. We expect it to come into operation in autumn 2003. Relevant education and health professionals will work with children of all ages and their families to achieve effective management of the condition. The centre is the first joint provision of its kind. It will be jointly funded by both Education Departments, and run jointly by a board of management and trustees from the North and the South.

It is a hugely exciting development, which will be of great benefit to children with ASD and their families. Children with autism represent a continuum of need, ranging from those with mild impairments to those with more serious autistic spectrum disorders. I am committed to achieving the best possible range of interventions to meet the special needs of those young people.

Mr C Murphy: The Minister's announcements on the proposed centre for autism in Middletown are welcome, not only for the children, their parents and the staff, but for the constituency of Newry and Armagh.

The news of this announcement, allied to the recent report on autism, has given a sense that there will, at last, be some movement on autism on the part of the education authorities. Will the Minister ensure that as much information as possible is provided at the earliest opportunity on who the centre intends to treat, how they will be treated, what resources will be available to staff, and what training will be available for teaching staff and educationalists throughout the island?

Will the Minister also outline what resources have been made available for the ongoing implementation of the code of practice for special needs education?

Mr M McGuinness: I recently reported to the House on the outcome of our most recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting. The details of how the centre will be staffed and administered are the subject of continuing discussions between officials from my Department and from the Department of Education and Science in Dublin. It will be some time before we can provide an accurate breakdown of how that will proceed. However, a joint working group on special education was established under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, and that will focus initially on autism and dyslexia. Northern task groups on autism and dyslexia were also established. The reports of those groups were published at the beginning of May 2002.

The all-Ireland centre of excellence for the education of children with ASD will be developed on a North/South basis. Many people are keen to see that put into operation as quickly as possible, and it is proceeding apace.

The code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs, prepared on foot of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, gives detailed practical guidance to schools and boards on how to identify, assess, meet and review special education needs. Substantial additional resources have been provided to support the introduction of the code of practice here. From 1998 to 31 March 2002, some £25 million of earmarked funding has been made available.

The Department has commissioned a survey of parental opinion to ascertain whether they consider the system achieves its aim — for example, how user-friendly it is, and whether it results in their children's special educational needs being met in the best possible way. The University of Ulster at Coleraine is undertaking the survey, and parents' views are being sought. That is vital.

Through my experiences and contact with people with dyslexia and the parents of dyslexic and autistic children, I know it is important to maintain a high level of contact with parents so that we can monitor the service provided. That is why it is important for parents to give their opinions in that survey.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement and the new centre that is being set up in Middletown. How will the centre help, if at all, in the early and effective diagnosis and statementing of children suspected by their parents as having autistic tendencies? Will the Minister assure the House that there will be maximum formal co-operation between health and education providers to ensure that autistic children and their families are taken seriously?

Mr M McGuinness: The decision to establish a centre of excellence was taken only recently. The facilities and expertise that will be available at the centre are the subject of ongoing discussions between my officials and officials in Dublin. It is critical that the centre deals with the treatment of autistic children from a very early age, as it is to be a centre of excellence. It will be essential to have procedures, mechanisms and expertise in place at the centre to deal with those matters.

The purpose of the centre is to provide education and diagnostic services on an all-Ireland basis for children with autistic spectrum disorders and their families. The relevant education and health professionals will work with children of all ages, and their families, to achieve effective management of the condition. I am happy with the way the centre is proceeding. It is a tall order to have everything in place by autumn 2003, but the Education Departments in Dublin and here are determined to have it operational. I am sure that the parents are also looking forward to that.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister say how many sites were considered for the centre of excellence? What were they, and what criteria were used to assess the suitability of each site?

Mr M McGuinness: A full economic appraisal, which presented a range of options, accompanied the proposal made to the Executive programme funds for the establishment of the centre on a North/South basis. The favoured option was for the purchase of the former St Joseph's adolescent training centre in Middletown in line with a valuation provided by the Valuation and Lands Agency. The economic appraisal was scrutinised and endorsed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. That did not identify any other existing premises as an option. As the centre will be acquired by the purchase of existing premises, a tendering process was not appropriate. The criteria used to locate the centre of excellence were that the services provided should be cost effective; it should be situated within a reasonable distance of both jurisdictions, North and South; it should be accessible to the main centres of population in the area; it should be able to provide a mix of residential, non-residential, long-term and short-term placements with children with autistic spectrum disorders; and it should enable the development of professional expertise in the area of autistic spectrum disorders among educationalists.

Capital Schemes

3. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Education whether those schools which were on the list of contenders for this year's capital schemes, but were unsuccessful, have been informed of the reasons why they did not receive capital funding. (AQO 1397/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It has not been practice to tell schools which did not get a place on the capital

programme why they are not to receive capital funding. My Department is reviewing the capital allocation process with a view to including a provision to advise unsuccessful contenders. The need for improved accommodation in those schools is recognised, but it is not possible to include them all, given the resources available.

Mr Gallagher: It is because of the procedures that the Minister has outlined that there are increased difficulties and disappointments for those unsuccessful schools. Most schools, regardless of the authority they are under, write to the Department when they come into contention, so I welcome the Minister's suggestion that his Department should write to the schools stating why they were unsuccessful. Can the Minister confirm that the procedure will be in place in future years?

Mr M McGuinness: As I have said, we are reviewing the capital allocation process with a view to including a provision for advising unsuccessful candidates. Through our discussions in the Education Committee we know that there are difficulties with this and that much disappointment is felt by schools that do not make the capital funding programme. The Department has a duty and a responsibility to explore ways of improving that, and we are determined to expedite this as soon as possible so that we do not have recurring difficulties of this nature.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister explain the process for selecting schools for the capital funding programme?

Mr M McGuinness: Schools are selected on the basis of educational need as reflected by reports from the inspectorate and information from the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other interested parties.

Mr S Wilson: I trust that during today's sitting, which is in public, the Minister will be able to answer my question without descending into the same loutish behaviour that we saw during the private session of the Education Committee last Thursday. I am sure that he now realises that such behaviour is unbecoming of a Minister of the Crown, and perhaps he will take this opportunity to apologise to the Chairperson of the Committee for the way in which he conducted himself.

The Minister has reiterated the oft-repeated mantra that he deals with these issues fairly and that capital finance is allocated in accordance with educational need. On Thursday he said that 5% of the educational need was attributed to the integrated sector of education, yet in the past two years that sector has attracted 20% of the funds. Can he explain that? Is his allocation based on need or on his own narrow political agenda?

Mr M McGuinness: I have absolutely nothing to apologise for. The Member is speaking absolute nonsense, which is, of course, his forte. The school capital building programme is determined solely on the basis of educational

need and not on any sectoral or area basis. I refute any allegation of bias in the allocation of resources. To do otherwise would result in some schools being elevated above others with greater need, and that would be unacceptable.

2.45 pm

It may be of interest to the Assembly and the public that as Minister of Education, I have made three school capital building programme announcements. Controlled schools received £132 million, which is 40% of the total; maintained schools received £113 million, which is 34%; voluntary grammar schools received £48 million, or 15%; and integrated schools received £35 million, which is 11%.

Anyone who advocates the allocation of resources on a sectarian basis, rather than on the basis of educational need, is behaving as a bigot. Criticism — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: — has been levelled at the allocation to Drumragh College, the integrated school in Omagh, County Tyrone, which is located in the grounds of a psychiatric hospital. I, and others, had serious concerns about that situation. Arguments such as those made by the Member imply that I should fund only a certain aspect of the new school — the toilet block or the canteen — rather than deal with the situation.

Such works in post-primary schools can be expensive for the schools capital building programme, especially where we must build a complete school, as in the Drumragh case. Following the economic appraisal and planning work, the Department decided that the best option was to build a new school. It was expensive, but some Members claim that the school got more money than it was entitled to, given its place, or the level of demand, on the list of contenders.

That argument is rubbish. It advocates that I, as Minister of Education, should give money to schools on the basis of a Catholic/Protestant headcount. I will not do that. When I make decisions vis-à-vis the school capital building programme, I base them on educational need. Statistics suggest that some people ought to reflect on the psychological damage they do in certain communities in the North by regurgitating such absolute nonsense.

Primary School (Carrick, Warrenpoint)

4. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what action he has taken to secure funding for the construction of a new primary school at Carrick, Warrenpoint.

(AQO 1375/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The scheme for Carrick Primary School is at an early stage in the planning process, and an economic appraisal must be completed before the scheme can compete with others for a place in the

capital funding programme. As part of the process, a feasibility study is under way that will assess the cost of various options for meeting the school's accommodation needs. However, given the number of schemes competing for a place in the programme, and the limited financial resources available, it is not yet possible to say when the school can be included in any future capital funding programme.

Mr Bradley: It is customary to thank the Minister for his reply. However, I cannot do so in this instance, because I am disappointed to learn that Carrick has not been prioritised. The school is bursting at the seams, with over 300 pupils, and it will be unable to enrol more children unless it is enlarged.

Will the Minister accept an invitation to visit Carrick Primary School to see the problem at first-hand and to advance the cause of the pupils in that area?

Mr M McGuinness: I will accept any invitation to visit the school. However, I must reiterate that the Department's intention is to ensure that the project is thoroughly planned and can be included in a list of schemes for consideration for next year's new-starts announcement. I cannot guarantee that a school will be successful.

Mr Speaker: When a Member thanks a Minister for his or her reply, he or she is not expressing thanks for the content of the reply, but simply for the Minister's taking the trouble to reply. Otherwise, Members would be rarely thanking Ministers for replies. It is out of courtesy that they properly do so.

Burns Inquiry Team: Educational Experience

5. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the range of educational experience represented by the members of the Burns inquiry team.

(AQO 1393/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Members of the review body were chosen on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise, following consultation with the Executive and the Committee for Education. They included representatives from schools, further education, higher education, business and training. Collectively, they had a detailed knowledge of the public education system; professional expertise in teaching at all levels; professional expertise in teacher training; extensive knowledge of business and commerce and of training and employment needs. The review body was supported by a team of five education advisers and an education consultative forum.

Dr Birnie: The Burns recommendations, particularly those regarding the development of collegiates, would, if implemented, have major, and perhaps negative, effects on further education and on issues on which they overlap such as careers education or business-to-education links.

Given that, does the Minister agree that it is strange that none of the 10 members listed on page 229 of the Burns Report appears to have had any further education teaching experience? Their experience of teaching in schools appears to be limited. Five of the 10 members have taught, but at university level rather than at school and further education level.

Mr M McGuinness: The review body comprised highly professional people with a wide range of experience and expertise relevant to the education service. Half of the members had been schoolteachers, and several of them had served as school governors. The review body also had access to advice from a panel of eminent educationalists and an education consultative forum that represented all local education interests. The chairperson of the review body was a former further education lecturer.

I am satisfied that the people appointed to the review body, following much discussions between the Executive, the Committee for Education and myself, were well qualified to carry out the review. Undoubtedly, they have produced a detailed and thought-provoking report that has been followed by what has probably been one of the best debates on education in recent years.

I have been encouraged by the recent debates. The Governing Bodies Association and the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland have made important contributions. During the past few weeks important and constructive contributions were made by the Transferors' Representative Council, which acts on behalf of the Protestant churches within the education system.

Consensus is emerging on the issues raised by Burns — for example, on ending the 11-plus; ending academic selection; pupil profiles; and on increasing co-operation and collaboration between schools. It is important to emphasise that recent, wide-ranging meetings have produced useful contributions.

During many meetings I have met with the principals of further education colleges, and I have listened to their criticisms. I am listening carefully to the views of those who are involved in further education, and I am determined to take this important debate forward to its conclusion.

Mr Speaker: I have noticed that the House has not been getting through many questions at Question Time. I encourage the House to try to get through as many questions as possible. We are still only on question 5, one question having been withdrawn.

Mr Molloy: Does the Minister agree that the present system is unfair to children from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Mr M McGuinness: I have said several times that it is unacceptable that only 8% of grammar school pupils are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The objective of all post-primary arrangements must be to ensure that all

pupils, whatever their gifts, can progress and fulfil their potential. It is wrong to focus on any single group to the exclusion of others. I seek post-primary arrangements that provide flexible, diverse and high-quality pathways to suit the varied abilities and aptitudes of all children. Every child must be given the opportunity to succeed.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that the response forms to the Burns proposals will be sent to around 670,000 households. I cannot stress enough how critical it is that people respond to the consultation. It is a unique opportunity for the community — which is the key constituency — to effect change that will enhance and strengthen the education system. The public have a key role. The form is straightforward; it asks six questions on the Burns proposals. It has a freepost envelope —

Mr Speaker: The questionnaire relates to the Burns review. Some of the responses may be lengthy, preventing other questions from being asked. I hope that we can move on promptly to other questions.

Mr M McGuinness: It is critical that all Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters in society recognise their unique opportunity to put in place a world-class education system for the twenty-first century. The focus must be on children's needs. Children — not institutions, and certainly not political parties — must be at the centre of the review. I hope that all political parties will rise above —

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, Minister; you know that I do not often intervene, but 27 minutes of the time allotted for questions have elapsed.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: From those Benches, other Ministers have also taken substantial time over questions recently. I hear them saying "Hear, hear" to that also.

Impact of Demographic Changes on Post-Primary Provision

6. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the impact of demographic changes on the school system over the next eight to 10 years and (b) how this might affect any restructuring of post-primary provision. (AQO 1408/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department projects a decrease of 10,000 enrolments in the post-primary sector over the next six years. It is projected that throughout the North pupil numbers will continue to decline well into the next decade. No school will be immune to the effects of the decline in pupil numbers. The status quo is not an option. Grammar schools already admit pupils who achieved lower grades in the transfer test, and the ability ranges of their pupils will widen further.

As grammar schools continue to fill through open enrolment, the greatest impact of the demographic

decline will be felt by secondary schools, whose pupil numbers will fall by some 11% over the next six years. They will suffer consequential reductions in funding and will also have to deal with an increased number and concentration of the pupils with the greatest social and educational needs. Surplus accommodation will increase in the post-primary sector, and action will be required to ensure that we make the best use of the schools estate.

It is important that all relevant interests address those challenges and engage in honest discussions about how to manage them in a planned and co-ordinated way. The current review of post-primary education provides the ideal opportunity to do so.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has consulted groups on the demographic changes to take place in the next eight to 10 years. What proposals did the Governing Bodies Association present for matching pupils in the coming years, particularly after the abolition of the 11-plus and the changes that will take place as a result of the demographic decline?

3.00 pm

Mr M McGuinness: In February the Governing Bodies Association gave a commitment to identify an acceptable method of matching pupils to schools. However, no proposals have been produced yet. If the association has developed acceptable proposals, I urge that they be made available for public scrutiny. Moreover, I urge that the association's position on academic selection be clarified as soon as possible and before the end of the consultation period.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Before considering the future alteration of education arrangements, will the Minister tell us how he intends to address the chronic problems in the North Eastern Education and Library Board?

Mr Speaker: I will have to ask the Minister to reply in writing to that question, since the time for questions to the Minister is up.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that question 2, in the name of Mr Éamonn O'Neill, and question 3, in the name of Mr Barry McElduff, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Bed Occupancy (South Tyrone Hospital)

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of beds presently occupied at the South Tyrone Hospital. (AQO 1398/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Faoi láthair, tá 41 leaba in úsáid in Ospidéal Dheisceart Thír Eoghain.

At present, 41 beds in the South Tyrone Hospital are occupied.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister understand the desire of people in Dungannon and south Tyrone to have more beds used in the local hospital and for the reinstatement of some of the services removed by her Department? Does her forthcoming consultation paper refer to the reinstatement of services at the South Tyrone Hospital? When does she intend to announce that consultation?

Ms de Brún: I have made it clear on several occasions that I want the valuable facilities in the South Tyrone Hospital to be used effectively. A wide range of services is already provided, for example, outpatient clinics and day-care surgeries, including new clinics for cardiac outpatients and brain trauma. In addition to the doctor-led minor injuries unit, there is a comprehensive radiology service; a day hospital for the elderly; inpatient medical geriatric wards; and a significant allied health professions service. Also, installation of a new CT scanner is to take place this year. At present it is not possible to make use of overnight care facilities for some services at the South Tyrone Hospital. That stems from the decision by the medical training authorities to remove professional training accreditation for the hospital. As Members know, that resulted in the temporary transfer to which Mr Gallagher referred in his question. I have stated on several occasions that the future of all hospitals will be part of the forthcoming consultation, and all points will be referred to in that paper. Members must await the consultation paper to see what it contains. That has been discussed on several occasions in the Executive. Following discussion, I expect to go to consultation and to be in a position to make final decisions during 2002.

Mrs Carson: Perhaps the Minister does not remember that the South Tyrone Hospital has 200 beds that could be used. Has the Minister had any contact with the Royal College of Surgeons with regard to reinstating the vital services which have been moved temporarily from south Tyrone to Craigavon? When does she intend to reinstate them?

Ms de Brún: I referred to the matter of reinstatement in my response to Mr Gallagher's question. Proposals for the future of the hospital will be considered as part of the acute hospitals review. As I have said on many occasions, no decisions have been made, nor will be they be made before a period of consultation. Any proposed changes for the long-term future of our acute hospitals will be subject to an equality impact assessment and public consultation. I have already dealt with the time frame for that. I am well aware of the need to

make the utmost use of the facilities of the South Tyrone Hospital. Recently, I was glad to open the hospital's human/patient clinical simulator.

The Department is considering proposals from the boards and trusts to rebalance services pending the outcome of the acute hospitals review.

Mr Molloy: The Minister has answered comprehensively my question about the requirements for the South Tyrone Hospital.

Teenage Mothers

4. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to reduce the number of births to teenage mothers.

(AQO 1400/01)

Ms de Brún: I ndiaidh an cháipéis chomhchomhairle 'Miotais agus Réaltacht' a fhoilsiú, bunaíodh grúpa oibre leis na freagraí a bhreithniú agus le straitéis agus plean gníomhaíochta a fhorbairt arbh aidhm dóibh breitheanna gan choinne do thuismitheoirí sna déaga a laghdú. Tá an plean sin le foilsiú sa mhí seo chugainn.

Following the publication of the consultation document 'Myths and Reality — Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood', a working group was established to consider the responses and to develop a strategy and action plan to reduce the number of unplanned births to teenage parents. The action plan will be published next month.

In the interim, the Department provided £250,000 in 2001-02 to fund 32 projects from a range of statutory and voluntary community organisations, mainly concentrated in areas with high rates of teenage pregnancy, to reduce unplanned teenage pregnancies.

Ms Ramsey: I welcome the fact that the teenage pregnancy and parenthood strategy will be published next month. How much funding will the Minister provide to ensure that it is successful? Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms de Brún: The projects I referred to were funded to the end of the 2001-02 financial year and are being evaluated. In this financial year, £300,000 is available to implement the strategy and action plan. Details of the current year's funding will be available soon, and the evaluation of the projects will inform future decisions.

Mr Speaker: Question 7, in the name of Rev Robert Coulter, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Litigation Cases: Expenditure

5. **Mr O'Connor** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the total expend-

iture on litigation cases in each of the last five years and (b) any action being taken to reduce this amount.

(AQO 1366/01)

Ms de Brún: Seo a leanas na suimeanna a íocadh sna cúig bliana seo caite: 1996-97 £5.3 mhilliún; 1997-98 £1.7 milliún; 1998-99 £14.7 milliún; 1999-2000 £5.5 mhilliún; 2000-01 £9.9 milliún. Níl figiúirí iniúchta don bhliain airgeadais 2001-02 ar fáil go fóill.

In 1996-97, £5.3 million was paid out; £1.7 million in 1997-98; £14.7 million in 1998-99; £5.5 million in 1999-2000, and £9.9 million in 2000-01. Audited figures for the 2001-02 financial year are not available yet.

Changes have been introduced to improve clinical and social care governance, particularly in specialities such as paediatrics and accident and emergency. Steps have been taken to ensure the safety of blood products and the sterilisation of surgical instruments. A risk management model for health and personal social services has been developed, and boards and trusts participate in a risk management forum that promotes quality in clinical governance and controls assurance and health and safety issues. Those measures will reduce health and social service's exposure to litigation.

Mr O'Connor: It is an important issue. Money that could be used for patient services is being paid out in litigation costs. Will the Minister assure the House that safeguards are in place to ensure that work is being properly monitored and that there will be no future litigation claims against professional staff?

Ms de Brún: I am sure that the Member agrees that it is vital that all those who use health and personal social services should get the same high standard of care, no matter where they live. That is why, in April 2001, I issued for consultation our proposals to do just that. 'Best Practice — Best Care' proposed to establish a framework for setting clear, consistent standards from a single point in the Department, putting in place the clinical and social care governance to which I have referred. Under 'Best Practice — Best Care', health and personal social services will have timely access to the most up-to-date guidance to help it make the best use of its resources and skills. Legislation to implement some of those measures will be necessary, and I will put my proposals before the Assembly shortly.

In addition to the proposals in 'Best Practice — Best Care', the competence of professionals is a key element in maintaining high standards and addressing some of the Member's concerns. The introduction of consultant appraisals from April 2001 means that the competence of individual consultants is assessed regularly. Other initiatives will be aimed at setting and monitoring standards across a range of professions. Strengthened regulatory mechanisms will provide important and powerful assurance control at practitioner level. Taken together, the proposals in 'Best Practice — Best Care', the legislation that I will

present shortly, and the initiatives aimed at improving practitioner performance will ultimately ensure that all of those developments reduce litigation claims.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the steps that the Minister has already taken in this regard. She has welcomed 'Best Practice — Best Care', but what effect does its introduction have on litigation that results from clinical negligence?

Ms de Brún: As I have said, 'Best Practice — Best Care' will ultimately mean that litigation will be reduced. However, it will do more than that. For example, the inspections and reviews undertaken by the new regulation and improvement authority will provide a further assurance that systems are in place to identify and reduce risks and that services are being delivered to the required standard and, therefore, offering further protection to service users.

Mr S Wilson: I am sure that the House will be dismayed that nearly £50 million has been spent on settling cases over the past five years. Will the Minister tell us whether the figures that she gave in her previous answer include the legal costs that the Department has to bear in such cases? How long have the measures that she outlined been in place? Is there any suggestion to date that they are having an effect on the number of people who take cases against the Health Service?

Ms de Brún: The amounts that I mentioned are what has been paid out in any given year, and, as the Member will know, the dates do not necessarily refer to the year in which the litigation began. Our full potential liability, including contingent liability, for clinical negligence is proportionately lower than in England. Claims are settled more quickly here, and in Britain the legal costs of litigation exceed actual settlements in a higher proportion of cases than here. The measures that are being put in place are having an effect. I gave April 2001 as the date for the introduction of consultant appraisal, but it is too early to give definitive results on monitoring, and as I said, ultimately all the developments that I outlined will work together and reduce litigation claims.

Expenditure on Primary and Acute Care 2001-02

6. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total expenditure for (a) primary care and (b) acute care in the last financial year.

(AQO 1363/01)

Ms de Brún: Níl figiúirí iniúchta do 2001-02 ar fáil go fóill. In 2000-01, áfach, ba é £503 mhilliún an caiteachas iomlán ar chúram príomhúil; ba é £572 mhilliún an caiteachas iomlán ar an ghéarchlár cúraim in 2000-01.

Audited figures for 2001-02 are not yet available. However, in 2000-01, expenditure on primary care

amounted to £503 million, and expenditure on the acute programme of care amounted to £572 million.

3.15 pm

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister gaze into her crystal ball and forecast whether the division of funding will remain constant in the future, or whether there will be a shift in emphasis? If so, in which direction would that be?

Ms de Brún: I thank the Member for his implied support for further funding for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That is welcome.

All health and social services need more money. With the finite amount that is available to me, I have committed significant additional resources to primary care, have increased provision to meet the community drugs bill by £25 million in the past year, have allocated £4 million to boards to support activity previously financed by fundholder overspends and have set aside £400,000 for GP accreditation and revalidation to test the professional competence of GPs. I have committed £1.8 million of new money to primary care development. I have also found a further £600,000 to help with the formation of, and early work on, the local health and social care groups, in addition to the £5 million that it will cost to run those.

The Member will not be surprised to learn that I have made substantial additional bids for the future. I am gazing into the crystal ball with my fingers crossed that some of my substantial bids will be met. My bids include £4 million for next year to improve the infrastructure by increasing the number and quality of practice staff and by upgrading premises and equipment. I also wish to see community-based clinics for chronic diseases, modernised premises and equipment for dental practices, and multi-professional training of primary care teams. As a start, I have made a bid for £2 million for those purposes.

We must also develop our information and communication technology so that, for example, outpatient appointments may be booked for GP surgeries. I am bidding for £3 million for next year to begin to fund that. My spending review bids for primary care development amount to more than £11 million, and will rise to some £36 million in 2005-06.

Mr Savage: Does the Minister agree that departmental administration costs, which amounted to some £34 million last year, are too high when compared with only £27 million for primary health and community care? Administration costs account for more than one third of the total cost of running the GP service in Northern Ireland. How will the Minister make the service more acceptable to the community?

Ms de Brún: I have explained clearly and in detail how I shall spend the considerable amount of money

that I wish to invest in the service in the future, should I receive it.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that, to address the matter of expenditure on primary and acute care, she should first attend to the matter of getting the local health and social care groups up and running? The problem is that there has been a delay in doing that. The Department should respond to that issue as it concerns many in the Chamber.

Ms de Brún: I am not sure whether the question is connected to this matter, rather than to later questions. However, candidates have been identified to fill almost half of the 270 management board positions across the 15 groups. Efforts continue to fill the remaining vacancies, and work is ongoing to ensure that the new groups become operational as soon as possible. Those who have been appointed have already begun work, and I see no reason why the groups should not become fully functional in a few weeks' time.

Strategy for Carers

8. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the publication of the strategy for carers, to detail the timetable within which she expects health and social services boards and trusts to review their service provision for carers with carers. (AQO 1403/01)

Ms de Brún: D'aontaigh mé gur chóir cúramóirí a ainmniú mar ghrúpa tosaíochta i gclár an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin le haghaidh cur chun cinn cuimsitheachta sóisialta. Cuirfidh grúpa oibre idir-rannach, a bheidh ag obair sa chlár um chur chun cinn cuimsitheachta sóisialta, moltaí uilig na straitéise cúramóirí i bhfeidhm. Tá mé ag súil go gcuirfear tús leis an obair seo faoi cheann na chéad chúpla seachtain eile.

I have agreed that carers should be designated as a priority group in the Executive's promoting social inclusion programme. An interdepartmental working group, working within the context of the promoting social inclusion programme, will implement all the recommendations of the carers' strategy. I expect work on that to begin in the next few weeks.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am sure that all carers will welcome that news. Will the Minister assure the House that adequate funds will be forthcoming to ensure the successful implementation of this strategy to address service provision for carers?

Ms de Brún: I have already said that I am determined to make the carers' strategy a reality. I have said on many occasions that some of the additional £19 million allocated to community care services this year should be spent on putting in place breaks for carers, and we shall be working towards implementing the

recommendations in the carers' strategy. A working group made up of departmental officials, representatives from boards and trusts, carers and representatives from an organisation that represents carers drew up the strategy. Therefore, as I said in my opening answer, it will be vital that we consider how we can ensure that all the recommendations of the carers' strategy are implemented.

GP Applications

9. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many new GP applications have been received by each trust in the last year.

(AQO 1381/01)

Ms de Brún: Ní sheoltar na hiarratais seo chuig iontaobhais. Nuair a thairgeann cleachtas páirtíocht do dhochtúir cuireann an cleachtas iarratas chuig Coiste Liachta na Lár-Ghníomhaireachta Seirbhísí le moladh a fháil do cheadú. Tugann an bord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta cuí ceadú don cheapachán. I ndiaidh an dochtúir a ghlacadh — agus cuimsíonn sin clárú a dheimhniú ag Comhairle na Liachta Ginearálta agus a dheimhniú fosta gur coimhlíonadh riachtanais oiliúna gairmiúla — cuirtear an dochtúir ar liosta liachta an bhoird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta cuí.

Those applications are not sent to the trusts. When a practice offers a partnership to a doctor, an application is submitted to the medical committee of the Central Services Agency for recommendation of approval. The relevant health and social services board then approves the appointment. After the admission process, which includes verification of registration with the General Medical Council and verification that vocational training requirements have been fulfilled, the doctor is admitted to the medical list of the relevant health and social services board.

I apologise to the Member; I am a little hoarse from too much canvassing in the past couple of weeks, but — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Ford: As long as it was not in Antrim town.

Ms de Brún: It was not in Antrim town.

Between 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board admitted 25 new GPs. The Northern Health and Social Services Board admitted 16, the Southern Health and Social Services Board admitted 14, and the Western Health and Social Services Board admitted nine.

Mr Ford: We have already discussed the money spent on primary care. Indeed, I have in the past asked the Minister about the amount of resources going to primary care. Given the ageing profile of GPs and the size of GP lists in Northern Ireland, is she satisfied that enough doctors are being recruited into general practice in every part of Northern Ireland?

Ms de Brún: I am satisfied that there are enough trained GPs to meet service requirements. I am advised that enough are in training and that there are sufficient numbers available to take up any vacancies that arise.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Perhaps the Minister is hoarse as a result of cheering so much over the weekend as opposed to canvassing.

Mr Ford's question concerned recruitment, but does the Minister think that enough doctors are being trained as GPs to ensure that the family doctor service has enough recruits to continue efficiently?

Ms de Brún: Yes, I do.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Minister accept that, because of the confusion surrounding the commencement of the local health and social care groups, many GPs have decided to opt out of the National Health Service and to start up in private practice? Will she comment on that?

Ms de Brún: I am not aware of any adverse impact on services, or of confusion surrounding the local health and social care groups. Services previously provided through the GP fundholding scheme continue as normal, and GPs and other primary care professionals continue to carry out their core function of providing health and social services. The management board posts continue to be filled, and there is no reason why the groups should not become functional within a few weeks.

Mr Speaker: Question 12, in the name of Mr Maskey, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Health Risk from Telecommunications Masts: (Newry Area)

10. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made of the health risk to the residents of the Sheepbridge/Corgary/Jerretspass area north of Newry as a result of the above-average number of telecommunications masts that are located in, and proposed for, that specific area. (AQO 1374/01)

Ms de Brún: Caithfidh oibritheoirí atá ag cur suas crann teileachumarsáide in aon cheantar deimhniú a thaispeáint a léiríonn go mbeidh an fhorbairt bheartaithe ag cloí le treoirlínte Choimisiún Idirnáisiúnta ar Chosaint ar Radaíocht Neamhianach faoi nochtadh do radaíocht RF.

Is léir don Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí gur gá le tuilleadh taighde, agus táimid ag soláthar breis airgid i leith an taighde sin, ach tá sí den bharúil go bhfuil treoirlínte Choimisiún Idirnáisiúnta ar Chosaint ar Radaíocht Neamhianach faoi nochtadh an phobail do raonta leictreamaighnéadacha bunaithe ar an fhianaise is fearr dá bhfuil ann go dtí seo — fianaise a

bhfuil glacadh uirthi ag an Eagraíocht Dhomhanda Sláinte.

Operators that wish to erect a mast must produce a certificate to prove that the proposed development will comply with the guidelines of the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) on exposure to radio frequency radiation. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is conscious of the need for further research, and it contributes financially towards such work. However, it considers that the guidelines of ICNIRP for public exposure to electromagnetic fields, as accepted by the World Health Organisation, are based on the best evidence available to date.

Accordingly, where concern is raised about the health effects of exposure to electromagnetic fields, it is my Department's view that if the proposed telecommunications development meets fully the ICNIRP guidelines, it should not be necessary for the Department to consider that aspect further.

Mr Bradley: I tabled the question as a result of the concerns expressed by residents in the Newry area. Does the Minister appreciate those concerns, particularly of parents, and would she agree to meet a group of residents, if requested?

Ms de Brún: My position on meeting the residents involved has not changed since my letter to the Member last year. My Department's role as regards telecommunications development is to offer strategic policy advice on general health issues, having regard to the expert opinion of the National Radiological Protection Board and others, including the ICNIRP. My Department has no part to play in dealing with individual applications.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

11. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the funding needs and shortfall of the Health Service, what plans she has to seek additional funds from the recently announced reinvestment and reform initiative. (AQO 1399/01)

Ms de Brún: Is deis shuntasach í a bhfuil géarghá léi an tionscnamh athinfheistíochta agus athchóirithe le cur lenár mbuiséad caipitil. De dheasca na mblianta de thearcmhaoiniú, tá riaráiste mór d'obair riachtanach athchóirithe agus cothbhála sna seirbhísí sláinte; tá gá ann fosta áiseanna nua a thógáil agus trealamh nua-aimseartha a sholáthar a bheas inchurtha le caighdeáin chóireála agus chúraim na haonú aoise is fiche. I mo chéad tairiscint ar airgead faoin tionscnamh seo, beidh mé ag lorg maoiniú don dá chineál oibre seo.

3.30 pm

The reinvestment and reform initiative represents a significant and much-needed opportunity to increase our

capital budget. Due to years of underfunding, health and personal social services has a large backlog of essential maintenance and refurbishment work together with a need for new facilities and modern equipment for twenty-first century standards of care. I seek funding for both types of work in my initial bid under the initiative, and the Member will support me in that.

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

Mrs Courtney: I understand that there has been a lack of funding in the Health Service for several years. If the money is not forthcoming, does the Minister plan to use the borrowing power contained in the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's package? If necessary, would she support an increase in the rates to pay for the lack of investment in much-needed services?

Ms de Brún: To start, we will have an extra £200 million of investment over the next two years. That is not at all connected with a rates increase. The money comprises a £125 million loan from the Treasury, repayable from the existing regional rate income, and £75 million from the Executive's own resources, including that derived from the Department's underspending. We should also include £70 million from the infrastructure Executive programme funds.

In total, therefore, there will be a £270 million investment programme over the next two years on top of the Department's basic capital budget. I fully expect that, as a priority spending programme in urgent need of capital investment, health and personal social services will receive a substantial share of this money.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3, standing in the name of Ivan Davis, has been transferred to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and will receive a written answer. Questions 6 and 10, standing in the names of Eamonn O'Neill and Eugene McMenamin, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Water and Sewerage and Regional Transportation Strategy

1. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with the Minister for Regional Development regarding the financial requirements of (a) the water and sewerage system and (b) the regional transportation strategy. (AQO 1364/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): Both matters were discussed with the Minister for Regional Development as part of the initial 2002 spending review bilateral meeting. A meeting specifically to discuss the implications of the regional transport strategy will be held shortly and will involve the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I have also

received a detailed paper from the Minister for Regional Development setting out the future needs of the water and sewerage system. The Executive will undoubtedly wish to discuss the matter in the near future.

Mr Bradley: The Minister for Regional Development said recently that savings from administration costs could be used to service borrowings to pay for required improvements. Will the Minister comment on that?

Dr Farren: The Minister for Regional Development has written to me in those terms, and I have heard him say the same thing publicly. In reply, I have agreed strongly that we must look hard at our administration costs as a means of addressing the deficiencies in our public services. The review of public administration, under the auspices of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, will also look at that. This must be an important element of the reinvestment and reform initiative.

I have also made it clear that I do not accept that any Good Friday Agreement institutions can, or should, be dismantled. I have also pointed out that the Treasury has laid down clear principles under which the new borrowing power will operate. If expenditure funded by borrowing is to be treated as outside our departmental expenditure limit, there must be a clear relationship between the activity concerned and a revenue stream, so that borrowing is wholly self-financing. Therefore, any borrowing under the proposed new powers will have to be paid from additional income through local revenues. I emphasise that it will be up to the Executive and the Assembly to decide whether to borrow and, if so, how much.

We will not be able to use our departmental expenditure limit to clear debt, as that would fundamentally undermine the Chancellor's fiscal strategy. Members will appreciate that that does not rule out the need to root out waste and inefficiency in order to improve public services.

Mr S Wilson: Many who face the prospect of huge rates increases over the next few years as a result of the Chancellor's initiative — to which the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister recently agreed — will be dismayed at the Minister's reply that the institutions that were set up under the Good Friday Agreement are sacrosanct and will not be part of a review of administration.

Does the Minister not accept that one of the heaviest burdens on the Administration in Northern Ireland has been that, for political reasons, we have 11 Departments instead of six; we have expensive cross-border bodies that soak up tens of millions of pounds each year; and we have peripheral institutions that increase their budgets in some cases by 50% each year?

Dr Farren: I do not accept that there is a proposal for a future major hike in rates. The Member will have no

memory of such a proposal being put before the House, and that would have to happen if any such suggestion were to be implemented.

I do not accept that political institutions cannot be reviewed; there is a review provision in the Good Friday Agreement. The review of other aspects of public administration will take place under the terms of reference that are being set out by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The review will address many of the Member's concerns.

There is a clear responsibility on the Executive and the Assembly to be concerned about efficiencies — and inefficiencies — in our public institutions and to take all advisable and necessary steps to address such shortcomings.

The Member may be assured that this Administration will be resolute in addressing public administration. The Good Friday Agreement is clear, and a review of its operation will take place in due course in accordance with its terms.

Ground Rent (Mews Lane)

2. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has any plans to abolish ground rent payments in respect of Mews Lane. (AQO 1410/01)

Dr Farren: The Member has already raised the subject of ground rents with my Department. I am not sure what this question refers to, and the Member may wish to ask a supplementary question.

The Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 provides a scheme for redeeming ground rents on residential property, and thereby acquiring the freehold title. The first phase is voluntary and will come into effect in July of this year. The second phase requires compulsory redemption of the ground rent, and it will be introduced late in 2003 when the necessary computerisation of Land Registry services has been completed. Therefore it is not accurate to say that the payment of grounds rents will be abolished.

Mrs Nelis: I assure the Minister that I am not too sure of my ground either — no pun intended. This matter arises, as the Minister is aware, because local councils pick up the tab for the maintenance of mews lanes, while residents whose property is adjacent to those mews lanes are expected to pay ground rent if they have not availed of the redemption powers. Do the redemption powers in relation to ground rent on property extend to land, in this case mews lanes, which are not really private property?

Dr Farren: I thank the Member for her clarification with respect to mews lanes. The issue is not a clear-cut one, although there may be greater clarity when the focus is on those mews lanes that are the responsibility of local authorities. Freehold in relation to mews lanes

can vary, depending on the terms and conditions associated with the acquisition of the land. It may be that the occupiers of the residential property adjacent to the mews lanes have responsibility for that part of the land that is in the lane adjacent to their property. The question needs to be examined with regard to the particular conditions associated with the freehold of a particular lane. In that respect, it is not easy to give a general answer. If the Member has questions about particular mews lanes, I shall undertake to provide specific answers.

Public-Private Partnerships and Private Finance Initiatives

4. **Mr O'Connor** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the recent reform and reinvestment package will impact on the review of the use of public-private partnerships in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1367/01)

7. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update of the Executive's review into the use of (a) public-private partnerships and (b) private finance initiatives. (AQO 1396/01)

Dr Farren: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I shall take questions 4 and 7 together.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive undertook to review the opportunities for public-private partnerships across all programmes. That work has been taken forward under the supervision of a public-private partnership working group, with membership drawn from the public and private sectors, the voluntary and community sectors and the trade union movement. The working group adopted a wide definition of public-private partnership, which also covers the private finance initiative but not privatisation.

I am pleased to say that the Executive have received the final report of the working group. A statement on their response to the report will be made to the Assembly. The working group report will be published for wider consultation.

The reinvestment and reform initiative, announced on 2 May during the visit by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, provides for new short-term and long-term borrowing facilities for the Executive, a new strategic investment body and the transfer of certain military and security assets to the Executive. The initiative offers the Assembly a further means of addressing our investment requirement in public infrastructure. The use of public-private partnerships is, in suitable circumstances, another option. The reinvestment and reform initiative thus provides a new and wider financial and administrative framework in which the report of the working group set up to review the use of public-private partnerships can be considered.

Mr O'Connor: I welcome the fact that the report is going to be published and that there will be consultation.

Will the Minister give the House details of the time frame involved?

Dr Farren: The public-private partnership working group has produced a final report for the Executive. The document will be published tomorrow, when a statement will be made to the Assembly on the Executive's initial response to the report.

The Executive have decided to seek a public consultation on financing future public investment, which includes the proposals contained in the public-private partnership working group's report. Further details will be made available tomorrow.

3.45 pm

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give a commitment that the consultation process on how private funds can be utilised for public capital investment will not be used as a delaying tactic? Given that we are three years into public-private partnerships, it is important that we quickly realise upfront capital investment in our public infrastructure, where there is a great need.

Dr Farren: I assure the Member that there will not be any delay. Members will appreciate that we are still in the early phases of recourse to public-private partnerships, and several Departments have successfully implemented some. The working group was established to review progress and the experience that we have gained of public-private partnerships so that we can put our imprint on how we might introduce public-private partnerships for future infrastructural investment needs. Setting the recourse to public-private partnerships alongside the reinvestment and reform initiative, which has given us the borrowing capacity that we may also wish to use, as well as the finance available to us through our normal public expenditure resources in the departmental expenditure limit, the Executive and the Assembly have three major sources from which to draw the required finance for the major infrastructural projects that we deem necessary.

Members will have heard Ministers highlighting the critical pressure for investment in our infrastructural needs. A range of resources is now available to us with which we can be more strategic in planning how we address those needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As I do not see Mr Beggs in his seat, I call Mr Ford.

Low-Cost Airlines (Civil Service Usage)

8. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his policy on the use of low-cost airlines for civil servants flying between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. (AQO 1385/01)

Dr Farren: The policy that covers civil servants who fly between Northern Ireland and Great Britain is contained in the Northern Ireland Civil Service staff

handbook. In determining best value arrangements for travel to meet business needs, Departments are free to use the services of low-cost airlines. However, best value must be assessed by considering all the costs associated with a business trip. It is not simply the cost of the airline ticket that must be considered but the cost of land travel by road or rail, the travel time and ancillary costs, which include parking fees, meals and overnight accommodation. The flight times to and from Britain are often the determining factor as to which carrier represents best value for a specific trip. My officials are undertaking a strategic review of this changing market to ensure that procurement arrangements continue to provide best value for Departments.

Mr Ford: Many low-cost services to Great Britain came into operation some years ago, but the Department is only reviewing it now, which would suggest that movement has been a little tardy. I wonder whether the Minister saw a recent advertisement placed by a not necessarily impartial organisation — Ryanair — about the amount of money that Government Departments in Dublin could save on travel costs. Has the Minister considered accepting that there may be many cases in which flexibility is required? Those who travel for routine meetings and conferences could save him considerable sums by travelling with low-cost airlines, as many private businesses and individuals tend to do.

Dr Farren: The Member did not listen carefully to my answer. I said that, in determining best value arrangements for travel to meet business needs, Departments may use low-cost airlines. They are already obliged to consider the use of such airlines, and how to achieve best value is clearly outlined in the Civil Service staff handbook. However, many considerations must be borne in mind. We will use the airline that provides best value. When making their pitch, airlines highlight cost; however, other factors should be borne in mind when trips are being planned in Departments.

I assure the Member that the review is being undertaken to ensure that we maintain commitment to best value. It is not new — it simply happens to be taking place now. There have been reviews in the past, and there will be reviews in the future.

Mr A Maginness: When senior civil servants and Ministers fly, air miles can be accumulated on some routes with some airlines. Can the Administration use such accumulated air miles to make economies or perhaps to make donations to charities in Northern Ireland?

Dr Farren: That is an interesting suggestion and one that we should examine. I will ask those who are conducting the review of best value on travel to take on board Mr Maginness's suggestions and to respond to him when the review has been completed.

Cancer Centre

9. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will recommend to the Executive

that money be allocated to building a cancer centre in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1371/01)

Dr Farren: My Department has already approved an outline business case for a regional cancer centre and is awaiting a full business case from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I share the widespread desire to see the construction of the centre to replace the outdated facilities at Belvoir Park Hospital. Although I recognise that there are other competing priorities, I am happy to recommend to Executive Colleagues that we look favourably upon such a worthwhile project. However, this depends on receiving a full business case and consideration of all feasible options.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his positive response, which we all welcome. Will he assure us that the extra money from the Chancellor's Budget is immediately allocated to health?

Dr Farren: The Chancellor's Budget provides an additional £96 billion from 2003-04 for the Health Service in the United Kingdom over the next five years. Our share of that is £2.7 billion. We are not obliged to make use of money received via the Barnett formula for the same purpose as in England. That is central to the concept of devolution. However, I have already recommended to Executive Colleagues that, as health is a clear spending priority, Northern Ireland's share of the full allocation from the Chancellor's action on the National Health Service should be allocated to health here.

The Executive's proposals on spending allocations for 2003-04 onwards will be set in a draft Budget in September, which will need to take account of all priorities, pressures and opportunities across the full range of public services here.

National Insurance: Increase in Employers' Contributions

11. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost consequence on the Northern Ireland block of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's increase in employers' National Insurance contributions of 1%. (AQO 1384/01)

Dr Farren: The 1% increase in employers' National Insurance contributions will add 1% to the public sector pay bill, which will result in a pressure of some £30 million on the Northern Ireland departmental expenditure limit. The Executive will address that pressure in the 2002 Budget process.

Mr Close: Does the Minister agree that the fanfare of trumpets that followed the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement of some £72 million additional to Northern Ireland was somewhat misplaced, and that Gordon Brown was giving with one hand and taking away with the other?

Dr Farren: There will be no major increases in local revenue until full public consultation has concluded and a fairer system for revenue-raising has been developed to replace the present system. The pace of change is subject to the approval of the Assembly.

Suspension of Rural Rate Relief Scheme

12. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why the rural rate relief scheme has been suspended. (AQO 1382/01)

Dr Farren: The Executive decided to suspend the implementation of the scheme as framed under the existing legislation because an impact analysis revealed serious flaws. Many properties would not benefit, as they were outside designated small, rural settlements. Also, the scheme did not address TSN considerations and was unlikely to sustain rural services effectively. I have asked my officials to work with officials in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to consider more effective alternatives to the existing scheme to enable me to bring proposals to the Executive by the end of June.

Any new scheme may require primary legislation, which could have implications for the timing of its introduction.

Mr McCarthy: I am disappointed with the Minister's reply. I suggest that it is a sign of the Department's incompetence. The scheme was initiated over a year ago for several properties, and the Minister's response will cause much disappointment.

Dr Farren: I accept that some time has passed since it was indicated that such a scheme might be introduced. However, several major interruptions and delays occurred at a political level. The transfer to Northern Ireland of a scheme developed for use in England necessitated careful consideration of its equality impact. The equality impact assessment flashed red lights to warn us of the difficulties inherent in direct transfer. We recognised the effectiveness with which the equality impact assessment had been conducted, and, unfortunately, that caused us to stall adoption of the scheme. It would have been foolhardy to implement a scheme that could not achieve its intended objectives. We were therefore obliged to examine alternatives.

As I have indicated, alternatives are under active consideration and will be brought before the Executive and the Assembly in the near future.

4.00 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: Has the Minister been able, with his Executive Colleagues, to reach a collective definition of rural proofing to assist the rural community with rural rate relief and other policies that directly affect its income and earning capacity?

Dr Farren: The Executive and, in particular, the Department of Finance and Personnel, have been in close contact with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to develop practical ways of translating the concept of rural proofing and to put it into effect. My Department has liaised closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, particularly on the rural rating scheme, and I hope that they will soon be able to report to the Executive and the Assembly on what action should be taken.

WARRENPOINT HARBOUR AUTHORITY ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 42/2002) be approved. — [*The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson).*]

Mr McGrady: I had started to make a few comments about the Order when I was interrupted. However, I warmly welcome the motion.

It is important that trust harbours are clearly accountable to the public. That will be achieved by the proposal for Warrenpoint harbour to have a maximum of three members from Newry and Mourne District Council as potential members of the new board. In his opening remarks on the Order, the Minister indicated that the board will have a membership of between eight and 12. In case the question that I put to the Minister became confused during my aborted attempts to ask it, I will ask it again. Will he recommend to the Department that the maximum of three members will mean three members elected from Newry and Mourne District Council? I presume that, theoretically, there could just be one or two. I simply want that clarified. Given that the possible membership spread is from eight to 12, it would be appropriate to have a commensurate number of non-council appointees with some specialism on the board.

The reason that the board is so important to the local community is given in the regional development strategy, which the Minister is also responsible for: it is one of the regional gateways referred to, and that attribute must be enhanced as far as possible.

The Minister will be aware of the tremendous difficulties that the harbour board and the community have had in trying to ensure the future of the port by way of a deep-water facility. Perhaps, on reflection and with hindsight, if there had been openness and accountability at that time, the misunderstandings that arose and contributed to the non-fulfilment of the deep-water provision would not have happened. That is an urgent matter. I welcome the extension of borrowing power for Warrenpoint harbour from a paltry £10,000 to a magnificent £2.5 million. However, the cost of a deep-water provision will be between £10 million and £12 million.

Much material grant money comes between maximum borrowing and that type of expenditure. However, I know that the Department can extend the borrowing range. I am sure that the Minister will note my enthusiasm and that of my South Down Colleagues for the future of the harbour.

The Minister said that the Department appoints an observer. That has been traditional to date; it grew up by custom and practice. However, subtly, or perhaps not so

subtly, the Order makes it a statutory requirement for the Department to have an observer at a board meeting. If the board so desired, would it be possible for it to meet in private and not have the departmental appraiser, if that is what he or she will be called, present? That is not clear from the Order. It smacks a little of a spy in the camp. I hope that that was not the intention, because there have been, and are, good relationships between the Department and the board through the observer. Clarification of that issue would be appropriate.

Other Members wish to speak, and time is short. I welcome the broad thrust of the Order. Perhaps the Minister will have time to answer my two questions during his winding-up speech. If not, he will undoubtedly do me the courtesy of writing me a letter, as he always does.

Mr Wells: I welcome the legislation. I apologise in advance to the Minister because, although I will be able to speak for a few moments, I will be unable to stay for his summation. There is a ministerial visit to Down district today, which I must attend.

I particularly welcome the increase in the local representation on the board. When vacancies arose on the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority last year, there were 30 applications for just two posts, which indicates the level of interest in working with the authority. There will be no difficulty whatsoever in filling the extra positions. Warrenpoint harbour is an important employer in the town, and we wish it well in its expansion plans.

However, a difficult balancing act must be achieved between the need to expand the port, which everyone recognises, and the need to maintain the unique character of Warrenpoint. Inevitably, that causes conflict. Having additional local government representatives will help in striking the balance that must be achieved between two apparently conflicting arguments. I understand that, already, some councillors in the area have not been hiding behind the bushes in suggesting that they might be appropriate for such positions. I have found the recently appointed council representative on the authority extremely responsive and helpful, which augurs well for any future appointments.

I welcome the increase in the borrowing powers but, as Mr McGrady said, Warrenpoint Harbour Authority's problems will not be solved even by those new generous terms. The provision of deep-water facilities in a way that is acceptable to the community will be extremely expensive, and the harbour will require his support, and that of the Department, if those facilities are to be realised.

I take a different view from Mr McGrady about the position of the person whom he implied to be the Department's "spy" who sits in on board meetings. I have found the Department's representative extremely helpful in all the negotiations associated with Warrenpoint Harbour Authority. He has helped to oil the wheels

of government and to make them more responsive to the authority's needs, rather than acting as a spy or trying to slow down the authority's work.

Apart from those minor comments, the legislation is to be welcomed. It gives Warrenpoint Harbour Authority more flexibility and will move the port's work forward into the twenty-first century. Other difficulties still remain, of which the Minister is aware, but they are not relevant to this legislation. I give it my full support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time set for this debate is running out quite quickly. Mr Bradley, perhaps a brief contribution?

Mr Bradley: Rather than elaborate on earlier speeches, I shall ask only questions. In the event of Warrenpoint Harbour Authority identifying land suitable for its needs in Warrenpoint or nearby, what level of pre-purchase valuation or approval will be required from the Department for Regional Development before completion of a purchase? My experience with Newry and Mourne District Council's attempt to purchase land in Warrenpoint led me to ask that question. Officials, correctly, included pre-purchase clauses. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a private developer offered more money, and the property was denied to the council.

Will the powers permit Warrenpoint Harbour Authority to negotiate with the Crown Commission in regard to the purchase or lease of land or property owned by the Crown?

My third and final question relates to the locality. Can the Minister assure the operators of the Warrenpoint to Omeath passenger ferries that the Order will in no way interfere with their operations?

Mr P Robinson: I understand that time is running out, and I want to answer some of the questions that have been raised, both before and after Question Time.

Mr McGrady referred to the key issue of sustainability. He and Mr Wells referred to the importance of Warrenpoint port as an employer. I agree that its role in the local economy is important.

Reference was made to the academic power to dispose of land. Although at present Warrenpoint Harbour Authority may wish to procure land, the circumstances might change in the future. The provision is there should the need arise. I agree that the board deserves its complement of elected representatives. During my visit I was impressed by the work it had performed, and I was happy to look around the port facilities.

I confirm that I intend to appoint the maximum number of elected representatives to the authority, after consultation with Newry and Mourne District Council. I understand that the Department of the Environment must have a formal resolution from the council before the council's name can be changed. That will require another amendment to our legislation. However, none of

that should impact on the appointments, and we will look for the council to provide us expeditiously with the additional names.

With respect to the borrowing range, Mr McGrady pointed out that it had increased from a paltry £10,000 to £2.5 million. However, there should be no rush to the shops. I understand the nature of the individuals concerned, and the matter will be dealt with prudently and responsibly.

Mr Wells said that the departmental observer should not be considered a spy. The harbour authorities consider him a friend and ally rather than a spy, and that is how it should be. As Mr McGrady said, it is not a statutory requirement. Schedule 1, paragraph 7, states that the Department

"may appoint one of its officials".

The Department is empowered, but there is no requirement upon it. As with Belfast harbour, now that there will be more elected representatives, I intend to review that issue. I understand, however, that our representative on that board has performed a very useful function. As a former Secretary of State said, we will look at it "in the round" as soon as the necessary additional appointments have been made.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 42/2002) be approved.

4.15 pm

LONDONDERRY HARBOUR ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That the Londonderry Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 41/2002) be approved.

Many of the provisions in the Londonderry Harbour Order are identical to those in the Belfast and Warrenpoint Orders, so I will restrict my remarks to the key differences in the Statutory Instruments.

Like the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority, the Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners have agreed a memorandum of understanding on their harbour lands with the Department. The memorandum came into effect on 1 March 2002, and a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library. As with the Belfast Order, article 4(2) of the Londonderry Order will give legal force to the arrangements set out in the memorandum of understanding.

Article 6(1) empowers the commissioners to borrow money upon the security of their revenues and property. However, article 6(2) provides that the total amount of such borrowing must not

“exceed £2,500,000 million or such greater amount as may be approved by the Department in writing.”

As with the Warrenpoint Order, the lower amount reflects the smaller scale of the Londonderry port operations relative to those in Belfast. Again, the borrowing provisions are similar.

Article 9 introduces schedule 1 to the Order, which contains new provisions for the constitution of the Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners and the procedures of the commissioners.

Schedule 1 of the Londonderry Order differs from the Belfast Order. Paragraph 2(1) states that the board of the Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners

“shall consist of not less than 8 and not more than 12 persons”.

The board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners has between 10 and 15 persons.

Paragraph 2(3)(a) states that a commissioner

“shall hold office for a period of 4 years or such lesser period as the Department may determine but shall be eligible for re-appointment.”

To provide greater flexibility, that was changed from the previous three-year fixed term.

Paragraph 3 states that a maximum of three of the commissioners shall be members of the city council and,

as with the Warrenpoint Order, shall be appointed following consultation with the council. However, that still represents a significant increase in the number of elected representatives to serve on the board because previously only one elected representative, my hon Friend, Mr Hay, has been a member of the Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners.

Article 11 provides for the repeal or revocation of certain statutory provisions peculiar to Londonderry port, as set out in column 3 of schedule 2 of the Order.

I commend the Londonderry Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 to the Assembly.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister’s announcement about the Statutory Rule for the Londonderry Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002. That three members of Derry City Council are eligible to serve as commissioners is welcome. It may mean that, for the first time, a woman from Derry City Council will serve as a commissioner.

I welcome the borrowing powers, which are similar to those for Belfast and Warrenpoint. Commissioners will also be able to make decisions about infrastructure, to issue licences for pleasure crafts and to take such decisions that they feel are in the best interests of local people.

It is also welcome to see that “pleasure crafts” refers to any vessel not exceeding 100 tonnes gross and that any unlicensed craft will not be allowed to operate.

I would like clarification on two points to which the Minister has referred. Paragraph 9 of Schedule 1 states:

“The quorum required for a meeting of the Commissioners shall be four.”

Paragraph 10(2) states that if a commissioner feels that he has any interest, directly or indirectly, it should be recorded in the minutes and he should withdraw from the meeting. Paragraph 10(3) states that if a commissioner has been prohibited from participating in the meeting but stays, a quorum will not be formed and his deliberations will be disregarded. Why is that? The practice is at variance with that in any other boards in that a member can remain while a decision is being taken although he has no pecuniary interest.

Mr Hay: I welcome the debate. We have come a long way, especially if we recall 1998 when reviews of trust ports in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain were being carried out in parallel. As the Minister said earlier, the findings of the review reinforced the importance of local trust ports to Northern Ireland’s economy. Mr Gordon Brown then announced the sale of Belfast port to get some money for infrastructure. It has not been easy to get the harbour Orders to the Floor of the Assembly.

We should thank the officials who have worked hard under difficult circumstances to produce the Orders. All

trust ports in Northern Ireland welcome the extra powers, and there is no question about the significance of the ports to Northern Ireland: their importance to the economy cannot be overstated. Until now, the Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners have been able to borrow only £350,000 for the port in Londonderry. The new Order will enable them to borrow £2.5 million. That is a huge increase and will be of great help in deciding what needs to be done.

I declare an interest because, as the Minister mentioned, I am a member of the Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners. Trust ports have played a significant and positive role in sustaining regional and economic development in Northern Ireland for many years.

A modern, effective port infrastructure will need continual investment to deliver high-quality port-related services. Given the significance of trust ports to our economy, it is important that we extend their powers to ensure that they can compete effectively with those outside Northern Ireland. They must act more commercially; develop a range of business activities; enter into joint ventures; and, most of all, access competitive finance and safeguard the public interest. Generally, trust ports in Northern Ireland have been more accountable than those in Great Britain. In Londonderry there has been a good working relationship between the council and the port.

The port officers and commissioners have kept the council informed of the three-year and five-year financial and economic plans. That role is important. When the new harbour Orders are finally in place, it is important that an understanding exists between the local authority and the ports. Where possible, trust ports such as Belfast, Warrenpoint and Londonderry should meet with councils to work in partnership on three-year and five-year plans. The trust ports should meet councils at least twice a year to update them on their economic plans. That is one way to achieve the proper accountability that the trusts ports in Northern Ireland must show.

Trust ports have stood the test of time and continue to perform a valuable role in supporting the local economy. The memorandum of understanding has been mentioned several times. We now have an understanding between the harbour authorities and the Department. For many years, trust ports have wanted to improve their public accountability. Moreover, there is a desire to protect the assets of the ports, as that is in the public interest.

I welcome what has been achieved in the House this afternoon, and I thank everyone concerned. The Committee for Regional Development —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member must bring his remarks to a close as we are running out of time.

Mr Hay: The subject of extra powers for trust ports has eluded members of the Committee for Regional

Development for some time. We all worked well to achieve today's outcome.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to those who contributed generally positive comments in all three debates on the new port Orders.

I am unsure whether I understood what Mrs Courtney was attempting to query about procedures for disclosure and withdrawal. I am clear that, as it appears in the Order, it would be common practice for someone with an interest in a matter that comes before the harbour authority to declare it and leave the meeting. A person who leaves the meeting will not participate in the procedures and should therefore not be counted as part of the quorum. Those who will participate in the decision-making process should form the quorum. Having increased the number of commissioners, it should not be hard to sustain a quorum.

I shall be delighted if the council includes a woman in its list of representatives. The Londonderry Port and Harbour Authority has taken a lead in that matter by appointing Mary Breslin as its chairperson. Those who have worked with her recognise that she is a very competent chairperson.

My hon Friend Mr Hay spoke about the working relationship among district councils — I suspect that he means in all three port areas — and the harbour authorities. I agree entirely. We wish that relationship to become closer.

There have been varying degrees of co-operation in each area, and, happily, it has been improving in all three areas. I hope that it will continue to do so.

4.30 pm

The additional elected representatives will help to improve that relationship. However, Mr Hay will be aware that I intend to bring forward an additional piece of legislation — a short harbours Bill. The Department is already preparing that piece of legislation, and part of it addresses adopting a code of practice and providing information for the Department. He and his colleagues on the Committee may well have views on issues relating to the interrelationship between councils and the ports when we deal with that piece of legislation.

Overall, I am delighted that the Assembly has taken the attitude that it has to these three Orders. The Port of Belfast, Warrenpoint and Londonderry operate in an extremely competitive environment. Members will be aware that competition comes not simply from the private sector in Northern Ireland, but also from the Republic of Ireland ports. The Republic has much more flexible arrangements than we have had in Northern Ireland. This will assist our ports to be more competitive and give them the ability to borrow and invest money. Many people will recognise that this will assist them in how they handle their business. I am also sure that

Members will welcome the memorandum of understanding that has been agreed by all three ports. This ensures that there is a close understanding between my Department and the ports when there is any disposal of land.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Londonderry Harbour Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 41/2002) be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY STATUTORY RULES SUBJECT TO CONFIRMATORY RESOLUTION

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the next four motions relate to social security Statutory Rules subject to confirmatory resolution, I propose to conduct one debate only. I shall ask the Minister for Social Development to move the first motion, and debate will then take place on all four motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall call the Minister to make his winding-up speech and then put the question on the first motion. I shall then ask the Minister to move each motion in turn and separately put the question on each motion without further debate.

I remind Members that a Statutory Rule subject to confirmatory resolution is already law, but will cease to have effect unless approved by the Assembly within a specified period. The following Statutory Rule subject to confirmatory resolution was made on 13 March 2002 and will expire on 1 October 2002 unless approved by the Assembly.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 99/2002) be approved.

The following motions also stood in the Order Paper:

That the Social Security (Inherited SERPS) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 441/2001) be approved. — [*The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds).*]

That the Social Security (Loss of Benefit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 79/2002) be approved. — [*The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds).*]

That the Social Security and Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 164/2002) be approved. — [*The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds).*]

An uprating Order is made annually to increase rates of contributory and non-contributory benefits, together with the various premiums that form part of the income-related benefits. As usual, the increases are based on changes to the relevant price indicators over the 12 months ending in September. Most social security benefits rise in the usual way, in line with the retail price index, which this year is 1·7%. Income-related benefits — income support, housing benefit and income-based jobseeker's allowance — are increased in line with the Rossi index, which is also 1·7% this year. Pensions and bereavement benefits are increased by more than that percentage.

It is important to look at the uprating measures as part of the wider pensions strategy. The basic state pension is, and will remain, the foundation of pensioner incomes. This year it has risen again — by £3 for single pensioners and £4·80 for couples — and on top of last

year's increases, that makes a total rise of 7% above the rate of inflation. Future rises in the basic state pension will be at least £100 a year for single pensioners and at least £160 a year for couples. Increases to the basic state pension alone would not be sufficient to tackle pensioner poverty. The minimum income guarantee has been radically improved, benefiting many pensioners. From April this year, a guarantee for a single pensioner has increased by £6 to £98·15 a week.

The standard rate of maternity allowance, as statutory maternity pay, has increased from £62·20 to £75 a week. Next year, maternity benefit will rise again to £100 a week. More has also been done for families with children. Child benefit and the income support allowances for children, which provide real help to families on low incomes, have been increased. Extra money is being paid to low-income families with a disabled child. This year, it has increased by a further £5 on top of the normal uprating to a new rate of £35·50 a week. Next year, it will rise again by a further £5 above inflation to more than £40 a week, benefiting a large number of children who need that help. It will also help families on low incomes, both in and out of work. The Order increases rates of benefit in line with inflation and provides additional help for those who need it most.

I now turn to the Social Security (Inherited SERPS) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001. The Social Security Act 1986 and corresponding Northern Ireland Order provided for a reduction in the amount of state earnings related pension scheme (SERPS) that a surviving spouse could inherit from his or her late spouse from 100% to 50%. This change, which was due to take effect from April 2000, was designed to bring SERPS into line with practice in non-state pension schemes, where it is usual for only half the pension rights to be inherited by the surviving spouse. The intention was that people would have the long lead-in period to make alternative provision, if they felt it necessary to do so.

In 1998-99, it came to light that several people felt that they had been misled due to incomplete advice in pensions leaflets, while others contacted the Benefits Agency in Great Britain and the Social Security Agency in Northern Ireland to argue that they had been given misleading advice. In response to those concerns, the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 provided for the reduction to 50% to be deferred until 6 October 2002. As a result, no one widowed before 6 October 2002 will be affected by the reduction.

The Social Security (Inherited SERPS) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 provide additional protection for the spouses of those at or near pensionable age and of those who attain pensionable age before 6 October 2010. Under the Regulations, the spouse of a person who reaches pensionable age before 6 October 2002 will be able to inherit up to 100% SERPS. The spouse of someone who attains pensionable age between 6 October

2002 and 5 October 2010 will have his or her inherited SERPS protected at a rate between 90% and 60%, depending on when the spouse reaches pensionable age.

The objective has been to devise a system that makes the transition to 50% inherited SERPS fair and recognises the fact that the amount someone must save to make up for the reduction increases the closer that person is to pensionable age. The Regulations provide such a system.

I now turn to the third Order before the House — the Social Security (Loss of Benefit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002. My Department spends over £3 billion each year on social security. It is our duty to ensure that the system is secure from both fraud and error, so that the right money goes to the right people at the right time. Members are well aware of the problem of social security fraud. During the debates on last year's Social Security Fraud Bill, Members across the Assembly signified their support for measures to tackle this problem.

The Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, which received Royal Assent last November, introduced several powers to support the overall strategy of safeguarding social security.

The Regulations provide the detail for one of those measures. The loss of benefit provisions form part of the continuing welfare reform programme. They build on one of the key recommendations in the report by Lord Grabiner on the informal economy that was published in March 2000. For the vast majority of people who cheat on benefits, their first conviction is their last. However, for those who continue to offend, it is appropriate that an offence should be brought into play.

The Social Security (Loss of Benefit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 introduces powers that will provide a deterrent to those who are considering committing further benefit offences. The Regulations will ensure that there is an effective deterrent to dissuade those who are subject to a first conviction for a benefit offence from reoffending, provided that where a sanction must be applied, it is done in a uniform manner across all sanctionable benefits and that the level of the sanction applied is based on experience gained from other areas of the Department that are tried and tested.

The Regulations ensure that a non-resident parent's responsibilities continue to be met by deducting child support payments before a sanction is applied. That sanction is enforced even when an offender tries to hide behind a partner by swapping benefit claims. That occurs in the case of a joint claim where an attempt is made to change the name of the primary claimant.

The Regulations provide for related passport benefits to continue when a sanction is applied and the availability of fallback provisions to protect the vulnerable, and those dependent on them, by providing a scheme that is a close reflection of the hardship scheme that already

operates for labour market sanctions. Finally, they ensure that a sanction to benefit cannot be avoided by merely stopping and restarting a claim to benefit.

The Regulations are not disproportionate. They are consistent across the board and introduce a fixed 13-week disqualification period. The Regulations are part of the overall strategy of tackling fraud and rebuilding confidence in the welfare state.

The Social Security and Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 make some technical amendments to various sets of Regulations governing child support to prepare for the introduction of the new simpler child support scheme. The package also includes some small amendments to the current scheme that are designed to protect the interests of parents who find themselves in certain specific circumstances.

Under the current rules it is possible to depart from the standard formula assessment in certain circumstances. One of the circumstances in which a departure direction can be given is where a party to the maintenance assessment has an asset worth more than £10,000 that is capable of producing income but is not being used to do so. The Regulations amend the current scheme so that certain payments made under the compensation scheme for victims, and the families of victims of variant CJD, will not be regarded as assets for the purposes of a departure direction. A corresponding amendment is being made in respect of the variation scheme that will replace departures under the new scheme. Those payments are made in recognition of the pain and suffering endured by the victims of that terrible disease, and by their families, and are intended to help reduce any financial hardship that they may face.

A further current scheme amendment concerns the calculation of the exempt income figure. That represents the income that parents need for their personal expenses, and it also includes allowances for any of their children living with them. Therefore, it is not taken into account when making a maintenance assessment.

The Regulations further provide for an amount equivalent to the enhanced disability premium to be included in a parent's exempt income calculation. It applies where either that parent or the child would, if he or she were on income support, satisfy the conditions for payment of the premium. It is important that we should provide protection for those clients who will continue to be subject to the current rules for some time yet.

Many of the amendments to the new scheme Regulations make minor technical corrections or serve to reflect the intended detail of the new scheme legislation, and I do not intend to elaborate on them.

In conclusion, the Regulations make small, but important, changes to the current child support scheme and ensure that the new scheme will work fairly and effectively, so

that maintenance can be sorted out quickly and children will see the benefit of maintenance payments.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Connor: I support all four of the amendments. The uprating of benefits is welcome. It will ensure that benefits for people on the breadline will be increased in line with inflation, which will help them to meet their daily expenses. I welcome the softening of the blow as regards the state earnings related pension scheme (SERPS) Regulations.

The Minister's point about the loss of social security benefit is correct. It is essential that the right people receive benefits. The people who defraud the system take benefits from those who need them the most, and sanctions should be imposed on them. People must fulfil their responsibility to pay child support. The Statutory Rules are confirmatory, therefore parity of legislation principles dictate that they must be introduced, otherwise the whole social security benefits system in Northern Ireland will be upset. On that basis alone, we support their introduction.

It is interesting that the champions of the unemployed and claimants of disability living allowance (DLA) are nowhere to be seen today. That shows how much they really care about unemployed people; they merely grandstand.

This side of the House welcomes the Statutory Rules and hopes that they will benefit the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I concur with Mr O'Connor's comments. The Minister has set worthwhile objectives, which we all support and wish to be realised. I welcome the report and the fact that the scheme will protect DLA recipients. I also welcome the new rules to deal with habitual defrauders. People who make one mistake will not have their money taken off them, but those who continue to defraud will be penalised.

Will the legislation help people who have received compensation for car accidents, as a result of which their health has been affected? Will they be able to keep their compensation? Will it affect the benefits to which they are entitled?

Mr Dodds: The debate has been brief. However, I shall explain the subordinate legislation.

I welcome the comments made by Mr O'Connor and Mr Shannon. The legislation is mainly technical, but it addresses issues that affect vulnerable and needy people, many of whom look to the Assembly to introduce the correct structures and the appropriate level of benefits.

I will respond in writing to Mr Shannon's question. I welcome the fact that some Members have consistently shown an interest in the matter, as proven by their presence here today. Mr O'Connor, as a member of the

Social Development Committee, is consistent on these matters. I am sure that he sometimes wonders why Members who are vocal on these issues in other areas are not present when these matters come before the House. That question is a matter for them, and no doubt their constituents will address it to them in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR99/2002) be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The second Statutory Rule subject to confirmatory resolution was made on 31 December 2001 and will expire on 6 April 2003 unless approved by the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security (Inherited SERPS) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR441/2001) be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The third Statutory Rule subject to confirmatory resolution was made on 6 March 2002 and will expire on 1 October 2002 unless approved by the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security (Loss of Benefit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR79/2002) be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The fourth Statutory Rule subject to confirmatory resolution was made on 29 April 2002 and will expire on 30 October 2002 unless approved by the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security and Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR164/2002) be approved.

COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Change of Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Arthur Doherty shall replace Mr Joe Byrne as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. — *[Mr Bradley.]*

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Change of Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Alban Maginness shall replace Ms Patricia Lewsley as a member of the Committee for Education. — *[Mr Bradley.]*

REPORT BY THE COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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

That this Assembly endorses the report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its inquiry into 'Preparation for the next Phase of the Rural Development Programme 2001-2006' (2/01/R), and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to implement those recommendations relevant to her Department.

The Committee decided on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's rural development programme as its subject for inquiry for several reasons. Most Committee members, and many other Members, have had some dealings with earlier phases of the programme. Therefore we were interested in the commitments made in the Programme for Government and in the Department's public service agreement to implement a new phase of rural development actions in 2001. Importantly, the Committee was conscious that good scrutiny involves following up on promises and commitments made by Departments to ensure that they have been carried out.

It was this concern to engage in good scrutiny that led the Committee to agree the inquiry's terms of reference as a follow-up on several issues highlighted in the Public Accounts Committee's report on the rural development programme. The Committee had no wish to rake over criticisms of earlier phases of the programme. However, Members felt that it was important to find out whether lessons had been learnt and good practice developed and implemented by the Department and by those agents involved in delivering other parts of the programme on the Department's behalf.

The Committee decided to concentrate on three main issues from the Public Accounts Committee's report: participation, project appraisal and rationalisation of programmes. In addition, we decided to take a brief look at the resources assigned to deliver the programme. The inquiry was not an attempt to investigate the whole programme or the reasons behind it. As elected representatives in rural constituencies, Committee members welcome all investment in rural areas, and the £80 million to £100 million quoted by the Department is worth having.

Rural development groups throughout the country have done much good work, and the Committee applauds those who have worked hard and given of their time to make things happen for the benefit of others. Therefore we did not go into the overall policy. We concerned ourselves only with certain aspects of the programme's delivery. Our hope is that the recommend-

ations in the Committee's report, which I ask the Assembly to endorse, will help to ensure that public expenditure is properly targeted, made available to those who are most in need and protected by good appraisal practices.

Of the three issues, participation was of primary interest to Committee members. The Public Accounts Committee asked the Department and the Rural Development Council — two of the main delivery organisations — to ensure that under-represented groups such as the farming community, women, young persons and the long-term unemployed participate fully in the new programme. The Committee felt that full participation was a fundamental requirement in a programme that sought to help the whole rural community. Members were keen to see the inclusion of farmers and their families. Although we recognised that the rural development programme is aimed at the whole rural community, members believed that the farming sector deserved special attention, considering its many recent difficulties. The Assembly has often debated those difficulties, and I do not need to repeat them today. We were told that audits and evaluations of the earlier programmes showed that farmers had not been involved as much as might have been expected, and Committee members felt that it was important for farmers to get a fair crack of the whip this time.

Members had no difficulty with the Department's definition of participation, which includes administration of programmes, membership of partnership groups and direct involvement in projects. However, the Committee concluded that all these must be measured to ensure that the target groups were getting their fair share of funds and participating as they should.

The Committee also expected to see clear statements of intent from the Department and its agents regarding participation backed up by appropriate action. The Committee's inquiry showed that the Department had stated its intention to encourage the participation of the farming community and other groups who had not benefited fully from earlier programmes. That was clear from the Department's published strategy, numerous documents, and the Department's written and oral evidence to the inquiry. It was also clear that the Rural Development Council and the rural community network had similar objectives. However, the Committee found that there were weaknesses in the Department's preparation for, and implementation of, the new programme, and that those weaknesses had resulted in obstacles to farmers' involvement.

5.00 pm

To be fair, the Committee welcomed much of what the Department had done, such as making farm businesses and co-operatives eligible for funding for the first time and involving farmers when promoting the programme.

However, it found that farmers, unlike community groups, had little access to assistance in the early stages of group development. The Committee was disappointed that the Department did not have targets for farmer participation and was not prepared to give a higher score to projects that came from under-represented groups when applying the selection criteria.

The Committee has made 12 recommendations to address the issues. Those include that the two divisions of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development co-operate to provide early development services to farmers' groups; provision of form-completion assistance to farmers ring-fencing of funds for the target groups and for projects that take longer to develop; and full monitoring of the uptake of grant aid made by the target groups.

The Committee's main criticisms concern the issue of full participation. However, Members believe that they have been constructive in their criticisms, and they have suggested solutions that should go a long way towards removing the weaknesses found.

The Committee was also keen to ensure that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development honoured its project appraisal commitments as that had been an area of major concern to the Public Accounts Committee.

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

Following the Committee's inquiry, members were pleased to conclude that the Department had taken action to ensure that satisfactory appraisal procedures were in place. However, the Committee's 11 recommendations on project appraisal — particularly those on scrutiny, audit and staff training — will strengthen the procedures. For example, the Committee recommended that the Department's economists scrutinise a higher percentage of pro forma appraisals to take account of an increase in the value of projects that will be appraised in that way.

The Committee also recommended that the choice of appraisals for scrutiny should be made more independent from the teams that carried out the appraisals, and that each project officer in a team should have at least one appraisal checked. Members believe that those actions will provide greater reassurance that public money is being well spent.

The Committee also investigated the Department's assurances to the Public Accounts Committee that it was seeking to rationalise the rural development programme structures. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had been criticised over duplication of the roles and responsibilities of different programme providers.

On a positive note, the evidence shows that real improvements have been made. For example, the number of delivery groups and partnerships has almost halved — from 33 in the last phase of the programme to 17 in the current phase.

The Committee considered that important, as less money should be spent on administration and more on projects.

Time will tell whether that happens. The roles of the Department and its main agents were also found to be better understood by customers and by agents. Those are improvements on the last programmes. The Committee decided, however, that there was still room for improvement. It made six further recommendations, including the need for greater clarity on farm diversification opportunities and on the terminology used by the Department.

I have given only a flavour of the Committee's report, as much effort went into its production. I commend it to the Assembly as an example of good scrutiny. I am sure that Committee members will want to add their own thoughts. The Committee will also be interested to hear the Minister's views, although, to be fair, she has had little time to consider the report. The Committee has asked for a full written response in due course.

The Committee believes that the report is fair and balanced; it gives credit where credit is due but is rightly critical where it finds weaknesses. I trust that the Assembly will support the motion.

Mr Bradley: I support the motion. I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for his presentation; he covered much and has left the rest of us with little to say.

The Committee engaged in long, healthy debate in developing the report. It is fair to pay tribute to all those who gave evidence, because they supported the thinking of the farming community and associated bodies. They are all due recognition.

The greatest problem in the rural development programme has been present from the outset — the difficulty of persuading the farming community to recognise the need for change. Maximum effort is required by everyone who supports the programme to ensure that the farming community is fully aware that change is needed. I trust that the Department will endeavour to get that message across. A survey in rural communities would find that many farmers still do not recognise the need for change; however, the rural community cannot survive without participation in farming.

The red tape associated with accessing funding for projects is often prohibitive; it discourages farmers from applying. They find it hard to understand why the pound cannot reach their pocket without going through a complicated process. That must be addressed, even now, to make it easier for farmers who present a genuine case for funding.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Committee is grateful to all who helped in compiling the report. I give particular thanks to the Clerk of the Committee and his staff, whose expertise greatly assisted us. The Committee also thanks the Assembly for scrutinising its work; that has created an in-depth report, and one that has considerable weight of expertise.

The report has 32 recommendations, many of which follow on from the work of the Audit Office when it drew up its report. Its work was backed up by the Public Accounts Committee. Their contributions are most welcome. However, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has examined those areas and has discovered some gaps, which it draws to the attention of the House.

I hope that the Department, when it is competent to do so, can address those matters and close many of the gaps, rectifying them for the benefit of the farming community and those who are associated with the rural development programme.

The House should be aware of the Minister's statement on the importance of the rural development programme so that it can put the issue into context. The importance of rural development is highlighted in the Department's current business strategy, which states:

"At the last census, just under 688,000 people (i.e. 43.6% of the population) lived in the rural areas of Northern Ireland. Rural communities are very important to the overall economy and society of Northern Ireland, and it is important that their development is supported.

The Northern Ireland Executive Committee's Programme for Government recognises the importance of rural society and that the rural economy has been neglected in the past. The Programme for Government contains commitments to regenerate rural areas, particularly the most disadvantaged, and sustain rural life and the countryside for the future."

That extract highlights the importance of rural development in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's strategy. We must measure the importance that the Department, in those words, attributed to rural development against the resources that it allocated to fulfil its objectives. At the back of the same strategy document, the Department outlines exactly how much of its budget it allocated for rural development: £9 million, or 3% of its budget.

The allocation of only 3% of the Department's budget for rural development shows how few resources it has to apply to the needs of 688,000 people. We must put that in context. Considerably more than £9 million will be required to address the needs of 43% of Northern Ireland's population. That problem was identified in the past, it is identified in the Committee's report, and I hope that the Department recognises it.

The Department must cut its own cloth and decide how it wishes to allocate its budget. However, many are sceptical when, having heard about the Department's commitment to rural development, they see how little money it allocates to fund the rural development programme. I am sure that the Department will wish to comment on those issues.

We must recognise not only that the resources to fund the rural development programme have been woefully inadequate, but that the Department, if it wishes to address the problems that the Committee identified,

must choose to apply more resources for that purpose. Administration and salaries account for over 30% of the Department's entire budget; rural development accounts for 3%. The Department will want to make its own judgement on how it allocates its resources. Many people involved in rural development are fairly sceptical about the extent of the commitment to the programme and want more resources to be applied to make it work better for the community.

Last Friday, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development discussed rural development with departmental officials. One official said that all departmental services should be seen in the context of broad support to the farming and rural community. In other words, one can marginalise the figure and say that only £9 million was spent on rural development, or that all the programmes funded by the budget are designed to assist the rural community.

I want the Minister to confirm that European Union subsidies do not constitute rural development.

5.15 pm

The farming community's rights to subsidy under EU legislation must not be confused with the issue of how the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development allocates its money to the rural development community. No other Department would do that. Rural development must be measured by what it does for farmers over and above their existing entitlement. It must be seen to make a significant difference beyond the existing rights of the rural and farming communities.

Many in the farming community are sceptical about the value of the rural development programme. That scepticism is identified in this report. However, that does not prevent those people from taking up these programmes, and it is good that they have done so. The Minister was very helpful in a reply to me, dated 13 May 2002, which indicated the level of uptake. Indeed, it is important to put this on the record of the House. In that letter the Minister stated:

"To date, 87% of the applications under the 'for profit' element of the BSP Programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives."

However, she continued:

"Only 5% of the applications under the 'not for profit' element of that Programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives. Likewise, 5% of applications under the Peace II Programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives.

Individual farmers may bring forward projects under the LEADER+ Programme. It is expected that LEADER+ Action Groups will be in a position to call for project applications around August/September 2002."

It is, therefore, incumbent on the Department to recognise that 87% of farmers, farmers' groups and collectives made applications under the programme's "for profit" element. We would like to see that figure increasing. In the "not for profit" area we want to ensure

that those resources also go to assisting the farming community. I am sure that the Minister is as disappointed as I am that only 5% of applications under the Peace II programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives. I am sure that the Minister will draw her Department's attention to those issues and address them.

The Department must do more to convince the farming community that the rural development programme is more than just "nice-speak" or Government gobbledegook. It must be seen as a solid programme for adding value to the work of the farming community and quality to the lives of those who live in the farming and rural communities.

I turn to some of the other points in the report that I hope the Minister can address — although not necessarily today, given the fairly detailed nature of the report. The Committee and I certainly look forward to seeing the Minister's detailed response to the report.

Committee members wanted the report primarily to focus the minds of those in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on ensuring that the programme is targeted at the people who need it most. Both the Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee identified that. They looked to both the Department and the Rural Development Council to

"ensure, as far as possible, that under-represented groups such as the farming community, women, young persons and the long-term unemployed fully participate in the programme in future".

The report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development went on to say, in relation to the programme, that members

"were particularly concerned that farmers and their families should benefit from its schemes."

It is essential that "the backbone of the rural community" does benefit. That phrase is often used, but it should not be used glibly, because without the farming community there is no backbone in the rural community. Farmers make the rural community what it is, and they must benefit from the schemes.

The Committee is realistic about what rural development can achieve. Indeed, the report goes on to say that

"those involved in farming must have their needs addressed in the same way as other rural groups. That is not to say that rural development could ever provide a cure for the current ills of farming. It cannot. However, the Committee believed that the case of farmers was deserving of special attention."

The Committee recognises that what we have is not a panacea; however, it does provide an opportunity to assist the backbone of the rural community. The Committee has addressed the ways in which that could be done. Deserving groups in the farming community should be targeted to ensure that they receive funding. Dedicated form-filling assistance must be provided to farmers. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should lobby the Department of Finance and Personnel

to simplify the process, particularly where small amounts of funding are involved. If we could overcome the cumbersome, complicated and off-putting form-filling processes of the past, it would be of great benefit to the farming community.

The Deputy Chairperson referred to eligibility. Those who are eligible must know that they can claim funding. A sickening aspect of today's society, in claiming both social benefits and funding for rural development programmes, is that, although many people are entitled to claim benefits, a large proportion do not because they either do not realise that they can or they are put off by the process. The Department must ensure that people are aware of their right to claim. Of course, it is up to individuals to submit claim forms. I hope that the Minister will address those issues when she has considered the report fully.

The Committee considered the rationalisation of the programme structures. Rural planning is a pet subject of mine, and the Committee felt that the interdepartmental committee could play a role in dealing with cases in which legitimate regeneration objectives are hindered by the strict application of planning policy. That issue involves the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment. The Minister must address those issues and ensure that the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's excellent report is used effectively and expeditiously.

I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: The report's recommendations are thorough, and it is to be hoped that good will come of them. In formulating the report with the Committee, I considered some of the many other reports. I hope that they will help the Minister to effect sustainability in the rural communities by creating additional jobs. Although the administrative offices are kept busy catering for those who work in the industry now, the future of the rural communities cannot rely on them. If that is the only result to come from the rural development programme, it is not worth implementing it. That is why the Committee stresses the need to focus on the participation and, as the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association points out, the role of farming organisations and farmers in rural development. To some extent, placing most of the emphasis on rural development has blurred that.

Due to modulation and the adoption of EU policies, farming is in decline because it is pitched against rural development to attract funding. Much EU money is allocated as subsidies. That is our current position with Europe. If farming declines to the point where we will have to work with countries such as the United States, which will support its own farmers when it suits it, and we have to deal with unfair prices, I am unsure whether we will have an industry in the future. We must look at

globalisation, which was driven by Margaret Beckett and others to drive prices down. Will we have a rural community with all that? That is my main worry. If we cannot sustain the rural community in its present state, I fear for how it will look in 20 or 30 years' time.

Many aspects of rural preservation depend on current farming practices. One only has to look at the Sperrins or similar areas that are kept in prime condition purely because they have livestock. If it becomes no longer profitable for farmers to keep livestock, the countryside will come apart and people in cities and towns may not want to visit it. I commend all the work that the vision group is trying to do for the future, but I also commend the work of the Rural Development Council, the rural community network and others who are trying to examine those programmes and listen to what we are saying about the future.

This programme contains much of what was discussed in the past, and we must ask what lessons of the programmes from 1991 to today will be learnt and acted upon. I am sure that many lessons on monitoring, evaluation, appraisals and so forth will be learnt, considering what has happened locally. Lessons will have been learnt about money and value for money. However, that can make it more difficult for people to find the programmes useful. The amount of paperwork and form filling involved discourages many farmers and people whom we tried to target, such as the most deprived or those who are most unable to access the funding and devise projects that will be useful for their areas. There will be no results unless we can do that.

People may ask how many farmers can avail themselves of the rural programme and how many young people can do off-farm work? A White Paper could facilitate the necessary research. How many people are currently full-time farmers? How many are part-time? How many could access any of those programmes? Do we know that? Are we merely gazing at crystal balls? Unless we know all that, we will have difficulty knowing whom to target and whom to help with mentoring, to whom the Department should give hands-on support and to whom we should give the resources.

CAB International carries out farm audits, and perhaps that should be extended because there are many farms that, even if they could diversify or move into micro-businesses or whatever, could not afford the energy or the time to do so because that would undermine their ability to pay banks and so on. People face huge difficulties when trying to take part in the programmes. In two years' time we could be talking about how little effect those programmes had had. I am unsure about the amount of work that has been done on those areas. The capacity-building programme that supports developing the coaching of communities is of prime importance, and I know from talking to people that many feel that the results of some of the last programmes were not good. I

refer to area-based strategy action groups (ABSAGS) and other programmes that were meant to help people in rural areas for whatever reason. If they did not receive funding, they will say that the programme was not good for them and that they will not get involved this time.

We must avoid that situation.

5.30 pm

The Committee's many recommendations on what must be done are accurate; however, without increased resources, many of them will not be implemented. In addition, many of the vision report's recommendations for sustaining rural communities will not be implemented unless resources are provided, and I am not sure that that will happen.

How much more farmers' money will be diverted through modulation? People may find reasons for diverting money away from farming. Ian Paisley Jnr asked about the £9 million that the Department allocated for the rural development programme. In addition, farmers worry about how much more money will be taken from them to fund what could turn out to be an administrative exercise, rather than a programme that can deliver what is needed. That is an important matter.

People have not always been able to make the best of the North/South aspect of the rural development programme. Perhaps even those on the Southern side of the border tend to be more interested in looking after their own positions than co-operating so that both sides can access the programmes. We should put more emphasis on that.

I have spoken many times about the lack of hands-on support for small businesses, which need a mentor similar to LEDU. If we are to start small businesses, we cannot simply ask people to complete a form and leave them to get on with it. We must support them throughout the process.

The Committee wants the Minister to listen to what it said in the report. There is no point in detailing all the recommendations. We dealt with issues such as women's involvement in agriculture. The Minister visited Fermanagh to see what could be considered to be a pilot programme for women in agriculture. It may be a conduit to deliver some of the programme, as women are often more open to new ideas than men. They can see matters differently to farmers, who do not have time to consider new ideas. That programme should be made mainstream, rather than simply added to other women's initiatives. It has a great deal to offer and may help to deliver some of the recommendations. I mention it as a possible approach to the delivery of the programme.

The Ulster Farmers' Union has made many points about farming families and the past exclusion of farmers from many programmes. That has left farmers with a bitter taste and has affected how they consider the concept

of rural development. Therefore, there is a job to be done in educating people. Cross-departmental work on health is needed. Rural action zones, such as the one in Dungannon, are required to look after the health of farmers.

Much can be achieved by working together, rather than establishing many separate programmes and co-ordinating groups that work to their own agendas, often to the detriment of the overall programme. We do not want that to be the outcome of this or any other programme.

Mr Armstrong: I have pleasure in endorsing the report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its inquiry into the preparation for the next phase of the rural development programme 2001-06. The programme is valuable in providing financial assistance and promoting rural development through the strategies established by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, will it regenerate agriculture, or will it merely create circumstances in which people will be happy simply to have tried even if people in the agriculture industry do not participate in the rural development programme? Therefore the Committee felt that it was of the utmost importance that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development encourages full participation in the new strategy by under-represented groups — particularly the farming community — and guides and supports them in planning and completing every application. One group that had no input was young people in rural areas who intended to go into agriculture, and the main reason for this was that they were not there.

The Committee also wanted to ensure that the Department was thorough in delivering its strategy and financial efficiency. The main criticism of the rural development programme was the lack of expertise of those delivering the project. They should provide farmers with clear, easy, readable documentation and unambiguous help in completing applications. They should also ensure that the application process is straightforward. A project such as this could help farming families throughout Northern Ireland. However, the Committee found that the farmers were required to form groups to avail of this funding, and they would have neither the time nor the expertise to prepare themselves for such applications. The long, complicated applications deterred completion. In fact, the Committee found that there were different funding rights available for farm diversification.

The Committee was concerned that projects might lead to uncertainty for prospective applications. It is often difficult to gain access to funding, and that is the case with the rural development fund. Proper assistance for groups would have helped them to apply for such funding. This would help the groups that deserve the money most to access resources. Guidance by departmental staff on form completion must be improved, and the Committee recommends the use of experts to

provide necessary assistance in rural areas to ensure that dedicated support is available.

The Committee welcomes the programme, as we welcomed the countryside management scheme and good farming practice. However, farmers in Northern Ireland need a decent income. The rural development scheme is welcome in theory, but it must provide practical support for farmers. It provides support for people in rural areas, but not for farmers. The Department could assist in the application process by simplifying the form.

I also endorse some of the concerns of the Public Accounts Committee, such as the lack of appropriate training for staff and poor standards of business plans prepared by consultants for major projects. It is fair to say that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has made positive moves in addressing some of these problems, but there must be continued improvement. Farmers want to know what the Department is doing to evaluate the rural development programme; they want the Department to acknowledge others' suggestions on how to improve it.

I also want to make a few points on rationalising programme structures. Close relationships should be developed with every local delivery organisation. The agriculture industry must be given every assistance, and this would be helped by rural co-ordinators working in all areas. Meeting producer and consumer would lead to a more efficient and quantitative agriculture sector.

The application process must be made as straightforward as possible so that money will be used efficiently to strengthen agriculture. I commend the staff of the Agriculture Committee on their forbearance with the Committee over the past few months. It is important to urge the Department to renew its programme and to accept the criticisms of the Agriculture Committee. The Agriculture Committee does have a vision for the future.

Mr Dallat: The proper appraisal of rural development projects and the Public Accounts Committee, which I shall speak about later, have been referred to on several occasions. It is important to remember that following the publication of the Public Accounts Committee's report, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development accepted its recommendations in their entirety. That should be welcomed.

In future, we can expect community groups to carry out the work without the difficulties that many of them experienced in the past when managing projects that had not been fully appraised for their viability. All too often, consultants offered poor advice to community groups and did not stay around to address the failures. It is my understanding that, in future, where they are deemed necessary, consultants will be selected solely through the Government Procurement Agency. The selection of poor-quality consultants is not exclusive to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development got poor value for money when appointing a consultant. In that respect, we must share the disappointment.

Some projects represented poor value for money and did not contribute greatly to rural regeneration. However, much has been learnt from the mistakes and inexperience of the past. An operating manual now exists, and there is appropriate appraisal training for staff. Business plans of a poor standard that were prepared by consultants will no longer be tolerated. Indeed, they have not been tolerated for a considerable time. The Committee welcomes those developments, as it outlines in the report.

The Rural Development Council will play a vital role in ensuring that socially excluded groups play their full part in the implementation of the new programmes, and the rural community network is also fully involved.

My main concern is that resources will not be adequate to address the various inequalities that exist in rural communities. In the past few years, the viability of many farmers has been in crisis, and special measures are needed to ensure that their futures as valuable members of the rural community are addressed. Young people find themselves in a difficult position, with income from farming too low to provide them with an acceptable standard of living. Training programmes must address their needs. Planning departments must be more flexible when considering planning applications for rural industries, which many young farmers have now turned to as a substitute for the agriculture industry.

The Rural Development Council must represent the many families on low incomes, as well as victims, ex-prisoners, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. As a member of that body, I am glad that they subscribe to the motto "not for profit-taking".

In future, farmers will have to consider collective action. In that respect, I am delighted that the principle of co-operatives is once again a focus of attention in rural communities. I am also pleased that the Minister has promised to encourage the development of co-operatives, and I accept fully her insistence that people in the community must accept responsibility for the establishment, development and running of rural co-operatives. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future, the Department has an important advisory role to play and will be called on for seeding grants and expert advice.

Members will recall that there are four target groups: the farming community; women; young people; and the long-term unemployed. The Minister has identified the special role that women have played in agriculture in the past. Research is now being carried out by her Department to ensure that women will be afforded equality and will not be taken for granted, as a handy form of cheap labour or, dare I say, slave labour. That is of fundamental importance, and I simply want to put on record my acknowledgement of the Minister's determination to

address the problem. As she is a woman, would we not expect her to?

Partnerships are a feature of life today. They have a vital role to play in agriculture and rural development. The LEADER+ programme has much to contribute to the development of successful partnerships, which will add value to the rural community in a variety of ways. The monitoring of those partnerships over the next few years will be critical, and that cannot be overemphasised.

5.45 pm

I want to return to the role of the Public Accounts Committee, and I must issue a word of caution. Although the Committee will scrutinise the accounts and check that business plans, policies, aims and objectives are not ignored, it will not become a handy excuse for inaction. It would be very unfortunate if the dreaded Public Accounts Committee became a firewall between the public and the Department and its agencies. There was too much talk about that this afternoon.

Rural development projects are high risk; otherwise they would be seized upon by the private sector. The regeneration of our rural communities is worth the risk, provided that that risk is within the parameters laid down by good governance. I would not want to see the Public Accounts Committee going beyond that.

I want to place on record my appreciation for the hard work performed by officials in the Rural Development Division of the Department, and we can rely on them for their continued support. Their contribution to the whole peace process and the regeneration of towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland is far too often underestimated.

Mr Shannon: I support the recommendations in the report. I will not go over the issues that Members have already mentioned, and I will keep my comments short and to the point.

There is a need for a rural development programme. With that in mind, and with the comments that have been put forward on the four target groups, I recognise that the farming community needs special help. That is what this programme is about. We want to ensure that the detrimental effect on the farming community over the last few years — BSE, foot-and-mouth disease and the introduction of large supermarkets — can be addressed, and give the farmers opportunities and options that they have not had.

I want to highlight the issue of women in the community. It is not just a matter of saying that behind every male farmer there is a woman. In many cases, the woman does as much work as the man. Not only is she rearing the family and looking after the household, she is also doing farm work.

Young people are drifting away from farms and the countryside into the towns. That is a concern for those

who live in the rural community, and it must be addressed. That is one of the target areas for this programme, and we welcome that.

There are more long-term unemployed than ever in the rural community. I hope that those who have little prospect for the future can find something there.

Recommendation 12 refers to active monitoring, and that will address those four issues. The Committee has concerns about the take-up and the slow response by farmers' groups. It requests that sufficient resources be made available to the Rural Enterprise Division, which is farmer-oriented. Who understands the needs better than those who are involved at the coalface, so to speak, and understands what the farmer needs? If those resources could be made available, it would be a way forward.

Recommendation 6 refers to hold-ups and shortcomings in the system. We must make it more accountable and easier to understand.

I and other Members believe that clarification is needed to differentiate between the farm-based rural development plan and the wider rural-community-based rural development programme to ensure that what is available in each is clear for those who are looking for assistance today. That must be highlighted.

My last point refers to the previous reports that have been introduced to the Assembly and other Committees. There is a need, and in the past it has been identified as the needs of the rural community.

The Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee identified those needs; however, we have waited for those Committees to table recommendations for implementation, and for some reason they have been delayed. We now have the recommendations of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and it is to be hoped that the Minister will be able to respond and affirm that the recommendations will be implemented quickly.

We agree on the thrust of the report's proposals. They are focused on helping the most needy in the rural community, and that is what we are trying to achieve. I commend the report.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I welcome the report on the rural development programme and thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Savage, for his recognition of the work already done to implement the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee. Appraisal is essential to ensure that we continue to refine and better focus the Department's rural development programme. I welcome Mr Dallat's recognition of the risks that have to be taken in rural development work.

The rural development programme provides a valuable review of our progress on several important issues. I shall give careful consideration to all its recommend-

ations. The rural development programme is co-financed by the EU structural funds, and so, in developing and implementing the programme, we have had to work closely with the European Commission, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Special EU Programmes Body. None of us had anticipated the amount of work that would be involved in negotiating the programme with the Commission, or putting in place the arrangements for implementation.

Although considerable progress has been made on all fronts, we have not advanced as far as we hoped. Nevertheless, the report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development shows that all the key issues on which we were focused have been, or are being, addressed.

I wish to thank the members of the Committee for the time and effort that they have devoted to the exercise, and for the constructive recommendations that they have made. I also thank those Members who contributed to today's debate for their interest in the rural development programme. Many of the report's recommendations have already been taken into account, or are currently being dealt with. I shall give my initial comments on each of the recommendations and deal as far as possible with additional points that have been raised in today's debate.

I agree with Mr Bradley's comments on the changes that face the farming community. At every opportunity, I shall seek to highlight to the farming community those changes that are beyond our control and make them aware of the need to meet the challenge of those changes. There are opportunities for farmers in the rural development programme, and I encourage farmers and farmers' groups to avail of those. I know that many Members, Mr Bradley included, do their best to help farmers and encourage them to take up opportunities.

Several Members referred to the full participation of under-represented groups. The Public Accounts Committee's report on the rural development programme drew attention to the fact that not all groups in the rural community participated in the 1994-99 rural development programme. Women, youths, farmers and the long-term unemployed were highlighted in the report.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has recognised the efforts I have made to alert all sections of the rural community to the opportunities offered by the programme for 2001-06. The Committee has recommended that the Department and the Rural Development Council maintain that effort. It is intended that promotion of the programme will continue and that progress will be regularly reviewed.

Promotional material will be updated when it is appropriate to do so. The Committee has recommended that the Department introduce early development services for farmers' groups to help them to secure grants through the programme. The matter requires careful consideration.

Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned the relatively small uptake by farmers. He is correct in saying that rural development programme money does not come from agricultural subsidy. It is up to each applicant to decide what measure to apply for, and farmer collectives are applying mostly under the “for profit” measure. That does not surprise me.

The Department is in discussion with the Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU) about how best to help farmers and their families take advantage of the opportunities offered by the range of programmes and measures available. I will await the conclusion of those deliberations before deciding what assistance is appropriate. I have had public meetings with farmers in some areas, and I am aware of the problem.

I accept the Committee’s recommendation that there should be a series of calls for projects from the profit-taking sector and that funds should be ring-fenced for each call. I am keen to give the profit-taking sector in rural areas as much opportunity as possible to develop worthwhile projects that will be eligible for funding under the programme.

I note that the Committee has welcomed the considerable effort that has gone into producing explanatory material for the programme. The Department will continue to review the need for further interpretative material.

The Committee has recommended that the Department put in place form-completion assistance for farmers. I have already explained that the Department, in conjunction with the UFU, is considering how best to help farmers to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the range of measures available. However, I am not yet convinced that there is a significant problem with completing the application forms, but I accept that they are long.

The real problem may be the lack of ideas that can be transformed into projects that will be eligible for funding under the rural development programme. If completing the form were a significant problem, I would expect it not to be confined only to farmers. Therefore if such a scheme were considered necessary, it would have to be open to the whole rural community. Farmers and other applicants can get advice on completing the application form from the rural development co-ordinators and the Rural Development Council.

I welcome Mr Dallat’s comments with regard to the Rural Development Division staff, because I see, at first hand, the results of the work of rural community groups assisted by the Rural Development Division staff as I travel throughout Northern Ireland. I agree that the impact of the programme is often understated, and I am happy to endorse his comments about the work of the rural development staff. Farmers and other applicants can get advice from the rural area co-ordinators.

I am happy to bring to the attention of my Colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Committee’s recommendation that there should be a simpler application form for small grants. The Department is adopting a top-down and bottom-up approach in the programme. The Department has already commissioned a study into the needs of rural women. The rural development division, as part of a consortium, is discussing with Youth Action how the needs of the rural youth sector could be addressed. The Rural Development Council has been asked to consider how the participation of the long-term unemployed might be encouraged.

I hope that Members will recognise that what I have said in a few words represents a considerable amount of work. The study on the needs of rural women will be presented to the interdepartmental steering group on rural development so that other Departments can consider what, if any, of the identified needs they may address.

Gender balance is not a problem only for the rural development programme, as can be seen from the membership of the Assembly and from some of the departmental Committees. It is a much wider problem. I am committed to encouraging women to participate fully at all levels in the rural development programme. My Department will encourage natural resource rural tourism partnerships and LEADER groups to be proactive in that respect.

6.00 pm

I have visited and had discussions with Fermanagh’s Women in Agriculture, Mourne Ladies in Agriculture, and Omagh’s Women in Agriculture. Mr McHugh said that women are more open and more adaptable, and I also find that. That is why I want to encourage women to be more proactive in accessing and having their capacity built to bring forward new ideas and to think outside the box. Women are particularly good at that, and I am sure that Madam Deputy Speaker agrees with me.

The gender balance of these groups will be monitored, as the Committee recommends. I intend to monitor the participation of women, youths, farm families, and, as far as possible, the long-term unemployed across all the elements of the rural development programme. Although I am committed to encouraging the participation of these groups, I am not convinced that they should be given preferential treatment in project selection. At this stage, individual projects should be selected on the basis of the quality of the proposal.

We will occasionally review the participation of under-represented groups based on monitoring information, and a judgement can be made at the time of the review as to whether any further action is appropriate. I assure the Assembly that every effort is being made to get the monitoring systems fully operational.

In section 3 of the report, 'Full and proper appraisal of all projects', the Department will give guidance to natural resource rural tourism (NRRT) partnerships and LEADER groups on the economic appraisal process and will also check compliance. The Department will keep its procedure manuals under review and will update them to take account of advice from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The Rural Development Division procedures for the Northern Ireland building sustainable prosperity programme have already been scrutinised by the Department's Internal Audit Division, and a forthcoming audit will check compliance with procedures. The operating rules for the NRRT and LEADER programmes form part of the contract with the respective groups. The groups will receive the operating rules at the same time that they receive their contracts to administer the programme.

I do not anticipate the rural community network having to use consultants to prepare economic appraisals under the rural development programme. Therefore, the question of managing such consultants should not arise. The Department appoints consultants in accordance with guidance from the Government Purchasing Agency (GPA). It reviews the performance of the consultants after each assignment, and the outcome of this review is held on the GPA's central database. The Department's economists would bring any shortcomings in a consultant's economic appraisal to its attention. These arrangements meet the objectives of the Committee's recommendations. The recommendation that the Department should increase the checks by economists on pro forma economic appraisals has resource implications, and I will have to consider it further. The Department will review its policy on economic appraisal training after economists have considered the first tranche of project appraisals.

In regard to recommendations 21 and 22, I agree that the selection of project appraisals for scrutiny by economists should be independent from the rural area co-ordinators and Department agents undertaking the appraisals. The Department will consider how this can be best achieved.

I accept the recommendation that the Rural Development Council should amend its procedures to incorporate assessment of marketing and management needs in the appraisal pro forma. The Department will instruct the council to adopt the same pro forma as used by the Department.

I want to address section 4, 'Rationalisation of programme structures'. It is one of the key roles of rural area co-ordinators to keep close links with local delivery bodies. LEADER and NRRT partnerships are also encouraged to develop such links. Rural area co-ordinators are prepared to engage with and assist those in the profit-taking sector who need advice on the rural

development programme and how to apply for a grant. However, it must be remembered that the grant scheme is competitive, and co-ordinators cannot give one applicant an advantage over others who also seek help. Within the parameters they will assist as best they can.

The Department has sought to maximise the amount of funds available for rural communities, including farmers, and to that end it has drawn on all the EU schemes available. Had the Department restricted its efforts to one scheme for each sector, it would undoubtedly have limited the available funds. I agree that it would be ideal to have one scheme only for each sector, but Members will agree that it is important to access as much EU funding as possible, and that means meeting the separate financial and organisational requirements of each programme or initiative.

Mr McHugh mentioned the rural health action zones, and I have given my full support and finance to that work, but the rural development programme is small and cannot cover everything.

I accept that the rural development plan, which is farm focused, and the rural development programme, which is aimed at the broader rural community, have the same acronym of RDP, and that causes confusion. The rural development programme has been in place for about 10 years and is unique to Northern Ireland in its work to engage rural communities in regenerative action. The rural development plan was one of four UK farm-focused plans that were put in place under the 2001-06 structural funds. I will consider the Committee's recommendation on that further.

I intend to provide regular public information on funding allocations to successful applicants and on expenditure on and uptake of the various schemes. I accept the recommendation that, where rural development regeneration projects appear to be at odds with planning regulations, matters should be discussed through the interdepartmental steering committee mechanism.

I welcome the Committee's recognition of the importance of the rural development programme for ensuring appropriate numbers of properly trained staff. I do not need to remind the House of the pressures on departmental running costs. At this stage I await the outcome of the staff review. However, I encourage modernisation in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and there is a real challenge for the Department, in conjunction with agrirural interests, to best forge and deliver rural development measures that address the needs of the rural communities and the demands of wider society. Last week at the Balmoral Show, I announced that I intend to create a stakeholder forum to consider the strategic issues that must be addressed.

I accept the Committee's recommendation on early agreement of the Rural Development Council's annual budgets. However, I must point out that there is much

debate between my officials and those in the council on the details, which can sometimes cause unavoidable delay.

There is much to consider on rural development funding beyond 2006, such as the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy (CAP), the post-Objective-1-status situation, the amount of EU support that will be available after 2006-07, the pressures from accession countries and the various fields of agriculture and non-agriculture development action.

I would like to deal with some of the issues that were raised in the debate. Mr McHugh's comments on the future of the agrifood industry, the rural economy in general, the vision report and the work of the rural development programme were welcome. He has often heard me speak about the need to manage the coming changes that are outside our influence, such as the reform of CAP and globalisation. Undoubtedly, the rural development programme has a role to play in helping to sustain rural communities and their way of life, which is worth protecting.

Mr McHugh also referred to modulation money, which is not used for the rural development programme. The rural development programme aims to encourage innovative thinking to complement traditional agriculture, not to replace it.

The rural development programme is aimed at the whole rural community, including farming families. Modulation money is returned to the farming community through programmes such as organic farming, agrienvironment schemes, and so forth.

As regards North/South co-operation, the INTERREG III programme will comprise a specific rural development measure that will be delivered through the cross-border steering committee, which operates under the North/South Ministerial Council. I remind Mr Armstrong that it is to be hoped that individual farmers will be able to apply to local LEADER+ action groups in early autumn. Farmers and their families will need to have innovative projects on which to base their application. I encourage them to think along those lines — outside the traditional box of farming — in order to access the funds.

I am encouraged by the call from Mr Dallat and others for additional resources to deliver the rural development programme. As the Committee is aware, resources are very tight, but I will consider carefully the comments on the matter. I welcome Mr Dallat's recognition of the risks inherent in rural development.

The matter will continue to be considered in the coming years. Although changes to farming, farm families, rural communities and the Department are inevitable, I assure the Committee and Members that my Department and I will continue to strive for the best possible rural development deal for Northern Ireland.

The Assembly and, in particular, the Committee agree that Northern Ireland's rural communities are an important part of its social fabric. It is extremely important that those communities remain viable and that locals can remain there and have a prosperous economic future. They should not — as was mentioned by a UUP Member — be forced to move into towns to take up jobs outside the community in which they have lived, and where they feel comfortable.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister, who gave up her time this afternoon, and Members, for their contribution to the debate. They showed that rural issues are close to our hearts.

The Committee embarked on its inquiry when the Department was preparing for the next phase of its rural development programme. Circumstances led to a delay in the completion of the inquiry, so Members were able to take into account the programme's launch and the implementation of its first schemes. The delay made the inquiry all the more relevant, enabling it to take into account the Committee's aims in respect of scrutiny, and the report of the Public Accounts Committee. The Committee's recommendations will improve the delivery of the programme over the next four or five years.

During the inquiry, the Committee also considered the resources available to the Department and its agents for the duration of the programme. It found that the Department's Rural Development Division increased its staff by almost 50% in order to deliver the new phase of the programme. Members expect that to translate into an improved service for customers. The amounts to be spent over the programme period are still small. However, according to the service delivery agreement for 2002-03, for example, rural development accounts for less than 7% of the Department's expenditure limit. Therein lies the opportunity for the Minister.

The Committee suggests that that allocation amounts to small potatoes in the overall scheme of things. Such levels of provision may need to change in the context of the CAP review, which is likely to result in a further shift towards rural development and away from the provision of traditional support for agricultural production.

The Committee has, therefore, recommended that the Department should consider internal rationalisation to improve co-ordination in policy areas where objectives may be linked to improve understanding of what rural development means and to raise the profile of rural development in the Department.

6.15 pm

The Committee heard concerns regarding the continuation of support for rural regeneration programmes after 2006, when it is expected that European funding may be lost or, at best, severely curtailed. The Committee concluded that the current phase of the rural

development programme will in no way address all the needs of rural areas. There will still be much work to be done after 2006.

The Committee has, therefore, recommended that the Department begin contingency planning, sooner rather than later, for a rural support programme to be delivered from national funding. That will require a case to be made to the Assembly. It will not be an easy case to make in the face of other pressures such as education, transport and health. The Department must address future funding concerns long before 2006. I give the Minister and the Department one bit of advice: keep it simple, plain and easily understood. Those three ingredients will go a long way towards getting everything going.

The Committee has carried out a thorough inquiry and has offered a report worthy of the Assembly's endorsement. The Minister made many comments. The Committee is concerned that no help was offered to farmers — a specific target group — to fill in forms.

Some schemes need careful consideration. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

We must look forward. There is no use looking over our shoulders at the past. The person who never made a mistake never did anything. I hope that, in the days that lie ahead, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development will progress with such zeal and understanding that people will regard it as a Committee that has really done something for the community. I thank the Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its inquiry into 'Preparation for the next Phase of the Rural Development Programme 2001-2006' (2/01/R), and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to implement those recommendations relevant to her Department.

Adjourned at 6.19 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 21 May 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the review of opportunities for public-private partnerships in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The Executive are today launching a consultation exercise, "Financing Our Future", based on the report of the working group on opportunities for public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Northern Ireland, which is published today. This represents a major opportunity to accelerate investment in our essential infrastructure and, hence, to meet some of the most pressing needs and opportunities for our public services. It is a very clear demonstration of the difference that we can make by taking responsibility for our own affairs and joining together through the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement. Without the joint efforts of the Executive in facing up to the issues on financing our future, we would face the continuing erosion of our infrastructure. We now have a major opportunity to make a difference.

The reinvestment and reform initiative launched on 2 May provides a new context for this consultation. As I shall explain more fully, we now have the opportunity to consider how best to address the infrastructure deficit with a variety of means at our disposal.

The key issue in this consultation is that we need to consider carefully what forms of finance we can and should use and what place PPPs should have in our strategy to address the deficit.

As stated in our Programme for Government, a central aim of the Executive is to secure the basis for a balanced, competitive, innovative and sustainable economy through renewed infrastructure and innovative policies. It is widely recognised that our public infrastructure has steadily deteriorated, and that has become more apparent in recent years. For decades, investment in public

service infrastructure has fallen well short of meeting the needs of our community.

Good infrastructure is fundamental to the economy. Transport links, in particular, are essential to our trade and communications with the rest of the world. There are also major deficiencies in the provision of basic public services. We need to invest in hospitals, schools and colleges if we are to fulfil our fundamental responsibilities to the public. Most basically, there are major costs in providing water and sewerage services that cannot be neglected any longer. The level of resources that is routinely available to us would not be sufficient to achieve the necessary outcome. In particular, dependence alone on routine public expenditure to fund infrastructure would make it much less likely that we could secure either the range or the quality of public services that the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

The urgency of the need for a major infrastructure programme led the Executive to take three major steps. We knew that, faced with a probable investment deficit in public services infrastructure of around £6 billion over the next 10 years, it was essential to explore vigorously all the options for bridging the gap.

The Executive seek to secure the best possible outcome from the current spending review, and the detailed work on the needs and effectiveness of our programmes is central to that task. Committees will have an opportunity to contribute to the needs and effectiveness evaluation that impacts most directly on their corresponding Departments.

The First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and I pressed the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to agree an innovative approach to address the infrastructure problem. That led to the reinvestment and reform initiative, in which we secured access to new means, through the agreed borrowing power, and to the short-term package that will enable us to improve infrastructure immediately.

Last spring the Executive launched the working group on public-private partnerships, which is one means of addressing the deficit. However, we needed to assess experience with PPPs here and further afield, and to examine the options and their implications critically and thoughtfully before agreeing an Executive policy. The working group's analysis of those issues is shown in the report.

The Executive thank the working group for producing a detailed and comprehensive report on a complex but important subject. In the main, the findings and recommendations of the review are broadly consistent with the Committee for Finance and Personnel's earlier review, which helpfully informed the deliberations of the working group. The Committee stressed the need for an investment strategy, a central investment board, and value for money. The working group concurred with those recommendations.

There is a clear need for inclusive policy-making, and we considered that it was important to ensure that the PPP working group included representation from the public, private and voluntary sectors and trade unions. The Executive welcome and value the contributions that the representatives of those sectors made to the deliberations of the working group.

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

We are especially pleased that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the trade unions and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) have taken the opportunity to set out in the report clear statements of their positions on the issues that it covers. Given the complexity of the issue, input was necessary from people in the public and private sectors who had expertise in, and experience of, various forms of PPP. We are grateful for the time and thought that many people have given to the project.

Although the report is the product of intensive work over several months, its publication marks the commencement of a wider consultation process. We hope that the report's comprehensive nature will help to ensure that that consultation process is well informed. The Executive are committed to a social partnership approach to this important area of policy development, which should be consolidated. We want to ensure that the social partners, including the representatives of business, trade unions, and the voluntary and community sectors, can make an effective contribution to the forthcoming consultation.

The working group comprised a PPP forum that operated as a steering group for the review, and four focus groups considered specific aspects. Three generic focus groups considered the accommodation, infrastructure and technology sectors. They strategically assessed the scope for PPP in a range of types of projects. A fourth group — policy and organisation — considered a range of wider economic and social policy issues, as well as organisational and structural issues.

The working group's format was such as to ensure that as wide a spectrum of views as possible was drawn on. We are pleased that the report reflects the deliberations of a group with a wide spectrum of local and international perspectives.

The key findings of the report include a helpful analysis of the scale and nature of the investment deficit and its causes, but I shall not dwell on that. We must ask how we can best address that deficit.

The working group developed a definition of PPPs to suit our circumstances, reflecting our unique social, economic and political characteristics. The definition is:

"A Public Private Partnership is generally a medium to long term relationship between the public and private sectors (including the voluntary and community sector), involving the sharing of risks and rewards and the utilisation of multi-sectoral skills, expertise and finance to deliver desired policy outcomes that are in the public interest."

The Executive welcome that definition of the concept. It embraces a wide range of possible forms of PPP, not merely those that have been used here so far. However, it specifically excludes privatisation. It is intended to be wider than the concepts of the private finance initiative (PFI) and to underline that it can include new, untried models as well as those for which there is evidence. It is sufficiently flexible to include approaches such as not-for-profit bodies, which will be considered further. The Executive support the working group's approach, which was that policy development in that area must be done in a way that suits Northern Ireland and reflects its unique social, economic and political characteristics.

The working group also surveyed the experience to date of PPPs in Northern Ireland. The survey involved 24 projects to a total capital value of £167 million. That primarily involved the design, build, finance and operate model of project, otherwise known as DBFO. That is the model that is typically used for private finance initiatives.

10.45 am

Projects have been largely accommodation- or technology-based. However, the group concluded that there are significant possibilities for PPP in the infrastructure sector, with the DBFO model having the greatest potential in that sector. The working group also looked at experience of PPPs throughout the world and cited several relevant examples in the report, showing that there are lessons to be learnt from a wide variety of contexts.

The working group viewed the infrastructure and accommodation sectors as having the greatest possibilities for PPPs, with the DBFO and concession contracts having the highest potential. More generally, the working group reviewed the potential of a variety of PPP forms. Those, such as non-profit distributing bodies, which have attracted considerable interest in certain quarters, have been included and recommended for further consideration.

A further key issue considered by the working group was the crucial distinction between the financing and the funding of public services. The central point is that no model produces free infrastructure: a funding source is always needed. The issue for the consultation is to establish how best to channel public and private sector capital finance into projects to get the best value for the money that has to be paid — by one means or another.

The working group defined the word "funding" as the source of public revenue to pay for a service and "financing" as the mechanism used to raise the capital needed for investment. The main issue in considering various forms of PPPs is that they represent alternative options for financing and delivering public services. The matter of how to fund the services — how to pay for them over the period of the partnership — must also be considered.

It is important to point out that every type of infrastructure financing leads to an ongoing funding requirement. Conventional procurement means that the public sector carries the risks and rewards of ownership and must have capital tied up in asset ownership. The initial capital investment must be found from our capital departmental expenditure limit. In addition, under resource budgeting, there will be charges for depreciation and the opportunity cost of capital for most public sector assets, which will be a call on our resource departmental expenditure limit.

Similarly, the borrowing power that the Executive agreed recently with the Treasury gives us a potential means of financing investment. However, we will be required to fund the repayments from resources that we raise, above existing revenue. On that basis, for the first time, we will be able to finance assets above the departmental expenditure limit, although the cost of the depreciation of assets acquired through borrowing will still be a cost to the departmental expenditure limit.

Some forms of PPP transfer the risks and rewards of ownership to the supplier, and the public sector pays for the use of the facility through a unitary charge. In such cases the capital investment would not be a call on the departmental expenditure limit. It would be outside the public sector borrowing requirement. Furthermore, those cases would not have to be covered by additional local revenues because no public sector borrowing would be required. The key issue would be budgeting for the unitary payments from the departmental expenditure limit.

The working group emphasised that, given the scale of our deficit, funding will have to increase significantly to provide the required level of public services. The group recognised that this would present us, and our constituents, with stark choices. This means looking hard at all the possible sources of ongoing funding for essential infrastructure. Various aspects might be included.

First, there is the better use of our departmental expenditure limit, which we are seeking to maximise in the spending review process. We need a strong and clear policy of pressing for the best outcome from the Treasury and ensuring that what we have is used to best effect — driving out unnecessary costs by improving efficiency and effectiveness.

Secondly, there is access to new borrowing, supported by increased local revenue under a reformed rating system — hence the very important links between this consultation and the review of rating policy, which is ongoing and for which a public consultation will be launched in the near future.

Thirdly, there are user charges — where it is fair and appropriate that costs should fall on those using a particular service. This has been suggested, for example, as a way of funding road improvements as part of the regional transport strategy. Fourthly, there is the matter

of asset disposals — so that we hold only assets that are needed for services to the public. To maximise the financing methods at our disposal, a clear funding strategy must also be determined, and that will be at the heart of our Budget planning for the years ahead.

The working group emphasised that PPPs are not the panacea to our financing and funding problems but that through them there is potential to improve efficiency, to provide value for money in service delivery and to deliver services sooner than would otherwise be possible. It is important to note that PPPs offer one route under which earlier delivery can be achieved without necessarily requiring extra revenue to be raised, as existing capital budgets could be converted to provide a stream of funding for the PPP projects.

The working group concluded that a variety of benefits could be realised from PPPs. The report shows that there is potential for better value for money and efficiency savings to be secured. Some types of PPP involve giving a supplier responsibility for lifetime asset maintenance. There is potential for service delivery to be achieved sooner than is possible under traditional procurement. Those are some of the benefits that can be achieved from the utilisation of the private sector in the finance and delivery of public services.

The working group emphasised that PPPs should be chosen only where they are deemed to provide value for money in comparison with conventional public sector procurement. Indeed, it is important to note that the Treasury allows PPP projects to proceed only where they pass the test of offering better value for money than conventional procurement, and I can assure the Assembly that my Department will continue to apply that principle here.

The working group also recognised that a range of concerns exists about PPPs, especially in relation to equality and public sector employees, and it considered those in depth. As I have said on previous occasions, such concerns are genuinely held. My own political instinct is to share such concerns, especially on employment-related issues. I will look for them to be addressed fully and carefully in any PPP approaches that we take. No one should be disadvantaged in employment conditions because a project is taken forward through the PPP route.

On equality, the working group has made some key recommendations aimed at ensuring the stringent application of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and strengthening the protection afforded to employees. The working group has also highlighted that the current investment deficit, and its impact on the quality of public service provision, results in various potential inequalities. The deficit has resulted in accessibility difficulties in public transport; difficulties in ensuring that water standards meet the required European Directives; health problems associated with failure to keep up to date

with advances in technology; and inequalities in standards of accommodation in some areas of our public services.

The working group noted that failure to consider or adopt alternative investment methods might exacerbate existing inequalities and service inadequacies. PPPs could provide the potential to facilitate early additional investment in public infrastructure, facilities and services in an innovative and efficient way.

The working group calculated that, if the current investment deficit were addressed, around 7,400 jobs could be created over a 10-year period in the construction industry, thus providing both economic and social benefits. Those benefits would arise under any form of procurement, but it serves to emphasise the direct economic impact of investing in our public service infrastructure, as well as the wider social and economic benefits of high-quality public services.

The working group noted that a benefit of PPPs over conventional procurement is that the contract mechanism ensures that the service is maintained to a specified standard over the lifetime of the contract. This is guaranteed by penalty mechanisms should the private sector operator fail to deliver. Under conventional procurement, an asset immediately becomes the responsibility of the public sector, and previous Administrations under direct rule found maintenance budgets an easy target for cuts in times of financial constraint. The impact of this was not immediately apparent, but it is certainly apparent now.

The Executive recognise that the issues of equality and public sector employees, addressed in the course of the review, have been particularly complex and difficult. Furthermore, while there has been a wide consensus among the social partners participating in the review on many of the recommendations in the report, clear differences of opinion remain on some matters. Thus, certain recommendations for further research and investigation into specific issues have been made, with the ultimate aim of finding resolutions to those differences.

We are determined that all necessary steps will be taken to ensure that the development of our policy on the use of PPPs is fully in accordance with all legislative requirements, especially those concerned with equality, and that the widest possible consensus on the implementation of our policy will be secured. In that context, the proposals relating to equality set out in the review of procurement have equal application to the use of PPPs.

As I mentioned earlier, the reinvestment and reform initiative changes significantly the context in which we will consider the report of the PPP working group. The Executive have considered carefully the arrangements for publishing the report and have formulated an initial response, which we are publishing to accompany the report. I have reflected this in the terms of my statement, and the full response is attached to the copies of the statement provided to Members.

At the heart of the reinvestment and reform initiative is the decision to create a new organisation in the form of a strategic investment body. We are determined to ensure that strategic infrastructure is planned and delivered in a way that makes the most of all the means and resources available. It is intended that the strategic investment body should have the necessary expertise and resources to serve the Executive's programme of strategic capital investment. By using the new body, the Executive hope to provide the best possible opportunities to promote the effective use of the various means available. One of the key tasks that may fall to the strategic investment body will be to advise on the appropriate funding route for particular projects.

In particular, I wish to emphasise that in the major consultation on the report, which we are launching today, we will want to include consideration of, and to hear views and comments on, the full range of possible sources of funding, and how they can best be used to address the needs of the region.

11.00 am

We made it clear on 2 May that to make vital improvements in infrastructure, we must examine all possible means and rally the best possible contributions from all sectors. We are convinced that no single solution – be it borrowing, PPPs or more traditional public expenditure – is likely to meet our need. Rather, different funding and procurement approaches will provide solutions in different circumstances.

Further debate and discussion on the use of public-private partnerships in our public services is necessary to ensure that the policy framework finally developed is one that attracts the maximum possible support and acceptance throughout the community and across all sectors. Accordingly, the Executive will initiate a detailed consultation process called *Financing Our Future* prior to taking policy decisions. That process will focus primarily on the working group's report and recommendations.

We intend that the consultation process should be proactive and constructive, encompassing debate in the Assembly, discussions with Assembly Committees and public meetings and detailed consideration and evaluation of written submissions.

The report will be distributed to a wide range of bodies to facilitate the consultation. That will include Assembly Members, a variety of public, private and voluntary sector bodies and trade unions and those listed on all departmental equality schemes. To further the social partnership approach adopted by the working group, we want to take account of as broad a cross-section of opinion as possible.

The consultation will last for almost 18 weeks — until 20 September. That will provide the Assembly and the general public with a lengthy period in which to

submit responses. It will afford representative organisations adequate time to conclude consideration on the report's key issues, after the summer holiday period if necessary.

We intend to hold three public meetings in the middle of June at locations around Northern Ireland, so that the details and key recommendations of the report may be explained to the public. The dates and venues for those meetings will be advertised in the press in the next week or so. A panel drawn from the four sectors of the working group will help explain and examine this complex and intricate subject.

We also propose to hold a debate in the Assembly in September — towards the end of the consultation period — so that Members may comment on the report and deliberate on its key issues. We will also engage with the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee of the Centre. Officials of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel are ready to support other Departments in giving evidence to other Committees, should they so wish it.

The new arrangements announced on 2 May have the potential to transform our prospects for dealing with the infrastructure challenge. We encourage an informed debate on how best to address those urgent matters and consider the implications of PPPs, borrowing and conventional public spending and options garnered from local or international experience.

I want the Assembly to join with me, and with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in thanking the working group for its vital contribution to tackling the issue of financing our future and for playing a full role in the consultation.

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 working group for its report. It is an important document, and I hope that consultation will follow. We also welcome the opportunity for public consultation. It is important that we engage as wide a range of people as possible. However, I am concerned about the structure of the consultation and how we ensure that we get the required response. The location of the consultation meetings is also important.

I am also concerned about the transfer from capital funding to public-private partnerships, which is dealt with in paragraph 24 of the report. How will that be achieved? Will it be authorised by the relevant Department, by the Executive or by the strategic investment body? It is important to locate the finances for projects and determine how they are going to be repaid.

Dr Farren: I wish to record my appreciation of the work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel,

which prepared its own report on public-private partnerships. The valuable contribution of the Committee is acknowledged in my statement and in the working group's report.

Final decisions on the location of the consultation seminars have not yet been taken. I welcome the advice of the Committee on the most suitable locations. The structure of the consultation has all the normal characteristics. All those with an interest are invited to make submissions. We trust that the 18-week period will be sufficient to prepare detailed and considered submissions.

The consultation seminars are intended to bring the issue as close to the general public's attention as possible and to involve the relevant sectors represented on the working group. I hope that the general public will find time to participate in it. In the near future I shall be taking advantage of speaking opportunities to advance the debate from my Department's point of view. I trust that Members will also contribute to that wider debate.

With regard to the decision-making mechanisms of the consultation, it is important to note that I have placed considerable emphasis on the changed context that the announcement of a new borrowing facility on 2 May has created and on the Executive's decision to establish a strategic investment body.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended that we pool the expertise in the Administration, given that 20 public-private partnership projects have been completed and several more are in the pipeline. The reinvestment and reform initiative compels us even more to pool that expertise and to take the best possible advice from the public sector and elsewhere on the most appropriate financing route to follow when we address the needs of particular projects.

Ministerial Colleagues are responsible for determining their departmental priorities. It is the responsibility of the Executive, following the advice, in this case, of the new strategic investment body, to make decisions on how finance can be raised to enable projects to proceed. Much remains to be worked out. If I detected a concern in the question, I hope that it has been allayed by my assurance that Ministers will still retain responsibility for their own priorities.

Mr McClarty: To what extent can we aim to save money from the existing departmental expenditure limit and use those savings to service borrowings?

Dr Farren: If the Member's question relates to the new borrowing facility that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister announced on 2 May 2002, there are two elements. Initially, we have a borrowing facility of £125 million, and we will add a further £75 million from our end-year flexibility. Additional finance of £70 million will also be available from the Executive programme funds.

With regard to possible expenditure on infrastructure and other major investment projects, over the next two years a facility that could extend to some £270 million to service the borrowing that may be made against the £125 million will come from existing revenue. No additional revenue, therefore, will need to be raised. If we move beyond the two-year period and begin to draw down from the National Loans Fund, the new and more permanent long-term facility will have to be serviced directly from the revenue streams that we control. The extent to which we determine the amount that we should borrow will be balanced by the extent to which we follow a public-private partnership route. Public-private partnership projects will be serviced by the departmental expenditure limit, so we will not need to use additional revenue from those revenue streams that we control. Therefore, judgements will be made.

It would be foolhardy to accumulate a great deal of debt through the borrowing facility and thereby impose pressures on those revenue streams that we control. The Treasury will monitor carefully the extent to which we attempt to borrow so that it can put the break on if we are foolhardy, but I do not anticipate that we will be. There must be a balance between the new borrowing facility and our access to public-private partnerships and whether we draw down from the capital stream in our departmental expenditure limit to provide the necessary funding for those projects that we decide to proceed with.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the publication of the report and the start of the consultation process. The Minister stated that he shared people's concerns about the transfer of workers and their rights. Will he address that matter further, and will he assure us that a two-tier workforce will not emerge?

Dr Farren: I trust that Members will appreciate that I went to some lengths in my statement to acknowledge the fact that concerns exist. To a certain extent I share those concerns as does the trade union movement.

11.15 am

The experience of public-private partnership projects in Northern Ireland has shown that 113 employees transferred to the private sector under 25 projects at a total value of £193 million. None of those workers has subsequently been made redundant, so there is no hard evidence in Northern Ireland to demonstrate that a two-tier workforce is emerging. However, we have made the point that it is necessary to monitor carefully this aspect of PPPs to ensure that workers' rights are fully protected when contracts are being prepared. I stated earlier that no one should be disadvantaged and, to put it more positively, their rights must be upheld fully within the framework of public-private partnerships. Legislation is in place to ensure that those rights are upheld. However, if there were a need to review the legislative protection, I am sure that the Assembly would support me in doing that.

Mr Close: I welcome the Minister's statement on this complex issue, which will have an impact on society for decades to come. His statement gave a definition of public-private partnerships. Does the Minister agree that the history of PPPs suggests a different definition, one in which the public sector carries the risks while the private sector gets the rewards? Public-private partnerships are like any borrowing — a way of getting additional capital investment at the expense of resource budgets. For those reasons they are expensive per se. They are financially expensive, and they have the potential to be expensive with regard to conditions for employees.

In his previous answer, the Minister referred to 113 employees. That is a small number, given the potential for 7,400 jobs, as mentioned in his statement. If we cast our net wider and look at the impact of public-private partnerships where they have more history — across the water, for example — we see that the impact is anything but satisfactory for employees. Does the Minister not agree that value-for-money considerations are invariably and inevitably blurred owing to the length of time these projects take? Will he give his opinion on whether the recent investment package represents better value for money than any of the current public-private partnerships of which he is aware?

The Minister challenged Members to advise him of suitable locations for public consultation. I suggest the Island complex in the new city of Lisburn as the ideal location for such public consultation.

Dr Farren: Is the Member suggesting that workers in the private sector in Northern Ireland are suffering a form of Victorian working conditions and that they are not protected? The public sector engages daily with the private sector in the provision of a wide range of contracts. Our roads, schools and hospitals have been built by engaging, and signing contracts with the private sector. Is the Member suggesting that workers employed under all those contracts have not been protected adequately; that they are subject to improper conditions of employment; and that their rights are not being upheld? That seems to be the implication of his question.

In the history of the Labour movement many public sector workers took umbrage and opposed the conditions under which they had to work. It is not simply a matter of looking to the private sector to see where workers' rights have been protected. We have to ensure that there is adequate protection for workers in the contracts — it would be totally improper for any Government Department to enter into a PPP project that did not make adequate provision for workers' conditions of employment. If the Member has concerns, he should submit them to me and quote the evidence. I will certainly consider any hard evidence, but he makes a sweeping statement about evidence existing outside Northern Ireland. I have not seen such evidence, but if it is there, let us see it and examine it in relation to our situation.

If I understand him correctly, the Member is also criticising PPPs by implying that they store up considerable debts for future generations. We have to look at what we have stored up as a result of our failure to invest in our infrastructure: the inadequacy of some of our transport services and roads; the inadequacy of some of our schools — Members complain frequently about the failure to invest in schools and colleges; and the inadequacy of the technological equipment in our public services.

We are seeking to provide the Executive with the means of acquiring the finance necessary to fund the projects that will give us a modern infrastructure and the services associated with it. That is what people are asking us to do. I think that they will compliment us on providing them with the legacy of a modern working infrastructure, and we will be careful not to impose a burden of debt that cannot be shouldered by this or future generations.

Mr Ervine: I thank the Minister for his statement and the delivery of the other half of Thatcherism — the first part was the disinvestment that creates the circumstances in which you do the rest, or at least the Executive seem determined to do the rest.

It is interesting that the Minister is keen to suggest that those in the public sector will be looked after and protected. They will probably belong to companies that have to be leaner and meaner. Companies will want to offer good conditions, but will they offer the same number of jobs; will those jobs be under a 12-month contract; will those jobs be without holiday pay or a pension; or will those jobs be like those in the public sector today? Of course not.

When the Minister is taking care of workers' interests and conditions, will the same number of jobs be provided under public-private partnerships as there are now? The Minister has put forward a "frightener". Anybody who works in the public services will be deeply frightened today.

Dr Farren: I remind Members that I am not launching a definitive policy document, but a consultation document. Those concerns are far off the mark in many respects. However, if the concerns that are suggested by Mr Ervine exist, they should be heard, documented, and addressed. I have made that abundantly clear. I belong to a political party that is concerned about social justice. It is concerned about ensuring that workers' rights are upheld — *[Interruption]*.

If the Member has something to say, perhaps he could stand up and say it so that I can hear him.

Mr Close: Are you going to put the rates up?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: We are not discussing the rates. There is no proposal for the rates to be increased.

Mr Ervine has raised serious issues, so let us be clear about them. I have indicated the estimated scale of jobs that could be created in the construction industry over the next 10 years. It is a sizeable number. Every one of those jobs — just like every other job in Northern Ireland's labour market — is subject to current legislation on working conditions, payment, pension rights and all other rights to benefit. There is no suggestion or implication in anything that I have said or in the report that there will be any diminution of those rights.

I have said in response to earlier questions and in my statement, and I repeat it, that my responsibility — and I imagine that this goes for my Executive Colleagues — for contracts relating to public-private partnerships, if the Executive decide that they should advance along that particular route, is to the effect that those contracts will enshrine the full protection of workers' rights and will satisfy not only Ministers, but also the House. That is a commitment on which I stand today, and on which I will continue to stand for the rest of my political life.

Ms McWilliams: I welcome the statement. However, I share some of the concerns that have already been raised on the Floor that it may lead to short-term gain and long-term pain.

To date, my experience of public-private partnerships has not been healthy. I want to give an example of something that occurred in my constituency, South Belfast. There were rugby and hockey pitches on the site of Wellington College. Northwin Ltd moved in to develop the site. I understand that the school was built on a much smaller scale than was initially thought to be required, leaving no room for expansion. The development benefited from public land. I attended a public inquiry at which those responsible for planning control were in dispute with the Department of Education over what should have happened to that public land. As we all know, developers win such disputes. What was a piece of green land and open space is now gone.

There are several concerns. Will the Minister take this opportunity to elaborate on the differences he mentioned that require further research and investigation?

Can the Minister confirm that health board finance officers have not had a happy experience of PPPs and that they may not offer value for money?

11.30 am

Dr Farren: I have stressed from the outset that the consultation is based on a report that reflects experience in Northern Ireland and elsewhere on this island, in Britain and further afield to see how we might adapt PPPs, if that is what we agree to do.

There have been mistakes, including delays and inadequate standards, in public sector projects financed by traditional procurement, which is how most developments have been funded. I cannot comment on the situation

that the Member mentioned, but if she wishes to write to me I will give her further information on the matter.

We are trying to learn from experiences here and elsewhere to see how we should progress; that is the nature of the consultation exercise. I do not present a definitive policy to the Assembly, and I understand why all of the Members' issues and concerns have been raised. They should be drawn to our attention, and evidence must be documented where it is available so that the consultation process can benefit from all views, positive and negative, on PPPs. In that way, when the matter is discussed by the Committees and then debated by the Assembly in September, Ministers can be as fully informed as possible about how Members wish us to proceed.

Mr McCartney: The statement sets out ways to borrow money to rectify the enormous deficit in infrastructure. Were the Minister and his Colleagues in both major parties unaware of that enormous deficit when they negotiated the Belfast Agreement? Did they take any steps then to require the Treasury to make good the deficit? The Minister now says that there was a failure to address infrastructure in the past. Were he or his Colleagues unaware of that? That is the nature of the problem, and perhaps the Minister can elaborate on that point.

When the matter was raised in the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates, the Minister did not deign to respond to the deficit or the methods to be adopted to deal with it. Is the method offered today not simply to borrow on the basis of screwing the people of Northern Ireland for additional money?

The Minister hesitated to use the words "rates" or "water charges". He talked euphemistically about revenue streams that we control and revenue sources. He never once mentioned the ugly fact that "revenue streams that we control" means increasing rates and imposing water charges. Why not? What is so nasty about those words that they cannot be utilised? Perhaps the Minister will explain why, however it is done, we will be involved in expensive borrowing when we are spending £1.2 billion annually on administrative costs that have never been pruned.

If £300 million to £350 million a year were saved on those costs for the next three years, the Minister would be able to commence some of those infrastructure projects with a lump sum of more than £1 billion, without increasing rates and water charges for the people of Northern Ireland, and without burdening them with debt and interest to private financiers in future. Those private —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has put three questions. I ask him to draw to a conclusion.

Mr McCartney: With respect, I might have had a little more time if the answers to earlier questions had not been so prolonged. However, why do the Minister and his Colleagues in the Executive not raise money

from savings on administration instead of imposing — or threatening to impose — further taxes?

Dr Farren: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is launching a review of public administration. In that context, if the Member has proposals on administrative efficiencies and cost savings that he believes should be addressed, he should perhaps make his views known. A general injunction is observed across all areas of public expenditure to ensure best value and to address efficiency and cost savings in every aspect of our public administration. I therefore assure Members that this Minister of Finance and Personnel takes very seriously the whole question of public expenditure.

I shall not address the issue of negotiations during the course of the Good Friday Agreement. I launch today a consultation process on the report of the working group on public-private partnerships. If the Member has suggestions on whether or how those should be used, I trust that he will use the opportunity afforded by the consultation to make us aware of his erudite views.

Mr O'Connor: I welcome some of what the Minister has said. However, I am unashamedly a socialist, and the idea of public-private partnerships rests somewhat uneasily with me. We have heard today from people who sat in the House of Commons and who did nothing when this place was starved of infrastructural investment. We have now been given powers under the reform and reinvestment initiative. Given the crisis in public services that the Executive must address, where does the Minister see those powers fitting in alongside any previous use of PPPs?

Dr Farren: I doubt whether there is a democratic Administration in any part of the world without an available borrowing facility. It is important that Members appreciate that. The report indicates, and perhaps Members already know, that the use of public-private partnerships is widespread across the globe. I invite Members who have not already read the report to examine it and to follow up with detailed evidence, which I am sure our library services can provide, regarding PPPs in Australia, the United States and Canada, as well as those across the EU and closer to home. Public-private partnerships are frequently used to provide infrastructure needs.

As I have already emphasised, we have three main sources from which we can provide the necessary funding for infrastructure projects: a borrowing facility; PPPs — which, if further adapted, can reflect Member's views more accurately — and the public expenditure allocation in the departmental expenditure limit, which was the traditional means through which we funded projects. The disposal of public assets is also outlined in the report.

With the best available advice and through appropriate and judicious use of those means, we can ensure that we provide the necessary infrastructure and make good the deficit. We must choose the most cost-effective route.

Mr Hussey: The consultation process will address how we finance our future. Does the Minister agree that if we were financing our future, we would not start from here? Reference has been made to the decades of failure to invest in public infrastructure. Who failed to invest in our infrastructure?

The Treasury has shown intransigency by failing to allocate additional funds from Europe to Northern Ireland. Security is being downgraded because we have yet to receive the much promised peace bonus. The reinvestment and reform package is piecemeal compared to the Province's needs. Does the Minister agree with those observations?

Further, is it not the case that the cost of borrowing would be lowest if the money were borrowed from the Treasury, whereas the cost of borrowing for public-private partnerships would be dictated by private sector partnerships? Given current financing and resource budgeting methods, the cost of depreciation will impact on the departmental expenditure limits. Therefore, we might pay for assets two or three times over. We will pay for the cost of depreciation and for the money that we borrowed. Will the Minister assure the House that the depreciation from the departmental expenditure limits is used for the future replacement of assets?

Dr Farren: The underinvestment that we experience in our public services and infrastructure is also experienced across the water. I assumed that Members on the other side of the House would appreciate that fact even more than I. The main cause of underinvestment was the cutbacks that successive Conservative Governments imposed in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Therefore our deficit is not unique. Readers of the London newspapers will know of the significant deficit in transport, hospitals and schools across the water.

It is not a deficit that is unique to us. Of course, our irresponsibility — and I use the word “our” advisedly — meant that we contributed to that deficit, because significant public funds had to be diverted to compensating for the tragic loss of life and destruction of the past 20 years. We made our own particular contribution to that deficit. However, the deficit is there, and we must find a way out of it.

11.45 am

Assembly Member Hussey commented on the impact of the different forms of financing that are available to us. It is the private partner who must finance a public-private partnership, but that is his or her responsibility. The calculation of the financial cost is part of what must be assessed to determine whether the total cost will give us value for money. The unitary cost must be paid for each PPP project, but that does not include depreciation. However, if we borrow, depreciation costs are then counted against our departmental expenditure limit. We

do not have to pay three or four times for the same thing, and it is important that Members appreciate that.

The Executive must ask how to achieve value for money from a particular project in the most cost-effective and efficient way, and find the answer. They should also ask what funding they should use to make particular projects possible. The Executive will answer those questions, and the answers will then be brought to the House so that Members know precisely what we are determining with respect to the expenditure burden. Nothing is free, as I said in my statement; all investment carries a cost. We carry the cost, and when I say “we” I mean everybody in Northern Ireland who contributes to the public purse, and, indeed, those outside Northern Ireland from whose contributions we draw.

We are guardians of that purse, and we must be prudent in making allocations from it. I trust that the decisions will be made prudently and that the projects will be those with which Members want us to proceed. The people of Northern Ireland want us to proceed with them sooner rather than later to make good that deficit. I must tell Mr Hussey that we are, in fact, where we are. We have no choice as to the position from which we start. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

FUR FARMING (PROHIBITION) BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill (NIA Bill 8/01) be agreed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister wish to make any further comment?

Ms Rodgers: The Bill seeks to prohibit the keeping of animals solely or primarily for slaughter for their fur. This is not a welfare issue but one of public morality. Our belief is that fur farming should be banned because it is inconsistent with proper value and respect for animal life.

Although killing animals is not inherently right or wrong, animals should not be destroyed in the absence of sufficient public benefit justification. Rearing animals solely or primarily for slaughter for their fur fails this test, hence fur farming cannot be justified. Fur farming is distinct from food production. Although keeping an animal for food production is of sufficient public benefit to justify breeding for slaughter, that premise does not work for the practice of slaughtering animals for their fur.

I am not aware of any fur farming businesses in Northern Ireland; however, that does not mean that the Bill is not needed. Similar Bills to ban fur farming in England, Wales and Scotland will be enacted on 1 January 2003. In espousing the principles inherent in banning fur farming, it is important that the Bill becomes law here to prevent such businesses in the rest of the UK from seeking to relocate here.

The Bill is relatively short, and it may be helpful if I detail briefly the five main clauses. Clause 1 deals with offences and creates a primary offence of keeping animals solely or primarily for slaughter for the value of their fur, or for breeding progeny for such slaughter. It also creates a secondary offence of knowingly causing or permitting another person to keep animals solely or primarily for slaughter for the value of their fur, or for breeding progeny for such slaughter. Both the primary and secondary offences are summary offences, for which the maximum penalty is £20,000.

Clause 2 deals with forfeiture orders and empowers the court to make an order for the forfeiture and destruction or other disposal of the animals in the event that a person is convicted of either the primary or secondary offence. Any person claiming to have an interest in the animals may appeal against the forfeiture order to the court. Clause 3 deals with the effect of a forfeiture order and provides a right of appeal for any person claiming to have an interest in animals that are the subject of a forfeiture order.

Clause 4 confers to officials authorised by the Department the power of entry and inspection to enable the gathering of evidence, and to anyone authorised by the courts the power to enter premises to carry out a forfeiture order. An offence of intentionally obstructing or delaying anyone in the exercise of his or her power is also created. Clause 5 provides for the Department to create a scheme to pay compensation to people who claim income losses as a result of the discontinuation of their business. Since there are not thought to be any fur farming businesses in Northern Ireland, that provision is unlikely to be invoked. However, it is included as a precaution to satisfy human rights requirements.

I hope that Members agree that the measures I have outlined should be implemented for the reasons given. I ask the Assembly to approve the Second Stage of the Bill and to support the motion that will allow it to progress to Committee Stage.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): At its meeting on 10 May 2003, the Committee agreed that I should speak on its behalf in this debate. On 15 June, the Committee considered the results of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's consultation on the Bill. Members noted that there were few responses and that no dissenting views had been expressed on the principles of the Bill. More recently, the Committee had an opportunity to examine the draft Bill and its explanatory and financial memorandum. I thank the Minister for providing the Committee with that information so early.

The Committee will fulfil its obligation to carry out a detailed scrutiny of the Bill at the Committee Stage before making its final report. Members are concerned to establish the purpose of the Bill and its implications for other sectors of the agriculture industry. There are ethical and practical matters to be considered. For example, we must decide whether the Department is taking a moral stand against breeding animals for the value of their fur, or whether prohibition will be on welfare grounds. If the former is the case, how does this stand against breeding animals for slaughter for their meat, or is this legislation intended solely to close a loophole in the law in the UK? What are the implications for the UK when our neighbours in the EU have not taken a similar step towards animal welfare? Those issues were raised during our early discussions in the Committee, and they will be explored further at Committee Stage.

I also expect the Committee to look closely at the proposed compensation scheme for fur farmers who incur losses as a result of the ban, given that we are told that there are no known businesses of this nature currently operating in Northern Ireland.

In summary, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development looks forward to the opportunity not only to consider the purpose and possible impact of the

Bill, but also to carry out a clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. I will conclude by saying that I was in a restaurant recently where one of the main courses on the menu was squirrel. These are examples of matters that we have to take on board.

Mr O'Connor: I support the Bill. This is basically a morality issue; it is about cruelty to animals. Those animals' sole purpose in life should not be to provide somebody with a fur coat. I fully support the Bill purely on the morality issue, and given that cruelty to animals is not acceptable, and that this is an issue of morals, I hope that some legislation banning fox hunting will be brought forward in the future.

Mr Wells: I totally and enthusiastically support the Bill. My wife will never wear a fur coat, and, quite frankly, no one with a fur coat will ever be welcome in my home.

Fur farming is a cruel, nasty and totally unnecessary process. Animals used to roaming in territories of up to 50 sq miles are taken, and bred, to be kept in cages measuring as little as 50 sq inches. They are then subjected to the most brutal death to simply appease the vanity of some narrow-minded women and, to some extent, men, who believe that wearing the fur of a dead animal on their back is fashionable. I find that morally obnoxious. If any Member of the House were to spend five minutes at one of the few remaining fur farms in the UK, they would be utterly appalled at what they would see. They would see animals chasing round and round small cages, being driven insane by the confines of their capture, and then being subjected to excruciatingly painful deaths so as to avoid any damage to the fur coat.

I am glad that, as a result of the work of organisations such as Lynx, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), public opinion has turned on this vile trade — to the extent that there will not be a need to pay compensation to any fur farmers in Northern Ireland because this practice has died out here. Sad to say, the last fur farm that I am aware of in Northern Ireland was in my constituency of South Down. It was in Ballynahinch, but I am glad to say that as a result of public opinion it has gone out of business.

This legislation is extremely enlightened. My understanding is that it is based upon equivalent law in the rest of the United Kingdom, where the fur farming trade has seen the writing on the wall. Agreement was reached between the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the representative body of the fur farming trade that fur farming will be phased out by 2003. A compensation package agreeable to all has been put in place. That is good news. The fur farming trade will go out of this business without being out of pocket, and we will no longer have this so-called process of producing fur in the UK.

12.00 pm

I have a couple of questions to ask the Minister. I would not at all want to stand in the way of this legislation. What is the situation in the Republic of Ireland? Could a situation arise in which this practice still continued in the Irish Republic and individuals circumvented the legislation by moving the process there?

Can I presume that any business that has already received compensation in other parts of the United Kingdom cannot move its operations temporarily to Northern Ireland to pick up a second tranche of compensation because the legislation here is several years behind that in the rest of the UK?

Finally — and the Minister may not be interested in answering this — I welcome the Bill as the first piece of genuine animal welfare legislation that she has advanced. Significant steps have been taken to alleviate suffering in the farming process. We have seen the abolition of stall-and-tether systems and the crate-rearing system for veal calves. The Minister must be aware that there are still one or two issues that cause enormous public concern in farming, even in Northern Ireland. The public is becoming more and more concerned about the way in which our animals are reared for food as well as for their pelts. She would certainly go down in history as having achieved major gains if she were to tackle these problems of animal welfare. All who have given any thought to this and who know what goes on in some farms will give her our total support.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is an emotive Bill for some people. It is important that we scrutinise it, as we would any other, regardless of whether it seems that we should just pass it and implement it. There may be important points to be addressed that are not immediately obvious. That can be done at the Committee Stage and later.

The consultation has not drawn much interest, and there are particular reasons for that. We are led to believe that there is no fur farming in the Six Counties. We must also take into account the impact of there not being similar legislation in Europe. What is the situation in the South? What is the possibility of fur farms simply moving from one place to the other? The point about secondary compensation may well have to be considered.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and the Minister have covered all the other points. In the consideration of moral issues, we have not properly looked at, or perhaps had access to, the principles of the Bill. We can do that later.

Some people might be afraid to bring in a total ban on anything, as that raises the question of where we could end up later. Could it be extended to other areas, such as animals for food and so on? The question always arises: what point will we reach in the future?

The Member opposite has covered the welfare of the animals involved in this trade. The public are totally against rearing animals for fur and slaughter only. There is no excuse or reason for it, and it has now become a big issue. Strong lobbies are fighting on these fronts and must be taken into account. They are fighting for an important cause. From that point of view, there are few who would oppose the Bill.

The point made about animals that are used to the wild being kept on fur farms is correct. Wild mink are not native to this country, and those that escape do enormous damage to wildlife in the countryside.

Lobbyists make many points about farming and other matters that are not accurate. There is a debate on penned calves, but as a farmer I know that calves can live quite happily in small pens, whereas other farm animals cannot. That is not taken into account by the lobbyists, and they use those points against farmers and others in the countryside.

The Minister should look at what happens elsewhere in the world, as we are in a global picture. What happens in the fur trade elsewhere, and have we any impact on that? Europe has not introduced legislation yet, but it may. What is the welfare standard in food production on farms outside Europe? Chicken processors here bring birds from countries outside Europe.

Mr O'Connor: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. What has that to do with fur farming? Mr McHugh is making a speech about food coming in from outside Europe. We are debating the Second Stage of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that point of order. There was a question on European Directives. Will Mr McHugh continue and keep to the point?

Mr McHugh: There are times when people may stray off the mark. However, points about fur farming bring in the arguments made by other lobbyists on agriculture issues. Fur farming could be called farming — the arguments are the same. If a ban on fur farming is introduced, that could have an impact on all other methods of farming in the future, including angling.

I will not debate the issue any further. I support the basic thrust of the Bill. The Committee and everyone else must get involved in the detail.

Ms McWilliams: I want to assure Mr McHugh that women who wear fishnet tights have very little to do with the products of angling.

I support the Bill. I will make one comment. If this Bill is following legislation being introduced in January in Scotland, England and Wales, where there may be fur farms and where fur farmers may require compensation, and if the consultation process here shows that there are no fur farmers, why is there a clause in the Bill to pay compensation? Nobody needs it.

We have a devolved Assembly and devolved legislation that reflects the circumstances of Northern Ireland. We are giving the Committee extra work that is not required. There is a commitment under the human rights legislation that we do not do anything that would have a detrimental effect on people, but it does not make sense to have clauses to do with compensation that is not required.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I always have a wry smile on my face when I follow a Sinn Féin Member making a speech on welfare. I wish that Sinn Féin and the IRA had shown as much concern for the welfare of human beings over the last 30 years as they are showing for the welfare of animals.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is a side issue. Unfortunately, it is not reflected in the Bill. The Bill raises some issues that the Minister may be able to explain to the House. The Bill has a clear objective, which is to prevent fur farming, and once it becomes an Act, those engaged in fur farming will be guilty of an offence and subject to a penalty.

However, what is the principle behind the Bill? That is important, because, as Mr O'Connor said, the issue is purely one of morality. Is that the Bill's policy objective? Is there a moral principle against the raising of animals solely for their fur or skins? If the principle is one of animal welfare, the Bill goes beyond that. A prohibition on the raising of animals is not normally the way to deal with matters of animal welfare. One of my Colleagues mentioned stalls and tethers for pigs. Stalls and tethers were banned, but the raising and slaughtering of pigs was not banned. The Department dealt consistently and appropriately with animal welfare as a side issue, but the fundamental issue of raising an animal for its products has not been addressed.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I shall not give way at this time. Is the Bill's objective a moral one? If so, I want the Minister to spell out that moral objective. It is important that the Government stand up and say that they have a moral objection to the raising of animals solely for their fur. If that is the Bill's intention, that is fair enough. That is open and honest and means that the Government are going to be consistent.

However, will they be consistent? To be consistent, to oppose the raising of an animal solely for its fur on moral grounds must mean that it is morally wrong to wear fur. If it is morally wrong to wear fur, we must wait for this Government to introduce another Bill that will ban the sale of fur. There must be consistency. If that is a policy of the Executive, there must be consistency across the Departments.

I do not oppose the Bill, but I do have a moral objection which is consistent. It is important that the Government are consistent, say that they are morally

opposed and take all the steps that they should be taking. As it stands, the Bill does nothing but pander to a certain political lobby. That is wrong and unfair.

The Bill's objective is not consistent with European legislation. That amazes me, because the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is always trying, and is often forced, to be consistent with European legislation and practice. Let us look at the facts. Mr Wells asked whether a loophole in the legislation would enable someone to move to the Republic of Ireland to raise animals for their fur. The answer is "Yes". One can move to any country in the European Union, raise animals solely for their fur and sell them in the European Union.

My Colleagues may be interested to know that there are more than 6,000 fur farms in EU member states. There are 290 fur farms in EU-applicant countries — those countries that will soon be welcomed into the EU. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may be interested to know that there are 29,125 retail businesses across the EU engaged in selling fur. If there is to be a prohibition, let us deal with those issues. Some 164,000 people are employed full-time in the fur industry in Europe — it is a European industry.

12.15 pm

The Government should recognise that in Europe the business is worth a great deal of money. It was worth over £4.7 million in the UK in 1999-2000, so it has to be worth considerably more in the rest of the European Union. The Government should be consistent, and they should spell out whether there is an alternative. The alternative may be to address the issue of animal welfare. That issue was addressed satisfactorily with regard to stalls and tethers for pigs, and it was addressed adequately with regard to raising hens for their eggs. If those matters were adequately addressed, can the Department satisfy its animal welfare objectives without banning a product? If it bans a product, it must ban not only the raising of it but the sale of it, or the Government will be being inconsistent.

I would like the Government to be consistent rather than say that they are simply against raising the animals. If you oppose raising animals for their fur, you have to oppose the sale of the fur. It would be highly inconsistent for a Member to say that he or she opposes the raising of an animal for its fur and then parade into the House in a fur coat. We should address that. My Colleague is itching to get to his feet, and I would like him to make his point before I address three of the clauses in the Bill.

Mr Wells: I largely agree with what the Member has said, but I would like him to address two points. First, we are not dealing with a domesticated animal that has been bred for centuries to be kept in captivity — we are dealing with wild animals. We are talking about wild American mink that are incapable of adjusting to a

domestic lifestyle. They are kept in extremely cramped conditions, which is cruel.

Secondly, these animals cause enormous damage to fisheries and wildlife when they escape from captivity. Departments in the rest of the United Kingdom have spent a fortune trying to eradicate mink from river systems. They are causing great ecological damage in Fermanagh, for example, and that is an unfortunate side effect of breeding mink for fur production. Species such as coypu and muskrat have also escaped and caused great damage to river systems in other parts of the United Kingdom. Does the Member accept that there is a good practical reason for discouraging fur farming in that we cannot afford to have any more escapes into the environment?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I appreciate the point, and my Colleague is being absolutely consistent. His opposition to fur farming is on moral grounds, and he is absolutely clear about that. Danny O'Connor said that his support for the Bill is on a moral objection. He said that this is purely a moral issue, and he is being absolutely consistent. However, I am worried that the Department is not doing likewise.

Mr Wells raised the point about the side effects, and I agree. If there is a pest, there must be pest control. However, the method of eradicating the pest may be crueller than raising it and then killing it under controlled circumstances on a fur farm. I agree that the consequences that he has spelt out are pretty devastating, having a large impact on the environment, and that they would, therefore, cause more moral objections for him and the people whom he speaks for on this.

Clause 1 on offences relating to fur farming states that a person will be guilty of an offence if he keeps animals solely or primarily for the distribution of their fur. If he is caught doing that, the fine will be £20,000 — the cost of two fur coats. Perhaps the Department should consider whether that is an adequate penalty. I do not know the level of the fine in the rest of the United Kingdom, but that issue should be addressed. Price was not one of the reasons for Mr Wells not buying his wife a fur coat, but he does know that they are very expensive. However, I do not think that the cost of two fur coats is an adequate fine.

With regard to clause 5, is compensation for existing businesses time-barred? As the Bill goes through Committee Stage, can someone set up a fur farm and receive compensation when it is closed down? Ms McWilliams raised the point that if clause 5 does not have to be included, why is it there? The clause opens the door for the legislation to be abused, and the Department should address that effectively. If we are sure that there are no businesses in Northern Ireland that should be compensated, why does the draft legislation include a compensatory clause? I hope that the Minister will reflect on those points.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, of which I am a Member, is looking at the Bill. The Committee has invited all the interested parties to make their points, and I look forward to hearing the points that the British Fur Trade Association will make in defence of its industry. I also look forward to hearing the opposition's case. It is important that we get a balance of opinion before we support something solely for emotional reasons and when there is no back-up from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Indeed, the Government, if they are to be consistent, should support all Departments.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I am grateful for Members' comments. It is not possible to cover all the issues in the time available. However, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope that I shall not be confined to five minutes when some Members spoke for around 15 minutes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that there is a Business Committee meeting at 12.30 pm. However, we shall allow the Minister to speak until then.

Ms Rodgers: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I ask only for the same treatment as everyone else in the House.

It will not be possible to cover everything in detail; however, I shall try to answer the more substantive issues. In reply to Mr Savage, the low level of response was not our fault — we consulted more than 80 bodies. On Friday, officials will discuss with the Committee many of the other points that were made; I covered some already in my opening statement. Mr Wells mentioned the situation in the Republic of Ireland. There are some fur farming businesses there and, as far as we are aware, the authorities in the Republic have no plans to prohibit fur farming. I share the Member's concerns for general animal welfare and shall continue to take steps to deal with particular aspects of that insofar as that is possible.

Mr McHugh raised the issue of Northern Ireland's fur farms moving to the Republic. As I have said, I am not aware that there are any here, and we cannot influence what happens in the Republic — our concern is to stop fur farming in Northern Ireland. He also expressed unease about total bans. I agree, and I try to use powers to ban activities judiciously and only when necessary.

In response to Ms McWilliams, the clause on compensation is necessary. It is required to ensure that the Bill complies with the European Convention on Human Rights. However, Ms McWilliams will note that there is no detail about compensation. It is only an enabling clause in case compensation is necessary.

Had Mr Paisley Jnr been present during my initial statement, he would know that I made it clear that this is not a welfare issue, but one of public morality. Our belief is that fur farming should be banned because it is

not consistent with proper value and respect for animal life. I advise the Member to read the rest of my statement. He will then understand that I was absolutely consistent, open and frank about why the Bill was introduced. I was amused to hear him talk about banning fur coats and so on. Any action that is taken must be balanced. One person's morality is not necessarily another's. For example, some people would ban swimming and the use of swings on Sunday. I do not think that morals should be imposed.

I believe that the Bill I have introduced has public support. It is clear from cross-party remarks today that fur farming should be banned because it is immoral and unacceptable. As for concerns about consistency with other countries, I remind the House that some countries have a practice of cutting off people's hands because they steal things. I hope that the Member does not suggest that we should adopt that practice.

A ban on fur sales from abroad was also suggested. Northern Ireland must honour its obligations under international agreements that were designed to ensure that countries have the right to trade freely. An import ban on fur products would have an adverse impact on our trading partners, many of whom are dependent on exports for jobs and do not necessarily share our cultural and ethical outlook.

The Government disapprove of fur imports, but they cannot control production of fur abroad. However, they are controlling production within their own sphere of influence. That is why Northern Ireland should set an example and ban fur production. Austria has led the way, and Scotland, Wales and England have followed suit.

I have been asked why I have introduced the measure, when other member states have not. Our treatment of fur farming is a matter for those countries to consider. Several member states share Northern Ireland's views on fur farming and the moral issue of how animals are treated and whether they are killed unnecessarily. The Government are taking action to apply consistency across the United Kingdom, and I imagine Mr Paisley would approve.

The fine of £20,000 is also imposed in the rest of the United Kingdom. As to its severity — I suspect that the price paid for fur coats is not the same as the price paid to the farmer, so £20,000 is a substantial fine for a farmer.

Mr Paisley and others raised the issue of farms moving South. The Department will not license any fur farming in Northern Ireland while the Bill is going through.

I will write to Members about any points that I have not covered. I thank them for their contributions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for drawing her remarks to a close exactly on time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill (NIA Bill 8/01) be agreed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Bill now stands referred to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

LIMITED LIABILITY PARTNERSHIPS BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill (NIA 9/01) be agreed.

The Bill delivers on the Department's commitment to keep the legal framework for business in Northern Ireland at the forefront of international best practice by giving firms an additional choice of business vehicle — the limited liability partnership (LLP) — within which to conduct their corporate affairs. The introduction of the LLP is a significant development in partnership law because it offers firms the ability to incorporate with limited liability while organising themselves as partnerships rather than companies.

The Bill intends that an LLP will be subject to broadly the same requirements as a limited company. As a separate legal entity, an LLP will be able to enter into contracts, hold property and continue to exist despite any change in membership. Partnership law will not, in general, apply to an LLP, with the exception of taxation. The decision to become an LLP will be taken voluntarily by partnerships and will be based on commercial considerations.

My Department has estimated that, for a medium-sized firm with an annual turnover of £13 million, the LLP start-up costs will be £8,670, with annual recurring costs of £8,520. Although the costs are in line with those in Great Britain, it is worth noting that by making the LLP available in Northern Ireland, local firms that might have otherwise located offshore to enjoy the benefits of LLP status will avoid paying the additional costs involved.

The Bill is a significant modernising measure. There has been no fundamental change to partnership law in Northern Ireland since the Limited Partnerships Act 1907. Members will undoubtedly agree that modernisation to reflect the realities and pressures of today's business climate is long overdue.

The growing number of professional partnerships exposed to litigation has highlighted a weakness in the traditional partnership, where an individual partner's personal assets are potentially at risk because of the actions of an unknown partner. The Bill will rectify that

weakness by combining limited liability with the internal flexibility of a partnership. It seeks to protect the personal assets of members of an LLP where the individual is not at fault. However, the assets of the LLP itself will be at risk if improper behaviour occurs, as will the assets of the negligent partner.

In recent years, the number of partnerships in Northern Ireland has increased to approximately 13,400. They encompass the full spectrum of business and industry sectors, as well as professionals such as solicitors and accountants. The growth and success of those partnerships is potentially hampered by unlimited liability, which puts the personal assets of each partner at risk as a result of liability incurred by one of them. The fear of losing personal assets as a result of a partner's actions is a particular disincentive to professional partnerships. In addition, as firms expand their services and multidisciplinary partnerships become more widely used, the traditional argument that partners should take responsibility for one another's work has less force.

The Bill has four main benefits for partnerships. First, the limited liability vehicle redistributes the risk to protect partners in a firm who have no direct responsibility for a claim against their firm caused by the action of a partner, thus reducing the risk of a non-negligent partner's assets.

Secondly, at present local firms do not have the option of registering as an LLP in Northern Ireland. It is, however, open to such firms to register in Great Britain or under similar regimes in offshore locations such as Jersey or the United States to gain limited liability status. Such moves are potentially detrimental to the Northern Ireland economy. The Bill, therefore, ensures that Northern Ireland firms have the option of enjoying the benefits of limited liability partnership status by registering in Northern Ireland rather than in other jurisdictions. That is of particular value to professional partnerships, which might otherwise be tempted to incorporate outside Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, as well as modernising partnership association by introducing limited liability, the Bill provides an added benefit. The redistribution of risk as a result of limited liability partnership status is likely to help those firms that have difficulty in recruiting potential partners, who may be deterred by the risk associated with the traditional form of partnership.

Finally, the legislation will maintain Northern Ireland's reputation as an attractive location for business, allowing local firms to operate competitively with their overseas counterparts. The Bill might encourage new firms, which might otherwise have chosen overseas jurisdictions, to register as limited liability partnerships in Northern Ireland.

Moreover, the Bill delivers on my Department's commitment to develop a modern, regulatory framework that promotes fairness and protects the public from

improper business practice. That is achieved by the provision of legal protection for members of the public who deal with this new form of partnership by requiring public disclosure of information about the limited liability partnership, especially about its finances, and by introducing insolvency safeguards. Public disclosure about the firm will help third parties to reach informed decisions about dealing with individual limited liability partnerships.

Regulations to follow the Bill will include provision for members of a limited liability partnership to be sued for wrongful or fraudulent trading; for disqualification of individuals from membership of a limited liability partnership and from trading as company directors.

My Department consulted widely on the Bill and all respondents endorsed its general principles, welcoming the legislation's extension of the choice of vehicles for business. Endorsement of the Bill by women entrepreneurs was especially noteworthy. The extended choice of business vehicle and limited liability have the potential to contribute to the economic development of Northern Ireland. Similar policies encouraged women to start up businesses in the United States. Consultees also welcomed the proposed safeguards, disclosures and registration arrangements for limited liability partnerships.

In conclusion, the introduction of the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill makes local firms more attractive to potential new partners, ensures that they retain their international competitiveness and that Northern Ireland remains a fair place in which to do business.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat. The legislation will be beneficial, especially for small businesses. It will afford greater flexibility and will modernise the whole system.

Were representations made by consumer organisations during the consultation process? It may be more difficult to obtain compensation from a limited liability partnership than under the current arrangements. Is that a potential problem for consumers?

Sir Reg Empey: Business organisations and other groups were consulted, under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It was a public consultation, conducted under the usual conditions. The proposals received complete support and there were no negative comments.

The current position on consumer protection is that partnerships are not obliged to publish their accounts. Although we want to limit the liability of individual partners, a consequence of that protection is that partnerships will have to publish their accounts in the same way as limited companies. Therefore, interested persons will be able to access the accounts of a partnership from Companies Registry.

A professional practice of consultants or accountants can comprise 100 partners based in different towns or

jurisdictions. Partners are jointly and severally liable for the mistakes of other partners, even though they may have no knowledge of them. The Limited Liability Partnerships Bill will allow partners to avail of the same provisions as limited companies. Therefore, unless a partner is deemed to have acted fraudulently or improperly, as is the case with company directors, there is a limit to the liabilities that he or she must face.

To protect the consumer and anyone who trades with such a partnership, the price of limited liability is that the partnership must publish its accounts annually. The ability to prosecute or disqualify partners or company directors is unchanged. Those provisions offset any risks faced by those who deal with partnerships.

The Member for Upper Bann, Dr O'Hagan, referred to a concern voiced by many people. If a partner is granted limited liability, it may put the consumer at greater risk. Although limited liability partnerships in Northern Ireland will be obliged to publish their accounts, those on mainland Europe may not be. However, I am satisfied that given that partnerships have grown, it is unfair to expect a partner in a large practice to know what another partner is doing in an office in a different county or city. Members must bear in mind that the current law dates back to 1907, when such practice was not envisaged.

The Bill is a modern tool designed to get the best of both worlds by encouraging partnerships and incorporation in Northern Ireland. The consumer, and those who will trade with limited liability partnerships, will enjoy the same protections as those who trade with limited companies. As the new regulations will demonstrate, members of the limited liability partnerships will be liable to the rigour of the law, including disqualification and prosecution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill (NIA 9/01) be agreed.

2.15 pm

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON THE PROPOSAL FOR A DRAFT ACCESS TO JUSTICE (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2002

Resolved:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 48(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider –

The Proposal for a Draft Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 referred by the Secretary of State, on behalf of the Lord Chancellor, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 2 July 2002.

Composition:	UUP	2
	SDLP	2
	DUP	2
	SF	2

Other Parties	3
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Quorum:	The quorum shall be five.
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Procedure:	The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — [Ms McWilliams]
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ASBESTOSIS

Mr Neeson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the plight of asbestosis sufferers in Northern Ireland and calls for proper civil justice for asbestos victims.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to this important motion. The motion was tabled because Assembly Members Mr John Kelly, Mr Mick Murphy and I met a group of people who are suffering from asbestosis. The group is known as Justice for Asbestos Victims and was formed by Mr Robbie Brown. I am delighted that Mr Brown and other members of the group are in the Gallery for this important debate.

Mr Brown had to wait 13 years before he was compensated for the disease. His experience reflects the experiences of many people in Northern Ireland in many ways. They suffer a long wait and uncertainty, and compensation often arrives too late because the individual has passed away.

On 5 March 2002, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, stated in the House that the Department and the Government would accept liability for those who contracted asbestos-related diseases before Harland & Wolff was privatised in 1989.

Ms McWilliams: Does the Member agree that it is rather disappointing that, given the issue's seriousness, no Minister is in the Chamber to respond? Indeed, several Ministers could have responded, and it would have been useful if the Executive, knowing that the motion was on today's Order Paper, had agreed at their most recent meeting which Minister had chief responsibility for responding in the debate.

Mr Neeson: I thank Ms McWilliams for her intervention. I regret not only the absence of a Minister, but I am not too impressed by the number of Members present in the Chamber. The issue is important, and it is one that myself and others are determined to carry through.

Last week, the House of Lords made a landmark decision; the Fairchild judgement. The judgement was made because of the uncertainty surrounding where people were employed when they contracted asbestos-related diseases.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning into the Chamber, and I assure her that she has not missed too much.

The uncertainty that was created is important. The interesting fact about the judgement was that it took the Law Lords barely a week to reach their decision. One of the reasons for that was that the case involved three people. Mr Edwin Matthews was too weak to travel to the hearing, and Mrs Judith Fairchild and Mrs Doreen Fox attended for their husbands, Arthur and Thomas, who had already died. That shows that the problem has

been around for some time, and that many people died before the decision was taken.

One of the main issues that the Assembly must take on board is that the cancerous disease mesothelioma can be caused by a single asbestos fibre. That demonstrates how severe the disease can be — it is a fatal disease. It can remain dormant in people's bodies for many years, and that has led to many injustices that people in the UK have suffered.

Mrs Judith Fairchild was awarded compensation in the region of £191,000 in last week's judgement. However, many people in Northern Ireland who have been awarded compensation have not received anything like that amount. I hope that today's debate will result in a review of those cases. People who have suffered must receive sufficient compensation.

I am pleased that the Scottish Parliament has begun to address the issue in a major way. At a meeting of the Public Petitions Committee on 27 February 2001, Mr Frank Maguire, a solicitor for many sufferers in the Clydeside area, said:

"Asbestos-related illnesses are probably the hardest cases. There are hard cases where people are dying for other reasons, but I am dealing with someone whose life is draining away from them. I cannot get the case through the courts in time to get them the payment in advance to improve their quality of life and to help them when they are ill. There is no point in getting them damages just before they die. If they die, the widow and the family have to carry on the case — that adds to the grieving process."

That shows the enormity of the problem and the suffering. It is not only the individual who suffers, but the whole family.

The problem has regional implications. Last year, in Great Britain alone, 5,000 people died from asbestos-related diseases. That figure is predicted to double over the next decade. Northern Ireland has a high number of cases of asbestos-related diseases. It is estimated that at least 90 people die each year from those diseases in Northern Ireland. The total is probably much higher than that. If the figure in Great Britain is going to double, there will undoubtedly be a similar trend in Northern Ireland.

Asbestosis does not affect only those who worked in the shipyard. Because of its fire-resistant qualities, it was used in the building industry in pipes, guttering, lagging, tiles and cement. It was also used in car brake linings.

Of particular significance to Northern Ireland is that many members of the emergency and security services, when they attended bomb scenes, had to enter old buildings that contained large amounts of asbestos without protection. Approximately two years ago I met a group of representatives of the Fire Service, the Ambulance Service and the police who were worried that they had come into contact with asbestos when

attending bombed buildings, but that that was not recognised by their employers. A special case must be made on that basis.

We need to address the problem of asbestos fibres being brought home on the clothes of people who have had contact with the substance. Those cases are similar to the contracting of cancer because of passive smoking. I want to highlight two cases. First, the headline of an article in 'The Belfast Telegraph' on 20 October 1999 read "Death under the stairs". The article stated:

"Playing under the stairs is a past-time that many people remember fondly as a game of their childhood.

But for Margery Conway, playing under the stairs as a child in her family home in north Belfast was to end many years later in tragedy. Her innocent game led her to developing a rare form of cancer which, after a brave battle, took her life in January 1997, five weeks short of her 50th birthday.

Her father James McAleer, who had used asbestos while working for Turner and Newells at Harland and Wolff shipyard during the 1940s and 1950s, used to hang his work clothes — covered in asbestos dust — under the stairs when he came home at night.

And doctors believe it was this contact with her father's work clothes that led her to developing the terminal disease, which did not surface until April 1995.

It is the nature of the disease to remain dormant for up to 50 years."

As I tried to explain earlier, the symptoms of asbestosis can remain dormant for a long time.

The second quote is from a debate in the Scottish Parliament on 16 November 2000, when Mr Duncan McNeil stated:

"Asbestos fibres that were brought into the home on overalls and in hair also damaged wives and children. I am aware of a case of a woman who was a bus conductress, who took shipyard workers to and from work. She had never been in a shipyard in her life, but she contracted cancer from asbestos on her passengers' overalls."

The two cases underline how the disease can be contracted. By pure coincidence, last night when I phoned a constituent about a different matter, I learned that her husband had suffered from asbestosis since his early 30s. Compensation is not the only issue. Prof McWilliams was correct to say that the matter is of cross-departmental importance.

2.30 pm

One of the big problems that my constituent faced was that her husband was in receipt of incapacity benefit, but it was suddenly disallowed. That was even though it was recognised that he suffered from asbestosis and was practically crippled. The Department must, therefore, ensure that all sufferers receive the right benefits. I recognise that the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland is carrying out a consultation process. However, the purpose of the motion is to demand — and I mean "demand" — the right for civil justice for all sufferers of asbestos-related diseases.

I thank the Assembly's research and library service for its help and the information sent to me. I also thank my researcher.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to try to limit their speeches to about eight minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I support the motion, and I thank Mr Neeson, Mr J Kelly and Mr M Murphy for giving us the opportunity to consider this important subject.

I want to make several remarks from the perspective of the Department for Employment and Learning and, in particular, from the Committee that I chair. I want to make about half a dozen points. First, I want to speak about the seriousness of this disease, which was well described by Mr Neeson. Secondly, I will refer to the Harland & Wolff employment liability issue, which was debated in the House about two months ago. Thirdly, I want to speak about the pneumoconiosis Statutory Rule. Fourthly, I will mention the position relating to the wider application of that Statutory Rule to asbestos-related diseases, which was covered in an answer by the Minister for Employment and Learning in April this year. Fifthly, I will speak about the House of Lords' ruling of last week, and, finally, I will address the impact on the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

There can be little doubt about the seriousness of the disease. Last year, around 5,000 people died from asbestos-related diseases across the UK. That figure is expected to rise to approximately 10,000 by the end of this decade. As we all probably know, the victims are mainly people from the building industries or shipyard workers. However, teachers, children and nurses have also been affected, partly because of the previous use of asbestos in the construction of, for example, schools and hospitals. As Mr Neeson has rightly pointed out, families can be affected by secondary exposure, ingesting substances from the fibres carried in on workers' clothes as they return home. There is about one death every four days in Northern Ireland from these related diseases.

My second point relates to the shipyard. It is thought that up to 3,000 workers employed by Harland & Wolff prior to its privatisation in 1989 were infected as a result of coming into contact with asbestos. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, made that point on 5 March this year. Up to £190 million of public money could be paid out over the next 50 years to employees seeking compensation — so it is a long-term commitment and liability. The Department's liability in this case arises because of the declared insolvency of Harland & Wolff's insurance company in January 2002.

In April 2002, the House affirmed Statutory Rule 133/2002, relating not to asbestosis but to a related lung disease, pneumoconiosis. For this disease public liability

on the part of the Department for Employment and Learning has been accepted in cases where individuals are unable to take court action to recover damages from employers — usually where businesses have ceased to trade. In a press release on 22 April 2002, the Minister for Employment and Learning said:

“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.”

That relates to the House of Lords ruling on 16 May 2002 that overturned a previous Court of Appeal judgement — the so-called “Fairchild judgement”. In the Fairchild judgement, the Court of Appeal decided on 11 December 2001 that where a worker had been exposed to asbestos dust during his or her employment with more than one company, he or she could not succeed in claiming for damages unless it was shown which company or employer was primarily responsible.

By overturning that judgement, the House of Lords has, appropriately, opened up a wider possibility for individuals to claim against companies. It is reckoned that insurance companies could face bills of up to £6 billion or £8 billion across the UK.

That has implications for the Departments here. The implied liability on the part of the Department for Employment and Learning, and perhaps the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will be less because it is now possible for individuals to claim against companies.

The Department for Employment and Learning must do all in its power to ensure that people are compensated quickly for this terrible disease. I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to do all that they can to ensure that compensation claims are settled speedily and so avoid prolonged additional suffering. I am confident that that will be their intention.

As Chairman of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the motion, and I will address it from two perspectives. The second perspective will be the enduring legacy of the use of asbestos. However, I also want to look at the potential threat from asbestos that is present in properties in this city and elsewhere.

Last weekend, the Housing Executive issued letters to a large number of people in west Belfast about the discovery of what it referred to as “low-grade white asbestos” in the roof spaces of various properties in Bingnian Drive and Bearnagh Drive. The Housing Executive has taken steps to assure people there that the risk is low and that it will be cleared up.

Several observations must be made about the Housing Executive’s response to that concern and the potential threat. The first is that the Housing Executive has decided that it will only inspect, clean and reinstate the roof spaces of the houses that it owns. That is unsatisfactory. Many people in those areas bought their properties from the Housing Executive. At the time of purchase, no reasonable inspection by them or by a surveyor would have revealed the presence of asbestos in the roof space.

Given that no reasonable inspection would have led to that discovery, it is incumbent upon the Housing Executive to rectify the defect and clear out the roof spaces of all properties potentially affected by what it refers to as “low-grade white asbestos”.

Secondly, the Housing Executive discovered the problem on the basis of an inspection of only 25 houses, in which it determined that there were only small traces of asbestos. I put it to the House that an inspection of 25 houses can be considered to be only preliminary in nature. To make a judgement about the real extent of the problem, the Housing Executive should inspect without delay the roof spaces of all the houses potentially affected in and around that area.

Thirdly, the houses in Bingnian Drive and Bearnagh Drive are terraced. There is a danger that even if the Housing Executive cleared out the roof spaces of its own properties, there would be cross-contamination with neighbouring properties in private hands that have not been cleared out and cleaned. To reassure people that there will be no contamination in the future, the Housing Executive should, as a matter of urgency, clear out those roof spaces in both public and private hands.

With regard to what is a potential and real threat, the Housing Executive claims that it has independent specialist opinion that the particular type of asbestos found on the properties presents, in its words, “a very low risk”. The Housing Executive should make public the basis on which it makes that assertion. If that evidence is not current or well founded, or is not based on up-to-date empirical analysis or ongoing research, it may not reassure people living in those properties that, as the Housing Executive says, there is a very low risk. It should publish the empirical basis on which it has come to that conclusion.

If it is proven that that evidence is not current or well grounded, the Housing Executive should conduct further independent research to determine whether the asbestos that still lingers in roof spaces in and around Bingnian Drive and Bearnagh Drive is or is not low risk. In all those circumstances, it should be able to indicate to concerned people in that area what the connection is between so-called low-grade white asbestos and ill health. What is the timescale between exposure and possible identification of ill health? What is the potential

of death arising from exposure, at whatever level, to low-grade white asbestos?

If we are to learn from the difficulties over many decades arising from exposure to asbestos in Harland & Wolff and elsewhere, it should be that it is the duty of public bodies, including the Housing Executive, to take all possible remedial steps quickly, to apply them equally and to give every reassurance based on medical and other evidence of the level of risk. In all those regards, the Housing Executive should be seen to act promptly.

I shall conclude by moving to the wider issue. Other Members will no doubt detail the history of asbestos use, risk and threat in workplaces in Northern Ireland. However, there are several particulars that should now be considered in order to bring quick closure to those who continue to suffer the effects of exposure to asbestos and to those who are still seeking compensation as a result of injury due to exposure to or on behalf of people who have died.

2.45 pm

Those initiatives should include various features. First, given that the Assembly is now paying the compensation, the Assembly, through the Executive, should lay down time limits and time frames within which every claim must be concluded. Otherwise, there will be further delay and doubt, and that will be no reassurance to the victims' families or the survivors. It is public money, so we have an obligation to lay down parameters within which to conclude those cases.

Secondly, given the recent House of Lords decision, an approach should be made to those organisations that still have insurance responsibilities for people in the North to ensure that they offer no further impediments to the settlement of cases. The House of Lords decision graphically reveals that insurance companies have habitually delayed cases in order to anticipate death and avoid responsibility. That should no longer be tolerated.

Thirdly — and I will conclude very quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker — there should be a special budget to ensure that people are not denied legal aid to pursue legal remedies. It should be possible to ensure that cases are brought to court and resolved quickly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It has been drawn to my attention that I gave Mr Attwood approximately 10 seconds extra. I did my long division sum on the basis that there would be more Members interested in speaking in the debate. As those Members are not present, it may be possible to allocate more time to other Members.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. He was actually given 20 seconds extra, but I do not think that anyone will get into a twist over it.

I start by referring to the Health and Safety Executive's press release of 5 February 2002. It said:

"All asbestos can cause cancer and the vast bulk of scientific evidence in the UK and abroad regards the risk from white asbestos as proven."

That takes me back to Mr Attwood's point. The problem of asbestos occurs in many places — it attacks in industry, schools and hospitals, and it is also evident in homes. Having taken on board the quote from the Health and Safety Executive, I am concerned that the Housing Executive has said that traces of white asbestos constitute a low risk. The same press release also said that:

"Building maintenance workers might be exposed to an estimated average of 0.1 fibres per millilitre of white asbestos over a working life which would create a risk equivalent to one death in 5,000 workers."

However, the Housing Executive has the cheek to tell its tenants that the asbestos is low risk.

I want to concentrate briefly on Housing Executive properties in the constituency of West Belfast. Over 13 years ago, the Housing Executive was concerned about asbestos in homes there, and it was advised to remove it. The Safety Advice Centre certified it, and the Housing Executive passed the work. Last year, concerns were raised that not all the asbestos had been removed. The Housing Executive carried out surveys and found samples of the very asbestos that should have been removed 13 years ago.

My concern is that out of 480 houses, 330 are now privately owned. People are being informed that there was asbestos in their homes 13 years ago when they were Housing Executive tenants and had been informed by the Housing Executive that the Safety Advice Centre had carried out the work. Now those 330 homeowners are being told that there is still evidence of asbestos in their homes. However, they will not come under the removal scheme. Those former tenants have been advised that it is low risk, but all asbestos can cause cancer. That has been proven.

The Health and Safety Executive has confirmed that building maintenance workers might be exposed to an estimated average of 0.1 fibres of white asbestos in every millilitre of air over a working life, creating a risk equivalent to one death in 5,000 workers. This raises such important questions that it is proper that we call for civil justice for asbestos sufferers.

I am concerned that asbestos is still causing problems today. As Monica McWilliams noted earlier, this problem does not belong to one Department alone. It affects the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when people are diagnosed with the disease; it falls under the remit of the Department for Social Development in terms of social housing; and it also concerns the Department for Employment and Learning. For that reason the Executive must address the problem, be it in industry, at home, in the shipyard, or in the Health Service, whose legacy of underfunding in turn affects asbestosis sufferers and their families.

The number 13 seems an appropriate number for today. The Housing Executive knew of problems in Andersonstown 13 years ago; 13 years later we are still waiting; and it has been highlighted that some people have been waiting for compensation for 13 years. That is a disgrace, and we must tackle the matter. Not only are those sufferers being ignored, but it is possible that people are still being exposed to asbestos, a known killer. We must ensure that the Housing Executive discharges its responsibilities to its tenants by proving that asbestos is not present in their homes.

Sinn Féin has sought copies of the Housing Executive's recent survey on the Andersonstown area, but was told that the survey cannot be released for legal reasons. I am concerned that that is being said today, only for us to find out next week that history is repeating itself.

I welcome the fact that Sean Neeson, Mick Murphy and John Kelly have brought this motion forward, and I support it. I also welcome the presence of some campaigners in the Gallery; of the Minister of Health, whose Department plays such a crucial role; and of Carmel Hanna, the Minister for Employment and Learning. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms McWilliams: It is sad that despite the knowledge that Greeks and Romans used asbestos and saw their slaves die of lung disease since before the first century, we were still learning about asbestos in the twentieth century.

Because this is a cross-departmental matter, I want to move directly to recommendations. Sean Neeson mentioned the horrific impact of asbestos on the shipyard workers who came to see us. In March, the Minister, Sir Reg Empey, announced that the Executive would pay out the huge sum of between £40 million and £50 million over the next four years and up to a total of £190 million by 2050. We are paying in the long term for what should have been paid more attention to by employers in the short term.

Achieving civil justice is extremely complicated. Anyone who has gone through the civil courts, whether for personal or business injury claims, will know that. I was shocked to learn that commercial and business compensation cases receive priority. Does every Member know that the courts take commercial and business cases first because they always have a backlog? It can take up to three or four years for asbestosis sufferers to get civil justice, not only because of the complications, but because other cases receive priority. The Department of Finance and Personnel and its Minister, Dr Farren, are responsible for civil justice. We must address that urgently, as was done in Scotland.

One of Scotland's Justice Committees, of which we do not have an equivalent, recommended that a judge be appointed to take responsibility for the litigation of those cases. Perhaps we should recommend that we examine

the issue of civil justice, which is a devolved matter, given the urgency of the situation. However, we should ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel also to appoint a judge. Then we could begin to process cases. Mr Attwood pointed out that we should look at timing because people are dying.

I took a relative through the court process of pursuing a personal injury claim, and it was extremely traumatic. Victims should not be victimised again by the system that they have turned to for help. They are already victims of a terrible illness, and there is a spectrum of illnesses beyond that. I asked a consultant at Belfast City Hospital to explain the range of illnesses that people suffer from when they have been in contact with asbestos. Some illnesses do not manifest themselves for a long time, and some people suffer a horrific type of respiratory illness. It is a terrible way to die, and sufferers' families have to watch them do so.

They are entitled to justice, because they have contracted the illness as a result of their occupation. In many cases, wives have it as a result of washing clothes that have come into contact with asbestos particles. Some victims' children have contracted the illness as a consequence of hugging their fathers after work, which every child loves to do. Now we hear that on top of the trauma and heartbreak, sufferers must wade for years through a complicated mess of litigation. A judge should be appointed for the litigation of those cases, which run into thousands. The judge to whom we give the responsibility will have a great deal of work to do. That is one of the more urgent recommendations to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

We also welcome last week's judgement in the House of Lords. It is a disgrace that sufferers had to go to the House of Lords to get employers to take responsibility. That leads me to the recommendation to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Its Minister, Sir Reg Empey, has just spoken about limited liability partnerships. In future, we should make it mandatory for employers to state who insures them. Some have gone bankrupt, such as in the case of the shipyard. Consequently, the Executive have taken responsibility for the insurance and are paying out huge sums of money. Since we have just debated liability, we should make it mandatory for companies to publish with whom they have taken out their employer's liability insurance, as well as their accounts, so that it is not up to solicitors to check who is responsible. To make employer liability insurance mandatory would be a simple yet important measure.

Mr Neeson said that cancer victims face huge complications when dealing with the Department for Social Development. Again I speak from a personal perspective, as my sister has recently been diagnosed with cancer. It is an added burden to have to deal with bureaucracy day after day to check what benefits she is entitled to.

3.00 pm

Mr Neeson has reported on a constituent who is already suffering, and who is being told that he will be denied incapacity benefit. Again, that is a disgraceful situation. People are being told what they will be denied, but are they then being told that matters will be sorted out and that they will be informed of what they are entitled to? That issue should be seriously addressed by the Department for Social Development.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety recently held an inquiry into cancer services. One of its major findings was the huge amount of bureaucracy that victims of cancer have to suffer in trying to discover their entitlements. For example, if they are self-employed, they need to find out whom they can turn to and whom they can fall back on. A long time can pass before they receive a single penny. My sister was diagnosed three months ago, but she has yet to receive a single penny. That is just one case, but other constituents have told me about the difficulties that they have faced in their illnesses. The Department must carefully consider those serious matters. What happens to people with a specific disease at the point of diagnosis, and how long will it take before they are entitled to some form of welfare, given that they have no other income?

The point has been made about the Housing Executive's investigation into homes. The debate today seems to have focused on occupational welfare. However, we may be looking at tenants' welfare in the near future. I urge the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland to publicise information about wearing masks and protective clothing, and to ensure that that information is taken seriously by men. I have spoken to men in the construction industry recently who told me that they are reluctant to wear protective clothing, masks and gloves in case they are seen as being pansies. Is that a weakness in our culture? Is it an attitude that has not been addressed seriously enough? We now know that smoking is a danger to health. So too is exposing oneself to substances that can cause cancers. People must take that seriously. Where employers have failed in their responsibility, individuals must take responsibility for themselves. Health and safety bodies must constantly be urged to put that message across.

I urge the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give as much support as possible to the Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke Association, which recently came to Stormont to discuss the difficulties that are faced in relation to respiratory illnesses, and the support for the victims of asbestosis, such as the increasing need for nebulisers. We now realise how important it is to have a regional cancer centre. People are coming forward in thousands and are having to go through the antiquated Belvoir Park Hospital. The sooner a decision is reached on the new regional cancer centre, the better.

The Minister for Employment and Learning is present to speak about the Statutory Rules that have recently been introduced. It seems that on the one hand there are flat-rate payments, yet Statutory Rules are constantly being introduced to increase payments in line with inflation. Perhaps there is a less bureaucratic way to look at that entire issue. The debate has not just been about civil justice — it has been widened to take into account all the types of injustice that are currently taking place. That is why I lay the responsibility for that injustice at the doors of many Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the next Member to speak that there is some flexibility on time.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support my Colleagues Mr Neeson and Mr John Kelly in proposing the motion.

The victims of asbestosis, and their families, are calling for compensation claims to be resolved with speed and urgency. They want to see an end to the use of asbestos in buildings. They want the removal of asbestos from roof spaces in all homes, and proper control of that removal, so that workers and householders are not in danger of contamination.

All water main pipes containing asbestos must be removed. The country is full of them, and has been for years. It is ridiculous. Every time such a pipe bursts, it is cut in order to repair it. Asbestos is carried into the water and directly into the home. That is not on; it must stop, and the Minister for Regional Development will have to take it on board.

The situation is improving. New water mains are being installed in many areas. Importantly, however, people are not being told that there is a small percentage of asbestos in the new pipes. It has been denied, but my information categorically shows that there is asbestos in those pipes. It is coated round the outside of the pipe. Burst pipes are repaired by sawing through them. Asbestos, therefore, is getting into the water supply and is causing more problems.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, thousands of victims have suffered a catalogue of problems, including cancer, enormous stress and disabilities. Homes containing asbestos have caused numerous health problems. The Minister of Health must take that on board.

Asbestos victims have never been properly treated or compensated, either by Governments or companies, which are directly responsible. Victims took the health and safety laws that said that asbestos would not kill or cause illness at face value. The Housing Executive is now doing the same thing. Many workers from Harland & Wolff are suffering from exposure to asbestos. What about public liability? For many years, big insurance companies have been getting enormous amounts of

money from public liability cover, yet they refuse to pay the victims. It is time that that point was taken on board.

Responsibility lies with the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. They must act now on behalf of the victims. As with the Fairchild judgement, the High Court will force Carmel Hanna's Department to act. A safety net must be put in place for asbestosis sufferers. Better legislation is required to effectively hold companies to account. I thank all the Members who have supported the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I acknowledge and highlight the very real human cost of this dreadful disease, not only to the individuals who contract it, but also to their families. Through recent coverage, we have all seen the plight of sufferers and how their lives are literally taken away from them, in some cases in just a few short months, leaving their families bereaved and in shock. As a human being, I can only offer my deep sympathies to all those afflicted by this terrible disease.

First, I will refer to the recent House of Lords' judgement on the Fairchild ruling. Many people in Northern Ireland and Great Britain have been afflicted by dust-related industrial diseases, particularly mesothelioma, as a result of their past working environment. It can be many years before the symptoms are detected. Therefore, a significant period may elapse before sufferers realise that a disease caused by their working environment is afflicting them.

For workers who have been affected by asbestos in their working environment to seek redress, the legal process is clear. Individuals take civil actions against their past employers through the court system. In many cases that worked well and people received appropriate redress. Moreover, where the relevant employer had gone out of business or could not be identified, the Government provided the pneumoconiosis (workers' compensation) scheme in respect of dust-related diseases, and that is administered by my Department.

However, Members are aware that some people who were exposed to asbestos by more than one employer have had real and substantial difficulties in pursuing their claims. The Court of Appeal explicitly addressed those difficulties in the Fairchild ruling. The effect of that ruling was that sufferers from work-related mesothelioma who had worked for more than one employer were prevented from seeking compensation through the courts if they could not prove which employer was responsible.

In the light of concerns expressed about the Fairchild ruling, I took action in the short term to help affected sufferers from work-related mesothelioma. On 22 April, I announced that the pneumoconiosis scheme in respect of dust-related diseases would be extended to cover qualifying workers affected by the ruling, provided that

the eligibility conditions were met. Mesothelioma is a terrible disease, and it would have been dreadfully wrong for former employees and their families to have been left without help as a result of that court judgement.

The Fairchild ruling was taken to the House of Lords, which adjourned the appeal against it until 7 May 2002. On 16 May, it was announced that the House of Lords had set aside the ruling. Although we await the detail of that judgement, my understanding is that people who suffer from work-related mesothelioma and who worked for more than one employer are no longer prevented from seeking compensation through the courts. I am pleased that sufferers now have access to compensation, to which they are rightly entitled.

When the decision by the House of Lords is published, my Department, together with other Departments, must examine the detailed reasons behind it carefully. We can then determine further necessary action in relation to the pneumoconiosis (workers' compensation) scheme. With regard to primary responsibility for the provision of compensation for sufferers, the current position is clear. Responsibility rests with the employers and their insurers, and, to date, that point seems to have been accepted by insurance companies in the immediate aftermath of the judgement by the House of Lords. My Department will therefore have little change to make to the pneumoconiosis (workers' compensation) scheme.

My past responses have dealt with the implications of the Fairchild ruling. I recently announced a plan to extend provisions specifically to cover those affected by it. The judgement by the House of Lords may now have made that extension unnecessary. However, my Department will continue to monitor the situation carefully.

It is accepted that the legacy of human suffering resulting from past exposure to asbestos is terrible. Northern Ireland is not unique in that regard. It is currently estimated that in Northern Ireland previous exposure to asbestos causes, or contributes to, approximately 60 to 80 deaths each year. Asbestos-related diseases are currently responsible for an estimated 3,400 deaths a year in Great Britain. It is estimated that the number of deaths resulting from such diseases will not peak for a further 10 to 20 years. Tragically, the full extent of the dangers of asbestos was not realised by Government, employers or employees until it was — sadly — too late for so many people.

3.15 pm

Asbestos was used widely in the shipbuilding, ship repair, thermal insulation and building industries from the 1940s to the 1970s, mainly because of its superior insulation and fire-resistant properties.

Asbestos-related diseases remain latent for a long time; typically, 35 to 40 years will elapse between a person's exposure to the substance and the development

of a disease. It was, therefore, only after many workers were exposed to asbestos that the true extent of the danger was fully appreciated and legislation introduced to better control its use. The use of asbestos is banned in Northern Ireland.

We cannot undo what has been done, but we have learnt important lessons, and we should continue to do so. Northern Ireland's stringent legislation to control the use of asbestos is comparable with that of any other country in Europe. The Health and Safety Executive's inspectors are responsible for that legislation.

The situation is more complex for private citizens. Responsibility for asbestos control falls to different Government Departments or the court system, depending on such factors as how the material was used, the environment in which it was found and the owner of the premises. Each citizen has a large responsibility for his or her health, safety and welfare. To that end, I am aware of the need for comprehensive, objective information on asbestos and the related health and safety, social and financial issues. That is especially important given that a problem has been identified in Andersonstown, in respect of which I hope an agreement will be reached between the Housing Executive and local residents, whether they own their houses or not.

The debate helped us to identify many information issues that must be addressed. All Departments, including my officials, will take note of all the matters raised and will address them as speedily as possible. I thank the Members who proposed the motion, and those who participated in the debate, for highlighting these important issues that tragically affect many people, and which I hope will be addressed seriously.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad that such an important issue has been debated. It is important because asbestosis and related diseases have brought tragedy to many families and have been covered up for many years. I am glad that Robbie Brown and his colleagues are here today with their wives and children. They have fought a tough campaign to highlight the sustained suffering that they have endured without any public or political attention.

I am glad, too, that the Law Lords, in their wisdom, made their recent ruling. Trade unions and lawyers agree that the judgement will help thousands of sufferers and will teach the insurance industry a lesson that it will never forget. The insurance industry has consistently denied its responsibility to those who were left without any recourse to claim compensation for the effects that, unbeknown to them, exposure to asbestos had on them.

The people themselves did not know that they were breathing in death. Death by asbestosis is described as a silent death, a death that comes unnoticed. As someone who served his time in a small Corporation Street marine repair yard in the early 1950s, I know that asbestos was

the only material that was available for lagging pipes. It was there in the morning, during the day, in the evening and at tea break. Asbestos was everywhere. It was thrown about, yet people were unaware that they were breathing in death. That alone was bad enough, but it was even worse to discover that insurance companies in particular, and unscrupulous employers, tried to evade their responsibilities. The Law Lords' judgement has cut off that escape hatch for those unscrupulous employers and insurance companies.

I want to thank those Members who contributed to the debate. Many Members have spoken in support of the motion, and I am glad about that. I will not rehash everything that they said, but all aspects have been well ventilated. Mr Neeson mentioned issues that campaigners against asbestosis raised with us.

The comments on Housing Executive houses in Andersonstown were new to me. I was unaware that that was a factor that caused asbestosis among people who were unaware that they were being exposed to asbestos daily.

I pay tribute to the Assembly's research services, which supplied us with information on asbestosis and asbestos about which we were unaware. We learned that asbestos was first heard of 2,000 years ago when the Greeks used it for yarn, and people died from lung-related diseases in those days — that is how far back the disease goes.

I recommend that compensation be exclusive of benefits. People who receive compensation should not be punished by having their benefits cut or stopped. That is the current situation for people with asbestosis. Compensation should be payable after someone has died from asbestosis. The wives and children who are left behind should remain beneficiaries of that compensation.

Today I was talking to an Assembly staff member whose father worked in the shipyard. His father recently had an X-ray taken that showed the presence of asbestos fibres on his lungs. That man carried asbestos home from work on his overalls, as did many shipyard workers. Mothers and daughters shook out the overalls and the dust was in the kitchen, the sitting room and the yard. Unknowingly, even the children breathed in death.

I welcome the presence of the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, given the seriousness of the subject, it is disappointing that other Ministers are absent.

As Monica McWilliams said, innocent children who hugged their fathers when they came home from work are now infected with asbestosis without knowing it. According to researchers, asbestosis is a silent and invisible killer that lies dormant for up to 40 years before striking in the form of a terrifying and painful illness.

I have just been reminded that Desmond Nesbitt is here. I am sorry for not including the Member in my remarks.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): Mr Deputy Speaker, my name is Dermot. Is that the Irish?

Mr J Kelly: I was using the vernacular. Sorry.

One lawyer described the ruling as the most significant decision in the history of industrial disease compensation. Like many people here, I worked in industry. We have been ignored. Diseases such as dermatitis and other industrial-related illnesses have been ignored over the years. This ruling might mark a watershed, and all industrial diseases may now be put under the spotlight and dealt with properly. This case has been settled as we had hoped it would be for those who have suffered silently and for so long from asbestosis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the plight of asbestosis sufferers in Northern Ireland and calls for proper civil justice for asbestos victims.

DIABETES

Mr Davis: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle immediately the serious issue of diabetes commencing with a screening programme for those adults who fall within high risk groups.

I will accept the amendment in the names of Dr Hendron and Mrs Courtney.

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

“Diabetes — possible to deal with, deadly to ignore” is the sound bite used by Diabetes UK, the primary group that represents diabetes sufferers. I thank that group for its work on researching and promoting awareness of the illness. However, the issue is not given the coverage that it deserves in the political arena, and I am grateful, therefore, that time has been set aside for this debate.

I must declare a personal interest, because I suffer from type 2 diabetes. Recently, I was interested to note that the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, is also a sufferer, and I am glad to hear that he is prepared to work with Diabetes UK.

A joint task force on diabetes was established in March 2001 to consider Northern Ireland’s response to the diabetes national service framework in England. Some might argue that the motion should have been debated after the report is published; however, the motion will help to highlight this much-neglected issue and move things forward. As the motion suggests, the debate has two simple objectives. First, the problem must be highlighted, and secondly, we must support the call for a screening process.

The facts about the seriousness of diabetes are startling — even frightening. The disease’s seriousness was highlighted in Diabetes UK’s presentation in the Long Gallery. I congratulate them on the success of that event.

3.30 pm

Forty thousand people in Northern Ireland suffer from diabetes. It is estimated that nearly 4,000 people are suffering from it in my constituency, Lagan Valley; in the Health Minister’s constituency, West Belfast, the number of sufferers is approximately 3,500. This includes those who are aware that they have diabetes and those who are not, which is why screening is needed. That is another reason for screening: 25,000 people have the condition but do not actually know, which is worrying. That supports my argument for the introduction of a carefully planned screening programme, but I shall deal with that in more detail later.

As well as affecting many people in Northern Ireland, the condition also has a major impact on NHS resources. This debate comes at a time when the Minister of

Health, Social Services and Public Safety is continually saying that the NHS is severely underfunded. If diabetes were dealt with more effectively, then the NHS would be able to save substantial resources. Some may question that, but according to Diabetes UK, diabetes accounts for approximately 9% of hospital costs in Northern Ireland, which is the equivalent of over £100 million a year. If diabetes were taken seriously, which is the objective of this motion, the NHS would not only be able to save money, it would also deal more effectively with the condition. Recent research has revealed that in Britain there is a shortage of specialists to deal with diabetes, and I will be pursuing this matter with the Minister to see if the same situation exists in Northern Ireland.

Turning to a screening programme, you may ask what I mean by “serious”, and what do I actually want to see happening. As the motion says, it is important that a programme of screening be introduced. This programme would not cover every adult in Northern Ireland — that is not really feasible. I am suggesting that adults in high-risk groups should be screened. For instance, it is recognised that the older you are, the greater the risk of diabetes. Also, diabetes runs in families, and the closer the relative, the greater the risk. It also appears that the vast majority of those with type 2 diabetes are overweight at diagnosis, so certain groups of people are immediately at high risk. Evidence suggests that people with type 2 diabetes have the condition for between nine and 12 years before they are diagnosed. Consequently, over one third of people with type 2 diabetes have at least one complication at the time that happens.

Of course, there are issues and details that need to be carefully considered. For example, how often should screening take place; where would someone go to be screened; and would it be appropriate for pharmacies with adequately trained staff to offer such a facility? Then there are the consequences of screening. If someone is diagnosed with diabetes, support has to be available to him and his family. Diabetes is a chronic condition, and there are many other effects beside the medical ones. Being diagnosed means a change of lifestyle, including employment and insurance matters.

Diabetes UK has been calling for such a screening programme for many years now to reduce the impact of the disease on people and NHS resources. That is why I tabled a question to the Minister on 15 June 2000 on examining the need for a screening programme. However, to the best of my knowledge, nothing has resulted from that.

I urge the Assembly to support this important motion.

Mrs Courtney: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 1 after “Assembly” insert:

“recognises the serious threat to health and to healthcare resources posed by the rapid increase in the incidence of diabetes, looks forward to the publication of the report of the task force on diabetes and”

I thank Mr Davis for tabling the motion and for accepting our amendment, which adds to the motion rather than detracts from it. We want the report of the task force, but we agree with the spirit of the motion and with everything in it.

The initiative on diabetes in Northern Ireland incorporates a multidisciplinary approach and was launched in March 2001. The initiative involved establishing a joint task force between the Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST) and Diabetes UK Northern Ireland. The task force is chaired by Dr McClements, who is the first convenor of CREST. It has a broad representation that includes healthcare professionals, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, representatives from public health, education and training, psychology and pharmacy, people with diabetes, and carers and representatives from the Republic of Ireland. It was a response to the national service framework for diabetes in England, Scotland and Wales. A vital factor in the task force’s work is the focus on patient involvement. Crucially, the real experts in living with diabetes — the patients — have been central to shaping its work.

We must ask what diabetes is and how much we know about it. It is defined as a chronic condition in which the amount of glucose or sugar in the blood is too high because the body cannot use it properly. Normally, the body produces a hormone called insulin that helps the glucose to move from the blood into the cells where it is used as fuel by the body. Forty thousand people in Northern Ireland have diabetes, and it is estimated that a further 25,000 remain undiagnosed. One pound in every seven spent in the Health Service here goes toward diabetic care. Better education may lead to prevention in future and therefore reduce spending.

As the condition is largely treatable, it tends not to be taken as seriously as it would be were the full implications known. These include blindness — diabetes is the main cause of blindness in people of working age in the United Kingdom. Diabetes is also the main cause of end-stage kidney failure and a main cause of lower limb amputation. I know that because three young cousins of mine died, and they all had to have toes amputated before their deaths. Diabetes increases a person’s chance of a stroke by three, and it increases a person’s risk of heart disease by five. It can also seriously damage other parts of the body.

Ignorance is a major problem with diabetes. People read up on its dangers only after they have been diagnosed — when it is already too late. We must find out why the condition is chronic.

There are two types of diabetes. In type 1, the immune system turns against the body, destroys the insulin and produces cells in the pancreas. This results in a complete deficiency of insulin. It is most often diagnosed in children and young people, although it can

occur at any age. Symptoms are often marked, and diagnosis usually follows quickly. It is treated with insulin injections and by change of diet.

Type two is caused by a shortage of insulin or by a fault in the body's response to insulin. Most people will have type 2, which mainly affects people over 40. The symptoms are less marked, with the result that it often goes undiagnosed. Type 2 can be treated by diet alone, by diet and tablets or by diet and insulin injections.

What are the dangers if it is not diagnosed? Too many people are diagnosed so late that they are already developing complications by the time of diagnosis. On average, people will have type 2 diabetes for nine to 12 years before diagnosis, and up to 50% of them develop complications by the time they are diagnosed. Only 46% of people know that death is a possible result of diabetes. There is diabetes in my family; two of my cousins died of diabetes in their 40s. It is a killer. Of those at highest risk, 76% do not know that they are in danger. Too many people are suffering and dying unnecessarily as a result of the complications they develop — complications that can be avoided, and one of the most proficient ways of doing that is to raise awareness dramatically of the condition, highlight the symptoms and promote a positive, preventative approach. Increased thirst, going to the toilet excessively, especially at night, extreme tiredness, weight loss and blurred vision are some of the symptoms to look out for.

The best way of avoiding diabetes, as well as many other illnesses, is to follow a healthy diet. Keeping blood sugar levels within healthy limits is a keystone of diabetes management. Preventing diabetes therefore means avoiding sugary foods, and targeting foods with a low glycaemic index such as unrefined brown rice and bread, oats and grains, following the recommended nutritional guidelines of eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, drinking lots of water and getting plenty of exercise.

Diabetes can adversely affect everyday living in other ways. Unless their diabetes is very well controlled, those taking insulin may be precluded from taking some jobs in, for example, the Police Service, the Fire and Ambulance Services, the armed forces and the merchant navy and the Prison Service. They cannot be train drivers, airline pilots, air traffic controllers, cabin crew (on some airlines only) or have any job which requires a HGV or passenger-carrying licence. Some local authorities have a blanket ban on all types of drivers, including cab drivers, who have been diagnosed as having diabetes. As has already been stated, having diabetes can affect a person's ability to drive, and if one has been diagnosed, one must tell the vehicle licensing authority and one's insurance company. If the diabetes is well-controlled and a person takes care, he should be able to do most jobs.

People should remember that they are in control, and there are diabetic specialist nurses in most hospitals who

will give advice if anyone is in doubt. People who are on insulin should carry it with them and avoid a hypoglycaemic attack — where blood sugar falls to a dangerous level. They should also keep a sweet drink, for example, Lucozade with them. I agree with screening and family members should be screened.

The task force will distribute the draft recommendations for consultation over the summer, and the completed guidelines will be published in the autumn of 2002. This Assembly must recognise that these recommendations represent the best opportunity to establish an effective framework to ensure quality healthcare for those with diabetes living in Northern Ireland. The Executive must prioritise diabetes in a meaningful way and resource the task force's recommendations fully or the problem will spiral into the next century.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to support the motion and the amendment, which Mr Davis has already accepted. I congratulate him for bringing this very important debate to the House today.

Diabetes is undoubtedly a condition with which all Members will be familiar. Three in every 100 persons are now likely to be affected by it, so I would be most surprised to learn that there was anyone in the Chamber who did not have some knowledge of the disease in either of its two forms.

I would like to draw particular attention to the earnest, hard work done by voluntary groups throughout the Province. Mr Davis has already mentioned that, and I concur with his remarks, because as well as providing a forum for those people who have the condition, they have offered support for their families, friends and carers.

Significant advances have been made in our understanding of diabetes and in our capacity to treat those who have been diagnosed with the illness to enable them to live longer and healthier lives. However, as well as those whom we know have been diagnosed as having diabetes, there are those who have not yet been diagnosed, and I will come to the reasons for that.

3.45 pm

It is the strategy of many of those groups to bring so much attention to the subject that diabetes can no longer be ignored as a healthcare priority in Northern Ireland. It is no longer an option to deny the seriousness of the disease. It is a lifelong chronic condition, and it is rapidly increasing.

As the Diabetes UK Northern Ireland association said when it lobbied us in the Assembly last month, diabetes has become an issue that is "too deadly to ignore". Recent figures bear testimony to that, and I congratulate it on its straightforward presentation. This is a very clear and stark reality: diabetes is too deadly to ignore.

There are 65,000 diabetes sufferers in Northern Ireland. While the known figure is 40,000, the worrying facts show that 25,000 people do not know that they have it.

From speaking with diabetes sufferers in my constituency I have learnt that it is not uncommon for a person to live with type 2 diabetes for nine to 12 years before it is diagnosed. That is totally unacceptable, and one of the reasons we are having this debate.

Consequently, over one third of those with type 2 diabetes have established complications on diagnosis that might not have developed had they been detected earlier. There is a need for prevention and early screening, particularly for high-risk groups such as those with a family history of diabetes, those aged between 40 and 75 — and that will include quite a number in the Chamber — and those who are overweight, which will include some more in the Chamber.

I was concerned when I read in a recent communication from a diabetes support group in Mid Ulster that many have died prematurely or have developed diabetes complications such as heart disease, stroke and blindness simply because they went undiagnosed for years and were completely unaware that they had this life-threatening condition.

It is not widely known that diabetes can kill. Each year, thousands of lives are blighted by a condition that can be treated successfully. That is the other side. It can kill — “too deadly to ignore” — but it can be treated successfully if detected early. It is important to remember that life expectancy is reduced, on average, by more than 20 years for people with type 1 diabetes and by up to 10 years for people with type 2.

Mortality rates from coronary heart disease are up to five times higher in people with diabetes, while the risk of a stroke is up to three times higher. Those are startling figures and merit serious consideration. Diabetes is the leading cause of renal failure, accounting for more than one in six people starting renal replacement therapy, the second most common cause of lower limb amputation and the leading cause of blindness in people of working age. With that being a factor, and medical science knowing it, why is the Health Service not taking it more seriously and dealing with it?

Diabetes leads to additional risks in pregnancy. Women with diabetes have an increased chance of losing the baby during pregnancy or at birth, of having a baby with a congenital malformation and of the baby dying in infancy. That shows the seriousness of the situation.

The ability to recognise the symptoms and the increasing of public awareness through the introduction of screening programmes are the key recommendations for dealing with diabetes in England. I have no doubt that such principles will also find a place in the Northern Ireland task force's report on diabetes.

The number of people affected by diabetes in Northern Ireland is expected to double by 2010. That will undoubtedly put a severe toll on an already over-

stretched health budget. What is being done to address the situation? The presence of diabetic complications increases National Health Service costs more than fivefold, as it does the chance of a person needing hospital admission.

Diabetes also has a profound impact on social services costs, with one in 20 people incurring annual costs whether in residential care or at home. That puts another strain on the Health Service. However, we always return to the fact that diabetes can be treated and can be cured. Research has shown that early screening, especially of high-risk groups, has the potential to save lives and improve the quality of life. It is essential that the public are made aware of what screening programmes are available, and the importance of having a particular test or examination must be emphasised.

A modern, patient-focused approach is required that will not only deliver a strategy aimed at care and prevention through an appropriate screening programme, but will provide a service of first choice, not one of last resort.

I support the motion and the amendment.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Ivan Davis, Joe Hendron and Annie Courtney for tabling the motion and the amendment to it. Like other Members, I commend the community and voluntary organisations for their valuable work in this field, not only for sufferers of diabetes, but for their families too — because the disease has a knock-on effect.

I do not intend to repeat all the figures that have been highlighted. Ivan Davis pointed out that 40,000 people here suffer from diabetes and that a further 25,000 are unaware that they have the disease. That is a matter for concern, because people will have lifestyle problems and remain unaware of their cause. It has been pointed out that the effects of diabetes include heart disease, kidney disease, blindness and, most surprisingly, premature death. Some sufferers of the disease also have to have limbs amputated, so it is crucial that those facts are publicised.

I thank Ivan Davis for accepting the amendment tabled by Dr Hendron and Mrs Courtney. I welcome the thinking behind the motion. On reading it, I can see that a common sense approach is the most sensible way ahead. We are targeting those adults who are in the high-risk group. There is no evidence to suggest that universal screening would be effective. The motion does not call for universal screening; it is about targeting and identifying adults in the high-risk group.

There is emerging evidence that it may be good clinical practice and cost-effective to offer screening to sub-groups of the population who present multiple risk factors for diabetes. As many of the risk factors are similar, that could be combined with screening for cardiovascular disease. The evidence, however, is not

definitive, so the screening committee has recommended further analysis of the existing research as well as further research into which sub-groups should be included in the screening programme, how to identify the people in those groups, whether it is better to rely on opportunistic screening by healthcare professionals, the sort of tests that should be used, how often people should be tested and the balance between the benefits and the drawbacks of early diagnosis.

The task force that was set up in 2001 is due to report in the autumn. One issue arising from the screening committee's work is the importance of early detection of diabetes, but there is a possibility that — and I could be wrong — the task force will wait for evidence from the screening committee, and that could take up until 2005.

Members have highlighted the different causes of type 2 diabetes, and I do not think that I should waste anyone's time by going over them. The causes can be genetic or related to lifestyle or social class. With regard to prevention, Members have a duty to highlight the 'Investing for Health' strategy, which was announced by the Health Minister some weeks ago. All Ministers and Departments are responsible for delivering on it. It involves the promotion of physical activity and improvements in diet and nutrition, the prevention of obesity and a reduction in the number of people who are overweight — I am a classic example of that.

As Members have said, it is better to prevent diabetes than to treat it, and we can take that from the 'Investing for Health' strategy. The Minister for Social Development is committed to removing 8,000 households a year from fuel poverty. That is a core aspect of deprivation. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is committed to pursuing an increase in participation in sporting activities. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a 'Be Active, Be Healthy' strategy. The Department of Education is implementing its 'Catering for Healthier Lifestyles' strategy in September 2002. Although we are talking about diabetes and the responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, ultimately, the Minister, the 'Investing for Health' strategy has to come into play because we are talking about prevention as well as cure.

I have one concern about the amendment. Although we agree to support it, the members in whose name it is are looking forward to the report of the joint task force, but they then go on to say that we should introduce screening now. We are probably pre-empting the outcome of the task force. However, the motion, as amended, is very good, and Sinn Féin will be supporting it.

Mr McCarthy: I will support any proposal or amendment that seeks to help the plight of people suffering from diabetes. I also welcome the presence of the Minister here today. I see that she is taking notes, and I am sure that she will act when the opportunity

arises. I also attended the presentation in the Long Gallery a few days ago, and I pay tribute to those people who so ably explained the suffering and needs of diabetics and all the risks associated with the disease.

As health spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I am extremely concerned at the apparent lack of knowledge. Mr Davis commented on the lack of public knowledge of this terrible disease. The leaflet that was produced by Diabetes UK gives some startling statistics, and it must make public representatives and health providers sit up, take notice and do something. The figures are astronomical. Diabetes accounts for 9% of NHS spending — some £14 million a day throughout the United Kingdom.

This figure could be reduced drastically if the disease were treated in its early stages or prevented in the first place.

4.00 pm

Diabetes UK has described the disease as the epidemic of the twenty-first century. Unless urgent action is taken by the Department of Health, things can only get worse. Currently 40,000 people in Northern Ireland have been diagnosed with diabetes, which leads to heart disease, blindness, kidney disease, lower limb amputation and finally death. These figures are expected to increase twofold unless drastic action is taken to call a halt to the epidemic.

The Northern Ireland Task Force on Diabetes is currently conducting an inquiry, and we look forward to its recommendations, which will be reported in September or October. We will then look to the Executive to prioritise diabetes and to provide funding so that it can be eradicated as far as possible. We need early detection and early remedies to surmount the disease. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Hamilton: Rev McCrea mentioned that many Members know someone who suffers from diabetes; my mother has the condition. I am glad that the debate is taking place, and I look forward to positive action in this area.

Diabetes UK's Northern Ireland representative, Stephen McGowan, is in the Public Gallery to listen to the debate. I have had a long series of discussions with him. It is estimated that 3,746 people in my constituency of Strangford suffer from diabetes. However, the figure includes 1,000 people who are not yet aware that they have the disease. If anyone asks why we need a screening programme, they should be shown those figures as well as others quoted by Members. I agree with my Colleague, Mr Davis, that any such screening programme should not be aimed indiscriminately at adults in the Province; it should target high-risk groups such as the elderly and those with a family connection to the condition.

It is worrying that many people do not consider diabetes to be a serious condition. This point was recently

reinforced by Diabetes UK, which commented that 46% of people in Northern Ireland do not realise that diabetes can be fatal. It is also interesting — but disturbing — that 76% of people who are at high risk from diabetes do not know that they are. The issue must be dealt with in a sensible and correct manner, starting with a screening programme.

I look forward to the report of the Northern Ireland Task Force on Diabetes, and I congratulate Diabetes UK and the Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST) on the task force's wide-ranging membership. Hopefully this will result in a report full of helpful suggestions that will not be set aside by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Indeed, it should be analysed carefully and any useful policies or measures should be implemented as soon as is practicable.

It is worth noting the link between diabetes and mental health. Four in every 10 people who suffer from diabetes will also suffer from depression or anxiety. Research conducted by Dr David Knopman in the United States argues that there is a link between diabetes and mental illness. He comments that

"Treatment of diabetes is important even in middle age, not just in the elderly, for preventing cognitive decline in later life. Therefore treatment must not be left until the last possible moment and a screening programme would help to develop an efficient and earlier response to diabetes."

The National Health Service should work closely on matters of mental health to get to the root of the problem. In Northern Ireland, there is a lack of psychological support for diabetics. As far as I am aware, there is no such support outside Belfast. Mental illness, such as depression, can lead to severe worsening of diabetes.

Diabetes is not being taken seriously enough, as is demonstrated by its rapid rise throughout the UK. With that in mind, I strongly support the motion, and I hope that the Minister will not easily dismiss the House's views.

Mr Shannon: Ilka sennicht it seems that we'r protestin that ae group or anither in the Halth Service hae its parteiclar wants an misters wrut lairge. A — an, A'm shuir, a whein ither fowk in this Chaumer — can haurdlie credit it that, insteid o the Meinister warin siller whaur it's nott, the'r siller gaein on haivers the lyke o signs. Gif siller wes wared on immident problems an investit in hinnerin disaise, we'd mebbe see the Halth Service back on its pins insteid o gettin slawlie smusht unner the wecht o fowk waitin on tent, traetment an help.

Diabetes haes neir cum an epidemic in this kintra, wi mair nor 40,000 tholin a disaise that taks fowk down awthegither whyles, causin hert an neir problems along wi blinndness an bluidflaw problems as can cum aff in the amputation o airms an legs. The exeistence o this wapon-gret percentage o fowk in Norlin Airland is made mair complicate wi fower in 10 o thir fowk tholin

gloums an stress. As Paul Street fae Diabetes UK haes alloued, "Diabetes is ower deidlie ti sling a deifie."

It seems that every week the Assembly calls for one group or another in the Health Service to have its wants and needs highlighted. It is incredible that money is spent on signage and trivial things instead of being spent where it is needed. If money were spent on immediate problems and invested in preventing disease, perhaps the National Health Service would recover instead of being slowly squashed under the weight of people who are waiting for care, treatment and help.

Diabetes has become almost epidemic in Northern Ireland. Over 40,000 people suffer from a disease that can be debilitating, can cause heart and kidney problems, blindness and circulation problems that can lead to the amputation of limbs. Four in 10 of these huge numbers also suffer from depression and stress. Paul Street of Diabetes UK has told us that diabetes is too deadly to ignore.

One of the main reasons for the increase in diabetes is obesity. More and more children, as well as adults, are obese because of their sedentary lifestyles. Children and adults alike are more likely to be found in front of the television than walking or playing sport on sunny evenings — when we ever have them. While people sit in front of the television, they seem to be eating more processed fatty foods, which contribute to the growing numbers of overweight people. That means that 20,000 diabetics could be dying from coronary heart disease. Diabetics aged under 20 die mainly from diabetic ketosis. All those deaths are preventable.

It is a startling fact that most people with type 2 diabetes have had the condition for between nine and 12 years before they are diagnosed and have usually acquired some of the most severe symptoms. Therefore, their treatment is more involved and puts an increasing strain not only on them but also on the Health Service that we all subscribe to.

It is estimated that at least 50% of GP surgeries have no policy for screening patients for diabetes. That is incredible, given that at least 4% of the population of Northern Ireland suffer from diabetes. Therefore, many people have lost the opportunity to be diagnosed early and to receive preventative procedures before the disease gets out of control and kills them. Perhaps we can have some response about preventative medicine and actions.

A test for diabetes can be as simple as an eye test. Inevitably, there will be initial costs, but fewer patients would occupy hospital beds because they could control their diabetes through diet, exercise and insulin. That is a clear example of spending money to save money in the long run. Is the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety too short-sighted to see what the rest of us see — that an impending diabetes epidemic is about to take hold of the country? Many Members were impressed by the facts that were outlined and the

concerns that were expressed in a presentation about diabetes in the Long Gallery.

If something as simple as an eye test could save someone's life, it is surely the duty of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, indeed, of Government to initiate such a programme. It is estimated that at least one million people have diabetes but do not know it and may have to wait nine to 12 years before it is detected. Those one million people — roughly the population of Northern Ireland — could be helped if the Government, and especially the Department, took it upon themselves to be forward-thinking, and progressive and if, instead of dealing with the consequences, they deal with the threat before it grips the nation completely.

It was revealed in the press yesterday that the number of diabetes specialists is not adequate to deal with the growing numbers of people being diagnosed. That is another issue that the Department can address. It is also thought that the current failure to obtain enough specialists means that the Health Service will be short of specialists for years to come, which will compound the situation. That is another reason for a preventative rather than a curative programme.

At least three quarters of the people at the greatest risk of developing diabetes have no idea that they fall into that category. All those statistics are frightening to people on the street — however, they are real. Something must be done about the situation now.

The diabetic epidemic costs the National Health Service £165 a second, or £9,900 a minute. Imagine how much has been spent while we have been debating the issue and how much will be spent by the time we are finished. The mind boggles, especially when most of the money need not have been spent had there been adequate screening and education, and enough staff in the Health Service, to deal with the disease. I support the amendment and the motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate Mr Shannon on his frequent use of Ulster Scots. It takes me back to my school days when I was taught Robbie Burns. It is good to hear it spoken in the Chamber.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate because like asbestosis, which was the subject of an earlier debate, diabetes is a silent disease that creeps up on people and, suddenly they are diagnosed as being diabetic. Increasingly, diabetes is affecting young children. A screening programme may have merits. However, there is much debate about the task force, and, in the context of the amendment, I wonder whether we should wait for its report in the autumn. The task force in England does not intend to report until 2005. It is unlikely that the autumn report will contain evidence better than that of the National Screening Committee

(NSC). Perhaps we should wait for clear evidence. We should hear the task force's recommendations before we jump immediately into a screening programme, important as such a programme would undoubtedly be.

4.15 pm

Diabetes is present in my family. I know its effects, the tests that children and adults must undergo, and what one must do to ensure that one does not develop it. The effects of diabetes include heart disease, kidney disease, amputation, blindness and premature death. Some 30 years ago, diabetes caused the blindness and death of a first cousin of mine, when treatment was not as good as it is today. Diabetes accounts for 9% of NHS resources, which is £100 million a year.

I agree with the motion and its contention that there is merit in introducing a screening programme. There is, however, also merit in waiting for the task force to tell us how to develop such a programme. How should people in high-risk groups be identified? Is it better to rely on opportunistic screening by healthcare professionals? What type of test should be used and how often should people be tested? What are the benefits and drawbacks of early diagnosis? As yet, there is no definitive evidence that early detection prevents complications.

We should promote prevention. Drinking, smoking and obesity are separate from heredity. Promoting physical activity, good diet and nutrition and reducing obesity are all important.

I support the motion and the amendment. However, there is a contradiction in the amendment. It is saying that we support the immediate introduction of a screening process while we look forward to the publication of the task force's report, which could be significant. We should perhaps give that time to develop. This is a very serious issue and I congratulate Ivan Davis for raising it.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Uasal Davis as an cheist thábhachtach seo a tharraingt anuas. Gabhaim buíochas fosta le bean Courtney agus leis an Dr Hendron as a leasú ar rún an Uasail Davis. Is fíor dóibh agus do chainteoirí eile gur galar an-chontúirteach é diaibéiteas agus gur cúis inní ar leith dúinne anseo é. Caithfidh mé a rá nach bhfuil leisce ar bith orm teacht leo ina mbarúil. Cé nach bhfuil aon fhigiúirí beachta ar fáil, meastar go bhfuil diaibéiteas ar idir a dó agus a trí faoin chéad den daonra: sin idir tríocha cúig mhíle agus caoga míle duine.

Buaileann sé óg agus aosta araon — agus is léanmhar a iarmhairtí ar gach a mbuaileann sé. Tá laghdú suntasach ar ionchas saoil na ndaoine sin a bhfuil diaibéiteas orthu. An té a bhfuil diaibéiteas air, tá sé cúig huaire chomh dóiche bás a fháil le taom croí ná duine gan diaibéiteas agus trí huaire chomh dóiche bás a fháil de bharr stróic. Mar a chuala muid cheana i rith na díospóireachta, is é

diaibéiteas an chúis is mó le cliseadh duánach — ós cionn duine as gach seisear a thosaíonn ar chóireáil scaghealaithe is mar thoradh ar chliseadh duánach é. Is é an dara cúis is mó é le teasadh géige íochtaráí, agus is é is mó is cúis le daille i measc daoine in aois oibre.

Tá an diaibéiteas a fhorbraíonn níos deireannaí i saol an duine fhásta ag éirí níos coitianta anseo agus ar fud an domhain ós rud é go bhfuil daoine ag titim chun feola agus ag tabhairt saol níos lú gníomhach. Is coscrach an scéala é fosta go bhfuil an cineál seo diaibéitis ag goilleadh ar dhéagóirí fiú féin, rud a bhí beagnach gan iomrá roinnt blianta ó shin.

I thank Mr Davis for tabling what is an important motion, and I thank Mrs Courtney and Dr Hendron for tabling the amendment. I agree with the Members who spoke that diabetes is a serious disease. I thank and praise the representatives of the community and voluntary groups that are here today.

Although no exact figures are available, it is estimated that between 2% and 3% of the population has diabetes, which represents between 35,000 and 50,000 people. As several Members said, diabetes can strike old and young alike, with equally devastating affects. Life expectancy for diabetics is considerably reduced, and a person with diabetes is five times more likely to die of a heart attack and three times more likely to die of a stroke. Diabetes is the leading cause of renal failure, and it accounts for more than one in six people starting dialysis treatment. It is the second most common cause of lower limb amputation and is the leading cause of blindness among people of working age.

As a result of increases in levels of obesity and the tendency for people to lead less active lives, diabetes that develops later in adult life is becoming more common both here and throughout the world. It is distressing to learn that that type of diabetes is affecting teenagers — a situation that was almost unheard of a few years ago.

Influencing the eating patterns of children and young people offers us the potential to improve their health immediately and to help prevent the onset of diabetes in later life. Eating habits that are established early in life are often maintained in adulthood, when they can be much more difficult to change. Research indicates that children's food preferences strongly influence meals served in the home, which is why it is important that parents ensure that children eat a healthy diet. As Members have stated, prevention is vital.

Diabetes places a significant financial burden on health and social services. Estimates suggest that approximately £1 from every £7 of the total health budget is spent on caring for people with diabetes. The draft position report that I forwarded to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 17 April states that the costs associated with the treatment of diabetes in the NHS are thought to amount to 9% of

total hospital costs. That funding would provide support to diabetes services at the interface between primary and secondary care, and could ensure that the condition be more aggressively treated in the community. As Members stated, the cost of the disease, in financial and personal terms, is considerable. The position report also states that failure to improve the health of our people not only adds to patients' distress but adds to pressure on expensive hospital services. Therefore, the Department has bid for considerable funding to provide services that improve the health of our population.

I should also like to highlight some of the positive aspects of diabetes care. Medical research has transformed our understanding of the disease's development in the first instance and its progression once it has developed. That knowledge is a powerful ally for diabetics and for the professionals charged with their care. As has been said, that research now shows that the most common form of diabetes that occurs in adulthood can be prevented. Lack of physical activity and obesity are the main risk factors. Therefore, integrated action is required to reduce the numbers of people who are physically inactive, overweight and obese. Promotion of a balanced diet and increased physical activity can do that. Members mentioned some of the ongoing and planned activities that several Departments are undertaking.

The principles laid out in 'Investing for Health' are the way forward to tackle many of those problems. As we know, 'Investing for Health' is the strategy that was drawn up by the ministerial group on public health, which I launched on behalf of the Executive. I chair that group, and senior officials from all Departments are members. The strategy's title was chosen because we recognise that by investing even modest amounts of money, time and resources we can make great savings and bring great benefits for the future.

Health professionals and patients are now armed with the knowledge that rigorous control of diabetes can also substantially reduce the onset of complications that it causes. It is heartening to hear of the dedicated work of teams of professionals involved in primary care, community health services or hospitals. They conscientiously monitor their patients for diabetic complications and liaise effectively with each other to ensure that access to appropriate treatment is available as and when required.

A vital example of that work includes initiatives to detect harmful changes in the eyes of those already diagnosed with diabetes. If treated early, blindness can be prevented. Support for the patient, especially empowerment through education, is increasingly seen as an important part of the health professional's role. With heightened public awareness about diabetes, the rates of diagnosis of the disease are rising. I am glad that public awareness has increased; that is important.

Responsibility for managing the care of patients with diabetes falls largely to GPs and other primary care professionals. Against that background, the management of diabetes care is an area on which many of the new local health and social care groups may choose to focus. One of the primary care commissioning pilots — the forerunners of the local health and social care groups that are being set up — identified the provision of an enhanced local service to people with diabetes as one of its targets. That recognised that many of the more serious problems caused by diabetes, such as heart disease, strokes, kidney failure and blindness could be prevented or delayed by good diabetes care, especially in the early stages of the disease. A task group made up of representatives of GPs, community dieticians, podiatrists, specialist nurses and others involved in the care of patients with diabetes was, as has been heard, formed to design a service for patients based on best practice. As a result, guidelines were drawn up on the care of patients with diabetes. Patients, GPs and other local professionals are following those guidelines. The primary care commissioning pilot was able to do some of that work. The establishment of local health and social care groups will offer similar opportunities for primary care professionals to work together in seeking to improve diabetes care for their patients.

There has been much debate among professionals and the public who are interested in diabetes as to whether there should be a screening programme for the disease. Most people's instincts lead them to think that that could only be a good idea. After all, it is a common condition with serious complications, especially if left unchecked. However, screening is a complex issue and demands close scrutiny of all the available scientific evidence. There is no recommendation in the English national service framework for diabetes to screen the general population for diabetes.

4.30 pm

The framework recommends that awareness of symptoms be increased among professionals and the public. It also suggests that, following further research, a screening programme for high-risk groups may be introduced.

The UK National Screening Committee, chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Henrietta Campbell, is responsible for providing advice on all aspects of screening policy, including the matter of whether programmes should be started, stopped or amended. The committee provides advice to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Health in England and analogous Departments in Scotland and Wales. The committee assesses proposed screening programmes against internationally recognised criteria, studying details relating to the condition in question, the test, treatment options, their effectiveness and the acceptability of the screening programme to its intended recipients. Assessing programmes in this way

is intended to ensure that they do more good than harm at a reasonable cost.

The committee considered a universal screening programme for diabetes against the criteria, and concluded that screening the whole population for diabetes would be an impractical and inefficient use of resources.

That brings me to this motion, which calls for a screening programme targeted at adults and high-risk groups. For several reasons, diabetes may be present for several years before it is recognised. Some people may have no symptoms, while others may ascribe symptoms such as tiredness and lethargy to the rigours of everyday life. Health professionals can also misinterpret the symptoms of diabetes when people initially present to them, so half of those diagnosed with diabetes may have developed a complication by the time it is detected. In some cases, that can have very serious consequences, such as permanent damage to eyes or kidneys. Therefore, it is vital that people with diabetes are diagnosed as early as possible. Greater awareness of the symptoms of the onset of diabetes among health professionals and the public is also essential so that it can be diagnosed as early as possible.

Some people are known to be at an increased risk of developing diabetes. This is particularly the case with people who are overweight, have a family history of diabetes, or come from certain ethnic minority groups where diabetes is more common. Other people in this category include people who have had abnormal blood sugar tests in the past and women who have temporarily developed diabetes during pregnancy. These people must receive regular check ups so that, should diabetes develop, it can be detected quickly.

Many health and social care professionals come into contact with people with diabetes and those who could go on to develop the condition. The need for increased awareness applies particularly to primary care staff, community healthcare staff and hospital staff. Other professionals such as pharmacists, optometrists, dentists and podiatrists have a role to play. Residential and nursing home staff who care for the elderly also have a vital part to play in detecting the condition in elderly residents.

I am pleased that the UK National Screening Committee has proposed detailed research that will examine the feasibility of screening individuals perceived to be at risk of developing diabetes. In such matters, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I need to be guided by expert medical advice. I await the results of the research and the outcome of the committee's deliberations before deciding whether a screening programme for high-risk adults is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take.

With regard to the immediate future, I am also aware of the excellent work of the joint task force here. The entire range of interested health professionals and

patients are represented in the group, which is in the process of completing a framework for diabetes care that will set standards for the detection and management of the condition. I understand that it will also specifically consider any gaps in service provision and that workforce issues are of great importance. We must examine all disciplines, including doctors, nurses, dieticians and podiatrists to name but a few, to ensure adequate provision in all areas. My officials and I will consider carefully their recommendations to see how the proposals can be used to enhance services for people with diabetes.

A significant degree of psychological morbidity, including depression and anxiety, is linked to diabetes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, time has run out.

Dr Hendron: This is one of the more important debates that we have had in the Assembly. I congratulate Ivan Davis for bringing this important motion before us and thank him for accepting the amendment in my name and that of my Colleague Annie Courtney.

Taking in the extended family, there is hardly a family in Northern Ireland that does not have somebody or somebody close to it who has diabetes. Mention has already been made of the genetic aspects, and diabetes tends to run in families. We know about obesity, about inactivity and, of course, about eating rubbish — the recommendation that people eat five portions of fruit and vegetables daily was referred to earlier. It is so important to prevent diabetes, cancer and heart disease in children and young people that that message is taken on board. I appreciate that many areas of the Health Service, including the Health Promotion Agency, have done so. However, it cannot be overemphasised.

I appreciate the Minister's being present. In her remarks she said that diabetes can often be prevented, and that is a key point. Also, rigorous control of diabetes can prevent complications. Apart from prevention, the most important thing is early diagnosis. Diabetes is increasing worldwide, and it can have a major impact on the physical, psychological and material well-being of individuals and their families. Everyone is aware of heart disease, stroke and renal failure, but diabetics are more than twice as likely to die prematurely as a result of their condition. I will not go over the statistics. Somebody said that £1 in every £7 spent by the National Health Service goes on diabetes. It is interesting that in the United States \$1 in every \$7 spent on health goes on diabetes.

There is evidence that type 2 diabetes, which is where insulin is required, can be delayed or even prevented. Effective management of the condition increases life expectancy and reduces the chances of complications. Type 2 diabetes is more common among poor people. The most deprived, one fifth of the population, are one and a half times more likely to have it. We require more investment in structured education, as many studies now show that poor people need to be informed.

Much has been said about the health action zones in Northern Ireland, which do great work in disseminating good practice. Those who are physically inactive or overweight are at increased risk of developing diabetes, and there is considerable scope across different Departments in this regard.

I also want to praise the work of the voluntary bodies, especially Diabetes UK. Kate Fleck and Stephen McGowan were mentioned earlier, and I pay tribute to them. I was not at the presentation in the Long Gallery, through no fault of mine, but I believe it was excellent.

As the prevalence of diabetes rises steeply with age, it is inevitable that this will become an increasing problem, given the demographic trends. One in five people over the age of 85 has diabetes, and older people need well co-ordinated, multidisciplinary care across primary, secondary and residential care and social services. They require information, education and support to help them manage diabetes, and staff need proper training to recognise their healthcare needs. With diabetes more common in the elderly, it has been said by one medical researcher that if people lived long enough, they would all get it. I am not sure if that is correct, but there is a point there. We require a strategic approach to address the whole system; otherwise there will be inefficiency in the allocation and use of existing resources.

The regional task force on diabetes should closely consider the second part of the diabetes national service framework due for publication this summer. This will set out the action required by local health and social care systems — milestones, performance management and programmes to support local delivery. I am aware that the Minister has some of the top experts in Northern Ireland on the task force. Both Prof Brew Atkinson, whom some of us have met here in the Assembly, and Prof David Hadden are on it. It is chaired by Dr Philip McClements, who is a former deputy chief medical officer, and the vice chairperson is Kate Fleck of Diabetes UK. The findings of this task force will be most important.

Diabetes is the epidemic of the twenty-first century. We have some recommendations from the task force in draft form, and failure to implement them will result in the cost of diabetes, both the human and the financial cost, spiralling out of control. I listened carefully to what the Minister said about screening. However, I would take a positive attitude towards a screening programme for adults who fall into high-risk groups.

Mr Davis: I thank Members for taking part in this good, constructive debate. Both of the debates this afternoon are important. They are a credit to the Assembly — debating issues that affect the people of Northern Ireland is what the Assembly is about.

Two years ago, I put a question to the Minister about setting up a screening programme. We are still waiting for that. I welcome the fact that the Minister is here this

afternoon. However, as Dr Hendron said, this is not an issue that can wait. Every Member who spoke this afternoon made the point that this must be done. The Minister talked about the cost. We must get on with this, because more and more children are being born with diabetes, and more and more children are affected.

When I go to my GP, he tells me that diabetes is vastly on the increase. He gave me a video to watch when I was first diagnosed. After watching that video for 19 minutes, I became an entirely different person, because it scared the life out of me. If nothing else, if people could even be given some kind of information by way of videos and so forth, it might alert them and wake them up to what this illness is all about.

I thank those who took part in the debate and sincerely hope that the Minister will keep a close eye on the situation.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the serious threat to health and to healthcare resources posed by the rapid increase in the incidence of diabetes, looks forward to the publication of the report of the task force on diabetes and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle immediately the serious issue of diabetes commencing with a screening programme for those adults who fall within high risk groups.

Motion made:

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

FUTURE PLANNING DEVELOPMENT IN DOWNPATRICK

Mr McGrady: I thank the Business Committee for the opportunity to discuss this important and urgent matter affecting the town and people of Downpatrick. At the outset, I want to say a word of appreciation to the Minister of the Environment for attending and taking part in the debate, although he has said that ultimately it is the Department for Regional Development's responsibility to determine what action must be taken. That is why it is doubly beneficial that the Minister of the Environment is sitting here for the debate and that he will respond.

Perhaps the heading of this Adjournment debate — "Future planning development in Downpatrick" — is slightly misleading. It should be "future development in Downpatrick", because planning will take place, except in certain restricted areas. Downpatrick is a growth town and part of that regional plan development that is so often referred to for the expansion of the population and, therefore, for the necessary attributes to accommodate that population, be it houses, recreation, water, roads or sewerage.

4.45 pm

Since March 2002, a moratorium has been placed on the Planning Service, preventing it from granting any planning permission for developments that may be connected to the main sewage disposal system in Downpatrick. There is a dispute about whether that moratorium constitutes a directive or advice; however, its effect is that no planning permission will be granted for dwellings or other buildings that would connect to the sewerage system.

The growth and development of Downpatrick has been jeopardised because of the apparent inability of the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development to resolve the crisis. I say "apparent" because I do not know what is going on behind the scenes. All planning applications, individual or composite, that involve the sewerage system are prohibited.

A ministerial reply from the Department of the Environment, dated 15 May, stated that the water management unit of the Environment and Heritage Service, which pulled the plug on planning permissions, had not issued a directive. If that is the case, I do not know what it did issue. I found out about the problem because of my interest in an application by Habitat for Humanity, the charitable housing organisation for low-income families, to build 14 residences in the Colmcille Road area of

Downpatrick. That was the first time that I heard that the water management unit had imposed a directive or made an input to the planning process. It advised Habitat for Humanity not to proceed with the planning application. Immediately afterwards, a moratorium was placed on all other developments. That may not have been official policy, but it is the situation.

Whether other directives have been, or will be, issued will be revealed during the debate. The moratorium affects not only those applying for planning permission for a new house and charities such as Habitat for Humanity, but any commercial or industrial enterprise that would need to connect to the sewerage system. It has wide-ranging implications for the immediate development of the town, because all planning permission has been stopped. One would have expected a warning that the danger point was being reached, or at least an amber light between the green and the red. However, permission was given on one day, and on the next it was not.

I embarked on a series of Assembly questions, including written priority questions, to the Ministers involved. The Department for Regional Development deals with the sewerage system, and the Department of the Environment deals with water and quality control and the Planning Service. It is an interdepartmental problem. I was amazed by the first response of the Minister for Regional Development when he said that there was abundant space and capacity in the sewage treatment works in Downpatrick and that there was no problem.

I then got information that the Department of the Environment's water management unit had advised that permission should not be granted for a particular plan. The Departments should have handled those matters. They have discovered that the problem was not caused by the output, but by the input from the sewage treatment works. There is, apparently, a subtle difference. Waste that is not treated at all remains raw sewage, and the quality of treated sewage varies. The inlet to the treatment works was defective, and at certain times blocked, causing a run-off of raw sewage into the Quoile estuary and basin, which is unpleasant for the local population, land and riparian residences.

According to the Minister of the Environment, his officials and those from the Department for Regional Development will discuss what short- and long-term measures the latter should take to address the problem. In his written answer of 17 May to my question AQW 3548/01, the Minister stated that ultimately

"it is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development's Water Service to determine what action needs to be considered in relation to the operational problems at the inlet to the town's sewage treatment works."

Because of the urgency of the matter, I had to elicit further information from the Minister for Regional Development in the form of a priority written answer to question AQW 3472/01. In that answer, the Minister said:

"The Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works is not overloaded. There is spare treatment capacity within the Works and the effluent discharged consistently complies with regulatory discharge standards set by the Environment and Heritage Service."

It is understandable why a layperson such as I could be confused. The Department for Regional Development states that there is no overloading, that there is sufficient capacity for the future and that the quality of the output meets required standards. Meanwhile, its Water Service tells us not to connect any more houses in the area and to stop all future planning and development.

The Minister for Regional Development further stated that:

"Aside from routine problems such as sewer blockages, Water Service has, in general, had no concerns about the operation of the local sewerage infrastructure. However, the Environment and Heritage Service has indicated recently that it has concerns about the inlet to the Treatment Works. Water Service is seeking further details about these concerns and will take appropriate action in conjunction with Environment and Heritage Service."

That response was given two months ago. I know that some action is being taken, and I have no doubt that the Minister for Regional Development will be able to give us an update on the results of that action. In his reply of 17 May to question AQW 3508/01, the Minister said:

"Preliminary work has already commenced on the installation of the new screening equipment at the inlet to the Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works. It is expected that the work will be completed within the next 4 to 5 weeks. The work will improve the reliability and efficiency of the treatment process by more effectively removing rags and other debris which have led to occasional blockages in the past."

One would think that completing that fairly minor work in four or five weeks would not have meant that it was necessary to stop all planning for that part of Downpatrick. The worst that could have happened is that a planning application, which in all other aspects was permissible, could have been given permission subject to a connection to the sewerage system in four or five weeks' time.

Building takes a couple of months, so there should not have been any problem. I do not know why there was no practical management of these applications. The broader issue of great concern is why this was allowed to happen. Inspections regularly take place, and several Government Departments and agencies carried out their little pigeonholed operations against all the checks and standards.

I had the foresight, if I may say so modestly, to table a question on 10 December 2001 before the matter arose. In reply I was informed that construction work on the new sewage works in Downpatrick would commence in 2005 at a cost of £2.3 million — no panic, no worry, no problem. The original target for the larger scheme was 2000, which has now passed. Is someone, somewhere not giving us the correct information? Has someone allowed a five-year fallout from the capital programme

of £2.3 million knowing, or not knowing, that there was a deficiency in the system? We would like to have answers to those questions, if possible.

Many questions arise from that incident. People who do not live in the area may wonder what this is all about, and the Minister may say that there are other areas in Northern Ireland with similar problems. If I lived in those other areas I would still be agitated, because, as I have said repeatedly — and possibly ad nauseam — it means a moratorium on all new building work in the centre of Downpatrick.

I have thanked the Minister of the Environment for being present, but he has said that he thinks that the Minister for Regional Development is responsible. If that is the case, the Minister for Regional Development should be here to answer the question. As a layperson in this area, I am totally confused by what has happened. The authorities appear to be divided, but in that division there must be maximum co-operation.

The salient questions are — is this a serious situation? If so, why has the main programme of £2.3 million for a new sewage works been postponed from 2000 to 2005? That information was elicited last December. In March 2002 there was a moratorium on planning, but was that necessary? What is the nature of the Environment and Heritage Service's authority compared with that of another branch of the same Department? The Minister of the Environment, in answer to my written question (AQW 3548/01), stated:

"Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has not issued a Directive to Planning Service but has recommended that no more development be connected to the Downpatrick sewerage system until operational problems at the inlet to the town's sewage treatment works are resolved."

Is that a directive? Do the planning officials have to take that on board whether they like it or not, or is it their decision? Where does the authority lie; where does the expertise lie; and where does the remedy lie? He went on to say:

"These problems have led to unauthorised discharge of sewage to a downstream waterway, with subsequent water pollution."

I ask, tongue in cheek, who is creating the authorised discharge? The Department of the Environment, apparently. If it is creating an unauthorised discharge, does it not have an immediate civic responsibility as the polluter to pay and sort out the pollution? I am confused by the final part of the answer, which states that it is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development's Water Service to determine what will happen.

5.00 pm

I hope that clarification is given on where responsibility lies. There may be a joint responsibility, and, if so, it must be made clear who is carrying out the work, when it will be done and where the authority for planning

permission lies. Is it with a sub-agency or is it with the Planning Service? It must be made clear whether it is possible to have a sensible attitude to planning management. If the construction is a four- to five-week wonder — as we are told officially — why can planning permission not be granted conditional on connection to the sewage works not being made for four to five weeks or until further authorisation is given? The developers or the individual could then go ahead with the work and build the main construction, by which time the connection could be made. However, nothing has been done; permission has not been given; no starts have been made; the construction firms carrying out the work cannot keep workers on; and people who have arranged house sales and mortgages do not know where they are going. This is a serious community matter, and the current situation flies in the face of the regional development proposals for Downpatrick.

I thank the Minister for being present, and I look forward to his response. I do not have to go into details about the geography, because as a co-representative of the area, he is familiar with the problem. I would not like to think that his interest was inhibited because he represents the area. There is an inverted idea that because one represents an area, one has to be especially careful. The same care must be exercised as with any other area. I expect a fulsome, favourable and open reply from the Minister.

Mr Wells: I share some of Mr McGrady's confusion. However, what we face today exposes a major weakness in the procedures of the House. Two Ministers are involved directly: the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Peter Robinson, and the Minister of the Environment, Mr Nesbitt. Why do we not have procedures that allow both Ministers to respond to Adjournment debates when there is a clear cross-cutting of responsibilities for the issue being discussed? I have raised this matter several times. I raised it during the debate on sheep grazing in the Mourne, where half the responsibility lay with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the other half lay with the Minister for Regional Development. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development stated that she could not answer some of my questions because they were not her responsibility, and she referred them to the Minister for Regional Development. That is not good enough. Flexibility is necessary if we are to have joined-up government in this Province. When there is a division of responsibility, both Ministers should be present.

The wording of Mr McGrady's motion is unhelpful. I read the local papers, and I read every word of Mr McGrady's that is published — that takes quite some time. I hope that he reads the small, succinct paragraphs that I write occasionally.

I was fully aware of what he was getting at when he tabled the subject for this Adjournment debate. However,

the heading “Future planning development in Downpatrick” could have referred to the delay in the publication of the Down/Ards area plan. It could have referred to the implementation of the regional development strategy, or it could have related to a specific planning issue. Unless one lived or worked in the area, one would not know what the debate was intended to be about purely from the wording of the title. Perhaps that is why the Minister of the Environment is present rather than the Minister for Regional Development. I do not know. Certainly, only those on the ground could have been fully aware of what Mr McGrady was referring to in the title. I have a policy: I will always give way at any stage if a Member wishes to challenge me on this or any other issue.

For many years in Northern Ireland we complained about the gamekeeper-and-poacher problem with the Department of the Environment. The Department of the Environment was huge. It was the “Department of Everything”. It was a vast empire, ranging from roads to planning to housing, and so on. The permanent secretary had vast influence throughout the Province, because the Department of the Environment had an input into practically everything that happened in Northern Ireland. It was, therefore, perfectly correct that the functions of the Department were separated and that its size was divided.

That achieved a division in the gamekeeper-and-poacher problem. Now, responsibility for water quality monitoring is entirely in the hands of the Department of the Environment’s Environment and Heritage Service, while the provision of water services, sewerage systems and water supply is in the hands of the Department for Regional Development. When a problem with water quality arises, the Department of the Environment can now, at least, take action — because it is not worried that its permanent secretary will be breathing down its neck, saying that it cannot take action because it is responsible for the pollution. I welcome that, but the problem is that it leads to a situation in which one Department blames the other.

I attended Down District Council’s meeting last night. The Minister of the Environment addressed the meeting. Many councillors were hopping mad about this problem, and they were venting forth about it. On several occasions the Minister rightly pointed out that particular aspects of the issue were not his Department’s responsibility and that they were the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development. The Minister for Regional Development was not present, and, of course, only one Minister is present this evening.

We are, however, agreed that the Environment and Heritage Service’s perception of water quality in relation to the sewage works is having a dramatic impact on development in Downpatrick. Development in areas such as Scotch Street, Folly Lane, Model Farm, Quoile Road,

Mallard Road and a large swathe of Ardglass Road and Saul Street has been stopped as a result of the problem. One of those applications is for no fewer than 214 dwellings. Another is for 26 dwellings, and a further one is for 12 semi-detached and two detached houses.

I feel particularly sorry for Habitat for Humanity — a charitable-based organisation that encourages co-operative work throughout the world. It encourages communities to have a stake in their area and to work as volunteers in building houses. It has achieved funding for its development in Model Farm, but that funding depends on planning permission’s being granted. If permission is not granted soon, the funding could be lost and the entire scheme cast into doubt.

If that happened in any other part of Northern Ireland, people would raise a stink, and rightly so. It is unfortunate that it is happening in Downpatrick, which has had other problems in recent years, such as traffic congestion in the town. It is the last thing that Downpatrick needs. Until the problem is sorted out, development cannot take place there. The companies involved cannot continue to keep staff doing nothing on their books. We are rapidly approaching the stage where there could be redundancies or lay-offs. Action must, therefore, be taken.

I read with interest the response given to Mr McGrady’s questions by the Minister for Regional Development. Somebody has clearly got it wrong. Either there has been a small hiccup in the provision of sewage facilities in Downpatrick that will be overcome in six or seven weeks or there is a major problem, identified by Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), that could hold things up for years.

The Department for Regional Development has said that the Water Service has already arranged for manual screens to be replaced at the inlet to the sewage works. It says that that work will be completed in the next six weeks and will satisfy EHS’s concerns, enabling development restrictions to be lifted. If that is true, it is an inconvenience that causes some difficulty, but it is an inconvenience that will be completely sorted out within a few weeks. The builders will be able to continue building, the green forms will start flowing from Mr Clarke’s office in Rathkeltair House and everyone will be happy.

At last night’s council meeting, I suggested to Mr Nesbitt that a negative condition could be attached to planning approvals. In other words, planning approvals would continue to be given on condition that the housing development was not connected to Downpatrick sewage works until the problem had been resolved.

As Mr McGrady said, there are many examples of houses taking six or seven months to be built, and connection to the sewage works can be left to the last. When the problem is sorted out, all houses will have been connected, the negative condition will have been

adhered to and everyone will be happy. At last night's council meeting, Mr Nesbitt replied that that would set a dangerous precedent because of what could happen were the problem not resolved in the next six to eight weeks. He said that it sets a dangerous precedent to give planning permission, only to find that houses cannot be connected to the sewage works.

If there is the remotest possibility that the problem cannot be solved in six to eight weeks, we shall face big problems in Downpatrick. It will be a major headache, to which I do not know the solution.

It was suggested that the developers could contribute their own money towards providing an alternative sewage works, or that they could even give money to the Department to help bring the existing sewage works up to standard. The difficulty is that the developers have purchased land, applied for planning permission and done their costings on the basis that houses will be directly connected to the sewage works. None of them would be in a position to develop an alternative solution to what is a difficult problem. As taxpayers and ratepayers, they would rightly expect the Department to complete the work and pick up the bill.

Is the problem simply a breakdown in communication between the two Departments? Have the two Departments not worked out what is wrong and when it will be fixed? If the first scenario is correct, the problem will have blown over by the end of June. If the second scenario is correct, Downpatrick will be completely blighted for planning approvals for many months and years to come. Therefore, there must be clarity. However, that is difficult to achieve in the absence of both Ministers. The reason that they are not present is not their fault, but the fault of the procedures of the House.

I want Mr Nesbitt to clarify whether EHS's representations to Planning Service suggested that the service was not happy with the situation and wanted something done about it, or whether EHS said that under no circumstances should any planning permission be given if it would lead to further problems at Downpatrick sewage works. The planners seem to indicate that the recommendation was extremely strong, but other material that I have seen indicates that it was more of an aspiration about the preferred way for business to be conducted. We need clarification on that point.

Urgency is essential. Planning development is one of the biggest difficulties facing Planning Service in south Down and must be given absolute priority. I am concerned when I am told that the matter will be sorted out in four weeks, and then six weeks, only to be told two weeks later that it will be another four weeks. Down district has been allocated 7,750 new homes under the regional development strategy. To ensure that Downpatrick has the critical mass, and to address its under-performance as the main town in the district, it is

absolutely vital that the bulk of those new houses are sited in the Downpatrick area. The problem calls into question whether the new houses can be built in the area. Clarity and urgency are necessary. The Committee on Procedures must examine the matter so that we do not face a similar problem in several months' time, blaming someone else because only one Minister can be on the Floor of the House at a time.

5.15 pm

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Adjournment debate has been a little misleading. Although I live some distance from Downpatrick, I represent the area. I wish to see its sewerage scheme being sorted out, but we must be wary that planning permission is not pushed through without proper water and sewerage systems in place to provide acceptable living conditions.

Downpatrick is a growing town with a growing population. Proper facilities are necessary — as are the systems to back them up. All systems must operate properly. Houses should not be built without an adequate sewerage system. That has happened in other towns in my South Down constituency. My own town, Rostrevor, has had such problems for years. We should focus on providing housing in Downpatrick, but there is no point in building 700 or 800 houses where there is no proper sewerage system and water service. All Departments should co-operate to resolve the matter once and for all.

Planners should be given every encouragement to develop new housing, and their improvement of Downpatrick should not be hindered by poor water and sewerage services. Were funding in place to provide that housing it would be up to Departments to get their act together to push the Executive for the £2.3 million for the proposed sewerage system. It should not be left until 2005; it should be brought forward so that proper development of the town can take place.

Under the rural development programme for 2001 to 2006, the Departments did not facilitate the sustainable improvement of the economic environment and the social conditions in Downpatrick and the Down district. Although I do not call upon those Departments and agencies to begin a rural development programme for Downpatrick district, it is necessary to tackle social needs and inequalities in health, housing and education. Downpatrick needs those things: for years the town has been a wilderness. We must acknowledge that it has been ignored under 30 years of misrule. As local representatives, we can voice our opinion, involve our local communities and highlight Downpatrick's problems. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I have noted some interesting comments to answer. I am sorry that Mr McGrady is confused; it is rarely the case, so I shall try to ensure that his confusion passes. Mr Wells

referred to critical mass. The regional development strategy identified Downpatrick as a main town, and aimed to realise the potential growth there. As Mr McGrady rightly said, the strategy recognises that growth is not simply about planning. Growth of recreation facilities, business, administration and housing must be balanced. The town's population drives that growth, and the strategy recognises that adequate housing is central to it.

Because the regional development strategy has identified Downpatrick as a main town, the developments in it must be consistent with the plan's aims. We must conform to the strategy. The Department has not been negative about the development potential in Downpatrick.

The Department fully accepts the opinions of Down District Council. Last night, in an example of accountability and democracy at work for the people of South Down and Northern Ireland, I was happy to answer the council's questions for an hour and a half. I am bullish and positive about what I am trying to do, not just for Downpatrick, but for everywhere else.

A pertinent point was raised. It is always good to have my written answers read back to me, which is why it is useful for me to read them before they are issued. At last night's council meeting, Mr Wells stated that there is no problem with the capacity of the sewerage system in Downpatrick. I told him that I agree. Mr McGrady seemed slightly annoyed that the Department for Regional Development advised that there is abundant space and capacity.

The capacity of the sewerage system is not the issue. There is sewerage capacity to service 16,000 houses, of which only 13,000 have been built. As Mr McGrady argued, the Department for Regional Development also confirmed that there is spare capacity and that the level of discharge that leaves the sewage treatment works complies with recognised standards.

The real problem lies with the inlet to the sewerage system, and last night, Mr McGrady's party colleague, Councillor John Doris accepted that. That is good because, if we agree that there is a problem, we can find a solution. The Water Service agrees that there is a problem and it has suggested a solution to the Department. As I assured the council last night, necessary steps will be taken to resolve the problem as soon as possible.

Mr McGrady sought clarification about whether the situation was serious, or the moratorium necessary, and he asked which body had authority for the matter. The Environment and Heritage Service's water management unit gave advice to the Planning Service, on the basis of which the Planning Service recommended that planning should not proceed. Therefore, the decision to prohibit planning was made by the Department of the Environment's Planning Service. As Minister, I could de jure exercise authority over the matter, but de facto it is left to other bodies.

The Environment and Heritage Service has the regulatory responsibility to ensure that water quality standards are met. The required standards have been increasing and will continue to do so as a result of European legislation such as the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive; therefore, the need to raise standards is more urgent. The water management unit of the Environment and Heritage Service knows when water quality standards have been breached or when there is pollution, as took place in Downpatrick. As the regulatory authority, the Environment and Heritage Service is obliged to provide advice on such matters to the Planning Service, which then makes a recommendation or a decision. If, or when, the problem is identified, the Department for Regional Development is responsible for implementing measures.

I was so delighted by Mr Wells's statement on the matter that I wrote it down:

"If we are to have joined-up government in this Province..."

I welcome Mr Wells's commendation of joined-up government in the Province. I thank the Member for that point.

As Minister of the Environment, I am often asked to account to the Assembly as the Minister with responsibility for the regulatory authority. In other debates, such as that on the safety of school transport, I was asked about actions that are the responsibility of the Department of Education or the Department for Regional Development. I do not have the money to implement the actions that were requested, nor is it my responsibility to do so. In this case, responsibility lies with the Department for Regional Development, which is charged with delivering the service. However, the Department of the Environment has a regulatory authority to ensure that appropriate standards are met, therefore that is why we are in this position. It could be argued that it is good that the regulatory authority and the implementing body are in separate Departments. I am not making a case in favour of that, but their separateness clearly delineates responsibility. I hope that I have allayed Members' fears.

The Planning Service makes decisions on the basis of advice from the Environment and Heritage Service and other bodies. The Environment and Heritage Service was concerned about pollution and the increase in required standards imposed by European Directives. The Department of the Environment is the regulatory body, and it is up to the Department for Regional Development to implement measures. The best way to ensure progress is for officials at the highest level in the Department for Regional Development and in the Department of the Environment to identify and solve the problem as quickly as possible.

5.30 pm

Mr Wells said that somebody has got it wrong: the Department for Regional Development says that it will

take weeks; the Department of the Environment says years. Neither need be wrong. We know that there is a problem, so we must identify it. The Department for Regional Development believes that the problem will be solved once vents have been installed.

Mr McGrady: The Minister says that officials from the two Departments will take action in future. The Department for Regional Development said that arrangements had been made to install new screening equipment at the inlet to the works; equipment that is expected to be operational in the next two months and which will enhance the reliability of the works. Has that happened or not?

Mr Nesbitt: Vents would enhance the reliability of the works, as the sewage coming through them would be slightly purer. However, there would still be a problem. Discussions have taken place, but the problem has yet to be resolved fully. The Department for Regional Development believes that its solution can be

implemented in a matter of weeks. We are less certain. However, I wish both Departments to agree a solution as soon as possible.

Pollution will occur where there are no legal constraints to prevent it. Pollution and its control are important; pollution affects not merely local people but the image of Northern Ireland.

We are obliged to meet increasingly rigorous European Commission standards. I would not be discharging my responsibility as Minister of the Environment if I did not ensure closer scrutiny of planning applications, especially if there are problems. This is not the only investigation in Northern Ireland; there are, I believe, eight such investigations under way — we must bear that in mind.

I hope that this matter will be resolved speedily to deliver the regional development strategy's recommendation that Downpatrick be a hub for development.

Adjourned at 5.33 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 27 May 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Ruling on Suspension of Sittings

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have first to respond to a point of order from last week.

At the sitting on Monday 20 May, Mr David Ford raised a point of order concerning the decision of the Deputy Speaker to suspend the sitting, by leave of the House, for five minutes. This was as a result of the Minister of the Environment's not being in his place to move the Second Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Mr Ford raised the issue in the light of my decision on 13 May to declare that a motion in his name would fall as he was not in his place to move the motion, but subsequently to suspend business for five minutes when a Member was not in his place to move his motion, because not to have done so would have meant the collapsing of all the business of the day. Mr Ford said that the decision of the Deputy Speaker on 20 May highlighted procedural inconsistency in handling the circumstances surrounding suspension of proceedings, and sought definitive guidance on when business on the Order Paper should or should not be suspended.

Members will be aware that the procedural convention has been that if a Minister or Member is not in his or her place to move an item of business, then that business falls and the next item of business is taken. The decisions to suspend the sittings on 13 May and 20 May were made in an effort to be helpful to the House, particularly on the first occasion, when the business of the rest of the day, save Question Time, would have collapsed. On the second occasion, the concern of the Deputy Speaker was to not obstruct legislation and other matters, those having been thin on the ground in the House. These were efforts to be helpful to the House, but they clearly introduced inconsistencies. I accept that in the wider scheme of things that can be unhelpful, albeit that the attempt at the time was to be helpful.

To avoid a recurrence of that, and after discussion with the Business Committee, I intend that in future the procedural convention of the House will be enforced as consistently as is possible, and that is the best that I can do. In doing so, I caution Ministers and Members about their responsibility for ensuring that they are in their places at the appropriate times to move items of business. It is a great discourtesy to the House to do otherwise, and to minimise the risk of such a situation occurring, Members may wish to consider putting more than one name to motions.

I hope that that clarifies the situation. I and the others who fulfil the role of Speaker and Deputy Speaker do our best to ensure not only a degree of order but also that the Assembly presents itself as well as possible to those we represent. However, we cannot do that on our own, and even with the help of others, it is sometimes difficult enough. I accept the Member's concern and rule as I have done.

MINISTERIAL PLEDGE OF OFFICE

Mr Speaker: Mr Wilson, you had a point of order.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During a BBC programme that was broadcast live from the Assembly last week, the former DUP Minister Mr Campbell intimated that he had either not taken the pledge or had taken a different form of pledge than that required under the terms of annex A, strand one, of the Belfast Agreement. Will you confirm that all past and presently serving Ministers have taken that pledge and are honour and legally bound to comply with its requirement to work to implement all aspects of the Executive's Programme for Government?

Mr Speaker: I cannot speak about the particular circumstance to which the Member refers, but I can say that all Ministers who take the Pledge of Office, whether they take it in the Chamber or elsewhere, must take the same Pledge of Office: that is clear. A facility was made available for nominees to ministerial office to take the Pledge of Office outside the Chamber to ensure that there was no delay in their taking up their positions. As such occasions sometimes arise at the beginning of a recess or such like, arrangements were made for it to be done outside the Chamber.

However, because this is an important legal as well as political matter, when a Minister takes the Pledge of Office in the Chamber it is recorded in Hansard as a matter of public record. When a Minister or a nominee takes the Pledge of Office outside the Chamber, it is done in the Speaker's office in the presence of the Clerk to the Assembly or the most senior Clerk available, and the procedure is conducted in writing. That is to say, the nominee is asked to give verbal assent and to sign the relevant forms that identify the pledge. There was no difference in respect of Ministers from any particular party who took the pledge inside or outside the Chamber. Those documents are available for anyone who wishes to verify that that was the case, in the same way that he can verify from Hansard, and there is no reason for such papers not being available to ensure that everything is done properly and is in order. I confirm that there is no legal difference between taking the pledge inside or outside the Chamber — Members could not legally be nominated successfully unless they were prepared to take that pledge.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There is nothing in the pledge to do with swearing allegiance to the Executive or to fulfilling the agreement — nothing whatsoever.

Mr Speaker: It is not for me to go into what is in the pledge and what is not. What is there is a matter of public record, and Members, or anyone outside who is interested to see what the pledge consists of, can read it. It is a public document and available.

Mr C Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The pledge is a matter of public record, and I advise Dr Paisley to look at paragraphs (c), (d), and (f) of annex A, strand one, of the agreement. It is clear that there is an obligation to work to implement the programme when agreed by the Executive, whether nominees made the pledge inside or outside the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: Order. The opportunity was taken to raise a point of order. I made it quite clear that these are all matters of public record. Members of the House and the public can read them; they are all available. I am not prepared to entertain getting into some kind of political business here. A point of order was raised, and I have tried to give a proper ruling on it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. That was a point of order. I want to remind the House that the DUP Members who took their seats — not as members of the Executive but who took office — made it very clear on the first occasion how they took that oath. That is a matter of record.

Mr Speaker: I can only supervise whether people legally undertake their responsibilities. People have done things with their fingers crossed in other places and circumstances, but that still did not alter the fact that they carried out those actions. I cannot enter into any further discussion on the matter. As far as I am concerned, the Ministers were appointed duly and in order, took up their responsibilities and, as far as I can ascertain, fulfilled those responsibilities.

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT POLICY

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on public procurement policy.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): With permission, I want to make a statement on behalf of the Executive on public procurement policy. Members will be aware that in November 2000, and in line with commitments in the Programme for Government, the Executive agreed to establish a procurement review team to review public procurement policy and purchasing arrangements in Departments and their non-departmental public bodies.

The procurement review team's report was issued for public consultation last September to over 400 individuals and organisations. Members of the team also met with the Committee for Finance and Personnel to discuss their findings and recommendations. Team members considered the responses to the consultation and views put forward by the Committee, and they were given the opportunity to clarify or amend their original recommendations.

The Executive have recognised the need for a more strategic approach to the development and implementation of procurement policy to ensure that Executive procurement expenditure, which is around £1.2 billion a year, was being spent in the most effective and efficient manner and to ensure that the policy had due regard to equality obligations. In today's climate of tight budgets and ever-increasing demand, it is critical that the Executive make optimum use of the resources available to them.

The Executive have, therefore, agreed to a revised public procurement policy, and they plan to initiate more than 70 measures over the period to March 2005 to implement that policy. Those measures are aimed at greater central guidance, collaboration and aggregation of procurement, with the objective of delivering increasing and sustainable value for money savings in the years to come.

The four main areas covered by the measures relate to policy; organisational structures; procurements processes and practice; and integration. I intend to spend a few minutes on the key points in each of those areas, starting with policy.

The definition adopted by the Executive describes public procurement as:

"the process of acquisition, usually by means of a contractual arrangement after public competition, of goods, services, works and other supplies by the public service".

The acquisition process spans the whole life cycle from initial conception and definition of the needs of the public service through to the end of the useful life of an asset or the end of the contract.

12.15 pm

Both conventionally funded and more innovative types of purchases, such as public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives, are included in the definition, as is the use of the private sector to deliver services previously delivered directly by the public sector — otherwise known as contracting-out of services.

The Executive also adopted 12 principles that will be the basis of Northern Ireland procurement policy in the future. Departments, non-departmental public bodies and public corporations will be guided by those principles. They include transparency in policy and its delivery; integrity, fairness and consistency when dealing with suppliers and potential suppliers; purchasing by competition unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary; responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of the community served by the procurement; compliance with European Union and other legal requirements; procurement staff being effective in carrying out their work, meeting the commercial, regulatory and socio-economic goals of Government in a balanced manner appropriate to each requirement, and carrying out procurement as cost-effectively as possible; and accounting officers and their equivalents in other bodies continuing to be personally accountable for procurement expenditure. Where appropriate, as part of the process of developing and implementing procurement policy, other Government economic and social policies will be integrated into procurement policy rather than cutting across it.

During the consultation process, some respondents expressed the view that the principles should contain an explicit reference to equality. While the Executive noted those concerns, Ministers believe that the principles are sufficiently clear, and it is worth repeating that the equality obligations of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 are already a duty on Northern Ireland public bodies in implementing procurement policy.

However, in applying the 12 principles and our equality obligations in procurement policy, public bodies need to bear in mind that the primary objective of the policy is best value for money. That concept is central to public procurement policy. The Executive have not adopted a narrow definition, but have defined it as

"the optimum combination of whole life cost and quality (or fitness for purpose) to meet the customer's requirements."

Members should note that that definition encompasses and sums up the 12 principles and allows for the inclusion, as appropriate, of social, economic and environmental goals in the procurement process.

In adopting the 12 principles, the Executive acknowledge that they will have certain implications for the development of the strategy required to implement the new procurement policy. For example, wider economic, social and environmental strategies and initiatives of the Executive should become more closely integrated into

the policy. In respect of strategic procurements, and policy in general, public bodies should ensure that there is appropriate consultation with members of the public who will be directly affected by the outcome of the procurement, and with the wider community and other stakeholders in the procurement system.

To optimise efficiency gains, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating the North/South, as well as the UK and Europe-wide, procurement markets. There should be greater collaboration between Northern Ireland public bodies to meet the wider social, economic and environmental goals of procurement policy.

There is an urgent need to develop better management information systems to enable costs and savings to be measured and reported, and to make for more informed decision-making on procurement and equality matters.

Given the financial importance of procurement policy, both in terms of total spend and in relation to the Executive's budget, the Executive have agreed that a procurement board should be established and given responsibility for the development, dissemination and co-ordination of procurement policy and practice for the Northern Ireland public sector. The board will be responsible to the Executive and accountable to the Assembly.

I shall chair the board in my capacity as Minister of Finance and Personnel, and membership will comprise, among others, the 11 departmental permanent secretaries. That high-level membership from each Department will ensure that there is compliance with the agreed policies and procedures in all Departments, their agencies, non-departmental public bodies and public corporations.

A central procurement directorate has been established to support the procurement board's work, and a new director will be appointed. In formulating procurement policy and practices for the board, the new directorate will consult staff from several centres that have specialist procurement expertise across the public sector.

The Executive will consider the interface between that new approach to procurement and the infrastructure investment issues that will fall to the new strategic investment body. However, the principle is clear that the strategic investment body will play a core role in planning and implementing capital investment, including public-private partnerships. Much detail must be considered and agreed before the new body can come fully into being, and the general approach to procurement policy must be established and advanced in the meantime.

The procurement board will be responsible for ensuring that a wide range of operational processes and practices are introduced as appropriate. The aim is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of procurement activities for contracting authorities and suppliers.

The Executive will integrate economic, social and environmental policies within the new public procurement

policy. Most respondents to the public consultation on the procurement review team's report accepted the need for integration. The integration of social policy drew the most comment, especially a proposed pilot scheme to help the unemployed return to work. The main reservations were that the scheme would increase costs to the contracting authority and that, as is outlined in the report, the scheme may prove difficult to implement.

The Executive acknowledged those concerns and recognised that the integration of social policy is difficult in the context of European Union and international procurement law. Nevertheless, they have decided to proceed with the development and implementation of the pilot to test whether those concerns are real, and whether the proposal is worthwhile and workable. The pilot scheme will cover 20 construction or service contracts — at least one will come from each Department — and will last two years. It will not proceed until the details have been agreed with the procurement board. Before that, there will be discussions with the representatives of the affected industries, namely the construction and service sectors, and the Equality Commission, to ensure that the scheme is workable. The results of the pilot will be reported to the Executive to determine whether the policy will be mainstreamed.

Similar issues are under consideration by my Executive Colleagues Sir Reg Empey and Carmel Hanna. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has recently taken receipt of the west Belfast jobs task force report, and the Department for Employment and Learning is close to concluding the work of the task force on employability and long-term unemployment. In moving ahead with the pilot project that arises from the new procurement policy, I shall liaise with my Colleagues to ensure, as far as possible, consistency of approach.

Other integration issues that the Executive have agreed that the procurement board should be tasked with introducing are encouraging and promoting the use of special contract arrangements to help disabled workshops; environmental purchasing; actions to assist small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to compete more effectively for procurement contracts; post-contract award mechanisms to provide assurance that contract conditions are adequately monitored, including an internal mechanism for considering and resolving complaints by third parties that contract conditions have not been honoured; and the development of a database to assess the integration policy's success.

A key area that was highlighted during consultation and in discussions with the Committee for Finance and Personnel was that of ensuring the compliance of public sector organisations and, in respect of anti-discrimination legislation, of suppliers. Although a few respondents argued strongly in favour of legislative compliance, the Executive agreed that legislation was not necessary to ensure that Departments and their non-departmental

public bodies complied, because implementation can largely be achieved by means of administrative action through the membership of the procurement board. However, the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 would need to be amended to enable that sector to comply with the proposals on integration.

The district councils' different and separate framework of accountability must be recognised. Under existing legislation, compliance is voluntary. The procurement review team's opinion was that some uncertainty existed in current Northern Ireland legislation as to the extent to which the award of procurement contracts is subject to a requirement not to discriminate. The Executive have agreed that procurement legislation should state unambiguously that direct and indirect discrimination are prohibited on the grounds included in current Northern Ireland anti-discrimination provisions, and should allow for such provisions in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Moreover, equivalent sanctions similar to those contained in the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 will be introduced to prevent firms found guilty by a tribunal or a court of persistent and recalcitrant breaches of anti-discrimination legislation from benefiting from public procurement contracts. The Executive agreed that those matters should be covered in the single equality Bill.

To develop the public procurement policy, an equality impact assessment has been carried out, as is required under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The report stresses the limited quantitative data available on which to base the assessment. Using quantitative data and other sources of information brought to our attention during the public consultation, my Department, having consulted the Equality Unit, has concluded that the new procurement policy will not directly or indirectly discriminate against any of the categories included in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Indeed, the policy could have a positive impact on equality of opportunity with regard to religious belief, political opinion, gender and disability. Moreover, the proposals are in line with the Executive's policy on targeting disadvantage and social need.

The procurement review team's report was issued to more than 400 individuals and organisations for public consultation, and the policy that the Executive adopted incorporates all the recommendations contained in the revised report. The Executive have, therefore, agreed that they do not consider it appropriate to repeat the consultation process. However, given that the Executive have approved the broad thrust of the policy only, my Department is content to receive comments on how the policy might best be implemented.

I hope that this statement has been helpful to Members in highlighting the main issues involved in the new procurement policy, and the way forward. I shall

issue a copy of the full policy document to Members shortly. I look forward to chairing the first meeting of the procurement board, which is scheduled for early July. Policy implementation as it develops will require the co-operation and support of my ministerial Colleagues if we are to achieve the optimum level of efficiencies and savings for the public sector. There is much to be accomplished, and, as I said earlier, the new processes and practices will be implemented up until March 2005. A successful outcome would contribute greatly to assuring the general public that every effort is being made to ensure value for money from this substantial element of Executive expenditure.

12.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee welcomes the implementation of a co-ordinated procurement policy, particularly the setting up of a board chaired by the Minister. It is important that departmental activity is co-ordinated so that each does not operate alone.

What savings will result from the procedure? Will it end select tendering, which discriminated against many suppliers so that they found it impossible to get onto the select list? I welcome the proposal to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and I hope that it will increase the number of local suppliers. Will the Minister explain the proposed pilot projects in more detail?

Dr Farren: I record my appreciation of the work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel during deliberations on the matter.

With regard to savings, there are signs that if we were to become as efficient as our counterpart across the water, we could save up to £24 million over three years. It may be unwise to specify a precise target until the board is in operation and the new procedures are in place; however, that record of achievement provides us with a goal. The estimate of £24 million is a scaled comparison of what would be saved in our circumstances. It will be up to the board, working with the new director and his colleagues, to set targets, which I hope they will be able to detail to the House soon.

In supporting SMEs, we are required to operate within the public procurement parameters set by the European Union. However, if we want to benefit from our membership of the European Union, we must accept that we are working in a single market and that opportunities to tender for contracts in Northern Ireland must be open to others beyond our boundaries. Nonetheless, it has been Government practice for some time to make local suppliers aware of opportunities. Inter-TradeIreland is bringing suppliers, North and South, to the attention of Government buyers in both parts of the island so that our suppliers can avail of contracts in the South, and vice versa. That applies also to suppliers

across the water, but we are anxious to ensure that our local suppliers maximise the opportunities that are available to them. The procurement directorate will intensify initiatives to bring local suppliers in touch with Government buyers.

Details of the pilot projects are not yet available. However, recommendations are being made about how the Government can stimulate economic development in areas such as west and north Belfast. The task force in west Belfast has reported to my Colleague, Sir Reg Empey, and the task force on employability and long-term unemployment is about to report to my Colleague, Carmel Hanna. It is likely that the latter report will recommend how we might use the means at our disposal to address the needs of the unemployed more effectively.

The west Belfast task force's recommendations are available, and we are anxious to see how we can use procurement opportunities to address some of the needs identified. We will be discussing with agencies, employers, trade unions and training agencies, where appropriate, to agree on pilot projects that would be most effective and enable us to learn relevant lessons.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Beggs): Does the Minister agree that the administrative cost of the new proposal should be minimal so that savings, rather than additional costs, accrue?

Does he recognise the dangers to the Assembly of procurement policies undertaken in euros, which would not relate to departmental budgets? Will he therefore confirm that procurement will be carried out in sterling?

Dr Farren: Overall procurement policy must be informed by a best-value approach. I assure the Member that that point will be borne in mind in administrative structures as well as in procurement practice.

I am not sure how the euro or any other currency will affect our procurement policies. Those who tender for contracts will know that we are in a sterling area. However, people from other parts of Europe may submit bids in euros. The bids will be assessed using the sterling equivalent. I doubt that we could prescribe the currency to be used in tenders. I imagine that people will bear in mind the local currency.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's statement and, in particular, the Executive's adoption of the integration of economic, social and environmental policies within the new public procurement policy. As an expression of the integration policy, one noteworthy proposal is that to develop and implement a pilot scheme of 20 construction and service contracts to last two years each, with at least one contract from each Department. Announcements have yet to be made in respect of the west Belfast task force. Will the Minister concur that any pilot projects awarded by the procurement board,

which are designed to assist unemployed people to return to work, should be based where unemployment is an enduring issue?

Dr Farren: As I said earlier, that part of the procurement policy will raise several questions. Indeed, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel has already asked such a question, and I would be surprised if there were not more on that point. The Executive believe that they have an obligation to coherently and comprehensively address their policies in respect of social and environmental issues, and to do so across all of their responsibilities. That is an example of the Executive taking their responsibilities seriously.

The precise details of the pilot schemes are not yet worked out. However, I will outline some of the thinking that is currently being developed in the Department of Finance and Personnel. For example, it is proposed that a contractor will be required to submit a plan with his tender, indicating how the firm will use the unemployed in the work of the contract, including work carried out by subcontractors. Failure to submit a plan will exclude the tender from further consideration.

The successful firm will be required to comply with the plan during the term of the contract. Failure to do so will mean that appropriate penalties are applied. The pilot scheme will take place over a two-year period, and will require about 20 works and service contracts to enable a proper assessment of its value and to fully address any teething problems. At the end of the two-year period, the results of the pilot will be reported to the Executive to determine whether the policy should be mainstreamed.

Obviously, if the unemployed — in particular, the long-term unemployed — are targeted, the contracts that are identified for inclusion in the pilot will be, in many cases, contracts that relate to significant pockets of unemployment — in particular, long-term unemployment. Broadly, that is the kind of thinking that is being pursued. I will return to the House with information when the details have been decided.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: What is the difference between the principles currently being exercised for procurement, and the Minister's 12 new principles? Does the Minister suggest that to date there has been no transparency in policy and delivery, no integrity, fairness or consistency, no purchasing by competition, no responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of the community, and no compliance with European Commission and other legal requirements?

He has advanced 12 principles. He should be able to tell the House plainly how those principles differ from the present policy. He briefly mentioned the EC. However, the EC is all-important, because — as the Minister knows — it has certain legal requirements. Money must be spent in order to meet them. Therefore, as the Assembly

considers those matters, it must keep new law in mind — removing the focus from Northern Ireland and dealing with European law.

Those of us who are in the business of politics are approached continually by firms that point out the difficulties that result from EU laws, especially in this field.

How much will the new directorate cost? What salary will the newly appointed director be paid? How many more Assembly task forces will there be, despite the fact that work on the task in hand has not been accomplished? Surely some work should be completed by now.

This is perhaps the most important question: will the Minister promise the Assembly that he will initiate a full debate on the matter when he produces his other documents, so that we will be able to ask questions?

12.45 pm

Dr Farren: The Member asked a nest of questions. I trust that I will remember most of them.

On the Member's final point, a consultation process has been under way for some time, during which no Member was precluded from initiating a debate. The Member's party is represented on the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has discussed the matter in some depth.

The public consultation process afforded many opportunities to make contributions, from inside and outside the House, to policy development. If the Member wishes to table a motion on the matter, it is up to the Business Committee to decide when that debate might take place.

Brevity of reference — if brevity describes my reference to the European Union framework — should not be taken as an indication that the European procurement framework lacks significance. We operate within that framework, which requires that opportunities to tender for public contracts be afforded to suppliers across the European Union. The Executive and the Administration accept that obligation.

Notwithstanding that obligation, and without violating the principles of the framework, we want to be proactive and ensure that our suppliers are made fully aware of the opportunities to compete and tender for and win contracts.

It is not for me to determine the number of task forces. I am responsible only for the task forces in my Department. If it is necessary for issues to be reviewed, task forces may be the most appropriate method. There may also be other review mechanisms. It is necessary, especially at the early stages of devolution, to conduct in-depth reviews of the practices, policies and legislation that we have inherited. Otherwise, we might be rightly accused of simply implementing what was there in the past. I doubt if that is the way that the Member, who has

always been a keen proponent of devolution, would want to see devolution progress.

I trust that there will be many opportunities to review other aspects of Government policy and practice. With respect to his question on costs, I do not have the precise figure for the directorate and its associated administrative arrangements. The director has been appointed at grade three level with a salary in excess of £60,000. I believe that I have addressed all the questions from the Member.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farren: No. If I have not addressed all the Member's questions, Hansard will reveal that, and I will reply to those in writing.

Mr Close: I draw particular attention to what the Minister said about the Executive, in initiating the new procurement policy, introducing more than 70 measures to be put in place between March 2000 and March 2005. The Minister went on to state explicitly that the Executive are adopting 12 principles as the basis for future Northern Ireland procurement policy. In other words, something is to be done that has not been done in the past.

I hoped that the hallmark of good Government in the public sector would be value for money, to be achieved through principles such as transparency, integrity, fairness, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency — the same principles that the Minister is trying to tell me are new. Can the Minister advise me which of those principles is currently not in use, and why?

I noted the Minister's comments on potential savings. According to the Minister, public procurement has a market of £1.2 billion a year and he mentioned potential savings of £24 million over three years. He can correct me if those figures are wrong. If my mathematics are correct, that represents a saving of 2% over three years — for 70 new initiatives and the list of principles, some of which I doubt are new because they should be already in place. There is, therefore, much camouflage and verbiage in the Minister's statement and, ultimately, not much product. Does the Minister not agree that a cost benefit analysis should be carried out in respect of anything done in the House to ensure that value for money is clearly demonstrated?

Dr Farren: The Member's question reminded me of Dr Paisley's first question. Given that Dr Paisley asked so many questions, it slipped my mind. However, one of them was almost the same question as that asked by Mr Close.

I have not claimed that all of the principles are new; many have been the basis for operating procurement practices. There is, however, a new emphasis in respect of integrating the principles so that future policy can be more coherent and targeted. There are some new principles,

and I single out consistency, responsiveness and integration as being new or as receiving new emphasis. The overall approach will be judged on value for money and on how we contribute to the social and other cross-cutting principles upon which the Executive's policies are based. It is to be hoped that the savings will be greater than those anticipated in the informal target that I suggested at the outset.

Mr Close is a member of the Committee that addressed the issue in considerable depth. The information supplied to me does not indicate whether the questions were posed in the same way to my officials during the consultation.

Mr McCartney: Although I thank the Minister for making the statement, it leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Will the Minister confirm that the basic premise for the initiative is the belief that the £1.2 billion procurement expenditure was not being spent in the most effective and efficient manner and that the Executive were not making optimum use of the resources available to them? If that is not the case, what is the justification for the initiative?

The Minister has been loath to reply to a brutally leading question from Mr Beggs about the minimal costs of administration. He ignored that question and now tells Members that there is no estimate of what additional administrative costs will result from the establishment of the central procurement directorate and procurement board. Is the Minister telling the House that no cost analysis of any kind has been made; that there is no suggestion that fresh administrative staff and bureaucrats will be recruited rather than seconded from existing Departments? Will the Minister first confirm that the assessment of possible savings is nebulous, as it is based on a comparison of much greater public expenditure on the mainland, which statistically cannot be indicative of cost savings here and secondly the cost savings, as estimated, are minimal in relation to uncosted expenditure?

Will the Minister guarantee that Northern Ireland firms that tender for Government procurement in Northern Ireland will be given preference? Will he state how many, if any, tenders for Government procurement in the Republic are given to Northern Ireland firms?

Dr Farren: Once again, I am faced with a series of questions. I therefore apologise in advance if I do not answer all of them. Mr Speaker, you will appreciate the difficult situation in which Ministers are placed when a plethora of questions are posed.

European Union regulations require us to be open to tenders from across the EU. The preferential treatment to which Mr McCartney referred is not open to us. As I said in answer to an earlier question, if we want to have the benefit of a single market and remain assured that our suppliers can tender for contracts elsewhere — and I

am sure that all Members want our suppliers to win contracts elsewhere — the same opportunities must be afforded to suppliers from elsewhere that tender for contracts in Northern Ireland.

I underlined the fact that the Administration — going back to before devolution — has been involved in making local suppliers aware of the opportunities in the whole range of Government contracts. They have been made aware of the standards required, the likely quantities required and the general conditions of Government contracts so that they can make their bids as competitive as others.

1.00 pm

Several people have asked whether we were operating effectively and fairly prior to this, implying that if we were, it may not have been necessary to review the process. We are always being urged, not just in the Assembly but also in life, to do better. To do so, we must examine our progress and the way in which we are operating whatever we are being urged to improve.

The Executive believe that it was necessary to improve procurement practices, which had been operating on a disparate basis across Departments, public corporations and non-departmental public bodies. The Executive had a well-founded belief that the coherence needed to maximise the opportunities for obtaining best value for money and the best goods and services was not being achieved. Providing a more coherent, centralised approach to policy development will not be a major operation that will take over the responsibilities of various Departments for procurement. That approach will deliver better value, and, as Ministers report to the House, it will be tested over time. Ministers of Finance and Personnel in particular will have that responsibility and will be open to scrutiny. If the savings that have been indicated, and best value for money, are not achieved, we will be reminded of this debate and the points that have been made.

Mr McCartney also raised questions about the involvement of companies and suppliers from south of the border in supplying to our Departments and agencies. I do not have those figures to hand. However, Inter-TradeIreland has been active in highlighting the opportunities for our suppliers in the South and for Southern suppliers here. I trust that the Member welcomes opportunities for our suppliers to compete for public contracts in the South.

If Hansard shows that I have overlooked any important questions — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: What are the costs?

Dr Farren: Mr Speaker, a ruling is needed on the number of questions that can be asked. I understand that Members are allowed to ask one question. If I am asked

10 questions, it is understandable that I do not remember each one.

Mr Speaker: On several occasions I have ruled that if Members ask more than one question, there is no requirement on the Minister to answer all the questions. Members may choose to ask several questions, but they cannot then comment on which question the Minister chooses to answer, whether it is because he or she remembers it, or for any other reason. If Members have a particular question they wish to ask, they would be well advised to put that question, rather than a whole series. The Minister may say that a series of questions is a burden, but it is also an opportunity, because he or she can then choose which questions to respond to. That is simply the nature of the process.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not normally take points of order on ministerial statements.

Mr McCartney: The question was put three times by three different Members.

Mr Speaker: The Member has experience of Westminster, and he knows that not just three times, but at three successive Question Times, questions can be put to which Ministers find ways of not responding. However, my advice to the House is that if there is a particular question that Members wish to ask, they ask only that question. It is then much more difficult for the Minister not to answer it. If Members ask a series of questions, they should not be surprised if the Minister chooses to take advantage of that or if his memory inadvertently chooses to take advantage of that.

Mr McCartney: I am happy that the point has been made.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the Member's point of order at the end.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement. My question revolves around a point made by Alex Attwood earlier about the engagement of unemployed labour. Does the Minister agree that it is unwise to engage untrained and unskilled workers — particularly in the construction industry, where construction sites are inherently dangerous, especially for untrained people? Does he further agree that it would be better to use public resources to put in place arrangements to provide proper training facilities for the unemployed? Finally, will the Minister give a commitment to consult fully with appropriate bodies, such as the Construction Employers Federation, before any recommendation is made to the Assembly?

Dr Farren: I can give assurances on each of those questions. It is inappropriate for untrained people to be in any form of employment. That is why I made it clear

in my statement that there will be full consultation with all appropriate interests. However, we must remember that the objective is to further key social and environmental policies, as deemed appropriate and likely to be effective, through the Government's considerable spending power, and Members must appreciate that. In taking forward these pilot projects we will not be seeking to force the employment of untrained workers at all. We will try to ensure that appropriate training is put in place.

Ms Lewsley: I too welcome the Minister's statement. However, all too often procurement is thought of as a policy issue, with a perception that it applies only to big companies. We should promote local sourcing, which has already been mentioned, and local business exchanges. Is there anything in the new approach that will lend specific assistance to medium and small businesses here?

Dr Farren: I assure the Member that we will do all in our power to ensure that local suppliers, which, for the most part, are small- and medium-sized enterprises, are aware of what is required in terms of cost and quality. The assistance available to them will be for other Departments, or, specifically, for the procurement directorate, to provide, rather than my Department. Nonetheless, we are anxious to ensure that local suppliers take maximum advantage of the considerable opportunities that exist with Government expenditure to win contracts and develop their enterprises. The point about more direct forms of assistance needs to be addressed to other Ministers — most particularly the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Weir: The Minister's statement refers to a pilot scheme. He has suggested that there is a belief that the integration of social policy may run contrary to either EU law or international procurement law. Given that belief is it not foolhardy to continue with a pilot scheme that could leave Departments vulnerable either to EU enforcement or to litigation by disgruntled companies? How can he ensure that when companies tender for those pilot schemes they do not try to fiddle the system and gain advantages by taking on long-term unemployed people on a short-term basis for the duration of the contract? If social policy is to be brought into procurement decisions, how can the Minister guarantee the long-suffering taxpayers in Northern Ireland that there is value for money in procurement?

Dr Farren: The details of the project have still to be finalised, so it is not possible to answer the Member's points with precision. An announcement will be made today about our policy approach.

It is normal practice to state what a policy will be, and then to highlight the areas that it will affect. It is the responsibility of those who will implement the policy to detail how it will affect those areas. Members who think that they know better than everybody else in the House should not snigger or make snide comments about the

matter. We are aware of our obligations on EU Directives, and we can develop procurement policies that take account of social policies. We are not inhibited from proceeding with the pilots, although the Member suggested that we might be.

Mr Bradley: Wearing my agricultural hat, does the Minister share the concern of the agriculture industry that Government food purchases for schools, hospitals and departmental canteens are usually imported and do not match the standards of local quality-assured products? That practice is questionable with regard to health, and it offers no support to local producers.

Dr Farren: I would be concerned if food were being procured that did not meet the required quality standards or take into account health considerations. Therefore, I would seek advice on the nature of the terms and conditions that apply to procurement practices in the sectors that the Member identified. I would want assurances that quality was a specified condition, and if the food were found to be unsatisfactory, the matter would have to be addressed. I thank the Member for raising an important question that needs further investigation.

Mr Morrow: The Minister's statement points out that

"the primary objective of the policy is 'best value for money'."

However, he does not inform the House how that will be achieved, an issue that has been queried on several occasions. If the Minister is not prepared to tell the House how that will be achieved, will he assure Members that he will give them that information in writing, or at least place it in the Assembly Library, so that it can be scrutinised?

The statement continues by saying that

"in order to optimise efficiency gains, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating the North/South ... procurement markets".

1.15 pm

What comfort will firms in Northern Ireland take from the Minister's statement, particularly if they are paying off workers, only to find that businesses south of the border are securing contracts here? Should firms here not be given priority?

The Minister said that the proposed approach would be compatible with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That section does not deal with best value; it is concerned with political correctness.

Dr Farren: I do not accept that equality issues, as the Member seems dismissively to claim, relate to political correctness. Affording equality of opportunity to all our citizens is a fundamental principle and a requirement of the Good Friday Agreement and legislation on the matter. It must be inherent in all aspects of Government policy and practice, and we must clearly demonstrate that.

With respect to the Member's initial question on best value, I said later in my statement that the concept is central to public procurement policy, but the Executive have not adopted a narrow definition. They defined it as

"the optimum combination of whole life cost and quality (or fitness for purpose) to meet the customer's requirements."

Those criteria must be applied to every contract so that we can demonstrate always that best value for the public's money has been achieved. Therefore, we are not shying away from the question of best value.

I refer Mr Morrow to my previous answers relating to Northern Irish suppliers. Suppliers, North and South, operate within the European framework. Suppliers from the South are entitled to bid for Government contracts in Northern Ireland, as suppliers here are entitled to bid for contracts in the South of Ireland. Indeed, suppliers can bid for contracts beyond the shores of this island, and many have done so successfully. I am sure that everyone is anxious to see suppliers gain even more contracts outside Ireland. Our responsibility is to encourage and assist them to do so, while complying with the requirements of European Directives on public procurement.

Mr Speaker: Dr Paisley, you had a point of order. Do you wish to —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is too late.

REVIEW OF RATING POLICY

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the review of rating policy.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): On behalf of the Executive, I open public consultation on our local rating system.

The Executive agreed in 2000 that a full review of our revenue system was needed. After detailed research and discussion involving the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the Departments and the Ministers, we launch the consultation paper on the review of rating policy. The paper that Members have is the final version of the text — although it will appear in a better, printed form in the next couple of weeks.

The Executive decided to embark on this review in recognition of the fact that the present system is unfair, out of date and does not meet our current needs. The subject is not easy to address: it is complex and provokes strong reactions. However, we are not in Government so that we can avoid the difficult issues. Any proposals for a local taxation system, which is what the rating system is, will touch the lives of all the households and businesses in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we have been mindful of the consequences of radical change.

I have been asked why the Executive cannot be more imaginative in seeking ways of raising local revenue. I have been asked why we have to look to the rates. The answer is that we do not have to restrict ourselves to rating property. However, our options are limited by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — we cannot readily introduce anything like income tax or VAT.

More importantly, international experience tells us that almost all developed countries continue successfully to operate property-value-based local taxes to help pay for local services. The consultation paper focuses on such systems, but other ideas are not ruled out, providing they can be easily administered, are stable, recurring, and fair to all, and do not have undesirable economic, social or environmental effects.

The consultation paper is not exclusively a Department of Finance and Personnel product. It is an Executive paper, and all Ministers have been consulted and have had an opportunity to have an input. We have worked with the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has employed a team of rating experts from outside Northern Ireland. The Committee has helped shape the document, and I appreciate its input.

It has been our intention to address the issues in a considered, balanced, open and transparent way. The consultation paper does not make any proposals or recommendations, but it expresses the issues and

available options as neutrally as possible, setting out objectively the pros and cons of the possible changes that might be considered.

Nothing was ruled in by the Executive, and nothing was ruled out, apart from domestic water metering and the rating of agricultural property. The consensus among Ministers was that those issues should not be put forward as options in the paper. I reassure Members that any decisions on changing the system, or elements of it, will take full account of the views expressed in the consultative process.

Twelve key issues are identified in the report. Although the question of how individual bills compare with what ratepayers and council-tax payers contribute in GB is addressed, the core of the review is about developing a system that distributes local revenue requirements in a fairer way.

I will not go through all the key issues covered in the paper. However, it might be useful if I mentioned two of the more difficult choices that we face — domestic rating and industrial derating. The present domestic rating system is very hard to defend. In presenting the options in the paper, we have included a dispassionate description of the existing system. However, it is quite difficult to find any defence for the existing domestic system. It does not target social need. On the contrary, in the distribution of the tax burden, it tends to disadvantage the less well off. Although there is a gradual upward curve, the amounts levied flatten out quite markedly for those in more expensive housing.

Therefore, ratepayers with low incomes that are just above the housing benefit threshold pay more than they would do under a fairer system. In taxation language, the system is not progressive. The valuation list is relatively flat and discriminates little between market levels and sectors. A revaluation is long overdue. The last one occurred in 1976 and was based on late 1960s rental values that reflected prevailing social and economic conditions.

The system lacks clarity and transparency. The figures in the valuation list are meaningless to the ratepayer. The rateable values are artificial, so most people cannot understand the basis on which they are asked to pay. That has an impact on an individual's ability to decide whether his or her assessment is fair, and it affects the public attitude to the appeal process.

Although we have presented the options neutrally, it is widely accepted that a revaluation cannot be conducted on the basis of rental value because an active private rental market exists in only certain areas and market sectors. If the independent market evidence were not widely available, the system would be rendered arbitrary. The main case for domestic revaluation is based on redistribution and the relative contributions of those in prosperous areas compared to those in less

well-off areas. However, the inequities of the current system will be exposed even more if the Assembly increases revenues significantly using the current tax base. After all, the review began after the outcry about the increases proposed in autumn 2000. For that reason, the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and I have given assurances that there will be no abnormal increase unless, and until, a fairer system is introduced.

If colleagues doubt the difficulty of defending the present system, they may refer to the many occasions in the Assembly when my predecessor and I faced questions on, and criticism of, the system. The calls to review the system urgently were clear and strong, as they have been for many months. Furthermore, if we agree to consider redistributing the domestic rating burden, we must ensure that there are appropriate safeguards for vulnerable groups and individuals who are beyond benefit support. That means taking into account people's ability to pay, the avoidance of genuine hardship and ensuring that we do not distort benefit calculations to our disadvantage, by comparison with other regions.

Industrial derating has existed since 1929 and is unique to Northern Ireland — no other region provides that tax break. It costs Northern Ireland £64 million a year, an issue that is likely to generate strong views. It was felt that the matter was so sensitive that it was examined separately, with assistance from external consultants. We wanted to determine the need for industrial derating, its purpose, its continuing relevance and its effectiveness.

A copy of the report will be made available with the consultation paper to inform debate, and I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library today. The study found that the justification for continued industrial derating was questionable, and there are strong arguments in favour of phasing it out. Furthermore, the consultants argued that the overall economic impact of its removal would be negligible in the medium term and that it is not a cost-effective tool of economic development.

I acknowledge that there are strongly held opposing views. A variety of interested parties believe that derating is a significant incentive to attract inward investment, a useful counter-measure to the attractive fiscal regime available in the South, and a partial compensation of the additional costs faced by industries here. The review will take all those views into account.

I mentioned two of the more difficult issues in the consultation paper, which also outlines what we pay rates on, existing and potential rate relief, and how best to deal with vacant rating and/or making owners ultimately liable.

1.30 pm

The paper includes an examination of relief for particular groups, ranging from broad reliefs, such as the

single person allowance, to more selective ones, such as assistance to pensioners or those who find it hard to make ends meet. The paper also covers some ideas for new reliefs for the commercial sector, such as small business and hardship relief. The list is not exhaustive, and consideration of different reliefs may emerge from public consultation. Again, we shall welcome any views on that.

I understand that the pressure for introducing additional reliefs or a different set of reliefs will be immense and diverse, but we must maintain a careful balance. After all, the rating system is the mechanism through which businesses and households pay their contributions to regional and local services, so if reliefs are wide ranging, they put an unfair burden on remaining ratepayers.

Funding of water services is also considered in the paper. The Assembly is well aware of the investment requirements of the water and sewerage systems, and the Minister for Regional Development has estimated that investment will amount to some £3 billion over the next 15 to 20 years. Water services in Great Britain are no longer in the public sector, so we do not receive any consequential funding under the Barnett formula, and all funding must be found from within our departmental expenditure limit. We must face that difficult issue, and the paper sets out some of the options we can consider. Others may be identified during the consultation.

The Executive are not in the business of creating financial hardship for anyone, and I emphasise that for any change in the rating system after the review, there will be carefully planned transitional arrangements to avoid hardship and to allow time for those paying to adjust.

The consultation period will run beyond the summer until mid-September. Three or four public seminars will take place around Northern Ireland in June, followed by a series of meetings with interest groups and organisations. A web site is ready to provide information and elicit feedback. Assessment of the responses will begin in the early autumn, and a range of options will be identified. An impact analysis will be carried out on those options, and a report will be made to the Executive, involving the Committee for Finance and Personnel, in the autumn.

The programme will be sensitive to the results of consultation and feedback and to the extent of amendments and additional work deemed necessary. The legislative process will follow throughout 2003 and possibly early 2004 when final decisions will be made.

During the various stages, some useful links can be made between the rating policy and public administration reviews. Some aspects of those reviews, however, are distinct. I do not agree that conclusions from the review of public administration are needed before we can make progress on the rating issues. One is a matter of ratepayer contribution; the other involves

distributing revenue in the most appropriate way to any new structures that emerge. We must address the basis on which we raise revenue for regional services as well as those covered by the councils. Those services will continue no matter what structures are in place.

I fully expect the consultation on rating to be complex and contentious. Time will be needed to assess the implications of the response to consultation from both an official and a political point of view. It seems realistic to plan on the basis that we will need to consider carefully when to take substantive decisions and how implementation of possible options might be phased. Responses to the consultation will clarify matters, and that in turn will affect the timetable for decisions. Furthermore, the neutrality and openness of the consultation are underscored by our deciding in the autumn the phasing on which any substantive decisions will be taken.

The recently announced reinvestment and reform initiative was not conceived until the rating review was well advanced. There is, however, a relationship between the two, in the sense that any additional revenue we decide to raise locally must come from a reformed and fairer system. The manner in which we address the review of rating will be a measure of how responsibly we are prepared to face difficult issues. The issues are complex, and the challenge is considerable. I am keen to hear Members' views, now and over the coming months.

Mr Speaker: The moment of interruption for Question Time is 2.30 pm. Therefore I remind the House to be as concise as possible in putting and responding to questions.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's statement. It is one thing to say that the current system is unfair, but it will be quite another to put an acceptable alternative in its place. I caution against the abolition of the industrial derating scheme, largely because of the negative impact that it is likely to have on small businesses in Northern Ireland. The clear inducements offered by the regime in the neighbouring jurisdiction would have an adverse impact on the Northern Ireland economy. How does the Minister envisage progress after the consultation period? Who will carry out the assessment, and who will be responsible for developing the proposals?

I ask the Minister to bear in mind the strong representations made by many people who feel that rating is a very important matter. Some people feel that small buildings — local community buildings such as Orange halls — should not be charged rates. Will the Minister pay particular attention to those representations and also to those made by the equestrian industry for the derating of equestrian centres? Many groups and individuals will want to make strong representations. Is the consultation period long enough, given that it is over the summer months, to allow such groups and individuals to make a real contribution?

Mr Speaker: Before inviting the Minister to respond, I would like to point out that this is a statement on a policy issue. I must ask Members not to get into the nitty-gritty of every little bit and piece. Whether they expect the Minister to respond, or someone outside to take notice of it, is another matter, but we cannot have detailed issues of this kind on a policy statement of such a substantive order. However, the Member did ask general policy questions and I invite the Minister to respond.

Dr Farren: I am unveiling the approach to a consultation process that will involve all interested parties and the public at large across Northern Ireland. I do not come with answers to particular questions this afternoon. The answers are to be elicited and developed during the consultation and an assessment of what the consultation provides us with thereafter. Therefore, if Members are looking to me for answers on particular aspects of rating policy, they will be somewhat disappointed. I am anxious to hear what people in the House and elsewhere have to say on the issues. The matter will advance in the usual way. The Department of Finance and Personnel has a particular responsibility in that regard.

The process will develop in consultation with the Executive and the Committees that are directly affected. For example, the Committee for Regional Development and the Minister for Regional Development will be anxious to make a contribution on the future financing of the Water Service. The Minister has told me some of his ideas on that matter, although I am not sure whether he has revealed them to the Committee.

I agree with the Member that replacing a system is difficult. It is easier to recognise the deficiencies of the existing system, but to acknowledge that the system is deficient in many ways, amounting to an inadequate account being taken of social need, places a heavy responsibility on us to address the rating system and to come up with recommendations that will remove gross inequities and make it fairer.

Ms Lewsley: The rating policy review could well be one of the most important initiatives that the Executive will have embarked on, as it will touch the life of every person in Northern Ireland, and it could pave the way for significant increases in our ability to invest in public services. In those circumstances, it is vital that everyone has their say. Can the Minister outline in more detail how the consultation will happen, and who will be consulted? How will equality and new TSN be taken into account in the review?

Dr Farren: I agree that this is probably one of the most significant consultation processes, and I trust that there will be considerable involvement in it.

Mr Kennedy made a point about time; the Department has set aside 14 weeks for the consultation. At this stage I do not want to make any commitment to extending that period, but I hinted earlier that we will take account

of the interest generated and give consideration to ensuring that submissions are well developed and that everyone who wants to be heard, can be. Let us address the time pressures closer to the end of the formally declared consultation period.

We can try to involve everyone by highlighting the issues through public events. I am sure that district councils, which are directly affected, will be anxious to meet me or departmental officials. Assembly Member Kennedy identified several interests, but there are many more and we will be available to hear their concerns. The work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel will be crucial. If sections of society are being missed in the consultation process, I hope that they will be identified early on. If we are failing in any regard, I hope that Members will draw it to our attention so that we can rectify it.

1.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The Minister has said that he is anxious to hear what the Assembly has to say. He has outlined how he will consult with the general public. How will the matter be debated in the Assembly? In another place, given that radical changes are involved, there would be a Green Paper, which would explain all the options, followed by a White Paper, which would indicate what the Government's view might be in certain circumstances. Both those papers would be debated in the House.

In answer to a previous question of mine, the Minister spoke about a motion being tabled. However, this is not a matter for private Members' business. It concerns impending Government policy. Therefore, the Government must take responsibility for the child that they will beget. They must, by way of a motion in the House, put the onus on the Assembly. The matter must be discussed thoroughly in the House, and I want an assurance from the Minister that that will happen.

The Minister knows the views of my party. The DUP does not believe that the rates system is the only system whereby money can be raised or saved.

I notice the irritation on the face of the Hon Speaker of the House. I will not fizzle his beard any further by making a speech.

Dr Farren: I am pleased that the Member has spared the House that imposition.

I have no objection to the matter being debated in the House. I am happy to give consideration to the most appropriate timing of such a debate. It would probably be useful for the consultation process to continue for some time so that Members are informed of the views of interested parties and of the general public before the debate. Perhaps the debate should be scheduled for the early autumn. However, I am open to suggestions.

We are also open to suggestions with regard to the raising of revenue. However, legislative constraints in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 preclude the income tax route, which might be one method of raising revenue that the Member has in mind. There is no reason why the House should not debate the matter. The Executive will give serious consideration to any views expressed. They will be communicated to the Treasury, and discussions will be initiated.

Mr Close: I welcome certain sections of the statement. I welcome the Executive's recognition — at long last — that the present system is unfair, out of date and does not meet current needs. I welcome the fact that nothing has been ruled in and nothing has been ruled out, and that the domestic rating system is now being seen as hard to defend.

I remain unconvinced of the genuine neutrality and openness of the consultation process. In reading this statement, and other papers associated with it, I can see the Executive's large footprints leading in a particular direction. The idea is to scrap rental values as the basis for free rates, to introduce capital evaluation and to scrap the abolition of industrial derating. The Executive are intent on making that happen, and they are also intent on the introduction of water rates. The imprints are already there.

In that respect, an opportunity has been lost. Does the Minister not agree that energies would have been better directed towards enabling the introduction of local income tax in Northern Ireland? That is unquestionably the most fair, equitable and transparent system of taxation. Going down this route effectively slams closed the door to local income tax. Surely we are not going to spend all this money on producing documents, having consultation and introducing a new system in a year's time only to introduce local income tax later?

Does the Minister not agree that, no matter how much we tinker with the rating system — changing the basis from rentable value to capital value — all we are doing is massaging the figures and introducing arbitrary reliefs? Does he not agree that the document is another contrived mechanism for furtively introducing a "tap tax" in which one of the only things ruled out would be water meters? Our poor consumers would not be able to assess the amount of water they use, yet they would have to pay for it.

Does the Minister not agree that an opportunity has been lost to bring about true change and demonstrate real fairness and equity?

Dr Farren: I cannot accept the Member's invitation to agree with him. I defend the approach adopted in the consultation paper. That approach gives opportunities for debate. It is also open to recommendations on other forms of raising revenue — that option has not been precluded. This is a democratic society, and the Member is free to articulate his views and make them known

during the consultation process. Mr Close is a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and I await concerted views on alternative forms of taxation from him or, indeed, the Committee. That is not a criticism of the Committee. The Member frequently refers to local income tax, but I have not seen any firm proposals emanating from him or his party. I await such documentation and recommendations that the Member might deem worthy of putting before us.

We are constrained by current legislation. The Member is aware that, during the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement, some of us were anxious to open up the subject of taxation for wider consideration. Although that was not possible then, it may be so in the future. Issues such as those relating to local forms of taxation could be addressed in the review of the Good Friday Agreement. However, it will be an uphill struggle to achieve what he suggests.

I do not accept that a rating system is necessarily regressive. If we continue with a rating system, we must make it as progressive as possible — that is the challenge in the consultation paper. By raising issues such as industrial derating, the document reflects the view of consultants who were employed to address the issue in as objective a way as possible. The consultation paper reports their views. I emphasise that their views are not Executive policy.

We were urged that it would be appropriate to address the question of industrial derating. It should be addressed because it contains weaknesses and inadequacies, and it does not apply across the business sector. Therefore, it does not, as some Members claim, act as an incentive in attracting inward investment. Those views and conclusions result from an examination of the situation. Members and others outside may have different views, and I urge that those be made known so that all possible views and recommendations are available in the course of the consultation.

Mr McCartney: The Minister has acknowledged that the source of the current problems is the deficit of perhaps £9 to £10 billion, the result of underinvestment over the years, particularly in water and other public services. The Minister has also made it clear that the scope for raising revenue is limited to the rates and, potentially, water charging. The Minister agrees that the money received under the Barnett formula is barely sufficient to meet day-to-day running costs.

The proposals are essentially for the imposition of a wealth tax as a matter of policy. He says that that is fairer, but what he means is that he will tax, through the rates, those who have better properties. That will be justified under the guise of fairness. Will there be any end to the increases on that narrow band of water charges and rates, as interest on private finance initiatives (PFIs), other capital expenditure and borrowings from

the Government under the recent arrangement clicks in? Is it not a policy under which the rates will be increased by substantial amounts year on year in order to fund the results of the Minister's own mistakes in not having ensured, at the time of the agreement, that the black hole of underinvestment was met, to some extent, by the British Government?

Dr Farren: The consultation document contains no proposals. Options are set out, and that is appropriate. We do not, however, claim a monopoly on knowledge and wisdom, and the Member and other interests may want to make us aware of other options.

The Member has frequently made the point that at the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement there was no commitment to, as he puts it, make good the deficit. As I recall, the Member denied us the benefit of his wisdom and recommendations in the final stages of the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. We are therefore left to speculate as to what might have been had Mr McCartney been present at that time.

2.00 pm

Mr Beggs: The Minister's statement will assist in launching the review of rating policy, and I welcome it on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I also welcome the public consultation exercise. I hope that citizens and interested groups will be stimulated by the document and contribute to the review. They have an opportunity to influence what happens, and there will be no point in their making comments in several months' or years' time. I hope that they will be engaged and that they will make a mature and responsible contribution to the issues highlighted today and the options open to them.

I welcome rates relief and rebates for the working poor. The review will discuss the rating of vacant property. Some £48 million a year is lost through the lack of rates for vacant properties. Such a proposal would draw in significant funds even if just a proportion of the money were used. Does the Minister accept that other policy changes may be needed in tandem with changes to the rating policy? Issues might emerge during the review of the rating system, such as planning restrictions in certain areas.

The Minister stated his intention to hold several public seminars in June and to establish a web site. Will his Department co-ordinate the seminars directly or will they be facilitated by neutral organisations as was the case for the regional transportation strategy, the railways task force and the review of the Planning Service?

Dr Farren: I welcome Mr Beggs's suggestions for the format and the auspices under which the public seminars would take place, and I will pass them on to the officials in charge. We want the consultation to be an open process in which all views are heard. I am not sure

how we can take on board the planning issues to which Mr Beggs referred. However, if he has specific ideas on how they will affect rating policy, I suggest that he writes to the Minister of the Environment and my Department. It may be that he is thinking about the valuations that are struck on particular businesses depending on whether they are situated in a town or a city. If Mr Beggs would clarify his concerns, I will ensure that they are addressed.

Mr O'Neill: Considering the amount of debate in the House on the review of rating policy, it is clear that it will be an important addition to our thinking on fiscal matters. However, does the Minister agree that the announcement of the reinvestment and reform initiative has changed the context in which the review is being carried out? That initiative, together with public-private partnerships and our public expenditure create new ways to improve infrastructure. What effect will the announcement of 2 May 2002 have on the review of rating policy?

Dr Farren: The precise connection between the announcement of the reinvestment and reform initiative and the review of rating policy — indeed any reform to replace a system of local revenue raising — is that borrowing under the reinvestment and reform initiative must be serviced through local revenue sources. The Treasury set that condition so that the direct relationship between what we borrow and the means that we have available to service the borrowing could be clearly seen. The reinvestment and reform initiative provides us, through that borrowing facility, with access to significant capital at gilt rates to invest in our major infrastructural projects.

Everyone in the House knows the extent of the need for investment in such projects across the major services of health, education, transport, water, roads, and so on. Our judgement on the sources that we draw on for the necessary finance must be balanced carefully. A strategic investment body will be established to advise the Executive on how best to finance those major investment projects.

Mr Morrow: I think I understood the Minister correctly when he said that the revenue review would consider more than just the money that could be raised by rates and water charges. Will he assure us that any savings that accrue following the review of public administration will be allowed for in the review that he is undertaking? In addition, the Minister said:

“The main case for domestic Revaluation is about redistribution and the relative contributions of those in prosperous areas compared to those in less well off areas.”

I am sure that the Minister agrees that we do not just want to see a redistribution that may result in a lopsided rating, or other, system. We must devote our energies and expertise to ensuring that we create a fair and equitable rating system. The Minister has rightly emphasised that the main thrust of the review will be to ensure that we

have a fairer rating system, if that can be achieved. Will he also assure us that the Assembly will have the final say on the matter when the exercise is finished and that there will not simply be a series of statements from him?

Dr Farren: If Members need any assurance that the Assembly will have the final say on the allocation of public expenditure and the sources from which public money is raised that we have control over, I give it. Any such decision cannot be contained in a take-it-or-leave-it ministerial statement. I should have thought that I hardly needed to give such an assurance, but I give it.

The more we save, the less we have to borrow, and the more is available to us to spend directly from our own sources on the services and the infrastructure for which we have responsibility. We will work vigorously to achieve maximum savings across the whole Administration. We have a clear obligation, as I made clear today in my previous statement, and have made clear on other occasions. A lopsided rating system would not be fair. That is the simple response to the Member's concern about that part of the consultation document that highlights the disproportionate contributions that the current system requires from ratepayers on low and high incomes. A fair system seeks contributions in accordance with people's means.

Deficient and unfair as the present system might be in some respects, there are provisions to exempt people on the lowest incomes. Housing benefit is available, which enables such people to pay their rate bills. A concept of social justice must run through the entire system, and it is up to us to meet the challenge of achieving a system that adheres to such principles. The system must be as fair as we can possibly make it. Nobody likes to pay taxes.

Mr Hay: I welcome the Minister's statement and the review of rating policy consultative paper. The issue is important; it is one that will be debated in the Assembly and across Northern Ireland for many years to come.

Several points are worth mentioning. The Minister said that he planned to hold three or four seminars across Northern Ireland in June. Is that sufficient to deal with the issue if it is so vital? Moreover, what mechanism does the Minister intend to use to consult with interested groups and organisations, and how does he intend to directly consult with local government? Given its importance, a separate or different mechanism for consultation with local government is necessary. Local government will want to be consulted.

Dr Farren: Local government will be keen to be consulted, and it will hardly need much prompting from me — or from any other Minister — to become involved in the consultation process. It would not surprise me if the paper is circulated as soon as it falls into the hands of officials from our 26 district councils. The paper will be circulated to Members, and time will be set aside over the coming months for them to debate the issue and

come to some concerted views. We shall consider any channels that we should use.

Mr Hay asked whether three or four seminars would be sufficient. I indicated in response to an earlier question that I am open to reviewing the need for such events. Public events are there to highlight the issues, and I do not imagine that decisions will be arrived at them. Such public events will draw in representatives and participants from a wide range of backgrounds. They will return to their various groups and organisations and stimulate debate. I hope that the events will be seen as a significant consultation, and that there will be considerable involvement. If Members are aware of groups to which we are failing to reach out, or groups that want to have an input and seek engagement with us during the consultation, I am happy to receive representations. I will try to see how we can meet any requests that are made.

2.15 pm

Rev Dr William McCrea: It never ceases to amaze me how so many Members welcome the Minister's introduction of what is going to be an extensive hike on rates for the vast majority of our constituents. Make no mistake about it: what is being talked about today will have major and serious implications for our constituents. The Minister spoke earlier about Members being free to articulate their views during the debate in the Assembly. That will be interesting, because Members are often limited to five minutes in debates in which to articulate their views. That does not happen at Westminster when major taxation issues are being discussed. Make no mistake: this is a direct taxation on the people.

Thatcher introduced a poll tax through the front door and was frowned upon by the vast majority of people. Will taxation through the back door be more favourably accepted? Can the Minister assure us that there will no such time limit during the debate and that he will do all in his power to ensure that there is a frank and open major debate on an issue that will be of major importance to all our constituents in the future?

Mr Speaker: One of the issues that the Member raised is really a point of order. It is not for the Minister to determine the length of debates or the length of speeches during the debates. That is entirely a matter for the Business Committee to decide. The Business Committee could determine that a motion would take all week. The Member and other Members should channel their views through their representatives on the Business Committee. In fairness, the Minister can reasonably be asked questions only about matters for which he has responsibility, and that is not one of them.

Rev Dr William McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not normally take them, but on this occasion I will hear what the Member has to say.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I did not ask the Minister to allocate the time. I asked him to use his influence to ensure that we have an open debate.

Mr Speaker: It is good that I clarified the matter for the House. It will be up to several Members when the time comes, one of whom is seated not very far from the Member — and he has great influence in these matters.

Dr Farren: Much as I might be described as having influence, I am glad that you, Mr Speaker, have indicated the way in which it is circumscribed in this instance and that this is a matter for the Business Committee. Members must be able to debate such a significant matter, and I will welcome that opportunity.

There is absolutely nothing back door about this. If there were, I would hardly have come here, made my statement and responded in the way in which I did to show that this is an open process. It will be for the Assembly to decide what form or forms of local taxation it wants to adopt and the charges that might be associated with them. It is up to us to promote the discussion.

I note the Member's foresight in that he can tell us that we are going to have significant hikes. I have certainly made absolutely no statement in that regard. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: Perhaps during the debate that the Member wants he will make proposals for the major hikes that he has referred to. I have certainly made no such proposals. During Budget debates in the future we will have to consider and determine the charges that are to be associated with our forms of revenue. There will be nothing back door about it; there is nothing back door about the process now, nor will there be during the public consultation that we are now embarking on.

AMENDMENTS TO STANDING ORDERS

Mr Speaker: There are three motions in the Order Paper to amend Standing Orders. They all relate to the same issue. Therefore I wish to conduct one debate only — if, indeed, debate there be. I shall ask the Clerk to read the first motion and then call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move that motion. Debate will then take place on all three motions and all who wish to speak, including the mover, will speak in that single debate. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will call the Chairperson to make a winding-up speech, if there have been any interventions. I will then put the question on the first motion. I will then ask the Chairperson to formally move each motion in turn and separately put the question on each motion without further debate. If that is clear, I will proceed.

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

I beg to move:

In Standing Order 12(1) delete “41(2)” and insert “41(8)”.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 41 delete all and insert:

“41. SCRUTINY OF STATUTORY RULES

- (1) Every statutory rule or draft statutory rule which:
 - (a) is laid before the Assembly; and
 - (b) is subject to Assembly proceedings, shall stand referred to the appropriate Committee for scrutiny.
- (2) The appropriate Committee may also scrutinise any statutory rule which:
 - (a) deals with a transferred matter (within the meaning of the Northern Ireland Act 1998); and
 - (b) is not subject to Assembly proceedings, whether or not the statutory rule is laid before the Assembly.
- (3) To assist Committees in the scrutiny of instruments under this Standing Order there shall be an officer of the Assembly known as the Examiner of Statutory Rules who shall carry out any functions delegated to him/her under paragraph (4)(b).
- (4) The appropriate Committee may:
 - (a) scrutinise the instrument itself; or
 - (b) delegate to the Examiner of Statutory Rules any of its functions in relation to the technical scrutiny of the instrument.
- (5) Where a Committee has delegated functions to the Examiner of Statutory Rules under paragraph (4)(b), references to the Committee in the following provisions of this Standing Order, in relation to functions so delegated, include references to the Examiner.
- (6) In scrutinising an instrument the appropriate Committee shall inter alia consider the instrument with a view to

determining and reporting on whether it requires to be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly on any of the following grounds, namely, that:

- (a) it imposes a charge on the public revenues or prescribes the amount of any such charge;
 - (b) it contains provisions requiring any payment to be made to any Northern Ireland department or public body in respect of any approval, authorisation, licence or consent or of any service provided or to be provided by that department or body or prescribes the amount of any such payment;
 - (c) the parent legislation excludes it from challenge in the courts;
 - (d) it purports to have retrospective effect where the parent legislation confers no express authority so to provide;
 - (e) there appears to have been unjustifiable delay in the publication of it or in the laying of it before the Assembly;
 - (f) there appears to be a doubt whether it is intra vires or it appears to make some unusual or unexpected use of the powers conferred by the parent legislation;
 - (g) it calls for elucidation;
 - (h) it appears to have defects in its drafting; or on any other ground which does not impinge on its merits or the policy behind it.
- (7) The appropriate Committee shall where practicable report on an instrument before any resolution or motion relating to that instrument is moved in the Assembly.
- (8) In this Standing Order:
- “Committee” means:
- (a) a Statutory Committee; or
 - (b) in the case of an instrument which has been made or is to be made by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly, or by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Committee of the Centre;
- “instrument” means a statutory rule or a draft statutory rule;
- “the parent legislation”, in relation to an instrument, means the legislation under which the instrument is made or is to be made;
- “statutory rule” has the same meaning as in the Statutory Rules (Northern Ireland) Order 1979.
- (9) For the purposes of this Standing Order a statutory rule or draft statutory rule is subject to Assembly proceedings if, in pursuance of the parent legislation, proceedings may be taken in the Assembly in relation to it.” — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 54(2) delete “41(2)” and insert “41(8)”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

This group of motions deals with the scrutiny of subordinate legislation and arises out of the Committee on Procedures’ report on its review of the legislative process. On 26 February 2002 the Assembly endorsed the recommendations of the report, of which this is one.

The substantive motion is to amend Standing Order 41. Due to changes in numbering, consequential amendments to Standing Orders 12 and 54 will be required.

Although the legislative review concentrated on primary legislation, the Committee found that there were several examples of subordinate legislation — [Interruption].

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr C Murphy: — that is, Statutory Rules that did not come under Assembly scrutiny. It noted the recommendation by the Examiner of Statutory Rules in his report for the period December 1999 to July 2001 that Standing Orders should be amended to ensure that all subordinate legislation is subject to, or at least liable to, scrutiny by the Assembly.

The Examiner of Statutory Rules highlighted how, under existing Standing Orders, the scrutiny role of the Assembly is limited to Statutory Rules or draft Statutory Rules, which are made under the primary legislation that comes within the remit of the Assembly. The effect of that, he explained, was that many Statutory Rules, which exercise considerable power over people's lives, escaped scrutiny by the Assembly.

He gave as an example orders made under the Diseases of Animals (Modification) Order (Northern Ireland) 1996, which are not laid before the Assembly but which regulate the way in which people conduct their business or the way animals are marketed. The Examiner highlighted the fact that that was not the case at Westminster, where procedures were in place to ensure that all legislation was subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The Committee agreed with the Examiner on the importance of the Assembly having in place procedures to ensure the closest examination of all legislation. As such, that is reflected in paragraph (2) of the proposed amendments to Standing Order 41.

The Committee considered another issue raised by the Examiner to amend Standing Orders to require a Committee, when scrutinising the Statutory Rule, to draw it to the attention of the Assembly where it requires a payment to be made in respect of a licence or consent or other service from a public body. That is not provided for in current Standing Orders.

The Examiner suggested that such a requirement should be qualified, so that an imposition of a charge, or the prescription of the amount of the charge, should be reported only where it appeared to the Committee that its imposition called for the special attention of the Assembly. The Committee agreed that the imposition of charges on the public should be drawn to the attention of the Assembly. That would bring it into line with existing practice in Westminster and in the Scottish Parliament. The Committee accepted the recommendation of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and that has been incorporated

in paragraph (6) of the proposed amendment to Standing Order 41.

I commend the amendments to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 12(1) delete “41(2)” and insert “41(8)”:

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 41 delete all and insert:

“41. SCRUTINY OF STATUTORY RULES

- (1) Every statutory rule or draft statutory rule which:
 - (a) is laid before the Assembly; and
 - (b) is subject to Assembly proceedings, shall stand referred to the appropriate Committee for scrutiny.
- (2) The appropriate Committee may also scrutinise any statutory rule which:
 - (a) deals with a transferred matter (within the meaning of the Northern Ireland Act 1998); and
 - (b) is not subject to Assembly proceedings, whether or not the statutory rule is laid before the Assembly.
- (3) To assist Committees in the scrutiny of instruments under this Standing Order there shall be an officer of the Assembly known as the Examiner of Statutory Rules who shall carry out any functions delegated to him/her under paragraph (4)(b).
- (4) The appropriate Committee may:
 - (a) scrutinise the instrument itself; or
 - (b) delegate to the Examiner of Statutory Rules any of its functions in relation to the technical scrutiny of the instrument.
- (5) Where a Committee has delegated functions to the Examiner of Statutory Rules under paragraph (4)(b), references to the Committee in the following provisions of this Standing Order, in relation to functions so delegated, include references to the Examiner.
- (6) In scrutinising an instrument the appropriate Committee shall inter alia consider the instrument with a view to determining and reporting on whether it requires to be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly on any of the following grounds, namely, that:
 - (a) it imposes a charge on the public revenues or prescribes the amount of any such charge;
 - (b) it contains provisions requiring any payment to be made to any Northern Ireland department or public body in respect of any approval, authorisation, licence or consent or of any service provided or to be provided by that department or body or prescribes the amount of any such payment;
 - (c) the parent legislation excludes it from challenge in the courts;
 - (d) it purports to have retrospective effect where the parent legislation confers no express authority so to provide;

- (e) there appears to have been unjustifiable delay in the publication of it or in the laying of it before the Assembly;
 - (f) there appears to be a doubt whether it is *intra vires* or it appears to make some unusual or unexpected use of the powers conferred by the parent legislation;
 - (g) it calls for elucidation;
 - (h) it appears to have defects in its drafting; or on any other ground which does not impinge on its merits or the policy behind it.
- (7) The appropriate Committee shall where practicable report on an instrument before any resolution or motion relating to that instrument is moved in the Assembly.
- (8) In this Standing Order:
- “Committee” means:
- (a) a Statutory Committee; or
 - (b) in the case of an instrument which has been made or is to be made by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly, or by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Committee of the Centre;
- “instrument” means a statutory rule or a draft statutory rule;
- “the parent legislation”, in relation to an instrument, means the legislation under which the instrument is made or is to be made;
- “statutory rule” has the same meaning as in the Statutory Rules (Northern Ireland) Order 1979.
- (9) For the purposes of this Standing Order a statutory rule or draft statutory rule is subject to Assembly proceedings if, in pursuance of the parent legislation, proceedings may be taken in the Assembly in relation to it.” — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy)*.]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 54(2) delete “41(2)” and insert “41(8)”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy)*.]

COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Change of Membership

Resolved:

That Mr David Hilditch shall replace Mr William Hay on the Committee for Employment and Learning. — [*Mr Morrow*.]

The sitting was suspended at 2.25 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair)—

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of the House to the visit of honoured guests to the Assembly. The President, or Speaker, of the Assembly of Kosovo, Prof Nexhat Daci, is here with several Members of the Kosovan Parliament. They are in the distinguished visitors Gallery, and I am sure that the House would wish me to welcome them. They will be here for two or three days and will meet with representatives of all the Members and various Committees and bodies of the Assembly. [*Applause*].

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: Question 3 in the name of Mr Molloy has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Questions 1 and 2 stand in the names of Mr Gibson and Mr Paisley Jnr respectively. However, they are not in their places.

Jubilee Tour

4. **Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what assessment the Executive have made of Her Majesty The Queen’s Jubilee tour of Northern Ireland. (AQO 1422/01)

The First Minister: The Executive have not taken an overall view of Her Majesty The Queen’s Golden Jubilee visit to Northern Ireland. However, we were delighted that the programme for the visit provided opportunities for people from all walks of life, and from across Northern Ireland, to participate in the events and to show the warmth of their feelings and good wishes for Her Majesty in her Golden Jubilee year.

Mr Savage: Does the First Minister take encouragement from the Queen’s statement at Stormont, which welcomed

“the real sense of normality that has over recent years been returning to the lives of ordinary people”?

Does he also agree that the visit was a great example of that normality?

The First Minister: I endorse the Member’s comments. In the well-judged remarks that she made in the Great Hall of this Building, Her Majesty referred to

“a real sense of normality”,

albeit one

“tempered from time to time by moments of disappointment and pessimism”.

We should examine other similar events to develop further that sense of normality. In the context of Her Majesty’s visit to Northern Ireland, it has occurred to me that an invitation by the Government of the Irish Republic to Her Majesty to pay a state visit to the Republic of Ireland would be a sign of developing normality.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 stands in the name of Mr Ford. However, he is not in his place.

World Debt

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, in the light of recent coverage about world debt, what steps are being taken to ensure that the views of the Northern Ireland Executive are represented at the G8 summit in Canada at the end of June 2002. (AQO 1448/01)

The First Minister: Ministers are aware of the difficulties of heavily indebted poor countries, where resources are diverted to interest payments on debt and are unavailable for vital programmes such as health and education. Ten billion pounds are spent annually on servicing a debt of over £200 billion in those countries — money that could be spent much more productively. Responsibility for international development lies with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development. Therefore, there are no plans for the Executive to consider the issue of world debt in the near future. We will not be making representations to the UK Government in advance of the G8 summit next month.

Mr McGrady: I am disappointed that OFMDFM will not be making representations on the matter. I draw the attention of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to the fact that the people of Northern Ireland are concerned about international matters, and it is appropriate that the Assembly have an opportunity to make their views known.

Are the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister aware that only 85% of the promises made in 1999 at the Cologne conference on world debt have been acted on? The payment of interest on the debts means that basic health and education standards are not being met. An estimated 19,000 children die in developing countries every day.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has put his question.

The First Minister: I appreciate Mr McGrady’s interest in world debt, and his concern was evident in his supplementary question. However, this is a reserved matter, so it would be more appropriate to raise it in the House of Commons, of which Mr McGrady is a Member. The United Kingdom Government’s policy is very similar to his suggestion. The Chancellor has played a

significant part in the measures to relieve the debt burden, but it is a complex issue. The burden arose partly because of changed economic circumstances, but largely as a result of self-inflicted problems such as the wars that have taken place in too many developing countries. Often, we are dealing with a symptom, but it should be addressed as sympathetically as possible.

Racially Motivated Hate Crimes

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the problem of racially motivated hate crimes.

(AQO 1436/01)

Hate Crimes

20. **Mr Neeson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give an update on plans to introduce legislation to tackle hate crimes.

(AQO 1425/01)

The Deputy First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, we shall answer questions 7 and 20 together. We deplore all racially motivated and sectarian attacks, which have no place in civilised society. Criminal justice, including the criminal law on racially motivated and sectarian crime, is a reserved matter. The Secretary of State has announced his intention to consult on the scope for strengthening the law in that area, and we await with interest the publication of his proposals.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his statement that sectarian crime has no place in society. Should Members be more proactive in encouraging the public to embrace ethnic minorities, particularly those who come from abroad to work for a long time, who often experience difficulties?

The Deputy First Minister: We must ensure that people are much more aware and sensitive to the needs of, and pressures on, members of ethnic minority communities, and the frequent insidious attacks on them. The Administration have been trying to examine those issues and to hear from those who are directly affected. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency examined the pernicious effects of such crime on ethnic minority communities. We must do more to promote the equality and rights of everyone, including those from ethnic minorities.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that any form of intolerance is to be deplored? Does he further agree that greater community support is required for the police if race crimes are to be combated, including support from Mr McHugh’s party?

The Deputy First Minister: Any crime victims would, understandably, wish to turn to the relevant statutory agencies, including the police service, for support and

assistance, and Members should do everything to try to encourage them and to ensure that they can. Members of ethnic minority communities, who are perhaps unaware of the subtleties and difficulties of our situation, instinctively turn to the police and other services. It is important that they get that support and that the police service be able to respond with due sensitivity, as well as alacrity.

Mr Shannon: Can the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister confirm that minority and majority viewpoints will be protected under the equality legislation? Many people are concerned that the equality legislation, as it stands, may be bogged down in the courts for months or years. Can the Ministers confirm that that will not happen?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that I can give the Minister guidance on that. I think he is on his own.

The Deputy First Minister: It is the usual acoustics problem in the Chamber. I am not quite sure of the content of the Member's question. It seemed to be that Members are concerned that the equality legislation will be unworkable and bogged down in the courts. I am not sure if the Member is suggesting that, due to equality legislation, issues relating to racially motivated crime will take a long time in the courts. I do not see a connection between the legislation and measures to tackle racially motivated crime. However, if the question is about the delay of the single equality Bill, I remind the Member that that has nothing to do with criminal justice.

Gender Strategy

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what resources have been deployed for the development of the gender strategy as proposed in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 1427/01)

The First Minister: Within our Department's Equality and Social Needs Division, the gender policy unit was established to promote gender equality throughout the work of the Executive. Its remit covers women, men, people of differing sexual orientation, people with or without dependents and people with differing marital status. The unit is to bring forward a gender equality strategy this year. It has a complement of four staff and has been allocated £121,000 from the departmental running costs for 2002-03. Those resources will be kept under review as the strategy is developed and implemented, and we will bid for more if need arises.

Mr Maskey: We are well into 2002 and the development of the gender strategy is behind schedule. I wonder whether the First and the Deputy First Ministers might feel it necessary to enhance the complement of staff or the time that the existing staff have to develop the gender strategy.

The First Minister: I am not sure why the Member thinks that it is behind schedule, as work is being undertaken. A consultation seminar has been held, involving voluntary agencies and Departments, to gather views on key issues. That has been followed up by a series of meetings with the relevant voluntary agencies. The work is under way, and I have no reason to believe that the target will not be met.

Mr Foster: Can the First Minister further outline what steps have been taken to develop the gender strategy?

The First Minister: In addition to the seminar and meetings, we are currently consulting Departments on the key issues that will inform the strategy. The strategy will have relevance throughout the Administration, and, therefore, it is appropriate that we consult on it. I remain confident that the Department will meet its objective of evolving a strategy this year.

Age Discrimination

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what action is being taken to tackle age discrimination. (AQO 1426/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We are determined to tackle age discrimination, and our proposals for legislation will be available for consultation next year. We intend that the legislation will be in operation in Northern Ireland before the deadline of 2006 imposed by the European Directive.

2.45 pm

In our consultation on the general content and scope of the single equality Bill, we asked some general questions about age discrimination. There are many complex issues to be addressed. We want to ensure that we take account of expert advice and experience elsewhere in advancing this work.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities to give due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons in nine separate categories, including persons of different ages. Under the promoting social inclusion initiative we are committed to set up a working group by December to examine the causes of social exclusion among older people and to develop a cross-departmental strategy for tackling those issues.

Mr McCarthy: Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister convey their response about tackling age discrimination to the Minister for Employment and Learning? Her Department has withdrawn the premium rate concession to people over the age of 60 who wish to avail of learndirect. The reason given, which could be construed as an insult to those people, is that learning and priority has been accorded to those in greatest need of help who are of working age, and, therefore, contribute

to the needs of the economy. The Department for Employment and Learning is saying that people over 60 years of age do not contribute to the economy.

Mr Speaker: The Member has made his question clear. Perhaps the Minister would reply.

The Deputy First Minister: The answer is yes. We will relay the points that the Member has raised to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr McFarland: Are there any plans to extend the powers of the Equality Commission to cover age discrimination?

The Deputy First Minister: We have decided in principle that the powers of the Equality Commission should be extended to include age, and indeed — for Members' information — sexual orientation. I offer that as a mark of our commitment to outlawing all forms of discrimination. We will consult on that when we advance proposals for the single equality Bill.

Mr Weir: Will the Deputy First Minister take the opportunity to make a public call to North Down Borough Council to reverse its disgraceful decision not to fund Age Concern — an organisation that helps the aged? That decision was taken on the basis that to give funding to Age Concern would be in breach of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Deputy First Minister: I am not aware of that issue, and I do not think that it would be appropriate for me make calls to a particular council in relation to its funding policy. However, I would be very surprised to hear that section 75 requirements could somehow preclude, or constitute a difficulty, in relation to funding groups that work on issues relating to older people.

British-Irish Council

10. **Mr Dallat** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the British-Irish Council. (AQO 1435/01)

The First Minister: At its inaugural meeting on 17 December 1999, the British-Irish Council (BIC) agreed to advance work on several initial priority areas: environment; drugs; social inclusion; the knowledge economy and transport. At the second summit meeting on 30 November 2001, two further priority areas of work were agreed — telemedicine and tourism.

Work is being done in each of the sectors through working groups of senior officials. Work flowing from those groups led to a ministerial meeting on transport on 19 December 2000; two ministerial meetings on the environment held on 2 October 2000 and 25 February 2002, and one on drugs held on 22 March 2002. Further ministerial meetings are planned. A third summit meeting, which is scheduled to take place on 14 June in Jersey, will focus on the knowledge economy, and a fourth,

focusing on social inclusion, is scheduled to take place in November.

In addition to meetings on priority areas, a BIC conference addressing the digital divide took place in Jersey on 24-26 April. A report will be presented to the summit meeting in June. A conference on targeting the proceeds of the drugs trade took place in Guernsey in May. Further conferences in the BIC drugs sector are planned.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's positive statement. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister take this opportunity to recognise the major benefits of the knowledge economy and encourage the strategic investment body to ensure investment in that crucial area?

The First Minister: The BIC is one of the new institutions created under the agreement and is being developed in parallel with other elements of the agreement. The response of all member Administrations to the programme has been positive and wholehearted. A conference for decision-makers on bridging the digital divide took place in Jersey, and provided an opportunity for representatives from Northern Ireland Departments to hear first-hand about models of good practice and experience of that issue.

The question on the strategic investment body is appropriate. It is, as the Member said, a crucial area and one that we are anxious to advance. In developing that initiative, we will want to take advantage of best practice across all elements of the BIC to maximise what we can discover.

Mr S Wilson: Does the First Minister believe that the British-Irish Council will be in place in a year's time, or does he agree with his Colleague, Lord Kilclooney, that, because of the behaviour of IRA/Sinn Féin, the entire agreement could collapse before then?

Will he comment on the views expressed by his party colleague, Jeffrey Donaldson, that his party should collapse the Executive because of the involvement of Sinn Féin in international terrorism? Are those comments simply headline-grabbing statements to prevent the haemorrhage of members from his party to the DUP?

The First Minister: I congratulate the Member for the width of his supplementary question, but I am slightly surprised at his use of the term "headline-grabbing", as if such tactics would ever be used by any party other than his own.

We have dealt with the British-Irish Council, and I have detailed the meetings that have taken place and will take place within that context. From those comments, the Member can see the good things that are being done. We have all known from the outset about the things that could threaten the existence of this institution. Indeed, some of those threats have come from the Member and his Colleagues. Nonetheless, we

endeavour to see this being implemented and hope that all parties to the agreement will carry out all their obligations under it.

Lord Kilclooney: Mr Sammy Wilson, who has deserted east Belfast to live in east Antrim for non-political reasons, mentioned my name. Does the First Minister recall that the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body was a failure because it met in secret and did not report to parliamentarians or to the people? Will the British-Irish Council report on its good work?

The First Minister: As the Member knows, following each meeting of the British-Irish Council and, indeed, of the North/South Ministerial Council, statements are made and matters put into the public domain. Consequently, there is an openness and a transparency that is highly desirable in any government institution.

We very much want to see responsibility to the British-Irish Council being maintained. We are, of course, conscious of the fact that the Assembly's existence, which the Member worked very hard to achieve, is one of the things that the people of Northern Ireland regard as a very significant benefit.

Those who sit in the corner and carp cannot point to any similar achievement of their own.

Small Employers' Threshold

11. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the small employers' threshold in disability discrimination law. (AQO 1447/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The EU Framework Directive requires the removal by December 2006 of the existing exemption from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 for employers with fewer than 15 employees. Consultation on the removal of the threshold and the timescale for doing so will be carried out later this year in Northern Ireland. We propose to implement the removal ahead of the required deadline of 2006 as set by the EU.

Ms Lewsley: This action compensates for many people's disappointment that the single equality Bill was not introduced. Has a target date been set for the implementation of the legislation?

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive recognise the need to extend protection to all disabled employees, so we intend to remove the threshold in advance of the EU's 2006 deadline. Our target date is January 2004, and consultation will be carried out later in 2002.

Northern Ireland Economic Council/Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre

12. **Mr Attwood** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans there are for the

future of (a) the Northern Ireland Economic Council; and (b) the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre. (AQO 1433/01)

The First Minister: After a review of the Northern Ireland Economic Council (NIEC) and the provision of independent economic advice and research, the Executive agreed on 17 May that they should seek to improve the supply of economic advice by setting up a new research body combining the roles of the NIEC and the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre (NIERC). Consultation has commenced with the NIEC, the NIERC, the Committee of the Centre, the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and it will continue until 19 June 2002.

Mr Attwood: Does the First Minister accept that it is important that the Government continue to have an independent mechanism of scrutiny and overview when they are carrying out economic policy planning and assessment? Does he agree that independent assessment is important, particularly as we unpick many decades of unfettered Civil Service power in the North? Why did considerable time elapse before the Executive's review of the matter in May?

The First Minister: It is right that those important matters should be considered carefully and deliberately. The Executive have agreed to set up a new research body, and consultation will take place. I assure Mr Attwood that a key objective is to ensure that the Administration have genuinely independent advice of the best quality. We need people who can consider the situation objectively, without being responsible for the decisions, matters and policies on which they advise, so that they are not influenced in their opinion. We appreciate that open and independent advice lies at the heart of good policy decision-making in the Executive. It is our urgent desire to receive such advice, which is partly why we took time to pursue the matter. The Executive will be able to be certain that the advice that they receive is genuinely independent.

The Speaker: I do not see Mr McMenamin in his place.

Constituency Visit

14. **Mr McClarty** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister whether there are any plans to visit his constituency. (AQO 1421/01)

3.00 pm

The First Minister: We have no plans to make a joint visit to the East Londonderry constituency. However, we visited the area on two occasions recently. On 12 April we officially opened the new Causeway Hospital and, more recently, we were there to see riders and spectators at a practice session for the North West 200.

Mr McClarty: Is the First Minister aware of the deep concern in my constituency of East Londonderry, and in other constituencies, following the revelation of the Republican movement's involvement in Colombia in last night's Channel 4 programme 'Dispatches: The Colombian Connection'? Does he agree that its involvement in South America calls into question its commitment to peace and democracy?

Mr Speaker: Order. Geography was never my strongest point, but the last time that I looked at a map, I did not notice that Mr McClarty's constituency extended to Colombia. I have heard it suggested here that he may intend to go there on holiday, but, given the experiences of some other tourists there, it might not be best advised for him to do so.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Mr Speaker: Question 7, standing in the name of Mr Byrne, has been transferred to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and question 8, standing in the name of Mr Jim Wilson, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Participation in Sporting Activities

1. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in the light of his objective to increase recorded levels of active participation in sporting activities, to outline (a) the time-limited targets set in pursuance of this objective; and (b) the measures being put in place to ensure that those targets are achieved.

(AQO 1453/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The target, including time limits set for increasing recorded levels of active participation in sporting activities, is 49% by the end of 2002-03, against a baseline of 48% for 2000-01. The proposed actions to achieve that target are increasing the number of sporting opportunities in schools, communities and the sporting network; increasing the number of volunteers equipped to develop the participation of young people in sport and trained to encourage lifelong participation; establishing the Northern Ireland Network Centre of the UK Sports Institute to increase opportunities in Northern Ireland; identifying and supporting talented performers in Northern Ireland; and raising the standard of coaching for high-level performers.

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

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to an increase of 1% a year. The targets are reasonable, but, given the health of some sectors of the community, perhaps greater encouragement to participate in sport should be given by targeting funding at organisations, such as schools or further

education colleges, where more impact could be made. If the targets are to be met and surpassed, the number of people who participate actively in sport must be increased.

Mr McGimpsey: This is the first year that the Department has set targets and, therefore, it has inadequate data with which to work. When setting targets, the Department must take heed of the level of available resources. Achievable targets are important, and they will be reviewed annually. I do not disagree with the tone of Mr McHugh's remarks: there are barriers to participation in sport. Sport is beneficial on several levels. A recent report from Queen's University claims that medical costs for those people who engage in physical activity are 30% lower than for those people who lead a more sedentary lifestyle. Participation in sport lowers heart disease and provides many other health benefits. Therefore, in addition to the pleasure of taking part in sport, there are financial and economic reasons for doing so.

Match-funding

2. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consider match-funding the moneys raised by voluntary organisations for sporting provision.

(AQO 1418/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware of the positive contribution of voluntary organisations to the development of sport in Northern Ireland. I would like to be in a position to match the funding that those organisations raise for sporting provision, but resources do not permit that.

Mr C Murphy: The Minister should be the master of his own resources. He should determine his budget in discussion with the Assembly Committee and his Executive Colleagues. Given that he feels this, why did he feel it necessary to interrupt important ministerial business several weeks ago to vote against an Executive Colleague's being able to enjoy the same flexibility to decide on, and be the master of, her budget? He voted for a motion that required the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to match the money raised by friends of hospitals groups. Does the Minister not consider his actions to be hypocritical, given that his voting against his ministerial Colleague was inconsistent with the answer that he just gave?

Mr McGimpsey: I will try to respond to that long, convoluted second question.

Mr C Murphy: It was a simple point.

Mr McGimpsey: I will respond without prompting, if the Member does not mind.

With regard to matching funding for sport, the Department is already providing up to 70% for capital funding, so the Member is asking it to reduce that from 70% to 50%. The Department is also funding up to 90% of revenue for sports development. Under the Member's

proposal, that would drop to 50%. With regard to Exchequer funding for sports development, we are already providing up to 50%, so funding from voluntary organisations is being matched in many areas.

Mr C Murphy: Perhaps the Minister could answer the question.

Mr McGimpsey: I ask the Member to be patient. If he does not shout at me, he will be able to hear me better.

With regard to sports, the data is less precise than would be expected for health and social services, so if the Member is proposing that we should match-fund the money raised by voluntary organisations for sport, he should say what sort of money he is talking about. We estimate that up to £50 million is raised by voluntary organisations, and it is completely beyond the Department's reach to match such amounts. There is a connection between sport and health, but they are two different matters. Mr Murphy would be better to ask questions that relate to my responsibilities.

Mr Hilditch: The Minister kindly supplied me with some information on the sports match-funding that is available in England, and that has distributed some £28 million among 72 different sports. I thank the Minister for his assessment. Has he looked at the possibility of introducing such a scheme?

Mr McGimpsey: The funding is constantly under review, but, as Mr Hilditch knows, we are constrained by resources. The money that we give to the Sports Council amounts to £2.4 million, a small amount. It is difficult to consider other initiatives with such a level of funding, but we keep the matter under review. I value the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's ideas for initiatives.

Visitor Amenities

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what capital and revenue funding will be provided to visitor amenities in Northern Ireland during the current financial year. (AQO 1449/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure already provides revenue funding to several visitor amenities, such as the Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Ulster American Folk Park, Armagh County Museum and the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium. The funding will amount to just over £12 million for this financial year. At present, no moneys are set aside for capital development or, indeed, to resource the 400 other facilities identified in research work for the local museum and heritage review.

Mr McGrady: The sums mentioned by the Minister are attributable to museums only. The Minister will be aware of the problems that many visitor centres are experiencing because of the economic climate, especially

the tourist trade. Does the Minister agree that those visitor centres should not be considered profit-making enterprises, although they should strive to enhance their income as much as possible? As visitor centres are enduring features of our culture and heritage, would moneys not be better spent on them than on one-off sponsored concerts?

Mr McGimpsey: It is difficult for me to see a way to fund all 400 local museum and heritage sites. My Department is looking at how we approach and prioritise support. That is where the current local museum and heritage review comes in. That review is with the Department of the Environment awaiting response, which will allow us to produce the document and an implementation plan. It specifically looks at the 400 local museum and heritage sites. Mr McGrady and other Members will understand that it is impossible for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to fund all the sites, so large is the network.

The Northern Ireland Events Company provides a different function for concerts and events held on the Stormont estate — it underwrites potential losses. If a concert does not make a loss, the Events Company provides no money. If a concert makes a loss, there is a limit up to which that loss will be underwritten, which is to ensure that the concert takes place. Thus far, the concerts have been successful; they have promoted the image of Northern Ireland in particular, which is important. After 25 years of our unfortunate, chaotic history, we need to try harder to improve our image outside Northern Ireland. Therefore, that is where the Events Company comes in.

Lord Kilclooney: Does the Minister agree that we could have an overprovision of amenity centres in Northern Ireland, and that he should show greater caution in approving further centres in view of the experiences we have had at the Navan Centre, the Armagh Planetarium and now at St Patrick's Centre in Downpatrick? Will he ensure that future applications have proper marketing machinery in place, so that centres do not increasingly burden our ratepayers?

Mr McGimpsey: This Department or, indeed, its predecessor, did not have a role in approving any of those cases. As far as I understand, Down District Council took the lead on decisions on St Patrick's Centre. The Armagh Planetarium has been in operation for some 35 years and is a valuable facility. That is why we are looking at proposals to ensure that the planetarium remains, and at ways in which we can redevelop it. The Navan Centre is the property of trustees in Armagh. As such, it is their responsibility.

I agree with the Member's subtext. We have a proliferation of such facilities, and people who decide to build and develop them should be clear about the revenue consequences. Obtaining the capital is only one aspect — getting the revenue to run the centres from

year to year is the hard part. There is a tendency in many proposals to overestimate the visitor count. The Navan Centre visitor count was estimated at around 150,000, yet it never attracted more than 50,000 — therein lies the centre's difficulty.

Mr Shannon: One of the major visitor amenities in Northern Ireland is Derry's walls, and that is not only when the Apprentice Boys attend their parade in the Maiden City. Will the Minister indicate the capital and revenue funding that the walls will receive this year, so that the figure of 90,000 tourists that visited the venue last year can be increased?

3.15 pm

Mr McGimpsey: The Derry walls are the responsibility of the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment. The Department plays a part in attracting visitors by promoting cultural diversity and through support for the Maiden City Festival, which, through the Apprentice Boys' march, features Derry's walls. The Department plays a part, but the question would have been better put to the Department of the Environment, which is more responsible.

Visual Arts Museum

4. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there has been any consideration of providing a visual arts museum at the Ulster Museum site. (AQO 1415/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland's (MAGNI) 'Opening Horizons' document identified the need for a museum that would encompass all creative arts, not another gallery displaying rows of paintings. The Department and MAGNI continue to discuss the best way to achieve that need, which could result in a visual arts museum at the Ulster Museum site.

Dr Adamson: This is a follow up to my question AQO 128/99 of 7 February 2000 on the creation of a creative arts museum. Will the Minister consider implementing the "string of pearls" idea throughout Northern Ireland, using such Belfast sites as the Crumlin Road Courthouse and Jail, the Ormeau Baths Gallery and the Engine Room Gallery on the Newtownards Road?

Mr McGimpsey: I recall the question and the response to Dr Adamson. There is an argument that there is a so-called string of pearls in Belfast; the other argument is that there is a cluster. We support MAGNI's strategy, a key part of which will be the museum of sea and sky, which relates directly to east Belfast and to the opportunities that are opening up around the Titanic Quarter — the slipways, the drawing office and the Thompson dry dock. That seems to be a productive way forward for the museum sector.

A £60 million flagship national art gallery was discussed, but that will be beyond the means of the devolved Administration for the foreseeable future. An extension to the Stranmillis building could provide a site for such a gallery. Other ideas can be advanced, but we must consider the capital and resource implications and be certain that we will get the visitors through the doors to avoid the need for constant subventions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Many private conversations are being held on all sides of the House. Please bear in mind that that is not only discourteous to the Minister, but it makes it difficult for the questioner to hear the answer.

Financial Assistance for Groups

5. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in view of the lack of European Structural Fund (ESF) funding to many groups, including the Inner City Trust and the Playhouse in the Derry City Council area, to give a commitment, in the short term, to provide financial assistance to some of these groups.

(AQO 1451/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As no additional funds have been set aside, I cannot make a commitment to provide further financial assistance to groups within the Derry City Council area; however, my Department has funded various groups there. In the past three years, £2 million has been awarded to arts projects through the Arts Council and direct from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Furthermore, last year over £200,000 was awarded to groups through the Department's cultural diversity grants programme.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his response, which I probably anticipated. The Playhouse has a unique history; it provides an extensive view of the arts through innovative programmes. Therefore, I hoped that in this financial year there would be a commitment to provide funding to tide it over during a difficult part of its history.

Mr McGimpsey: I appreciate Mrs Courtney's concerns, and I understand exactly why she holds them. However, her question relates to the lack of European structural funding — in effect, the gap. Unfortunately, resources for the arts are limited. It is difficult to fund gaps, although the Executive have recently tried to do so. There is constant funding.

The Inner City Trust has received funding, and the Playhouse in the Derry City Council area has received funding to the tune of £266,000. There has been support in the past, but it would be wrong of me to hold out hope that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure can step in and provide gap funding for groups that are in difficulties as a result of the lack of ESF funding.

Mr Douglas: Does the Minister agree that Derry City Council should manage its finances better, so that it could give extra finance to those facilities, rather than

give the Bloody Sunday Trust a large amount of money to the detriment of other voluntary and social groups in the wider council area?

Mr McGimpsey: That is a matter for Derry City Council. I am not aware of how much money has gone to the Bloody Sunday Trust. The ratepayers and the electorate in the city need to ask those questions. Mrs Courtney illustrated perfectly the difficulties that several groups face over a very small amount of money. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure cannot support those groups, and the council needs to look carefully at how it can support them — if it is not already doing so.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mrs Nelis): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the community and voluntary organisations committed to promoting culture and the arts in designated TSN areas will not benefit from Peace II because the criteria have been skewed to favour the private business sector?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not saying that I agree or disagree. That question is outside my remit and should be directed at another Minister.

Disabled Sports Funding

6. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the total funding allocated for disabled sports in the last five financial years; and to make a statement. (AQO 1430/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council is responsible for distributing funding for sport, including disabled sports, and the total funding allocated for disabled sports in the past five financial years was £409,000. That may not sound a significant sum, but well over half of that total, £223,000, was allocated in the last year. I will continue to do my utmost to secure further additional funds for disabled sport.

Ms Lewsley: The Special Olympics will be held in Ireland next year, the first time that they will have been held outside America. Will the Minister say what the Sports Council is doing to encourage people with disabilities to participate in sport, so that they will be able to compete in next year's Olympics?

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has bid for £1.2 million from the Executive programme funds to support the Special Olympics. We are playing a part in the host towns' process and the torch run, and an event is taking place in Belfast. The Sports Council supports athletes with disabilities, and the Department and the Sports Council want to increase participation and access.

I do not have details of the funding for athletes taking part in next year's Special Olympics. However, a series of programmes is under way, and Disability Sports NI, which was set up with Sports Council guidance, runs

many of them and promotes athletes with disabilities. We are producing a strategic plan for Disability Sports NI, and funding has been offered. The Sports Council has always funds for disability access and so on, but I will see what more can be done.

Cultural Diversity

9. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what strategy he will develop to explore how cultural diversity can be creatively addressed. (AQO 1429/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has played a key role in promoting cultural diversity through, for example, the Diversity 21 programme, and its cultural diversity grants programme. The need for a wider cultural diversity policy was identified in the arts and culture vision document 'Face to Face'. The Department has begun the process of gathering information to help shape a cultural diversity strategy. The process is in the early stages of development and will include specific proposals for action to extend the Department's cultural diversity activities in line with the recommendations set out in 'Face to Face'.

Mr Maskey: The Minister will be aware that there has been a re-emergence of some difficulties in interface areas, even in his constituency of South Belfast. Will he assure us that he will seek to work on community relations with representatives from such areas to allow those strategies to be developed in a meaningful way that will have a tangible and positive impact on interface areas?

Mr McGimpsey: Responsibility for interface areas, and the issue that Mr Maskey has just raised, lies with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The principle behind the cultural diversity programme is increased understanding across communities. The development and implementation of a cultural diversity policy is being advanced. Work is under way to develop the policy and is informed by what is happening on the ground and the role that we can play.

Culture shapes us and makes us what we are. To deny somebody's culture is to try and deny their existence. That is one of the elements that is in play on the Ormeau Road, where a cultural right is being denied. Denying the rights of the Orange culture in south Belfast and Ballynafeigh is effectively a way of saying that people have no right to exist in that area. That type of message promotes difficulties at interface areas. Increasing understanding across communities, difficult though that is, is worth striving for. We need everybody to work towards that. Many of the problems in interface areas have nothing to do with cultural differences. Rather, they have more to do with territory and, perhaps, organisations that are involved with those territories.

Library Materials

10. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the current level of expenditure on materials purchased by libraries in (a) English; (b) Irish; and (c) Ulster Scots. (AQO 1452/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information cannot be provided for those categories of materials. However, through the electronic libraries project and the introduction of a new library management system, the information should become available. Education and library boards' policy is to provide stock that meets local demand, and, therefore, the amount and nature of material varies between libraries.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

The Minister will not be surprised to learn that my primary reason for posing the question is to address the inadequate provision of Irish language materials in libraries. The Minister does not need to be reminded of his statutory duty to promote the Irish language across all departmental services. Will he make a commitment to recognise, in terms of library provision, the growth in the Irish-medium sector of education and the general increasing interest in the Irish language, and ask for details to remedy the underprovision in our libraries?

Mr McGimpsey: This year, £1.7 million will be spent on books and materials for our libraries. Mr McElduff asked about the breakdown of expenditure on materials in English, Irish and Ulster Scots. He will not be surprised to hear that the overwhelming majority of the money will be spent on English language material because that is where the demand lies — that is what is being used. However, there is specialist demand in some libraries for Irish material, just as there is for Ulster Scots material.

3.30 pm

At the moment, the difficulty lies in identifying that need, library by library. Under the electronic libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) project, we will be able to do that. However, it will be no surprise to the Member that there is little or no demand in Newtownards library for materials in Irish, just as there would be little demand for Ulster-Scots material in Coalisland library. We look to meet the demands of library users and to increase the use of libraries.

We take our responsibilities seriously. Foras na Gaeilge is responsible for promoting the Irish language. It is funded by, and answerable to, the Assembly, as is Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. Those matters are being addressed. The argument for extra resources can be made across a huge range of needs. However, we have made strides.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that there must be a more conjoined and proactive approach by his Department and the Department of Education if Ulster Scots is to be accorded the equality of status it was promised in the Belfast Agreement?

Mr McGimpsey: Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch has responsibility for the promotion of Ulster Scots and has made great advances in language and culture, and in the building of Ulster-Scots groups. However, there is still a great deal of work to do. There are matters that can be discussed with the Department of Education and, in particular, the education and library boards. It seems to me that there is a demand for Ulster-Scots language and culture in several schools. I see that demand on a regular basis, and I am sure the Member does also. I am sure that the Department of Education will take that demand seriously and examine how our young people can be better informed.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Vision Action Plan

1. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to publish the vision action plan; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1442/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): In early March I announced my acceptance of 11 measures, recommended in the vision report, which could be implemented without additional resources. I have also made budget bids in respect of recommendations on the environment, strengthening the food chain, developing people, animal health, research and development and rural development. Those recommendations were widely supported in the consultation exercise and were capable of being turned quickly into policy proposals. I am now working on an action plan, which I hope to be able to publish in late June or early July.

Mr Bradley: The vision plan calls for radical change in the industry. Does the Department also need to change?

Ms Rodgers: The vision exercise is one of several strands of work that are coming together and that highlight the need to examine the Department's structures. Others include our commitment to e-business, the review of education and research and development, the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy and the independent review of our handling of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, as well as major policy reviews on tuberculosis, brucellosis, forestry and fisheries.

To meet those pressures, I have commissioned officials to undertake an internal departmental modernisation programme. That will involve a review of our aims,

priorities and strategy to ensure that they reflect not only the outcome of the vision exercise, but also a more modern approach, better suited to the developing needs of our customers and the wider society.

Mr Shannon: Has the Minister decided to establish a food body, as recommended in the vision action plan? If so, when will that body come into being?

Ms Rodgers: The Member may be aware that I have set up a working group, as recommended by the vision report, to examine whether there should be a food body, and if so, what its remit should be. I expect that group to report by the end of June. I will make a decision on the food body depending on what arises from the report.

Mrs Carson: What consideration have the Minister and the Department given to supporting projects such as Taste of Ulster in the vision plan in order to promote Northern Ireland produce?

Ms Rodgers: I am not sure whether there has been any reference in the report to projects such as Taste of Ulster, but the Department assesses projects on their merit. Recently we funded Taste of Ulster at the fisheries exhibition in Brussels. We examine projects individually, and we support projects as we see fit. We are awaiting a business plan from those behind Taste of Ulster.

Kilkeel Harbour

2. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to provide funding for the development of a new pier at Kilkeel harbour. (AQO 1457/01)

Ms Rodgers: A new pier at Kilkeel harbour would form part of the proposals for the redevelopment of the harbour. The total cost has been put at around £30 million. Completion of technical studies, including work on the design and wave climate of the proposed new outer harbour, will allow assessment of the feasibility of the proposals. In addition, the scope to pursue that as a public-private partnership must be explored, and the project must be subject to an economic appraisal. No formal request for funding has been made by the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority. Such a request would have to compete against other bids for support. It is too early to indicate if and when funding will be made available.

Mr McGrady: The new Kilkeel harbour project has been a long saga. I am somewhat surprised by one aspect of the Minister's reply regarding the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority. The authority told me that it has inadequate funding to pursue the matter. That is a fairly large gap in the programme, but many studies have been carried out over the years, and consultation has taken place with the onshore and offshore fishing interests. Is there any timescale to allow Kilkeel and other harbours to modernise in order to

compete in a difficult market, which is becoming increasingly more difficult for our Northern Ireland fishing fleet and its onshore add-on value factories?

Ms Rodgers: Specific provision is made in the Department for harbour development schemes. That enables the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority to access funds, subject to satisfactory economic appraisal of need and business cases. In addition, resources including match-funding from the Department are available under the current round of European structural funds. My officials have been in close contact with the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority in connection with three aspects of work to Kilkeel harbour that the authority has identified as priority projects for the safety and continued viability of port users. I have therefore advanced those projects for funding under the current initiative, which was negotiated recently by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister with the Treasury, and the Executive programme funds. However, they will have to be considered alongside other competing priorities.

I also looked to the review of the fishing industry which I announced earlier this year, and which I expect to launch shortly, to consider and advise on the longer-term aspects of the strategic development of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland, including the appropriate infrastructure to promote and support the industry in a safe and forward-looking manner.

E-government Initiatives

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to report on progress in her Department in introducing e-government initiatives. (AQO 1450/01)

Ms Rodgers: For some time my Department has been making progress on introducing e-government initiatives in several areas that can change how business is conducted between the Department and its customers. My Department is engaged in progressing several reviews and initiatives to enable it to meet more effectively the challenges of the agrifood industry and the wider needs of rural communities in the new millennium.

Ms Lewsley: What electronic services are available for farmers who apply for farm subsidies?

Ms Rodgers: Over the past two years, data held on the Department's cattle database — APHIS Online — has increasingly been used to preprint animal details on subsidy application forms, and that helps to reduce the administrative burden on farmers. Over 43% of farmers now have their subsidies paid directly into their bank accounts, which is speedier, more secure and more convenient than payable order.

Work is under way to facilitate the submission of applications for farm subsidies via the Internet. Our aim

is that applicants under the 2003 sheep annual premium will be able to submit their application in this way. The online claim facility will then be rolled out progressively to other schemes over the next two years. A wide range of information about farm subsidies, including blank application forms, is already available on the grants and subsidies web site.

The rural portal web site forms a central part of the Department's e-government strategy. It provides farmers and growers with a single signposted access point to online information and services. It provides a one-stop shop for the farming community, enabling many services to be accessed from home. To date, about 9,000 farmers have been able to access these services on computer, and the aim is that all farmers will be able to access it by 2005. We will also enable farmers to reskill and to up-skill to do that.

Mr Poots: The Programme for Government is committed to making 100% of key services available online. Does the Minister regard all the services provided to farmers by her Department as being key services, or are some areas excluded?

Ms Rodgers: The Department of Agriculture is on target in its commitment to the Programme for Government. Nine thousand farmers, roughly one third, have access to online services. By 2005 we hope that farmers can access all online services and that all will avail of it. Farmers who do not wish to use online services may continue to use paper.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's progress on e-government. Surely it is another way of including townland names in her customers' addresses, as these are all in the countryside?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is stretching supplementary questions a bit too far. Mr Francie Molloy is not in the Chamber, so question 4 will fall.

Local Produce

5. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to promote (a) the purchase of local agricultural produce in Northern Ireland; and (b) the export of local produce to EU and non-EU countries. (AQO 1456/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have provided financial support of £1.5 million to market Northern Ireland red meat for its quality, and £400,000 has been earmarked for marketing in the pig sector. In addition, my schedule of visits is planned to lend support to local producers and food companies. I regularly attend major events such as international food fairs, the Balmoral Show and Ireland's International Food, Drink and Catering Exhibition (IFEX). I have actively participated in campaigns to promote local produce run by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU),

retailers and the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC).

I have also met with major food retailers in Northern Ireland to encourage greater use of locally sourced produce. Under the Northern Ireland Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity I have recently launched a joint marketing initiative promotion scheme for fisheries and a marketing of quality agricultural products grants scheme to assist the food industry in marketing and promoting its products. One of my main priorities is to enable the resumption of Northern Ireland beef exports. I am pressing the EU Commission to relax the conditions of the date-based export scheme to make it more commercially viable for meat plants that wish to export beef.

3.45 pm

Mr M Murphy: How many farmers have applied for the schemes under the rural development programme? In order to promote local produce, will the Minister encourage people to ask where the food that they purchase in supermarkets, shops, restaurants and other food outlets has been produced?

Ms Rodgers: I cannot give the Member a detailed response on the take up of schemes because some of the schemes have been introduced and others have not. However, I will inform the Member as soon as I have the figures. I use every opportunity to encourage people to purchase local produce. In particular, I encourage housewives and house husbands, when they do their shopping, to enquire at the meat and vegetable stalls whether the food is sourced in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): The Minister knows that in the drive to boost local purchase of Northern Ireland produce it is important to educate the public about the quality and standards of the food that they eat. In the light of a previous answer that the Minister gave me, which revealed that beef labelling rules do not apply to processed foods such as sausages, pies and canned beef, will she consider introducing a voluntary labelling scheme for Northern Ireland-sourced processed produce, so that a local campaign based on high-quality content may be mounted?

Ms Rodgers: The Member is aware that the EU regulates beef labelling. A voluntary labelling scheme would be just that — voluntary. People would not be required to participate in it. Food labelling is a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

Mr Byrne: Given what the Minister has said on that issue, does she agree that there is great concern about some imported products — derived from chicken and beef — that end up in the catering trade, where there are not the same stringent conditions on food quality? Does she agree that Government purchasing departments

should be sensitive to quality issues implicit in the use of imported food products?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of local industry concerns about food safety. However, I assure the Member that all imported foods must be checked and certified by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I would encourage caterers — and have done so publicly — to use locally sourced and locally produced foods in the catering industry.

Rural Development

6. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support she has given to women in the context of rural development. (AQO 1428/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under the capacity-building element of the Northern Ireland Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity delivered by the rural community networks there will be opportunities for rural women to develop the skills, knowledge and experience that they need to play a part in the significant economic, environmental and social changes that are impacting on rural areas. Under the same programme the local regeneration programme delivered by the Rural Development Council and the Rural Development Division provides opportunities for women's groups and organisations, among others, to bring forward proposals for consideration. Those proposals can have an economic, social or environmental focus or combine elements of all three. Several women's organisations and other bodies have submitted applications to the Rural Development Council for consideration, and those are currently being processed.

The LEADER+ programme is a special EU community initiative designed to encourage and assist the rural community to develop its own areas in accordance with its own needs. Women comprise one of the priority target groups on which LEADER+ will focus. The LEADER action groups will submit their business plans for approval shortly. I anticipate that those will feature various initiatives targeted at women, with a particular focus on microbusiness.

The Rural Development Division is working with the Women's Resource Development Agency, the Rural Community Network and rural women's networks in carrying out an analysis to assess the needs of rural women. That work is being completed, and I look forward to the outcome.

Mr Maskey: Several sources of funding and other levels of support have been mentioned. The Minister is aware that many organisations are in danger of collapse because of a lack of funding. The rural women's network, which recently made a presentation to the Committee of the Centre, is one example. What specific measures will the Minister's Department be taking to give leadership to the rural women's network and other rural women's organisations?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of these matters. My officials and representatives from the Women's Resource Development Agency and the rural women's network will be meeting consultants in early June to address the concerns that the Member has raised, and I know of the concerns about core funding.

Returns for Local Producers

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in ensuring that local producers get a fair return on their produce from (a) meat processors; and (b) large supermarket chains; and to make a statement. (AQO 1454/01)

Ms Rodgers: The question of fair returns is essentially a commercial matter between producers, processors and retailers. However, the long-term interests of the industry lie in effective partnerships between all parts of the food chain. I encourage the industry to develop such partnerships to ensure that a transparent and fair price is paid for Northern Irish meat.

To help the industry obtain the best return for its output, a range of support is available to assist with improvement in quality and marketing performance. For example, to ensure that Northern Irish beef is marketed to best advantage, I have provided £1.5 million of support to the Red Meat Strategy, which was developed between all parts of the industry and the relevant Department.

An important part of the strategy is to focus on premium markets that can provide a premium return for our beef. However, to service those markets, we must produce top-quality cattle. There has been a decline in the quality of finished cattle in recent years, and to reverse that trend, I have secured £2 million a year under the Programme for Government for a Beef Quality Initiative.

Following claims that the price differential between Northern Ireland and GB pigs was due to differences in quality, I commissioned a study which showed that there is room for improvement in the confirmation of Northern Irish pig carcasses, and officials will be working with the industry to address that. Some of the funds that I have allocated to support marketing in the pig sector are being used to improve quality.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that, to gain a fair price for farmers and primary producers, the implementation of the £1.5 million strategy, which includes the Beef Quality Initiative, depends on farmers getting paid for producing quality beef? They have not been paid for that until now. In the vision exercise, could further gains be made by focusing more on farmer co-operatives to increase the strength of primary producers?

Ms Rodgers: There is support for farmers' co-operatives. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has facilitated and supported farmers' attempts to form co-operatives, and it continues to do so.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister establish a fair-pricing investigation into the real distribution of profits in the agrifood sector, and follow up the results with a fair practice pricing code? Such a code would enable consumers to identify products that had generated a fair return for farmers and other primary producers.

Ms Rodgers: Fair pricing is a reserved matter; therefore, it is not the Northern Ireland Assembly's responsibility. The Competitions Commission investigated the allegation that processors were not offering fair prices and found no evidence of what were purported to be unfair practices by them.

“Closed Herds”

8. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has considered rewarding the owners of “closed herds” by allowing higher rates of compensation in the event of a tuberculosis or brucellosis outbreak. (AQO 1420/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under current legislation the Department can pay compensation only for animals that it slaughters because of tuberculosis (TB) or brucellosis. The Government have no provision or precedent for compensating any other losses, and I have no plans to introduce any.

Mr Kane: Does the Minister foresee the introduction of a financial package designed to encourage the establishment of more “closed herds” in Northern Ireland? Such a package would include double-fencing to prevent contact with neighbouring herds, and assistance with trials of vaccines against bovine tuberculosis infection. Does the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development value the concept of “closed herds” as a tool to prevent the spread of tuberculosis and brucellosis?

Ms Rodgers: I have no plans for such a package. “Closed herds” are not an official concept; some farmers operate them as a precaution, which I welcome. However, I urge all farmers to play their part in assisting us to fight brucellosis. Through the Department's veterinary services, the measures that it has taken and its review, it will do everything possible to reduce the incidence of brucellosis and to eradicate it. That can be done only with the co-operation of farmers.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Colleague, Councillor Mickey McAnespie, and I recently met farmers in the Carrickmore and wider mid-Tyrone area who are anxious about the unduly high incidences of TB among cattle. Local farmers believe that not enough is being done to identify and eradicate the root cause of the problem. Will the Minister meet a representative group of mid-Tyrone farmers to hear their concerns so that she can take appropriate action, or will she task her officials to do so?

Ms Rodgers: I assure Mr McElduff that I am aware of the areas where there is a worrying growth in the incidence of TB.

4.00 pm

The Department is taking the increase seriously, and a review of its policy on TB and how its eradication measures can be improved is being finalised. I meet the farming unions regularly to discuss the issue, but if Members wish to meet me to discuss specific issues, I will consider their requests.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 is in the name of Mr Gibson, but he is not in the Chamber.

Modernisation Programme

10. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures have been taken to initiate the modernisation programme in her Department; and to make a statement. (AQO 1443/01)

Ms Rodgers: I announced my intention to initiate a major internal modernisation programme in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in my speech at the International Food, Drink and Catering Exhibition (IFEX). This will include a review of the Department's aims, priorities and structures to ensure that they are best suited to the developing needs of its customers and of society, and I have created a modernisation unit in the Department to advance it. The unit is headed at assistant secretary level and reports directly to the departmental management board.

Mr A Maginness: Why has the Minister decided to initiate this modernisation programme?

Ms Rodgers: The vision report, among other things, highlighted the need for the agrifood industry to change in response to current challenges and opportunities. It would be unthinkable to expect the industry to change without also examining the Department. The Department's structures and working methods have been in place for decades, during which there have been many changes in the industry and in the Department's responsibilities.

Several other strands of work are coming together that have highlighted the need for restructuring. They include the Department's commitment to e-business; the O'Hare Report on the Department's education and R&D provision; the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy; the independent review of the Department's handling of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis; and major policy reviews on tuberculosis, brucellosis, forestry and fisheries. With all of that coming together, it would not make sense for the Department to fail to determine how its structures can best suit the needs of the changing modern industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time for questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is up.

Motion made:

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

THE IMPACT OF THE AGGREGATES TAX ON BUSINESSES IN FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE

Mr Gallagher: The quarry tax is one of the most substantial threats ever faced by our economy. I acknowledge the work that the current Minister of Finance and Personnel, Dr Farren, his predecessor, Mark Durkan, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, have done to find an alternative to it. The Executive have put their weight behind the effort to persuade the Treasury to rethink its position on the quarry tax in Northern Ireland. The efforts to date have achieved a deferral on processed products such as concrete blocks and ready-mixed concrete. That is a useful concession.

In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 1,000 people are dependent on the quarry industry for their livelihoods. However, since 1 April, the quarry tax has been levied on stones, gravel and sand. The demand for those products from quarries in the constituency has dropped dramatically already. I have figures that show a drop in output of 40% in some quarries, and in one, a drop of 74%, based on an average output of the same materials over the past three years.

Traditionally, this is the time of year when the demand for quarry products increases. It is a busy time for the construction industry and on farms. Farmers buy large quantities of stone for drainage work and the construction of farm roads. Since 1 April, a great deal of the material for such work has been brought across the border. The substitution of materials from quarries in the South for those from our own quarries demonstrates how ill-advised the introduction of the tax is in Northern Ireland.

The Treasury says that imported stone is also subject to a levy of £1.60 a tonne. However, everyone knows that although that seems to be the case on paper, the reality is different. The levy cannot and will not be enforced because Customs and Excise does not have the manpower to enforce it. We know from our experience with the fuel tax that Customs and Excise does not have the resources to ensure that this tax is applied.

The aggregates tax was supposed to achieve environmental improvements. However, in our case, it will not achieve those, and it is not hard to see why the initiative will fail to have the desired effect. We know from our travels through counties across the border, such as Donegal and Cavan, that, just as there are many quarries

along and close to the border on the Northern side, there are also many quarries along and close to the border on the Southern side. As the volume of material extracted from quarries on this side of the border decreases, there will be a corresponding increase in the volume of material extracted a short distance away in the South. As a result, there will be no environmental gain. In that context, the aggregates tax cannot be justified for Northern Ireland. It is a punitive measure that will lead to the closure of quarries and the loss of jobs if it is not stopped.

The Chancellor cannot ignore the wishes of the Assembly — an elected body that is accountable to the people of Northern Ireland. He cannot ignore the Assembly's concern about the effect of the quarry tax on border areas and the entire industry throughout Northern Ireland. There is a more effective way to address the environmental issues associated with the quarrying industry, and that is through North/South arrangements. There is a need for harmonisation and a level playing field for the industry, North and South. Through North/South co-operation, we can arrive at a better outcome that will safeguard the quarry industry, protect the environment and stabilise our rural communities.

Members must remember that these border communities have not yet benefited from the peace dividend. It is well known that the fuel tax has devastated the economy in those areas. It has resulted in the closure of almost all the filling stations and many small shops in rural areas. Those areas have borne the brunt of the fuel tax, and they are now to be hammered again by an ill-conceived Treasury initiative. I ask Members for their support, and to call on Gordon Brown to abandon the aggregates tax.

Mr Foster: This is a big issue, and it has been going on for a while now. When I was the Minister of the Environment, I remember writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as the issue is an environmental one. I also met some quarry owners and the secretary of their association at the Killyhevlin Hotel in Enniskillen last year. The impact of the aggregates tax will be devastating, and I am glad, therefore, to see this Adjournment debate take place. I look forward to seeing some positive action being taken to address the problem.

The matter can be approached from both an economic and an environmental point of view, which I shall endeavour to do. First, I shall set the scene. Quarry producers have lobbied for a long time on the issue, and many meetings have taken place between our Ministers and the Treasury in London. Despite gallant efforts, the tax was introduced, albeit with a tax break for one year, which is a slight easement. However, the industry is a significant exporter to the Republic of Ireland, with as much as 90% of production from some plants being sold across the border. Export markets account for one third of asphalt produced in Northern Ireland, 50% to 70% of pre-fabricated concrete, and 30% to 40% of production

from firms on the border, which can rise as high as 90% at times.

I have statistics for one company in Belcoo, County Fermanagh. In May 2001, its quarry was outputting 627 tonnes, but this year the figure has reduced dramatically to 119 tonnes — a decrease of 508 tonnes. That figure accounts for only one month. It is estimated that hundreds of jobs are at risk — up to 1,000 jobs in Tyrone and more than 700 in Fermanagh could be lost. To develop Northern Ireland's economy, the industry is essential for construction, housing, and road construction, on which we are embarking. Over one year, it is estimated that the tax will reduce the output of aggregate from this quarry by more than 100,000 tonnes.

The aggregates tax, which was only introduced on 1 April 2002, is already having a major impact on the industry, and, as a result, job losses will follow. This Belcoo firm has predicted that up to 15 workers will have to be made redundant, which is a lot of people in a small rural area. Many of those jobs are located in rural communities that are designated as TSN areas. The problem lies in the fact that buyers are now going to quarries across the border to avoid paying the £1·60-a-tonne aggregates tax.

One quarry firm, Acheson & Glover, estimate that between 400 and 500 tonnes of aggregate material is to be moved from the Republic into Northern Ireland via Belcoo every week. Surely the Government can see the grave effect that that has on the industry. Quarries from the South of Ireland are supposed to register with Customs and Excise; however, that is not happening and they are avoiding paying the tax. Therefore, a main issue is the fact that a level playing field does not operate — there is unfair competition. The situation would be eased if quarries in the South had to pay the tax, because it would mean that buyers would not have the advantage of crossing the border to purchase aggregate.

I shall now approach the debate from an environmental perspective. The Treasury claims that the main purpose behind the tax's introduction is to address the environmental costs associated with quarrying operations, such as noise and dust. That objective cannot be faulted. However, when one looks at the effect that the tax is having, one will see that, environmentally, the situation is deteriorating. We may ask how that is the case. As more buyers travel to the Republic of Ireland to buy their materials, it means that transportation takes longer. As a result, there will be an increase in CO₂ emissions and, therefore, atmospheric pollution. Moreover, additional health costs may be incurred as the number of asthma sufferers in the rural border regions increases.

4.15 pm

The second environmental point to note is that Northern Ireland cannot generate large volumes of recyclable material compared with Great Britain. The vast majority of available

construction waste is recycled in an effective manner. Therefore, it is clear that the environmental argument for this tax being in place is nonsense when its impact is examined carefully.

I want to take this opportunity to urge Departments to encourage major public buyers of these materials to buy only from bona fide suppliers — those who have paid the aggregates tax. If that were to happen, it would transform the situation overnight and safeguard thousands of jobs in my constituency.

With a tax rate of £1·60 a tonne, Republic of Ireland producers will be able to haul their product 20 to 25 miles to compete on a local producer's doorstep. Republic of Ireland product will flood any area within 20 miles of the border. Exports from Northern Ireland to the Republic, which once flourished, will become a thing of the past. Our Government must take cognisance of this frightening imposition, which is disastrous to the quarry industry.

I seek Government change in this process; otherwise, we lose an industry that has contributed so much to the economy over many years. I support the aim of asking the Government to appreciate the difficulties of a land boundary. Across the water it is not appreciated that we have a land boundary with another state and, therefore, the situation is not understood. This tax is a real burden; there must be another way. I support Mr Gallagher on this issue.

Mr Morrow: I too give my support. I thank Tommy Gallagher for having the foresight to bring the matter before the Assembly today. It is an emotive issue across Northern Ireland but especially in border areas. Those of us who live in, and represent, those constituencies have first-hand knowledge of the impact that the implementation of this aggregates tax will have.

Throughout Northern Ireland, the aggregates industry employs around 6,000 people. Potentially, up to 1,000 of those jobs could be lost as a result of the implementation of the aggregates tax. It is completely out of proportion, because the impact will be felt most strongly in the border constituencies, especially Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as Tommy Gallagher has rightly said.

I listened carefully to Mr Gallagher; he called for co-operation with the South on this matter. However, when the issue is examined more closely, it will be found that the real competition comes from the South of Ireland. I am sure that Mr Gallagher is aware of that. Our jobs and our industry will be lost to the South of Ireland if something is not done.

This is not a devolved matter. I am delighted to see the Minister here today. I thank him for taking an interest in the matter, and I have no doubt that he will adopt a hands-on approach to do what he can. The Assembly will be grateful to him for doing so and for

the attitude that he has adopted. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that even if he wanted to do something tomorrow — and if it were entirely in his control and brief to do so, he undoubtedly would — unfortunately, he could not do so. This is not a devolved matter; it is a matter for London. If I can say anything constructive about that, I ask the Minister to continue to make representation to ensure that the impact that will be felt here is minimised as much as possible.

Sam Foster quoted some accurate figures about job losses and the potential loss in Northern Ireland, especially along the Fermanagh and Tyrone border. The average daily output for April was 401 tonnes in 1999, 2000 and 2001. However, in 2002, even before the real impact of the introduction of this tax has been felt, that has reduced to 252 tonnes. The reduction is well over 40%, and the impact on a constituency already facing difficulties will be a loss of jobs and revenue.

The average daily output for May in 1999, 2000 and 2001 was 627 tonnes. In 2002 it is 134 tonnes. That graphically illustrates the extent of the problem. It has been said that much finance will be generated by the introduction of this tax, but that does not tell the whole story. We were told that Northern Ireland would generate £35 million for the Treasury. With a potential loss of 1,000 jobs, £35 million is a hefty price to pay: the net gain will be virtually nothing, and the revenue to those towns and villages along the border will also be affected, particularly in Fermanagh and south Tyrone.

This is an emotive issue. We must plead with London and explain that this is not a level playing field and that work will be diverted across the border where it will be cheaper. It is reckoned that when the aggregates tax is fully introduced, it will put about £2,000 on the price of a new house.

The knock-on effect will be devastating. It will have an impact on road-building schemes, and Departments will have to compete in an unfair way. Sam Foster referred to that when he said that London does not fully realise that there is a land border, and the implications and impact that that will have in the coming years will be devastating. I agree with what has been said.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. I too agree with all that has been said. It will bring to the attention of the Minister and others that, although they cannot do something directly about it, they cannot allow the case to be lost by default. It must not become less important — it is very important for the reasons given.

Those problems are of primary importance in areas such as Fermanagh and Tyrone where there is an abundance of quarries and great dependence on such industries. Those areas depend heavily on agriculture and tourism, both of which have been in decline in the last couple of years — especially agriculture. This is important to those who live in that part of the North.

Last year the Assembly voted unanimously for Ministers to make representations to the Treasury to try to prevent the tax. It has been said that the tax would raise £35 million at the cost of 1,000 jobs. The derogation is only putting off the evil day for a short time for those involved.

The aggregates tax is designed to ensure that the negative environmental impacts of quarrying are reflected in the price, and to encourage producers to use recycled materials. Members have said that we do not have an abundance of materials to recycle and that we have not been using aggregates to any great extent compared to England, where the tax has been brought about by the green lobby. Our difficulties have been outlined. There is unfair competition across the border, which goes directly against the objectives of the tax, and the green lobby should take that into account.

It does not take that into account when writing to us or when making representations. The lobby hopes that the Ministers, and others, will stand to on the matter and that we will be forced to deal with it ourselves.

The tax is unlikely to have significant use. The difficulty is that we do not use the alternatives — unlike large urban areas in Britain, which have large brownfield sites, abundant demolished material and a different landscape to ours.

No business can make strategic plans on the basis of what is essentially a one-year stay of execution. Adequate breathing space must be given if jobs are not to be lost. Quarry owners must invest and work proactively, even though the threat of the tax and the uncertainty that surrounds it will deter them from doing so. That will cost jobs, regardless of what happens. We can do nothing about that; we can only say that we will fight on and that the fight is not over. The lack of ongoing investment in lorries, and so on, has negative effects on the environment. Roads are negatively affected when upgrading does not take place.

The Quarry Products Association (QPA) highlighted that the tax of £1·60 per tonne would raise £35·2 million a year in the North, but the potential losses total £61·4 million. That could mean the loss of as many as 4,000 jobs in the North. The ripples caused by the proposed tax levy could impact on all levels of construction. The public will be left to pick up the tab. The introduction of the tax may not simply result in the loss of 1,000 jobs; many quarries, some of which are heavily dependent on aggregate sales, may have no option but to close.

The ripple effect may be felt not only by construction workers but by subsidiary industries, including engineering, that are involved in the quarry industry. All those industries have been severely affected by the agricultural decline in the past few years. Companies such as Finlay Concrete Products, and Acheson & Glover, who supply up to 50% of their products to customers south of the border, will immediately find the market difficult — that is how they will get bitten by the tax. Quarry owners

here will point out that they are already subject to the strictest environmental legislation in Europe. There is no significant problem with the quarry industry, despite the fact that one was perceived by green pressure groups such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, and Friends of the Earth.

Over time, the Government aim to shift the burden of tax from “good” issues, such as labour and capital, to “bad” issues such as pollution. Environmental taxation must meet the general tests of good taxation. It must be well designed and meet objectives without causing undesirable side-effects.

The introduction of the aggregates tax here will not fulfil the objectives of the environmental tax; rather, it will have a detrimental impact on the environment. Extra miles will be travelled, as lower-cost products will be sourced from the South, which will have an impact on the environment. If those building houses or tendering for roads or large projects begin to source aggregates from across the border everyone here will suffer severely. The overall cost of products will be also raised massively for councils, local Departments and those living in border areas who are most dependent on the industry. I support Mr Gallagher on the issue. Go raibh maith agat.

4.30pm

Mr Bradley: I have heard nothing with which I disagree in the debate; everything that I have heard I could have said myself. There are several quarries in my constituency of South Down, and they face the same threat as those in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Quarries in County Louth and County Monaghan are only a short distance away, and there is no doubt that the business will go in that direction if the aggregates tax is introduced.

Quarry owners mainly employ rural people whose wages and salaries go back into the rural economy. I can think of several part-time farmers in my constituency who take up quarry work. The reverse can also be the case. Those jobs go hand in hand, and the people who fill them are good employees. The same families have been employed in those businesses for generations. That goes back to the 1950s, and young men are still going into the industry. That tradition would be broken if the aggregates tax were introduced. Any tax on sand, gravel or stone will result in job losses.

I often wonder about the attitude of decision makers in Westminster towards Northern Ireland. Do they act as if we did not exist, or do they impose taxes upon us regardless of the consequences? Do they adopt a “like it or lump it” attitude? They do not consider the land frontier or the threat that such taxes pose to those trying to make a living on this side of the border, and where it would drive customers.

I thank those Members who stayed for the debate and Tommy Gallagher in particular for introducing it. I commend his efforts since the dreaded aggregates tax was first mooted.

Mrs Carson: Much of what I have to say is repetitive; but as a former schoolteacher, I believe that repetition helps to hammer the message home. I thank Mr Gallagher for raising this matter, and I am glad that so many Members from the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency have stayed for the debate. I welcome the debate and support its intention.

I understand the thinking behind the Government’s scheme. Its aim is to reduce waste and carbon dioxide emissions and to lessen the impact on the environment. However, like many well-intentioned Government schemes, it is flawed. The aggregates tax was set at £1·60 a tonne in an attempt to persuade the businesses concerned to adopt a recycling agenda and to reduce the extraction of virgin aggregates.

This tax may help businesses in England, Scotland and Wales to think seriously about recycling that does not have an adverse effect on their profits. However, Northern Ireland’s case is completely different. This is the only part of the United Kingdom that has a land border with another European country. That has affected our economy in many ways; its detrimental results have included livestock and fuel smuggling. This tax will put another nail in the coffin of our businesses and industry.

The aggregates tax will be detrimental to businesses in Northern Ireland. The strategy to reduce any environmental impact in this sector of business should be left to the Assembly. Sales of aggregates rocketed in March in an attempt to store up stones and avoid the extra cost. Northern Ireland quarry businesses are doing much to address environmental issues. The quarry industries in Northern Ireland had the highest uptake of any industry of the ISO 1400 environmental standard.

In 2000, there were 1,700 confirmed cases of water pollution. However, only 11 were associated with quarrying.

The quarry business has produced a good code of environmental practice. The majority of available construction waste in Northern Ireland is being recycled. Recycling took place on site for the Odyssey project, for Belfast City Airport and at the Sirocco Works. Our quarry industry should not be penalised for environmental reasons when it has tried its best with environmental initiatives. The Government wish to be assertive on environmental issues but they are ignoring the efforts that our quarry industry has made.

The consequences of the tax must be highlighted: potential clients will seek aggregates products from quarries in the Republic of Ireland because of price and currency differentials. Some quarries in Northern Ireland are within 25 miles of the border, and they will be

forced out of business just as petrol stations were. Many jobs will be lost because of that knock-on effect. Grocery stores will be affected if people move when they lose their jobs. The loss of employment will have a detrimental effect on the local economy of Fermanagh because, over the past few years, it has lost much of its industry and its economy has been affected. We must do all we can to retain what is left there.

There will be added effects and costs to departmental schemes, and that was mentioned by Mr Morrow. The projected costs for road maintenance will rise by 4%, and road capital schemes will potentially rise by 17%. The environmental cost of the tax will also be high. Quarries in Northern Ireland are close to their markets, and they have an average delivery range of about 10 miles. It has been estimated that that delivery range will double, at least, if customers order from quarries in the Republic. That upsurge in road traffic will increase, not reduce, CO₂ emissions and will put more stress on our road infrastructure.

One of the stated aims of the tax was that there would be no effect on the competitiveness of Northern Ireland quarries in international markets. The reverse is the reality. The tax will affect their competitiveness and will encourage increased importation of quarry products from the Republic of Ireland.

The tax discriminates against quarries in Northern Ireland. I urge the Government to abandon this course of action, as it is contrary to the interests of a devolved region of the UK. If the Government want environmental targets to be reached, I hope that it will afford the Northern Ireland Assembly the opportunity of working with the quarry industry to do just that. The issue affects all of Northern Ireland, not just Fermanagh and South Tyrone. It should be within the remit of the Assembly to redress the problem. I support the intention behind the debate.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): I compliment Mr Gallagher for tabling the Adjournment debate, and for raising the important issue of aggregates tax again. I am fully conscious of the interest and concern that he and other Members have in the tax, and particularly in its impact on the local economy. I acknowledge the points that Members have made as regards the impact on the local economy especially in border areas.

I recognise that border areas such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone are at the forefront of problems in price levels and trade flows, given their location and the distortion caused by the tax. However, I wish to highlight some of the progress made on aggregates tax since the issue was first raised in the House in December 2000 and then move on to the nature and direction of future work. It is important to outline some contextual points first.

Aggregates tax is only one of several fiscal measures that have been introduced throughout the United Kingdom. However desirable Members may find it to have discretion over such issues, taxes are an excepted matter. As a result, our ability to influence versions of taxes that reflect the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland is limited. It is critically important that the Executive are engaged from the outset when tax measures that could affect Northern Ireland disproportionately are being considered. I could extend that to all tax measures, insofar as it is possible to include us, because sometimes it is not possible to assess the effect of a tax.

Regrettably, in the instance of the aggregates tax, the interests of Northern Ireland were ignored at the outset. Much effort has been expended to recover the situation, and there is still a long way to go. I am reflecting views that were communicated to officials when it was realised that the aggregates tax would have a negative impact on Northern Ireland. We were not on the radar screen as far as considering the tax's impact was concerned; we were ignored because we were not considered relevant in any impact assessment.

My predecessor, Mr Durkan, and I have stressed in correspondence with the Treasury that the argument for introducing uniform taxes throughout the United Kingdom is not well founded and that the vision of those in Whitehall must extend beyond the Greater London area. As part of my responsibilities, I have pressed the point, on several occasions, that Northern Ireland shares a land border with another state that is now a member of the euro zone. In the Republic, there is no environmental tax, and that point has been driven home in almost all the contributions.

We have had some success in pressing home our arguments to the Treasury, and I welcome recent comments made by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury that there is a need for specific Northern Ireland research on aggregates tax. Of course, it would have been much better to conduct the analysis before the implementation of the tax.

Another indication of progress is that last November the Treasury announced in its annual pre-Budget report that, for Northern Ireland only, it intended to phase in over five years the introduction of tax on aggregates used in processing.

4.45pm

I am pleased to inform the Assembly that the measure was recently given state aid approval by the European Commission. It is important to recognise that it is not only London that has to be convinced of our arguments, but Brussels, because Northern Ireland is working increasingly within frameworks that are set down by the European Union, especially with regard to the environment and other matters that I referred to in my statement.

As industry representatives said at the time, that was only a small step, but it was a step in the right direction. Although the Assembly and the Executive can rightly claim some credit for that measure, Members should be reassured by the fact that by no means do my officials or I intend to rest on that point. Much work remains to be done. It is imperative that the Assembly and the Executive act collectively to address urgently the issues at hand.

I want to concentrate now on the present position and on what I hope to achieve in the coming months with regard to the aggregates tax. In welcoming the pre-Budget report measure, I am also aware that the main beneficiary is limited to aggregates used for processing, and that the five-year digressive approach may not be the best for the industry. A working group led by departmental officials has been established. It is engaged in detailed discussions with industry representatives on alternative options. The Minister of the Environment and I had a useful meeting earlier this afternoon with a delegation from the Quarry Products Association. The meeting had already been arranged for today and, therefore, coincided nicely with the debate. Meetings have taken place recently, and they will continue. I am aware from those meetings, and from talking to the delegation earlier today, that the Quarry Products Association appreciates its need to contribute to the protection of the environment. It seeks to work with the Assembly to ensure that those environmental objectives, which we all subscribe to and want to see promoted, can be achieved.

Although wished for by many in the House and outside, complete derogation from the aggregates tax for Northern Ireland appears to be an improbable and unrealistic outcome. Therefore, the Assembly must work within existing parameters. The Treasury has stressed that point on several occasions. The solution will be a matter of balancing the interests of the industry with legitimate concerns about the long-term protection of the environment. That will not be easy. It will involve compromise and a willingness to accept that environmental damage must be mitigated effectively. However, I am encouraged by the willingness of quarry owners to work with the Assembly to ensure that environmental protection measures are put in place.

I continue to acknowledge the real concerns, especially in border constituencies such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone, that have arisen since the introduction of the aggregates tax in April 2002. I have asked departmental officials who lead the aggregates tax working group to continue to monitor the situation and to keep me fully abreast of developments, especially in relation to distortions to trade flow and potential job losses. The aggregates tax is an important Executive priority, and will remain so until a satisfactory solution is found.

As the analysis of the working group identifies a possible way forward, I intend to correspond further with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to help achieve a version of the tax that better reflects the realities of our circumstances, both economic and environmental. What we have achieved to date, however limited it may be, is further evidence of the Assembly and its Executive effecting change for the better. Our combined efforts, together with those of the industry, have enabled us to make a strong case to the Treasury that has had to be answered.

I take the point about engaging with the North/South Ministerial Council, and I will seek advice as to how best we can combat the aggregates tax in that context. I will take an early opportunity to at least raise the issue with whoever is appointed to the finance portfolio in the new Administration in the South. I will meet that Minister in the context of the North/South Ministerial Council's meeting on European Union programmes in June.

The issue of the responsibility of Customs & Excise was implicitly raised by some Members. I underline the fact that we do not have responsibility for Customs & Excise. The duty of Customs & Excise is to monitor the impact of the tax in Northern Ireland, especially in border areas. Any evidence of tax not being levied on imported aggregate from the South is certainly a worrying development. My officials should be given that information so that they can take it forward with Customs & Excise.

I have addressed most, if not all, of the main points in my response. If other points escaped me, I will respond to Members in writing.

Adjourned at 4.53 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 28 May 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PUBLIC PETITION

Siting of a Telecommunications Mast at Cavehill Road, Belfast

Mr Speaker: Mr Alban Maginness has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr A Maginness: I beg leave to present a petition, which has been signed by more than 1,600 residents of north Belfast, opposing the siting of a telecommunications mast on or near the footpath on Cavehill Road, Belfast. The petition cites the potential health risks, the adverse impact on the visual amenity near Cavehill and the impact on the general environment as good reasons for opposition to the mast.

I present the petition and indicate my support and concern for the campaign.

Mr A Maginness 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.

EMPLOYMENT BILL

First Stage

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 11/01] to make provision for statutory rights to paternity and adoption leave and pay; to amend the law relating to statutory maternity leave; to make provision about flexible working; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

OPEN-ENDED INVESTMENT COMPANIES BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Open-Ended Investment Companies Bill (NIA 10/01) be agreed.

Following the legislative changes on economic development that led to the establishment of Invest Northern Ireland, the Department is focused on updating Northern Ireland company law with a series of legislative measures. The Open-Ended Investment Companies Bill is the latest of the four company law measures that I am bringing to the Assembly during the current session. It is the most technical of the four Bills, but, nonetheless, it is an important measure for the financial investment sector in Northern Ireland. The Bill will ensure that Northern Ireland investment firms have the same opportunities for open-ended investment companies (OEICs) as their competitors in Great Britain, thus removing any potential disadvantages to the local investment sector.

To help those Members who are unfamiliar with the subject, I will provide a broad definition of the nature of an OEIC. An OEIC invests in securities, such as the shares of other companies. It issues shares to its investors, and the value of that capital may go up or down as shares are either issued or cancelled. A fund manager, who must be authorised by the UK Financial Services Authority (FSA), manages its investments.

The assets of, or investments owned by, an OEIC must be held by a depositary, who must also be authorised by the FSA. The depositary plays a key role, similar to that of a unit trust trustee, and must be legally independent of the directors of the OEIC. Details of the performance of individual OEICs are regularly reported in the financial pages of the broadsheet newspapers.

Owning shares in an OEIC is an efficient and flexible means of investing in equities and other securities, with all the opportunities for capital growth that that entails. By pooling their investments, an OEIC's shareholders can invest more cheaply than if they owned shares directly, while at the same time spreading their risks and using expert fund managers. That means that OEICs can extend the benefits of wider share ownership to investors who lack the expertise, time, resources or inclination to choose their own stocks.

The current legislation for the regulation of OEICs in Northern Ireland provides only for the operation of the type of company permitted by Directive 85/611/EEC on Undertakings for Collective Investment in Transferable Securities (UCITS). Non-UCITS OEICs offer a wider range of investment schemes, including money market and property funds and funds of funds. The investment fund management sector in the UK argued that it would be desirable for the Government to legislate for the establishment of non-UCITS OEICs in the UK to ensure the continued success of the OEIC as a UK investment instrument. The UK Government legislated for that change in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which applies to Great Britain only. The Open-Ended Investment Companies Bill proposes to extend to the Northern Ireland investment sector the ability to form OEICs whose investment powers would take them outside the scope of the UCITS Directive, enabling them to offer the extended range of open-ended investment schemes.

The second effect of the Bill is to transfer the registration of Northern Ireland OEICs from the Northern Ireland Companies Registry to the FSA. That would mean that, as well as regulating OEICs in Northern Ireland, the FSA would be responsible for maintaining a register of them. Under existing regulations, the Northern Ireland Companies Registry undertakes the registration of OEICs, while regulation is undertaken by the FSA.

Those arrangements constitute a cumbersome and unnecessary splitting of responsibilities. The new provisions, in the form of draft Regulations that will come before the Assembly, will, therefore, represent a significant rationalisation that benefits the local investment sector. That is because the Financial Services Authority will act as a single point of contact for OEICs in the United Kingdom.

The third effect of the Bill is to enable the creation of Regulations that will further simplify the governance of OEICs. Those will make provisions for OEICs broadly the same as those for unit trusts, provisions that are contained in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. Therefore, there should be no significant divergence in the Regulations that govern unit trusts and OEICs. That will help investors because OEICs and unit trusts are similar investment vehicles, and such divergence could cause confusion. The proposed subordinate legislation will be laid in the Assembly if the Bill is passed.

The decision to register an OEIC will continue to be voluntary, based on commercial consideration. The Bill is intended to offer an extended choice of OEICs to the investment fund management sector in Northern Ireland, similar to that which is available in Great Britain. The Bill will also streamline the arrangements for registration and regulation under a single body, the Financial Services Authority.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will also ensure that investors in the new type of OEIC are protected. That will be done by drafting Regulations that will ensure that those companies are governed by the same standards of investor protection that apply to authorised unit trusts. Although no OEICs are registered in Northern Ireland, the Bill represents my Department's commitment to keep the legal framework for businesses here at the forefront of international best practice. The Bill achieves that by giving Northern Ireland's investment sector the opportunity to take advantage of the extended range of OEIC investment vehicles. That demonstrates that Northern Ireland is a modern economy, anchored in legislation that creates the conditions that allow business to develop and prosper.

Mr Wells: This is not the most glamorous of subjects to speak about, but it is important. I welcome the legislation. Departmental officials briefed the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment well on the matter, and the Committee asked the relevant questions on how the legislation would affect investors in Northern Ireland. The Committee unanimously decided that the legislation should be supported, so I do not intend to pick holes or complain about it.

Open-ended investment companies are affectionately known as OEICs, which is an unfortunate acronym. They succeed the old unit trusts, and many Members are investors in unit trusts. I must declare an interest — I hold four investments in OEICs. The returns were substantial until the events of September 11, and the rapid decline of share prices since that date has meant that the Jim Wells benevolent fund has taken a series of knocks from which I do not know if it will recover. Therefore, I have direct experience of investment. As everyone knows, under the old unit trust system there were bid and offer prices, and the spread was normally 5% to 5.5%. There is a single, transparent pricing system under OEICs that means that investors will know almost immediately the value of their funds.

As the Minister said, fund information is published regularly. Indeed, it is published daily in 'The Daily Telegraph' and the 'Financial Times'. Therefore, investors will know the value of their holdings within a day and can calculate it by multiplying the number of units that they hold by the price quoted in the newspaper.

The legislation is permissive; Northern Ireland institutions do not offer OEICs. The legislation simply enables companies such as Northern Bank, First Trust Bank, et cetera, to establish those funds if they wish. We should have no difficulty in supporting that, as this is parity legislation.

10.45 am

Shares in OEICs are regulated in exactly the same way as in unit trusts, so investors are protected. I am glad that the Financial Services Authority (FSA) has

provided a rigorous and high standard of protection to investors. There has been only one recent example of skulduggery, and, as soon as it was discovered, the FSA acted quickly to rectify the situation. All investors, including myself, were put back into the same position that they would have been in had the discrepancy not arisen. We can progress with a great deal of confidence that this part of the financial market is well regulated, and so this technical change does not undermine investors' confidence in these vehicles.

It is unfortunate that there is limited investment in unit trusts, OEICs and investment trusts in Northern Ireland. As the Minister said, this is an excellent way of gaining exposure to the stock market without the risk inherent in investing in one or two companies. Only when people here have a wider interest in investing in the stock market will Northern Ireland start to establish its own venture capital trusts and other vehicles that invest directly in Northern Ireland firms. We tend to be somewhat conservative and put our money under the bed, which I cannot understand. We tend to put money safely into deposit accounts in banks where it gains a poor rate of interest and does nothing for investment in our industry.

Aside from those minor points, the House should support this legislation. I hope that it will be enacted in time for financial institutions in Northern Ireland to set up OEICs. Perhaps, one day, one of those funds will invest entirely in shares of Northern Ireland companies, which would enable Northern Ireland people to invest directly in the future of the Province. The present difficulty is that we have quite a narrow base. Even our largest company, Viridian, would be very small in the scheme of things on the London Stock Exchange. However, I hope that, as there are already funds that invest entirely in Scottish companies or Belgian companies, we will have an OEIC that will invest entirely in Northern Ireland, so that people can have a stake in the well-being of our plcs.

Sir Reg Empey: The acronyms are difficult to wrestle with. I note that the Member's benevolent fund took a dive after 11 September. However, we are all confident that a sufficiently broad back can withstand such pressures and that it will emerge triumphant in due course. The question is how some of us can get a slice of it. Joking aside, the Member made a serious point. We all recognise that we have a grossly underdeveloped financial services sector. The Republic concentrated on attracting financial services to its new centre in Dublin, which was successful.

The Department has a commitment to ensuring that our legislation meets best practice and international standards. While there are currently no companies trading in this fashion, that will not always be the case, so we must ensure that our legal framework is modern, up-to-date and has the benefit, as the Member pointed out, of ensuring that the interests of consumers are

protected. We must remember that people may be investing their life savings in such companies.

People suffered shocks in recent years after investing in shareholdings through endowment mortgages and other forms of investment. They experienced shortfalls. It is most important to ensure that consumers are protected, so the involvement of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) and the streamlining of the administrative processes for establishing and registering these companies, under the remit of the FSA, is a positive development that avoids duplication and will ensure that Jim Wells's benevolent fund will grow and prosper.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Open-Ended Investment Companies Bill (NIA 10/01) be agreed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill now stands referred to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

ONE ELECTED POSITION

Ms Morrice: I beg to move

That this Assembly, recognising the volume of work involved in local government, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the UK and European Parliaments, opposes double-jobbing and calls on MLAs to dedicate themselves to one elected position only.

The Women's Coalition is moving this motion because the time is right for debate to be opened on the practice of public representatives holding more than one elected position. With elections to the Assembly due in less than a year and the long-awaited review of public administration and local government gathering momentum, we need to send a clear message to the electorate that things will change for the better under this Administration. As far as the Women's Coalition is concerned, changing for the better means ending what we describe as the unacceptable practice that allows elected representatives to hold dual, and even multiple, mandates.

The Women's Coalition believes that the principle of one member, one mandate is fundamental to best democratic practice. In fact, we absolutely fail to understand how the practice of one person holding a number of elected positions is tolerated either by parties, within Governments, or by the public at large. Figures that are available for all to see show that some Assembly Members hold as many as three elected positions. According to the figures that research has supplied to me, out of 108 Members, 60 are councillors, 12 are MPs and one is an MEP. Also, a total of five hold three elected positions.

We need to think about what that means in terms of time, energy and commitment, about the responsibilities of an elected position and about whether it is possible for one person to carry out two or even three full-time elected roles. We are talking about separate locations, involving air travel, overnight accommodation and extremely demanding responsibilities — huge responsibilities, as we have found. Is it right that this practice of people stretching themselves to the limit and spreading themselves too thinly should continue, and is the service being provided correctly?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am very interested in your analysis, and wonder if you apply it to yourself. Are you doing your job correctly when you have a second job with the Laganside Corporation?

Mr Speaker: I suggest to the Member that he speaks through the Chair.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Given that the Member has raised this, I wonder if she applies the same principle to herself. She has another job with the Laganside Corporation, for which I think she gets £7,000 a year. Is she doing that job correctly, and is she doing this job here correctly? Is it not the case that she can do them

both because they complement each other? I should like to know, because people might think that there is an element of hypocrisy in this motion.

Ms Morrice: I am glad to take that intervention. I remind the Member that the motion refers to elected positions and responsibilities. I also remind him that my work on the Laganside board, which the Minister, Nigel Dodds, was commending yesterday at Laganside, takes one morning a month.

That is different from holding three elected positions that involve flights to London and Strasbourg and time out of Northern Ireland away from the constituency and work on legislation, which is vital.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Morrice: I will not give way at the moment. *[Interruption]*.

A week may be a long time in politics, but it is not enough time to cover three separate elected roles.

Lord Kilclooney: Briefly, I want clarification. Why is the Member against an MLA having two mandates but in favour of an MLA having other jobs outside the House?

Ms Morrice: The big difference is that these are elected positions in which one has a responsibility to the electorate, the voters. There must be clarity on the work that is being done. In speaking about responsibility to the electorate, we can argue that the people vote us into these positions and, therefore, accept that we can carry out these roles. I am trying to make it clear that separate people carry out these roles in other places, and that is not clear to the public. It is important to note that there is recognition of this incompatibility in the European and the Scottish Parliaments and in the Welsh Assembly.

Lord Kilclooney: Will the Member give way?

Ms Morrice: No, I have given way once to Lord Kilclooney.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that the conditions that pertained in Northern Ireland in the last 30 years were instrumental in bringing about the conditions that she now criticises? Does she agree that the people who willingly gave their time and put their lives on the line for the democratic process are the only reservoir of political experience that we have available? Perhaps in the future, we may be able to build that up, but there are good reasons now for people having multiple positions.

Ms Morrice: That is a useful point, and it is exactly what I am saying — we are in a new dispensation. Changes are occurring, and we want to be able to let people know that we are committed to change. I acknowledge the Ulster Unionist Party's recognition of the relative incompatibility of holding more than one elected position as its members sometimes do.

I want to know what effect that has on the work and on the legislatures wherein these people with dual or triple mandates hold office. I cannot speak from personal experience about the situation in Westminster or Strasbourg, but here there are serious problems with attendance at debates or getting quorums in Committees. We have all seen Clerks desperately phoning around, trying to get people to come to Committees because there is no quorum. Where are they?

We are also aware of the slow progress of legislation in the Assembly. What is slowing that progress? Is there any correlation — dare I even suggest that there may be — between the fact that Ministers in the Executive are also MPs and councillors?

11.00 am

I would not dare suggest that there was any link, but I want it borne in mind that there is a certain block on the work going through the Assembly.

We talk of power sharing as if the only thing that matters in this new dispensation is the division of spoils between Unionists and Nationalists. Mr Ken Robinson made the point that if we are striving for equality in the truest sense of the word, and if we want to increase democratic participation, we should be freeing up those positions to encourage more women, younger people, those from ethnic minorities and many others to come forward and become involved in politics so that it is truly representative of the people of Northern Ireland. Instead, elected positions are being hoarded, and we kid ourselves, our parties and the electorate that no one else could do the job better. If parties are unable to find suitably qualified candidates for election, that says more about those parties than the voters.

We are moving into an important phase of consultation on the review and reform of public administration. Local government will be an important element of that review. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: When the new legislation is eventually introduced, some 60 Assembly Members who are also local councillors are going to find themselves in a very unusual position. If the proposals are accepted, they will be voting to give local government more power, more work and increased remuneration. We do not have to look too far to see what legislatures beyond this jurisdiction are doing. It has been recognised that holding a dual mandate is no longer accepted practice. In Scotland and Wales the need to reduce that practice has been acknowledged, and only a few stalwart Members are left working as local councillors or MPs.

At community level, a motion has been passed in the European Parliament, pointing out that dual mandates are incompatible, and that holding them will be discouraged

from 2004. However, the UK has secured derogation from that until 2009.

There may not be much sympathy on the floor of the Assembly for the motion, given the number of councillors present. However, the public will be more sympathetic. There is a great deal of support for the principle — *[Interruption]*.

Lord Kilclooney: Will the Member give way?

Ms Morrice: I cannot give way; my time is up. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: The public will support the notion of one Member, one mandate, and we will see that at the next elections. I rest my case.

Dr Birnie: I agree with most of the sentiments in Jane Morrice's speech and motion, though I would qualify them somewhat. We are all aware of the public disquiet about the levels of reward or salary for MLAs and the perceived productivity or effectiveness of public representatives in Northern Ireland, especially in the Assembly. Some of that is to do with perception, and some criticisms are unfair, but we cannot afford to be complacent.

There is clear evidence that a multiple mandate leads to a reduction in the attendance of those individuals who are members of a variety of institutions. For example, recent attendance statistics for the European Parliament show that our party's representative, Mr Jim Nicholson, attends between 80% and 90% of debates in the Parliament in Strasbourg — that is because he has a single mandate. In contrast, the attendance records of our two other MEPs, Dr Paisley and Mr Hume, are much poorer. Their attendance rates are about 40% to 50% — about half that of Mr Nicholson — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Birnie: Some of our politicians may claim to be remarkable individuals. However, that remarkable ability does not stretch to allowing them to be in more than one place at a time.

Mr Speaker: It is generally accepted in most responsible elected bodies that Members should not comment on Members of other elected chambers, not least because those Members are not present to defend themselves. Likewise, the same respect is accorded to Members of this elected body.

Dr Birnie: I sound a note of caution about how the motion would relate to the overlap that Members who are both MLAs and councillors experience. I am not a councillor, but 60 of our 108 Members are. Experiences and responsibilities clearly overlap in the two levels of government. However, some individuals who are both councillors and MLAs can do both jobs well — they find them mutually supportive.

Councillors are not paid a salary, so it cannot be argued that to hold both posts results in a multiplication of financial rewards, although it could be argued that councillors receive some expense payment, albeit a relatively small amount.

We must bear in mind that we are at a transitional point. The Assembly is a new institution and, until relatively recently, there were some doubts about its survival. Given that, it is understandable that many councillors were also elected as MLAs. However, it should be the long-term aspiration of all parties to strive to reach the position where, as far as possible, councillors are not MLAs and vice versa.

I want assurance that council commitments are not the cause of failure to maintain a quorum in Committee meetings. Many of us have observed the phenomenon that occurs in Committees at 4.00 pm or 4.30 pm when certain Members leave because they have a council meeting to attend that evening.

Potential conflicts of interest will arise, two of which have already been mentioned: the recent Local Government (Best Value) Bill and the forthcoming review of local administration. The public will perceive that councillors who are also MLAs have a conflict of interest. That also applies to Ministers who are councillors, although I understand that the ministerial code of practice makes some provision for that. With the various qualifications attached, I support the motion.

Mr O'Neill: The first thing that struck me about the motion is that its first line calls for recognition of the volume of work involved in serving the various institutions. It occurs to me that much of the work of public representatives goes unrecognised. It is important that we recognise the volume of work that public representatives, by and large, carry out in all the roles that we are considering.

The burden is particularly onerous on Members of the Assembly, Members of Parliament at Westminster and Members of the European Parliament. The SDLP agrees with that part of the motion. My party recently changed its constitution to enable it to work towards that position. Mandates gained should be recognised and cannot be denied. A mandate has authority, and it will take time for any change to filter through. Therefore as a party we aspire to such a position on those responsibilities.

There are several reasons why we disagree, however, with the inclusion of local government in the motion. The concept of public service is crucial in local government. It is not a job in the sense that the motion refers to "double-jobbing". It is certainly not a salaried job. Those of us who have been councillors for many years have done so while continuing with our normal working lives. That is what public service means. We should not attempt to deny that concept; it is valuable, and we should try to ensure that it is maintained.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member agree, in the spirit of that public service, that the former leader of his party and the leader of my party, and others, by working so tirelessly over the years, delivered a peace package of millions of pounds for Northern Ireland under the Delors scheme, which provided a foundation for this community to go forward; and that if they had left it to others, we would still be waiting for that money to be delivered?

Mr O'Neill: Yes. Indeed, Mr Ken Robinson also mentioned the importance of public service over the past 30 years, and the commitment of people to deliver for the community at every level. That should also be recognised. However, my comments were particularly concerned with the public service element of local government.

Perhaps the proposer's party does not have as much experience or involvement in local government as others in the House. It is understandable that its members may not fully appreciate the concept of asking people to give of their time to serve the community at local government level. To describe the work of local government as "jobbing" of any kind is a contradiction, and it does not sit well with my party. We will, therefore, oppose the motion on those grounds.

My personal view, not necessarily shared by all my Colleagues, is that the Assembly and local government are in danger of becoming too separate. It could become a case of "us and them". That would not be healthy. At least, in the interim period, one of the best ways of ensuring that that gap does not widen is the involvement of Members at both levels.

In that way, we can ensure that this institution and local councils work together rather than in opposition. If people do not take that as a credible point, they should consider the conflict between central Government and local government in England, which has been clearly documented over the past 20 or 25 years, and note how destructive a gap a "them and us" syndrome can be. I see some merit in Members also serving in local councils, at least in the short term.

11.15 am

Mr Weir: I agree with many of the remarks made by Mr O'Neill. Unlike Dr Birnie, I will be resolutely opposing the motion, and I hope that I will carry the support of many Members. Judging from the interventions of many of his Colleagues, Dr Birnie may also find that many Ulster Unionists will oppose the motion; that is for them to decide.

I oppose the motion on three grounds: it is anti-democratic; it is hypocritical; and it aims at the wrong target. It may be a very old-fashioned view in the new dispensation, but I happen to believe that people get the politicians that they deserve and the politicians that they vote for, and the best system is to allow people to vote for whomever they want. Any attempt to impose standards

that specify that people should serve in only one Chamber and should not be allowed to run for a second Chamber — or have to give one up if they are elected to it — is profoundly undemocratic.

Ms Morrice: The Member makes an interesting point about people being allowed to vote for whomever they want, but does he not admit that the party decides on the person that the electorate vote for?

Mr Weir: The electorate votes for the individuals that it wants. It can vote for candidates representing a range of political parties, and that is democracy. Anything that tampers with that is profoundly undemocratic. We should not be surprised that the Women's Coalition is taking up an anti-democratic stand. After all, this is the same party that mothered the Civic Forum, for whose members not a single vote was cast, and whose achievements can be written on the back of a postage stamp.

When we went through the charade of the election of the First Minister last November, that same party was rehearsing for the pantomime even before the Alliance Party had donned the pantomime horse's clothes. I should not therefore be surprised by an anti-democratic proposal from the Women's Coalition. I am also disappointed in the motion on the grounds that it is hypocritical because, if she were here today, the proposer's leader could vouch for the fact that she stood for election to Westminster, presumably on the basis that she would have some sort of dual mandate.

Ms Morrice: Absolutely not. Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I have given way once already.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am quite agreeable for Members to give way, and for a certain amount of toing and froing, but it begins to become inappropriate when those who have either already made speeches, or have the opportunity to make further speeches, intervene repeatedly. If this were the Committee Stage of a Bill, that would not be unreasonable. However, I must ask Members who have the opportunity to speak not to make interventions in this way, but to restrain themselves, marshal their points and bring them to the Chamber at a suitable time. Otherwise, it all gets completely out of order.

Mr Weir: The proposer's leader aside, my Colleague Mr Paisley Jnr has already highlighted the sheer hypocrisy of the position. The proposer of the motion is also double-jobbing on the Laganside Corporation. I gather that the pay is around £7,500 a year, but I was not aware that it was for only one morning a month. Perhaps the Member will be changing her name by deed poll to Naomi Campbell, given the rates of pay that she seems to expect. I understand the high degree of overlap between local councils and the Assembly where much of the work is basically the same.

As a public representative, one deals with constituency complaints. I fail to see a direct correlation between being a member of Laganside Corporation and representing North Down in the Assembly. On behalf of the constituents of North Down, I cannot see that they have gained advantages to the tune of £7,500 from Jane Morrice's being a member of Laganside Corporation. I look forward to the announcement of her resignation from that board in her winding-up speech, if she truly believes in the spirit of the motion.

The motion is targeted wrongly, because there is an overlap between the various jobs that public representatives do. However, that is recognised by the fact that MLAs who are also MPs receive only one third of their Assembly salary, because much of their Assembly work overlaps with work in Westminster. There is a large overlap between council work and Assembly work, and it would be a shame if we were to become completely detached from local government.

There is no correlation between the amount of work that people do and their having one mandate or two. Since the last general election, the majority of my party's MPs who are also MLAs have had a better voting record in the House of Commons than David Burnside, who is a single mandate MP. All my party's MPs have a better voting record than Jeffrey Donaldson.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have already advised the House that it is not appropriate to mention Members of other places by name who cannot defend themselves. Members may choose to refer to such matters in a less definite way, but they must not refer to Members by name. Members of this House would think it inappropriate if they were mentioned by name in other places and found it impossible to respond in a proper parliamentary fashion. I ask the House to observe that.

Mr Weir: In that spirit, Mr Speaker, one Member of my party, who is an MLA and an MP, has a voting record that is 80 times greater than that of a former leader of another party in this House who was formerly an MLA. There is no direct correlation between someone's being a single mandate representative and the job being done properly. One MP has voted against her own party on 24 occasions. One questions whether that is a good use of time. A former MP, who has now been replaced by someone who is also an MLA representing a constituency to the north of our current location, was noted for his poor attendance and poor work at Westminster. I am surprised that the American security forces are not searching his former offices for Osama bin Laden, who could hide there without any trouble.

During a former period of devolution, from 1921 to 1972, it was standard practice for people to be MPs either at Stormont or Westminster. There has been critical comment, especially from the Unionist Benches, that the Unionist case suffered — and by extension the

Northern Ireland case— because a second eleven was often being sent to Westminster. However, I want to praise a former Stormont and Westminster MP, Lord Fitt, who had a greater impact at Westminster in the 1960s than many MPs who were there with a single mandate.

The motion is targeted wrongly, because the Assembly is based on the examples of Scotland and Wales. If we had managed to get Northern Ireland down to the proportionate level of representation that exists in Scotland and Wales, perhaps there would be some merit in Members having more than one mandate. The Scottish Parliament has approximately 20% more Members than this Assembly, yet it represents three times the population. Wales has the twice the population of Northern Ireland. However, the total number of Welsh Assembly Members and MPs is still less than the number of Members in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Northern Ireland is over-represented in the Assembly, but not at Westminster. However, Northern Ireland cannot afford the luxury of having people representing the electorate in only one body.

Of much greater concern is not that Members sit in more than one Chamber — they are doing the same job in each; it is the number of Members who have served on quangos. Ms Morrice is the ideal example. At least councillors, MPs, MEPs and Assembly Members are people who do similar jobs, have similar levels of representation and deal with similar problems. When a person visits his constituency office, or contacts an Assembly Member, he does not delineate his problem as an Assembly matter, a council matter or a parliamentary matter: he wants public representation. It is much more serious when people are double-jobbing through employment in quangos. The Assembly should investigate that issue more closely than the one proposed in the motion.

What ultimately lies behind the motion? It could be naivety on the part of the Women's Coalition; however, that remains to be seen. Ms Morrice told the Assembly that it is about "freeing up" jobs and opportunities. I believe that it is about freeing up opportunities for the Women's Coalition. That party has an abysmal record of failure in elections. It managed to get only two people elected to the Assembly and one to a local council. Together with its proposal to limit the period in which councillors can serve to two terms, the Woman's Coalition is attempting to knock out of some of the political "big hitters" in various parties to give itself a much better chance of being elected to the Assembly and local councils. That is what lies behind the motion. I urge Members to reject the motion because it is anti-democratic, hypocritical and wrongly directed.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The motion is really about service delivery; and to that end it is somewhat disparaging. However, all parties should consider it. One can understand why such a motion, and the questions it raises, finds its way to the Assembly Floor. All Members have experienced the

negative aspects of political double acts that have been part and parcel of local politics for more than 50 years. It is hard for some parties to break the mould.

The motion raises the issue of the ability of elected representatives to carry out their work effectively if they are doubling up on jobs — Ms Morrice and other Members have mentioned that. Proper methods of accountability should sort out that matter. However, the motion also questions the integrity and intelligence of the electorate who have elected politicians to jobs in local councils, the Assembly and Westminster — and will, possibly, elect representatives to Dáil Éireann.

The motion implies that it is not humanly possible for one person to perform the roles of councillor, Assembly Member and MP and give effective service to their constituents. That may be the case for some individuals. Although Members acknowledge the volume of work involved in the Assembly, they must also acknowledge that there are politicians who are dedicated to the electorate and who have successfully managed to combine their various elected roles and give their constituents the benefit of both worlds.

A Member: Sinn Féin/IRA.

Mrs Nelis: We also know those politicians who have winged it for many years and have relied on their media coverage as a substitute for hard constituency work.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Nelis: I will not.

We have all heard the single-transferable speeches, just as we have witnessed poor quality of service to the electorate. In principle, Sinn Féin supports the concept that one elected position is the preferred option.

However, that is predicated more on the notion of stability than that of capability. For practical reasons, parties have chosen, to stand for seats in the Assembly, candidates who, in many instances, have already proven that they are electable and who have a good track record in local constituency work.

11.30 am

Therefore, it could be argued that the motion is not only about capability, but stability. Those who are sincere and who believe in democracy would, if given the choice, prefer a more focused and, perhaps, single workload. The problem is not just about doubling up; it is about making politics work, regardless of whether a person holds one job or two. It is to the shame of some parties in the Assembly that we cannot hold up this institution as an example of making politics work. Few elected representatives, if given the choice, would have abandoned their constituencies in the past four years, given the Assembly's instability.

We should cast our minds back to the public outcry over whether Members should be given a pay rise,

regardless of whether we double up. The public pronouncements on that were not complimentary. On the whole, people said that we did not deserve a penny because nothing happens in this place — they do not say that nothing happens in local councils or at Westminster.

The real issue is not whether we double up, or do one job or three jobs. It is whether we are good at the job to which we have been elected. The people elected us in the first place to uphold and strengthen the Good Friday Agreement. Regardless of whether we have a single job or whether we double up, we are doing that job well. The jury is still out on that matter.

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

Sinn Féin has given the matter considerable thought. We have examined whether holding seats on local councils, in the Assembly and at Westminster provides an adequate voice for the Republican electorate who have given us their mandate, which is to pursue our political agenda on an all-Ireland basis. That mandate will change the political landscape on this island and on our neighbouring island. How we progress our agenda and whether we hold two or three elected posts is worked through our party's strategy.

Several Sinn Féin councillors, myself included, have resigned our seats on local councils, having worked out with other parties a mechanism for co-option to ensure that the quality of service to the electorate is not diminished or interrupted. We continually examine matters, not least the conflict of interest between local councils and the Assembly. We are also obliged to continually assure our electorate that the transfer of power from Westminster will produce better local democracy. However, that remains debatable.

Although we support the motion in principle, we shall abstain from voting for it, for several reasons. The principle of co-option in local government, specifically on Unionist-dominated councils, has not been firmly established. The Assembly is still sitting on the Unionist San Andreas fault, with the threat of a seismic split just around the corner. However, there is an advantage in giving the decisive power to the people. They had the choice in the first place and have judged that their local elected representatives can represent their interests on councils, in the Assembly, in Dáil Éireann and at Westminster.

Choice should be restricted only where there is good reason. There is no legal or constitutional impediment to candidates offering themselves for positions — in the final analysis it is the people who have the choice. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Close: I admire the courage of Ms Morrice in batting on a hostile wicket and suffering the wrath of those Members who have served society for many years

and whom she attempts to dismiss as double-jobbers. I applaud her courage, and that is where my charity ends.

In declaring an interest, I place on record that I was elected to Lisburn Borough Council, now Lisburn City Council, in 1973. I was re-elected in 1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997 and 2001. I am honoured and privileged to have served the electorate of that august city for 29 consecutive years and now to be in my thirtieth consecutive year of elected position.

A Member: So am I.

Mr Close: Others in the Chamber can also take a bow on achieving a wonderful record, and I applaud them.

Why has Séamus Close been on Lisburn Borough Council, now Lisburn City Council, for 30 years? A couple of answers spring to mind. People may wish to suggest others, but the two fundamental reasons are that Séamus Close decided to put himself forward to the electorate and that the electorate, for better or worse, decided to elect him. If a mistake was made in 1973, the electorate has had many opportunities to rectify it. It has decided, however, to elect and re-elect Séamus Close. That is democracy in practice.

I maintain that I am a democrat. I believe in, and respect, the voice of the people. It is my prerogative to think that at times they may have got it wrong, but it is their prerogative to decide who will represent them. The people are the final arbiters when choosing their representatives, and I shall defend that right against any attempts to enforce petty, stupid rules for as long as I can.

In case any Members think otherwise, I am not a Member at Westminster. Before people jump to their feet to tell me that I tried often enough, I concede. I tried many times to become a Westminster MP, and I failed on each occasion.

Mr S Wilson: Miserably.

Mr Close: I shall not use that term, because it reflects on several representatives of the Member's party who polled fewer votes than I did. If my result was miserable, I shall allow the Member to comment on the results of his party Colleagues. However, he did not really mean that. He endorsed my view that, as a democrat, I accept the decision of the people. They decide either to elect me or that they do not want me as their MP, and in future they may decide that they do not want me as their councillor — next year they may decide that they do not want me as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. That is the people's prerogative. How dare anyone try to deny the people the right to choose? That is an insult to the electorate.

Ms Morrice said that it was not clear what the public should do to elect representatives — "It was not clear to the public" is a direct quote. Was Ms Morrice suggesting that the electorate are stupid? Is she suggesting that when people enter the polling booth they do not know

for whom they are voting? The electorate in Northern Ireland are extremely intelligent. Members who have canvassed will appreciate just how tuned-in our electorate are. It is far off the mark to suggest that they are lacking. Post-election, a candidate may think that the electorate were silly because he or she did not get elected, but that is the electorate's prerogative. If the people of the Lagan Valley constituency and the city of Lisburn wish to have Séamus Close as both a councillor and a Member of the Assembly, so be it. That is a highly intelligent electorate.

There are several impediments to standing for election. A person under 18 cannot stand. If a person is insane, he or she cannot stand — though there are a few in the Chamber who appear to have slipped through. They shall remain nameless. All credit to them — they must not be as mad as they seem. There are others, predominantly outside the Chamber, who would say that all those who put themselves forward for election qualify to be described as insane. The third obstacle to standing is bankruptcy — in financial terms only; it does not refer to bankruptcy of thought or political content or ability. To add to that list of impediments the circumstance of being already elected to another body would be to deny the electorate the opportunity to exercise their intelligence and the right to make a democratic choice.

Like other Members, I want to know what motivated the motion. Why is it on the Order Paper now? It was not on the Order Paper 12 months ago. Is it just coincidence that 12 months ago local government elections and, more importantly, a Westminster election took place in which one of the proposer's colleagues stood as a candidate for South Belfast? That is particularly pertinent to the motion. Like myself, she was unsuccessful; although I received a few more votes than her. Has the motion been tabled by a johnny-come-lately party — perhaps it should be referred to as a Monica-come-lately or a Jane-come-lately party — that wishes to change the political process because it has failed to gain more than one mandate? I cannot assert that as a fact. I can only question the motives behind the motion.

The motion poses other questions. If Ms McWilliams had been elected last year, would the motion have been tabled? If so, would she resign her seat as a Member of the Assembly, thus denying her constituents her wisdom and her ability to contribute to the House and the Committees?

11.45 am

Alternatively, would she have given the Westminster seat a trial run for a few months before deciding to resign, forcing a by-election at great cost to the electorate? If politicians cannot obtain two mandates, why criticise those who have them, especially as the electorate choose. That is petty politics; it is not good politics and is not in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. As has already been mentioned, a large degree of complementarity runs through all elected positions. If someone

comes to me with a problem, I cannot decide whether that person has done so in my role as a councillor or as an Assembly Member. There is an overlap. The representative role can often be fulfilled better if one has more than one elected responsibility.

Many politicians in Northern Ireland cut their political teeth in 1973 — that is when they learnt the intricacies of the great profession that is politics, when they learnt how to represent people and when they learnt the basis of service. When I think about those bygone days, I must say that those of us who stood for election to the respective councils in that year did not think about financial rewards. There was no such thing as financial reward. We stood to serve the people. Are we to be dismissed now as “double-jobbers”? That is an insult to those who, during the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s, were the only democratic bulwarks in our society against terrorism and against those who wished to see democracy go down the plughole. I could tell the House of numerous occasions when I was under attack inside and outside the council chamber and in my home because I dared to be a democrat, and because I dared to put my head above the parapet in days when it was fashionable not to be bothered.

Let us look at some other practical experiences. What would have happened if the rule had been in vogue in 1973, and people who had been elected to our newly formed local authorities had been prevented from standing for the proposed power-sharing Executive? Where would the pool of necessary expertise and talent have been? What would have happened if the rule had been carried through to the 1975 Constitutional Convention, or to James Prior's rolling devolution experiment of 1982-86, of which I was privileged to be a member? Having been elected to the local authority in 1981, was I to say that I could not stand in 1982? As Ms Morrice said, I would have been elected in 1982 and forced to resign one seat. That experiment lasted a few years. It fell because of the Anglo-Irish Agreement — I am not making a political point, merely stating a fact. If that stupid, petty rule had been in vogue in the 1970s, what would have happened, and where would we have been in Northern Ireland if all those who had developed expertise since 1973 in the new local authorities were suddenly without a “job”? Where would democracy have been?

When Members table motions, they should think the matter through and give it some consideration. It does not do any of us any good to hear what I can only refer to as a half-baked idea that denies people democracy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure, Mr Close, that, in the interests of democracy, you would not deny other Members their opportunity to speak, so will you draw your remarks to a close?

Mr Close: I conclude by saying that reference has also been made to the fact that one cannot do two jobs. I

can relate only to my roles as a councillor and as an Assembly Member. I defy any Member, or any member of the electorate, to look at my attendance record in any of the Assembly Committees on which I serve, my record on any of the committees on which I serve at Lisburn City Council or my attendance at any of the full council meetings. I will be at one of those meetings, if God spares me, tonight to represent the people. I am in the Chamber now, and I will leave here to attend a Committee in the Assembly. The roles are complementary, and any tinkering with them should be avoided at all costs. Let the people decide.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If Members restrict themselves to seven minutes, it will be possible to include everyone who wishes to speak.

Sir Reg Empey: Although the motion is welcome in the sense that it allows us to discuss the matter, it is a blunt instrument in its current form. As Mr Close said, one cannot be over-prescriptive — people have a choice. We must break the system down into its various components. For example, there are four Ministers serving as councillors. In the long term, that is not sustainable because conflicts of interest may arise, although interests are declared and such conflicts do not arise frequently.

Mr O'Neill spoke about the concept of public service and said that local government is in a different category from the European or Westminster Parliaments. There is some substance in that. As Mr Close said, we must remember that, at one time, local government was the only fragment of democratic representation left at local level. It was a very watered-down system. As you know only too well, Mr Deputy Speaker, people kept that alive during very difficult times when there was no glory and there were no resources. It was hard work for often little or no reward, and local government had few powers. However, local government has been improving, and I hope that it will improve further as a result of the review of public administration.

However, we should debate the issue of simultaneous membership of the Westminster Parliament, the European Parliament, the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive. Although I accept Mr Close's point that people are entitled to their choice, there is a point where it becomes physically impossible to be fully effective in every role. This is a Europe-wide problem and is not confined to the United Kingdom.

Members of the French National Assembly are often mayors in their districts. The President of France used to be the mayor of Paris. He held that position while he was also a member of the French National Assembly. People also hold positions simultaneously in the Assembly and in the *Départements* that are the units of regional administration in France. The same situation is found across the European community. A great deal of the work of the European Parliament is done in Committees

as well as in the monthly meetings in Strasbourg, and it is not possible, physically, to be in Committees here, at Westminster and at the European Parliament, while attending plenary sessions at the same time. It is not physically or humanly possible.

Although I fully accept that our three MEPs have a good record of bringing help to Northern Ireland, how much better might it have been if they had done that full time and concentrated on it exclusively? Similarly, in Westminster, sporadic attendance at Northern Ireland Questions when the cameras are there and at the odd committee, especially a Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, is fine — it is a good contribution. Squeezing in a few votes on a motion on which there will be many divisions so that MPs can maintain their voting record is all very well. However, that is only part of the job. There are other parts. Some Members here refuse to sit on Committees, and it is not because they are not available. Such Members do not face any financial consequences. Therefore, before we beat the drum too hard, perhaps we have to get our own House in order.

There needs to be a debate about how a person can realistically occupy three or four significant positions simultaneously and hope to do all the jobs as adequately as he could if he were concentrating on one of them — but that will take time. Mr O'Neill's point is valid, because there is more difference between representation at local government level and the Assembly than there is between representation at Parliament and at the European Parliament. Nevertheless, if, as I hope, local government returns to a more recognisable form, and the jobs become more substantive, then the question will arise again. I accept that the people in Northern Ireland are an informed electorate. They have a choice to make, and they know who and what they are voting for.

I welcome the fact that we are having this discussion and debate. There is an issue about Ministers holding more than one position, and it is something that we will have to address. Part of the reason for people holding more than one position is that the Assembly was perceived as a fledgling institution that had not settled, and many of us might have reconsidered our decision to stand for election last year had the circumstances been different. Moving forward to the position that Mr O'Neill has outlined: for those who are not Ministers the local government role and the Assembly role can be compatible, but it is something we will have to look at.

The EU is moving to a point where it will not be possible to be a member of the European Parliament and other elected bodies after 2008-09.

Lord Kilclooney: Elections to the European Parliament are a matter for UK legislation; what the European Parliament says is of no consequence.

Sir Reg Empey: The right hon Member is correct. However, there is a tide of opinion among Governments

in the EU that may soon lead to it not being possible to have dual mandates. When we have a situation where there are people with three or four mandates and jobs — which we have here — we reach the point of overdoing it. The hon Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Close, defends the electorate's right to choose, and I accept that. I also understand that the situation has particular temporary exigencies. However, it is useful to have the debate. We will have to return to this subject, and in the long term the game is probably up for those holding three and four jobs. The position is not sustainable. However, local government is a different matter.

Mr S Wilson: Like Séamus Close, I am bewildered at the reasons behind this act of political masochism by Jane Morrice. She appears to be happy to have set herself up in the Assembly with the motion. I suppose she has got the support of Esmond Birnie — whether that is of any comfort to her, I am not so sure. She has not even succeeded in getting the support of the members of IRA/Sinn Féin beside her, who are well known to be in favour of doing the double. For a long time, their members were required to have a night job as well as a day job, and only recently have they allowed conscientious objectors into the ranks of the public representatives of the party.

Of course, this has been a useful exercise for Séamus Close. He has had a wonderful opportunity to electioneer for next May. I notice that he has told the electorate that he has been a representative for 30 years and has been very pleased at the support they have given him. He admired their generosity, knowledge, and wisdom. At least Jane Morrice has given Séamus Close a chance to get some publicity for himself.

12.00 pm

Mr Close is right that many people will be amused, amazed or bewildered by the motive behind the motion. The Women's Coalition is not against double-jobbing. It is not against it in principle. On many occasions, I have heard Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice champion the cause of the working woman. They ask for crèches, nurseries and facilities to free them from the sink and get them out to work. Therefore they are not against double-jobbing in principle — a woman can be a mother and a housewife, and she should be helped to do another job as well.

As we heard from several people, they are not against double-jobbing personally. The register of Members' interests makes interesting reading. Ms McWilliams, who is too busy to attend the debate even though her name is on the Order Paper, has registered an interest as an external examiner and as a non-practising professor, though I do not know what that means. Ms Morrice is on the board of Laganside. She said that that does not really matter because it is only for one morning a month. I got the attendance records, and in the past twelve

months she has managed to get to only three out of every four meetings. She seems to find no difficulty in having a non-elected position as well as an elected position.

What is the motive behind this? Now and again, the Women's Coalition comes up with some bizarre ideas. Ms Morrice's most bizarre idea before this came during the debate on the memorial for the millennium. She proposed that every house, without qualification, and every tree that was over 100 years old — how that could be worked out, I do not know — should have a protection order placed on it. It did not matter what condition it was in, so long as it was over 100 years old. That was how we should remember the millennium.

Mr Kennedy: What about Séamus Heaney's house?

Mr S Wilson: It was not 100 years old, and it was still falling down. Perhaps this was just another bizarre idea.

We also know that the Women's Coalition is a party of interferers. It loves civic forums, commissioners, agencies and commissions. If there is a way to interfere in people's lives, the Women's Coalition will find it. If it has not yet been discovered, it will be. Perhaps this interfering tendency is behind the motion, or perhaps, as has been suggested, it is not about efficiency; it is all about jealousy. Members of the Women's Coalition could not get elected to two positions; so, if they cannot have two, nobody else will.

We have had a constructive debate today, but it is up to individuals to decide whether they want to set themselves up for more than one elected position. If they want to be sad, if they want to run from this place to that place, from this person to that person and from this role to that role, that is up to them, and the Assembly should not legislate for it.

It is also up to their parties to decide whether they do the jobs efficiently. Some people can organise themselves better; some find one job enough to hold. It reflects on the party if people get elected and then do not do the job well. The electorate will decide that they do not wish to have that person about the place. The people know whether someone holds more than one elected position. Let them decide if that is the kind of person that they want to represent them.

Let us not accept such an "interfering busybody's" attitude from a party that has no Member with a double mandate. Despite Ms Morrice's comments, Members are not hoarding elected positions, and parties with Members who have a double mandate do not lack suitably qualified candidates. Was the Women's Coalition so bereft of suitably qualified candidates in South Belfast that it had to put forward Monica McWilliams? Could another Women's Coalition member not run for election? Ms McWilliams was fielded because the party believed that her profile as an Assembly Member gave her a

better chance of winning a Westminster seat. They were wrong. Ms Morrice should not come here with sour grapes, because she got it wrong.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Morrice to make her winding-up speech.

Ms Morrice: Mr Deputy Speaker, dare I?

I expected blood to be spilled, and no less. We have had a valuable start to an important debate; it is only the beginning.

I thank Dr Birnie for his support and clarification of the issue. Sir Reg Empey said that Ministers who are councillors could have a conflict of interests and that eventually it would become physically impossible for them to remain fully effective as representatives. That vital point supported my comments about the difficulty of juggling the responsibilities of elected positions, which can involve air travel and accommodation difficulties.

Mr O'Neill agreed that MLAs should not be MPs or MEPs. He made the vital point that mandates represent authority and must be recognised. In addition, I thank him for his point about timing. Mr O'Neill and Mr Close stated that local councillors provide an important public service. I do not wish to detract from the hugely important service that is provided at local council level. Patricia Wallace is the Women's Coalition's councillor in North Down, and we appreciate the work that her position involves. I congratulate Mr Close and others who have served their communities so well for so long; however, times have changed.

Mr A Maginness: If MLAs relinquished their council positions, by-elections might be called, even if the major parties agreed. I am sympathetic to Ms Morrice's argument, but does she not agree that, to facilitate the relinquishment of council positions by MLAs, we need a mechanism whereby vacancies are filled through automatic co-options rather than by-elections?

Ms Morrice: That is a valid point. I commend the former SDLP leader John Hume for relinquishing his seat in the Assembly because he recognised the heavy burden of the role. He passed his mandate to Annie Courtney, enabling her to participate also. The appropriateness of a similar system at local government level to allow for co-option is an important point for debate.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Morrice: I will not give way. I have only 10 minutes in which to cover all the points.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will deal soon with Mr Weir's comments that the motion is anti-democratic, hypocritical and wrongly directed.

Several Members made the point that Monica McWilliams stood in South Belfast in the Westminster elections. Some of the comments were quite absurd. There is no question that members of one body must be

allowed to stand for election to another. However, if elected, they should give up any other positions they hold at the earliest opportunity. That is our policy, and it is not hypocritical. Elected representatives should not even contemplate taking up several posts at the same time.

The point was made that co-options and alternates are a valuable way of bringing new people in. Several Members mentioned that things were different in the past. I acknowledge that. However, as far as the Northern Ireland Assembly and the new dispensation are concerned, times have changed. We desperately need new blood, new thinking and young and different voices. That is why debates such as this are so valuable.

I thank Sinn Féin for its position on the issue. Fair enough, it is not yet at the stage of fully supporting the motion, but it supports the concept that one elected position is the preferred option. Sinn Féin is at least moving in the right direction. I also recognise the point that Mary Nelis made about the importance of stability.

Mr Weir said that the motion is anti-democratic. We must consider who chooses election candidates. I was interested to hear Mr Close's remark that he chose to go forward and the electorate voted for him. I was not aware that that is how parties operate. I thought that party members put themselves forward for nomination as a candidate and that the party then selects the candidates. Is that not the case? It is not common practice for the Ulster Unionist Party to select a candidate who already holds another position. Such practice is a nod in the direction of the motion.

Parties choose their candidates. Surely parties should be encouraging new, young blood to join their ranks. I am not trying to interfere, but there is recognition in the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and in parties here — the SDLP and Sinn Féin have nodded in this direction — that it is a physical impossibility to carry out the work of three elected representatives at the same time. Three people should be doing that work.

If one person can do three jobs, why not consider the antithesis of that and have two people job-sharing an elected position? Is that not a novel approach, not unlike our millennium preservation fund mentioned by Mr Sammy Wilson, which could have perhaps saved Séamus Heaney's house?

12.15 pm

Another issue that Mr Sammy Wilson and others might dismiss is the dual currency debate on the euro, yet there is growing support for that. Those ideas are not as wild and crazy as some would have us believe.

We are here to challenge traditional thinking, and to make people think new things. We want to get support from the public: we believe that we have that. We have

laid ourselves open to this sort of criticism, but it is worth it in the end.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 8 Noes 40.

AYES

Billy Armstrong, Esmond Birnie, Tom Hamilton, Lord Kilclooney, James Leslie, David McClarty, Pat McNamee, Jane Morrice.

NOES

Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Séamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Arthur Doherty, Sam Foster, Tommy Gallagher, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, Joe Hendron, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, Alban Maginness, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Maurice Morrow, Sean Neeson, Eamonn O'Neill, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Mark Robinson, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

The sitting was suspended at 12.24 pm.

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

2.00 pm

CRIME RATES

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise Members of how I propose to conduct the debate, which has been allocated two hours by the Business Committee. Two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List. The amendments will be proposed in the order in which they appear on the Marshalled List. The round of Members who wish to speak will follow that order. When the debate is concluded, I shall put the question on each amendment in turn. If amendment No 1 is made, I shall not put the question on amendment No 2.

If that is clear, I shall proceed.

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the increasing levels of crime and falling crime detection rates in Northern Ireland and condemns the public stance adopted by Sinn Féin to the police in Northern Ireland.

Policing in Northern Ireland is causing grave concern. Political interference in policing — due to the Patten proposals, which stem from the Belfast Agreement, and the damage that those proposals have done to the numerical strength and morale of the Police Service — has contributed directly to an escalation of crime on the streets of Northern Ireland.

Public representatives receive communications on a weekly basis from people expressing their concerns about letting their youngsters go out at the weekend because of the number of attacks on people at places of entertainment. Parts of Belfast and other towns have become notorious for the number of attacks on young people in particular. Parents who thought that the alleged ending of terrorist campaigns made it safe to send their youngsters out without their being blown up are now afraid to send them out in case they get beaten up.

People are concerned about the effects of increasing lawlessness on their property — car theft is rampant, and there is damage to cars and burglary. According to the police, the number of reported incidents of crime in the last year rose by 11·6%. As a result of the decimation, demoralisation and curtailment of the Police Service, detection rates have gone down from 27·5% to 18·8%. The detection rate for car theft and damage to cars has fallen to half of what it was a year ago. That means that of the 16,000 incidents of car theft and damage to vehicles occurring each year, only a small proportion of the people responsible are being identified.

That has undermined confidence in the Police Service in Northern Ireland. It has caused increasing frustration among people who do not have a political agenda. They want to bash the police not because they are anti-police, or because they consider the police to have changed as a result of the Belfast Agreement. They are unhappy about policing because they believe that the level of service that they are entitled to as citizens has been affected. Their property and their families are being affected by the rising crime rate. The police appear to be powerless in the face of that crime rate.

I am sure that other Members will say that that is the case. That is true whether people come from Nationalist or Unionist backgrounds or from working-class or middle-class backgrounds. It does not matter what race they are. People want to live in safety and have their property protected, but that is not happening.

There is general concern, which I am sure will be expressed today. I do not wish to harp on, but this point must be forcefully made. Unfortunately, the Police Service of Northern Ireland is less effective because people voted for political interference in its running. They voted for political correctness instead of police effectiveness. The effects of that can be seen on the ground.

We were told that those sacrifices, hard choices and difficult decisions — words that I have heard from members of the Ulster Unionist Party — were made because policing had to be accepted. We were told that were the Police Service accepted, it would become more effective. Immense sacrifices were made. People who had given years of service to the community in the most difficult circumstances were hurt, damaged and, indeed, besmirched by some of the Patten recommendations that were later accepted in the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.

What has the effect been? Have all those changes led to an acceptable police force? I do not wish to bore the Assembly with all the comments that have been made, but there are sheaves of statements from IRA/Sinn Féin that use exactly the same language about the “Pattenised” Police Service as they used about the RUC. The police are still called human rights abusers. They are still called a police force within a police force. They are still unacceptable. Sinn Féin representatives still publicly say that they wish the members of the Police Service to be treated in the same way that members of the RUC were treated. There has been no change. Opposing proper policing supports criminality.

Let us make no mistake. IRA/Sinn Féin cannot condemn the police in the terms that it has expressed and yet wring its hands in lament at the criminality that has descended upon its community. Opposing the Police Service means that criminality is supported. Of course, we can understand that people who were and who are criminals will hardly support those who are meant to deal with criminals. Despite sacrifices having been made,

and the subsequent effect on the ground, there has not been the acceptance that we were promised — far from it. In fact, even more changes are demanded.

One of the proposed amendments to this motion calls on those who support criminals to get on board with the Police Service. I do not wish to turn this debate into a call for Sinn Féin to get on board policing in Northern Ireland. The inherent criminal tendencies in that section of the body politic should have no part in policing. Although the poison of Sinn Féin may have affected this institution, I am glad that the Policing Board can get on with its work because that poison has not been injected into its veins.

The Government are going to make the mistake of making further concessions to those who continue to churn out their hatred of the police. What further concessions can be made to involve them in policing? Should terrorists be involved, just to bring Sinn Féin on board? That would be wrong for several reasons. My party joined the Policing Board, albeit with reservations because of the probable effect of Patten’s weakening of the police. The SDLP joined on terms which were acceptable at the time. To change those terms to facilitate the intransigent supporters of criminals would be a travesty and a betrayal of those who joined on the original terms.

For the Government to pander any further to IRA/Sinn Féin would be a grave mistake. First, it would undermine those who have joined the Policing Board. Secondly, more concessions will only weaken the police and have a grave effect on their morale, which is already at rock bottom.

This motion is timely, because of the concern at the reduction in the Police Service’s effectiveness as a result of the Patten reforms and the subsequent Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. As the Government head towards a review of policing and the 2000 Act, the Assembly must issue a warning. I hope that the voices of the SDLP Members will be raised in public, as they have been in private, to warn the Government that concessions have weakened a vital service in society and that no more can be made.

Mr Maskey: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 2 delete all after “detection rates in Northern Ireland” and insert

“and believes it is essential that policing structures and arrangements are such that the police service is professional, effective and efficient, fair and impartial, free from partisan political control; accountable, both under the law for its actions and to the community it serves; representative of the society it polices, and operates within a coherent and co-operative criminal justice system, which conforms with Human Rights norms.”

Sammy Wilson began, at least, to mention that part of the motion that deals with the increasing levels of crime and the falling detection rates. He went on to make several political assumptions and observations. I share

many of his concerns about the levels of some crimes, particularly those which have, unfortunately, been highlighted again. The elderly are vulnerable members of the community who continue to fall prey to criminals. Many of them have been brutally attacked in their homes, yet no one has been arrested, tried or convicted for those crimes.

2.15 pm

The problem with policing here is not the fault of Sinn Féin. I remind Members that Sinn Féin was involved in the negotiations for the Good Friday Agreement, which included a section on policing. Those involved in the negotiations and those who signed up to the new beginning for policing acknowledged that there was a fundamental problem with policing in the Six Counties.

The motion condemns the public stance of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin's position and public stance is clear. It believes that Peter Mandelson's Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 usurped the new beginning that was promised in the Good Friday Agreement. However, critically, Sinn Féin will continue to press the British Government to undo the damage of the 2000 Act and to fully legislate to provide for an effective and accountable police service.

The motion is bogus. It aims to make Sinn Féin the scapegoat for the absence of an effective police service. It is unclear whether the proposer blames Sinn Féin or the Ulster Unionist Party — perhaps he is trying to get at both. Sinn Féin, therefore, will not support the motion.

Sinn Féin will not support the second proposed amendment, because it too is also fundamentally flawed. The 2000 Act has undermined our ability to create an effective and accountable police service, although that aspiration was endorsed by the electorate last year when the SDLP and Sinn Féin published an analysis of policing that had a significant bearing on the outcome of the election. Sinn Féin was returned as the largest Nationalist party, showing that its overall position, including its views on policing, was endorsed by the electorate.

As is the SDLP's right, its proposed amendment asks all parties to endorse its party position. However, as the SDLP did not join the Policing Board until after the elections last year, it appears that it did not have the courage to inform the electorate of its position then, which would suggest a lack of confidence in the Nationalist community's support for the policing arrangements set out in the 2000 Act.

Sinn Féin's amendment, standing in my name and that of John Kelly, is designed to bring the debate back to the core issue, namely the fulfilment of the demands of the Good Friday Agreement. I pledge to all communities that Sinn Féin will tirelessly work to establish the police service that it negotiated for in the Good Friday Agreement. Sammy Wilson may not be pleased to hear this, but I look forward to the successful outcome of those negotiations, because it will enable

Sinn Féin to participate in the establishment of the service that it endorsed on Good Friday 1998 but has since been denied. I look forward to Sinn Féin's role in overseeing the new police service.

Regrettably, my community is all too aware of criminal activity. Tomorrow in west Belfast we will lay to rest Kieran Conlon, another victim of so-called car crime. The long-term legacy of bad policing in my constituency contributed to his death, and I extend my sympathy to Mr Conlon's family. I assure them that his death is not a party political issue in the Chamber today. Proper policing structures are an imperative of the Good Friday Agreement, to which all parties signed up.

Sinn Féin's view, and the view of many others, is that we have not yet reached the new beginning, but Sinn Féin will continue to strive to do so. I assure all those who have been recently bereaved, hurt by plastic bullets or denied justice, that Sinn Féin will work to establish a new, effective and impartial police service that all in the community can embrace and find beneficial.

Mr Attwood: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 2 delete all after "detection rates in Northern Ireland" and insert

"and calls on all parties to participate in the new policing structures and arrangements which provide the basis for a police service that 'is professional, effective and efficient, fair and impartial, free from partisan political control; accountable, both under the law for its actions and to the community it serves; representative of the society it polices, and operates within a coherent and co-operative criminal justice system, which conforms with Human Rights norms.'"

I wish Sammy Wilson and Joe Byrne, and Fred Cobain of the Ulster Unionist Party, well for this time tomorrow when they will sit on the interview panel for the new Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. At least they are not shirking their responsibility to make real the new beginning for policing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Maskey: In its discussion tomorrow, will the Policing Board explain to the people of Short Strand how they ended up on the receiving end of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which is supposed to be the new police service?

Mr Attwood: I shall answer that in the details of what I will say.

The Assembly should note that the new Chief Constable will be appointed tomorrow. The post is our most significant public appointment: none has greater consequences. People who assume the responsibility for making such an appointment must be acknowledged and applauded. They are at least trying to sign up to the Good Friday Agreement and the changes suggested in the Patten Report, even if some of them do not like those recommendations and may indeed deny them. Others are not prepared to acknowledge their policing

responsibilities, although they are fulfilling every other aspect of the Good Friday Agreement.

I should like to respond to some of Sammy Wilson's points. The SDLP accepts that not everything in policing is right; only a fool would claim otherwise. However, it is improper and unfair to say that many things are wrong; and it is particularly unfair and wrong to blame everything on the Patten Report. Our policing and political problems pre-date the Patten Commission and are not a consequence of its report. The Nationalist community was unable to support the RUC and to join it in representative numbers, and too often that force failed to account legally and publicly for its actions. That failure, and the RUC's wider associations, caused division and dispute in our society over policing — and all of that pre-dates the Patten Report. To blame Chris Patten and the other commissioners for what is now wrong in policing ignores all our history, all the evidence and many of the facts.

Mr McCartney: Although it is arguable that those factors pre-dated the Patten Commission, that body was supposed to cure them. In fact, the factors have been exacerbated since the Patten Report, and that is why this debate was proposed.

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge that argument, and, as I said, there are still difficulties in policing. It will take a long process and much heavy lifting to get it right.

If the present policing system is being assessed, then why not acknowledge that there have been several recruitment exercises and that 50% of those joining the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) now come from a Catholic background. The latest evidence suggests that people from that background come from every constituency in the North and from all types of Catholic backgrounds. That was not the case when the old RUC existed, but is true in the days of the PSNI.

If people are saying that there are still problems with policing, they should also acknowledge that a recent household survey confirmed that 75% of the Protestant community have confidence in the work of the Police Ombudsman, who is an essential partner in the new beginning for policing. Eighty-one per cent of the Catholic community have confidence in her work. So much for those who say that the Police Ombudsman is a toothless tiger. In her statement on the Omagh bombing, whether we like it or not, Nuala O'Loan demonstrated her real teeth, her real power and her real ability to affect policing change in the North.

If Bob McCartney is right to say that policing is worse than when the RUC existed, why does the Nationalist community test policing in some places; why does it support it in others; and why does it join the PSNI in yet others? Why do we not acknowledge all that is changing and all that is positive, rather than saying that policing is worse now than in the past? That is Sinn Féin's argument,

because even if the glass were full, it would claim that it was half-empty. Those who believe in the new beginning for policing, or who at least participate in it, should not indulge Sinn Féin's attitude that regardless of what is right, some things will always be wrong.

Sammy Wilson said that crime figures show that there is more crime and less detection. I do not deny that rates of crime and detection must be addressed. However, as Sammy Wilson and other Policing Board members know, the acting Chief Constable said on the record that the new system for recording crime had affected the results so that more crime was recorded, inevitably creating a higher recorded rate. Crime facts and figures must be discussed frankly and fully; we should not be selective.

Sammy Wilson said that the new crime figures are a result of the decimation and demoralisation of the police. Even if there are occasional and short-term losses, there will be many longer-term gains. When we have a representative, accountable, civilian Police Service that conforms to human rights standards, we will have made a breakthrough in the community's culture and processes so that everyone will have confidence in the police.

Alex Maskey asserted that we should not make policing a party political issue. He will know what I am about to say, because I have said it before: who made policing a party political issue by referring to Policing Board members as "collaborators"? Sinn Féin in Derry City Council referred to SDLP members and supporters of the Police Service as "collaborators". Is that not party politics? Who referred to all the Policing Board members as "dummies"? Martin McGuinness. Is that not party politics? Who said that no Nationalist or Republican would join or support the Police Service? Who had the high-handedness and arrogance to make those claims? Was that not party politics from Gerry "there but for the grace of God go I" Adams? Such remarks show who is playing party politics and preying on people's worst fears.

Mr Roche: Party politics are embedded in every policing document that the SDLP has ever produced. For example, at the Brehon Law Society conference a few years ago in the United States, the party's then deputy leader said that the RUC was upholding the law of the jungle in Northern Ireland, implying that the RUC perpetrates terrorism, rather than protects citizens from it. If that is not a disgusting politicisation of policing, I am open to persuasion.

Mr Attwood: Recently, the SDLP has been getting every aspect of policing policy and practice right — that is the most compelling argument for its amendment. If the SDLP had not been on the Policing Board, Ronnie Flanagan would still be the Chief Constable, and Nuala O'Loan's report on Omagh would have been "decimated", to borrow a word.

Policing power would not have been turned on its head, as it was in the board's response to Omagh, if the SDLP had not been on the Policing Board. There would not have been a code of ethics, which the human rights community has acknowledged as being positive and progressive, if the SDLP had not been on the Policing Board. There would not be a multidimensional strategy to put into practice Patten's imperative to integrate Special Branch into the wider Police Service if the SDLP had not been on the Policing Board.

2.30 pm

Through the scientific research programme commissioned by Patten, plastic bullets may be banned. Sinn Féin has stated that that threshold is acceptable, and that if it were implemented in full, it would join the Policing Board. This gives an opportunity to introduce other methods of riot control that conform with human rights standards, are consistent with minimum force requirements and rightly protect the police and the public from the riots that are so often seen on the streets of Belfast and elsewhere. I commend this amendment to the House.

Sir John Gorman: As Members will know, I am a former member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, as was my father before me. My youngest son is a reserve constable. It is appropriate that I should say something on the motion, and I hope that what I say will be of some value.

Contrary to some fears, the level of recorded crime is fairly static, and the year-on-year increase over the past 12 months is almost nil. When I was chief executive of the Housing Executive I was conscious of the fraudulent use of tax certificates. Therefore I was heartened to read last week that the PSNI team, which has spent many months investigating this issue, has now traced over 100 people who are involved in this deplorable crime in Northern Ireland. These people extracted more than £10 million from taxpayers. However, the case is sub judice, so I will say no more about it, but I am certain that there will be prosecutions.

More than 70% of crime in the Province is drugs related. The use of drugs has an enormous impact on young people. However, the number of violent crimes, while recently on the decrease, is shocking compared with the levels we suffered when I was in the RUC. Leaving aside terrorist killings, murder is now almost a weekly occurrence in Northern Ireland. Thirty years ago it was so rare that the names of the victims were imprinted on the public mind.

Undoubtedly, the fear of crime is great, but it is disproportionate to the real risk. Public concern is focused on the PSNI's woeful 27% clearance rate. I note the point that has just been made from the SDLP Benches, but the rate is still very low. The clearance rates for burglary, criminal damage and robbery are especially

worrying at less than 15%. The number of investigations into terrorist killings that lead to prosecution is also extremely low, although, as much as anything else, that probably reflects failures in our criminal justice system, gaps in the legislation and communities' fears of reporting paramilitaries.

I can support the motion. It is succinct and lays the blame where it should be laid. Sinn Féin's attitude to the PSNI is as deplorable as its attitude to the Omagh investigation and nearly as bad as its mealy-mouthed attitude to the gardaí. I am glad that nearly 95% of voters in the Republic saw through Sinn Féin's attitude to the gardaí.

Sinn Féin deliberately adopts an "impossibilist" position. Its vision of a police force or police service bears no relation to any police force in the world. It seems to think that policing should be a branch of the Department of Health and Social Services. However, anyone with any experience knows that a police force is a necessary evil that must strike a balance between coercion and accountability. Sinn Féin forgot to add certain words to its amendment; I point that out as an important factor in the decision that it may make. It should have added six important words: "Get rid of the Special Branch".

In principle, there is nothing wrong with the SDLP's amendment. We should all be able to support the vision of a police service contained in the Belfast Agreement. Those of us on this side of the House, especially perhaps, believe that the RUC was, and is, a fine force and one that did its best to fulfil the aims of the agreement in extremely difficult circumstances.

The problem with the SDLP's amendment is that it seeks to commit a deliberate evasion. It fails to name the guilty party in the Chamber. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party, while sharing the SDLP's vision of a first-class police force, will abstain on the SDLP's amendment. I see no reason why the SDLP cannot support the motion today, and I look forward to hearing some further explanation as to why it will not.

Mr Boyd: I support the motion. The decent law-abiding people of Northern Ireland have had to endure a huge increase in crime as a direct consequence of the Belfast Agreement. This is hardly surprising, given that the Belfast Agreement is a corruption of democracy and the rule of law.

The Belfast Agreement has destroyed the Royal Ulster Constabulary and reduced policing resources significantly. At the same time, illegal terrorist organisations have been able to strengthen their structures and carry out their criminal activities due to the early release of hundreds of their members, many of whom committed the most heinous crimes.

Thirty-one terrorists freed under the Belfast Agreement have been returned to prison for their criminal activity. One such individual who had been released early and has since been returned to prison is a double murderer who was recently convicted of a sex attack in Belfast.

Released prisoners have been seen on the streets of Belfast during recent rioting. One such individual observed by members of the security forces at recent riots in Ardoyne is the Republican Sean Kelly, who murdered nine innocent Protestants on the Shankill Road. That is clearly a breach of his early release licence. The majority of the 31 prisoners who have been returned to jail have been accused of criminal offences such as theft and assault.

It is nauseating to hear IRA/Sinn Féin express concerns about human rights. No group continues to abuse human rights more than IRA/Sinn Féin. IRA/Sinn Féin have murdered over 300 police officers and injured many thousands more during the past 30 years. Everyone, except the naive and gullible, knows that IRA/Sinn Féin are not committed to the principles of exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

The Provisional IRA, which is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin, continues to be fully armed and has enough explosives and ammunition to murder everyone in Northern Ireland. There has been no decommissioning of illegal weapons and no disbandment of the Provisional IRA. All we have are meaningless statements. In fact, there is clear evidence that the IRA is heavily involved in gunrunning.

The Provisional IRA continues to murder, bomb, gather intelligence, deal in illegal drugs and carry out beatings and shootings, including attacks on children. The IRA is heavily involved in the abuse of social security payments, illegal livestock trade, evasion of tax and VAT, tobacco and alcohol smuggling and duty evasion, illegal fuel, insurance and compensation fraud, money laundering, cheque and credit card fraud, electoral fraud, motor vehicle licensing fraud, extortion, counterfeit goods, vehicle theft, armed robbery, hijacking and many other criminal activities.

What are the human rights of the innocent victims of such crimes? Have the Government cracked down hard on illegal organisations? Not at all: the opposite has happened. A self-confessed leader of the Provisional IRA, Martin McGuinness, boasts of his criminal activity, yet, disgustingly, he was made Minister of Education by the pro-agreement Members. What sort of example is that to young people? Is it any wonder that many young people turn to crime when they see the likes of Martin McGuinness in the Government of Northern Ireland?

It is little wonder that Sinn Féin is opposed to the rule of law when the Provisional IRA has such a huge criminal empire. The IRA murders Catholics who join the police — what about their human rights?

It is regrettable that there has been a huge increase in crime in Unionist areas as policing resources have been decimated by the implementation of the Patten report. We have lost hundreds of experienced professional and long-serving officers as a result of political expediency, and their expertise is gone forever.

At 11pm a week ago last Saturday, I contacted Newtownabbey police station on behalf of a constituent. Newtownabbey has a major police station serving a population of approximately 81,000. However, no one above the rank of constable was in the station. Neighbourhood beat officers have been moved to other duties and no longer walk the beat.

The reduction of policing resources throughout Northern Ireland has resulted in a large increase in crime and a lack of resources for bringing the guilty to justice. There is a daily catalogue of crime, including armed robberies, burglaries, assaults, attacks on the elderly, vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

A few months ago in my street in Newtownabbey, an elderly lady was robbed on her way to church on Sunday morning. Throughout Northern Ireland pensioners are being robbed in their homes. The brutal murder of Joshua McClenaghan in south Antrim in March this year is a graphic illustration of the depravity of the people carrying out these crimes.

Businesses and retail outlets are robbed regularly, leaving staff, including young people, traumatised for a long time. Then many shop owners have to endure intimidation, threats, assaults and demands for payment of so-called protection money from Republican and so-called Loyalist paramilitary organisations. Decent law-abiding people are fed up with such illegal activity.

In Newtownabbey alone, Translink has suffered damages of £100,000 as a result of attacks on its vehicles in the past 12 months. Every weekend, new bus shelters are smashed in a litany of vandalism. Seven bus shelters were smashed in close proximity in one night.

The Government's response to the crime wave is to consider the closure of around 17 police stations and the removal of a permanent policing presence from many areas. Members are irresponsible when they tell people not to provide information to the police about the Omagh bomb and other crimes.

Illegal terrorist organisations set themselves up as judge, jury and executioner. They have murdered drug dealers and other criminals — some within their own organisations — but the Government bury their head in the sand and describe such activity as "housekeeping".

The courts must also get tough with criminals. The punishment should fit the crime and be a deterrent to others. I publicly condemn the comments of the vice-chairman of the Policing Board, Denis Bradley, for stating that ex-terrorists should be allowed to join the

police. That is a corruption of democracy and the rule of law. Equally corrupt is the prospect of IRA/Sinn Féin taking seats on the Policing Board and controlling the forces of law and order.

The “Defend the RUC” pledge and declaration states:

“We repudiate a structure for policing that offers a role to the representatives of paramilitary organisations.”

Regrettably, such structures exist, and the ultimate corruption of the integrity of the rule of law will occur when IRA/Sinn Féin takes up positions in such structures in the near future after it gains more concessions from a weak Government.

2.45 pm

Mr McCartney: I have high personal regard for Sir John Gorman and the service that he, as a former member of the RUC, and his family have rendered to the community. However, his assertion that crime is static does not hold up. The figures contained in the Chief Constable’s report to the board, which was made available at the beginning of the month, clearly demonstrate that that is not the case. As Sammy Wilson pointed out, the overall detection rate when compared with last year dropped from 27.5% to 18.8%. The rate has decreased substantially in all but one area, in which there was a marginal improvement of 0.2%.

There is no doubt that police in any jurisdiction need two things to sustain their success: first, they must have adequate resources and numbers; secondly, they must have good morale and must believe that their service is worthwhile and that they have the respect of the people on whose behalf they put their health, lives and bodies at risk. In both respects, the RUC suffered because of the Patten Commission. Now, as the Police Service of Northern Ireland, its numbers have been significantly reduced and the morale of those who serve in it has been seriously damaged.

For example, within the past six months, I had a meeting with the senior officer for the north Down area. Notionally, he should have between 280 and 290 constables to cover the area. Of that number, 40 took redundancy under the Patten Report and have not been replaced and 55 are on special static duty and look after notables and those who, despite the ceasefire, apparently require 24-hour guard. A further 60 are on long-term sick leave — that is they have been sick for more than 12 months. That figure does not include those who have taken significant sick leave within that period. The figures total 155, which means that under 50% of the allotted staff are available for police duties.

A consequence of that is that Holywood, a quiet town with good community relations, has been turned into Tombstone or Abilene. There have been three bank robberies. During a robbery of the Ulster Bank in Church Road, the getaway car was blocked in by a car that had

been double-parked. One can walk comfortably from the police station to the site of the robbery in less than five minutes, but it took the police so long to arrive that the robbers managed to extricate themselves and the getaway car and make good their escape. That is only one example of under-policing as a result of Patten.

We have heard much factual detail about the difficulties and hardships suffered by people as a result of the rising tide of criminality. I want to address some of the fundamental principles behind that tide. Fergus Finlay — a one-time special political adviser to Dick Spring; no longer of pious and immortal memory in the political scene — said at the time of the negotiations that without Sinn Féin any agreement would not be worth a penny candle. The day after the joint Downing Street declaration was issued, in an address to the nation, John Major said that the only people who could give peace were the armed men of violence.

The result of that for the British Government, as far as the Belfast Agreement was concerned, was not a political settlement, but conflict resolution between the British state and armed and violent Republicanism. The price that the British Government paid was political and policing institutions that were essentially transitional in nature. Sinn Féin was promised that it would be given what it wanted as long as it did not bomb the mainland and ceased its activities so that the business and commercial communities could be bribed with the prospect of enriching themselves.

The result is that since 1998 Nationalist and Loyalist communities in public housing areas, whether Poleglass or Ballybeen or Kilcooley, have been subjected to the rule of terrorists, paramilitaries and criminals who are responsible for a great percentage of rising crime.

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

Some months ago there was a debate in this Chamber that was not about policing; it was about the implementation of agreements said to have been reached at Weston Park. Mark Durkan, the Deputy First Minister, told the House that two senior officials in the British negotiating party told him that the reason that his proposals were not being implemented and that Sinn Féin’s might be was because he had no guns. The issue of policing is directly connected to the possession of arms and the arsenal of terror.

The two main objectives of a paramilitary terrorist organisation such as Sinn Féin/IRA have been, first, to keep possession of the means of terrorising those whom it wishes to bend to its objectives and, secondly, the destruction of any force that might be an effective counter-terrorist organisation. Those are the twin aims of Sinn Féin/IRA. It wishes to retain the arsenal with which to threaten British Administrations so that they will meet its demands and to destroy whatever police force there is.

Those who take time to read the opening paragraphs of the Patten Report will find that, curiously, Mr Patten confirmed that the broad acceptance rates of the RUC were higher throughout the entire community than those of any continental police force. That is amazing when one recalls that that force, which had 301 dead, 8,000 seriously injured and a multitude of others scarred mentally and physically, was awarded the George Cross. That was rather like being awarded the Victoria Cross on the first day of the battle of the Somme and then being shot on the sixth day for cowardice. That is what happened. The George Cross was the pay-off for destroying the record and service of a proud force.

All of that might have been remotely justified if what had been put in its place was a more effective, efficient and acceptable police force that was reducing crime. Although one could argue that many of the factors giving rise to crime pre-dated Patten, as I said in my question to Mr Attwood, Patten was supposed to be the great cure-all.

Patten was supposed to be the herald of the reforms that would see an effective, acceptable police force that would be capable of reducing crime. Instead, we have a police force that is undermanned, undernourished, with a much reduced morale, faced with a rising tide of crime not a falling tide. What does the SDLP offer? It offers the old principle of “live, horse, and you will get grass”. It says that some time in the future all those marvellous promises and reforms will result in fewer elderly pensioners being beaten up in their homes, fewer young people being killed by joyriders on the roads, fewer violent robberies, fewer murders and fewer sex crimes. We shall see — but it is quite plain that that is not the case.

For many years, the SDLP refused to endorse the RUC despite the losses that the police were suffering, despite the RUC's record in bringing to justice a far higher percentage of so-called Loyalist terrorists and criminals than Republican, and despite the fact that some of its members had also suffered death and injury at the hands of the Loyalist organisations.

All crime is not attributable to Sinn Féin or Republicans. A very significant amount of crime is attributable to the activities of Loyalist paramilitaries, some of whom are represented or fronted in this House by the PUP. We could talk about the PUP/UVF in the same way that we talk about Sinn Féin/IRA. The terminology would be equally appropriate, but the principles for which I contend, and which I hope the motion will inspire, are equally applicable to both. The only reason that there is emphasis on Sinn Féin is that it has far greater political representation; it has far greater political clout, and it has been promised a great deal. It is right that we should send a message from the Assembly that Sinn Féin is not only not welcome here while it is inextricably linked to armed terrorists, but that it has no place in a democracy

in participation either on the Policing Board or on the local police boards.

I believe in redemption. I believe that those who give up their criminal activity, who dissociate themselves entirely from terror, who evidence it by their works as well as their words, should be accepted into the company of democrats. I have no truck with Members of Sinn Féin in this House or with Loyalist paramilitaries, but the day that they give firm evidence that they are no longer committed, in any way, to criminality and terror, I shall welcome them — even though I am opposed, in principle, to this form of devolution. However, until then, they must be treated like the pariahs they are. I encourage all Members to support the motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I open my comments by touching on the two amendments. The Sinn Féin amendment is unsurprising in its “Gerry in Wonderland” predictability. It is a Republican wish list of what they want for policing, but it does not even call on people to support the police. If Members read it carefully, there is no call to support, or join, the police.

This comes from a party that is in Government, which is absolutely ridiculous, and yet will not put its name to a motion that calls for support for the police. If we think for one moment of the import of that decision, people will realise the terrible state of affairs that we have come to in this country. There is no such thing as neutrality on the issue of law and order. There is no neutral gear, because if you do not support the police, you support crime and those who are engaged in it.

3.00 pm

We see the supporters of crime and their activity daily. For the past four months, business in my Colleague Mr Campbell's council chamber in Londonderry has consistently been disrupted by Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin activists. They prevent council business from taking place because they are opposed to policing in Northern Ireland.

The second proposed amendment — the SDLP amendment — is slightly better in that it calls on parties to participate in policing, and that is a welcome change from previous SDLP policy. It has been stated, during this debate and previously, that we welcome the fact that the SDLP has come to a position of political maturity where it does support the police, and it should be congratulated for that.

However, I have to comment on some of the points that Alex Attwood, the Member for West Belfast, made in his criticisms of Sinn Féin. He said that the geographical distribution of people joining the police dismisses the Sinn Féin argument. I wish that the Nationalist community were more supportive of the police than Mr Attwood hopes they are. The recruitment figures in Newry, Armagh and west Belfast are not as

hopeful as they might have been. Alex Attwood and his Colleagues must show leadership in those areas to encourage people to support the police. Mr Attwood referred to Nuala O'Loan's report. The Policing Board did not support that report; it set it aside, and he should be honest about that. If he wants to admit that he let her down, so be it, but he set the report aside. In those circumstances he ought to be careful when he addresses the issue of policing.

The two proposed amendments avoid the issue, and Sir John Gorman put his finger on it when addressing that matter. I am disappointed by the SDLP's woolliness and by its failure to focus on placing the blame. I am also disappointed that, together, the two amendments are peddling a sectarian line that is poorly conceived in human rights jargon. It is about an anti-police line — anti-Special Branch and anti-Protestant-members-of-the-Police-Service, if they had the guts to say so — and it comes from parties that have been on record as referring to the police as “pigs” outside Policing Board meetings. That is the anti-police stance taken by certain Members. If they could get away with it, they would say it in the amendments to my Colleague Mr Sammy Wilson's motion.

In supporting the motion, I draw the House's attention to three incontrovertible facts. First, there is increasing crime. Of that there is no doubt. Statistics for 2001-02 show that there were 123,269 crimes in Northern Ireland, and in the previous year there were 110,421. That is a substantial increase that we cannot get away from. In his most recent report, in May 2002, the acting Chief Constable said that the recorded crime figures for the period would undoubtedly be revised upwards. The trend is not static; it is increasing.

Secondly, detection rates are falling. Two years ago almost 30% of crime was detected, and last year it was only 18%. In April 2002 the Assistant Chief Constable for Greater Belfast, Mr Alan McQuillan, said in the 'News Letter' that police detection rates are plummeting in Northern Ireland. He went on to say that while the level of service is dropping, detection rates are plummeting. Put those two facts together and one can see why that is. When there is a deficit of almost 2,000 police officers in Northern Ireland, it is no wonder that detection rates have dropped considerably. The House must realise that there is a crisis in policing that is aided and abetted by terrorists being at the heart of Government. It would be a dereliction of the Assembly's responsibilities if it failed to acknowledge that that crisis exists.

I will quote from crime statistics given to members of the Policing Board this month, because they knock on the head any notion, such as the view of Mr Attwood, that the Assembly should look at those figures frankly and fully. If the Assembly looks at those figures frankly and fully, it will see that crime detection figures are down in every sector. There were 22,000 offences against the

person this year. Only 44.6% of those crimes were detected. Last year, 60% were detected. The detection rate for sexual offences is down by 20%. Burglary has become a major problem across the Province — there were 15,000 last year. The detection rate for burglaries has plummeted from 14% last year to 9% this year. There were 37,000 thefts recorded this year, and the detection rate has dropped from 20% to 12%.

I could continue through every category. The ability of the police to detect crime has dropped. I am sure that there are Members of the House, such as the 18 who sit under the Gallery opposite, who applaud the fact that the police can no longer detect crime. That is a major success for Sinn Féin, which undermines policing here by encouraging people to support a shocking and shameful process that has reduced the Police Service by 2,000 members in the past year.

I am also concerned that the Northern Ireland Office has tried to gloss over the major crime problem here. It recently published its organised crime task force's report. When the Police Service gets it right, it should be applauded, but it is getting it right in fewer cases now than ever before. That is a sad reflection on its ability to do the job that people expect of it and want it to do. The reason it is not able to do its job is that it does not have enough officers. I must emphasise for the record that the Police Service should be congratulated when it gets it right, because it is an excellent public service, and the sooner it is given the resources, manpower and capability to take on and tackle criminals, the better. One of the major reasons why there is so much crime is that not only is manpower down, but resources are also down. The police are currently operating on an operational deficit of around £15 million. It is up to the NIO to fill the pot.

The third factor in the debate is that the Assembly must condemn Sinn Féin/IRA for the stance it has taken. I welcome the fact that the Ulster Unionist Party, the United Kingdom Unionist Party and the Northern Ireland Unionist Party are supporting the motion. The Assembly must lay the blame where it should be laid. The attitudes of Sinn Féin Members to the police are clear from the records of the House.

Mr Molloy says that if Sinn Féin does not get what it wants, it will go back to what it does best. In the past 30 years, what Sinn Féin/IRA has done best, in its eyes, is murder and mayhem, bombing and killing. The leader of the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin, Mr Gerry Adams, has said that he will treat the police in the same way that the Catholic community treated the RUC. What a terrible indictment by the leader of a party that is in government. Will Sinn Féin treat the police as it has done for the past 30 years, by attacking, shooting and killing them?

The Chief Constable's crime statistics show that there have been 113 attacks, principally organised by Republicans, on individual police patrols in the past year.

Mr Adams's comment, when considered in the light of the increased attacks on police officers, highlights the bankruptcy of our political movement, particularly when people attempt to justify the election of that organisation to the Government of Northern Ireland.

Sinn Féin hands out medals of support to the IRA scum who killed and bombed police officers in this community. It is little wonder that the crime crisis is worsening. The organisation dares to be in government while refusing to support the police. Those attitudes ought not to be compatible, and it is a shame that some believe that they are. Sir John Gorman said that the electorate in the Republic saw through Sinn Féin; I only wish that certain people in this House would see through them. The sooner they do so, the more quickly we will be able to deal with crime.

It is often implied in debates on this subject that, although crime is still committed, it is less serious than it has ever been, and we no longer face terror crime. However, the IRA remains armed and capable — as do Loyalist paramilitaries — of continuing the job that it did before. The Chief Constable's most recent report shows that munitions finds were higher when the Government were not pressing for decommissioning than they are now. The police have been unable to recover as many munitions during this period of peace as they did while we were told that a war was going on.

In the past year, 939 organised terrorist offences, designed to overthrow democracy and to ruin this state, were recorded. Failure to support the motion will be applauded by criminals throughout Northern Ireland, because they will see that some people in one section of the community are prepared to turn a blind eye to their criminality in the name of some political shibboleth. We must smash that shibboleth, because if we fail to do so, we will fail to send out a message that this House is opposed to crime and its causes. I support the motion.

Mr Byrne: Policing is of major and relevant concern to the Assembly, especially given that 10 Members sit on the Policing Board; albeit only three of the four parties so entitled have taken up their seats. Some still shirk their public responsibility regarding policing; the SDLP does not. Patten recommended strongly that community-centred policing should be a major priority in developing and promoting the new policing policy agenda.

Policing is a core public service that involves everyone in Northern Ireland. It has always been a difficult and controversial issue, particularly because of the major political difficulties regarding the operation of government structures in the past. Policing can only be effective when all sections of the community are involved in, and can identify and feel comfortable with, all structures of government, including a regional police service.

Although the SDLP recognises that past, it also acknowledges that there have been changes. The Good

Friday Agreement provided a template for policing. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) came into being in April 2002, and already there have been new recruits. Two batches of probationary officers are now in the mainstream service. Those young men and women chose a Police Service career. They must be respected and supported in that work.

3.15 pm

Every Member should stand up for the fundamental human right to choose a career or job without fear or intimidation. Young Nationalists who choose a career in policing must be allowed to realise their ambition and be respected in the exercise of that freedom. There must be no implied criticism of their wish to be police officers and no prevarication or threat to its achievement. Policing is a noble career for those who choose it.

Without exception, the human rights of young people who choose a career in policing entitle them to respect. Sinn Féin has no right to victimise Nationalists or Catholics who join the PSNI. The last phrase of the amendments put forward by Sinn Féin and by the SDLP is "which conforms with Human Rights norms." Let us practise what we preach.

As I said earlier, policing has always been a vexed and difficult issue. Historically, political structures did not enjoy widespread support or allegiance. Consequently, policing was a casualty from the outset. The last 30 years of conflict emphasised that. The Good Friday Agreement, however, and the constituent part which relates to policing, offers a clear way forward. The policing problem was tackled by providing for the establishment of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland. Patten issued a comprehensive report and a route map for better policing in Northern Ireland. Patten's parameters and recommendations are the primary agenda for change, leading to the ultimate objective of an impartial, professional and widely accepted Police Service that delivers effective policing to communities across the region.

I accept that there is a rise in ODC. That term means "ordinary, decent crime" and I do not like it. Our communities experience difficulties and want more effective and efficient community-based policing to tackle them and to treat all sections equally. The new policing structures offer the best opportunity and potential to realise that objective. However, it requires positive commitment and work from all of us to achieve it.

Policing is a major and challenging issue in every part of the western world. It was a Victorian concept and it was hierarchical. Like everything else, however, it must evolve and change. Modern societies require greater involvement of communities in the policing system. For that reason, the SDLP believes in the merits of district policing partnerships, which afford an opportunity to bring police closer to communities. I am convinced that

communities — Nationalist and Unionist — want such partnerships to realise effective community policing.

The SDLP's amendment is comprehensive and reflects the spirit of the community, which yearns for effective policing.

Mr Leslie: The motion does not have any bearing on my ministerial responsibilities. My remarks, therefore, are made as a private Member.

Like my Colleague, Sir John Gorman, I have no difficulty in supporting the motion. I suspect that crime figures are similar to unemployment figures. From time to time, the measure is changed and the numbers appear to alter, but whether they have increased, stayed the same, or been re-based, the level of crime is unconscionably high. That should be of great concern to the Assembly. Crime detection levels are also unsatisfactorily low.

The figures for Northern Ireland must be considered in the context of crime figures in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Rising crime rates are a serious and widespread problem, in which drugs play a considerable part. Nonetheless, the scale of the problem is of great concern to me and to society. It will require a determined effort from political parties, civil society, the police force and the judiciary to get to grips with the problem. Given that criminal law is a reserved matter, significant initiatives cannot be generated from here, although we can agitate for suitable initiatives.

Inevitably, the DUP and other parties to my right have tried to blame the Belfast Agreement for increasing crime levels. It is a familiar tune, which they have been singing for some time. Anyone who has studied the affairs of our Province over the past 30 years will know that when the new Secretary of State arrived at Belfast International Airport in June 1997 and said that she was going to reform the RUC, we feared the worst. Knowing the political journey of that particular Secretary of State, we feared that the outcome would be worse than our worst fears. Therefore, the appropriate response — the response taken by the Ulster Unionist Party — was to go into damage limitation mode. Given that the Government were bent upon reforming the RUC, it was best to circumscribe those reforms and ensure that the Government were given as much advice as possible while they were evolving them.

That is why the Ulster Unionist Party sought, in the Belfast Agreement, to set terms of reference for the review of policing that was going to occur whether there was an agreement or not. It is a matter of great regret to us, and something for which we are all paying a price, that the Government chose to allow the Human Rights Commission to disregard those terms of reference and to implement a series of proposals that were well beyond anything that was envisaged when those terms of reference were drawn up. None the less, the Ulster Unionist Party battled on by tabling more than 200 amendments to the

Police (Northern Ireland) Bill as it was going through the Houses of Parliament. It is significant that no other Unionist party tabled any amendments.

Members must also bear in mind, and any study of Northern Ireland affairs since 1970 confirms, that every time the security forces appeared to have some success against the terrorists they were put under such an enormous barrage of publicity fire by the Republican movement that they inevitably stopped doing whatever it was that was proving effective. The history of the Government's involvement in those affairs over the past 30 years shows that the consequences of the review of the RUC were not particularly surprising.

We must consider several matters in order to address the crime levels. When I served on the Policing Board I was fortunate to be invited, with other members, by the US Administration to New York and Washington to look at some of the actions that they had taken, and also to hear about the study that had been done on the problems of dealing with crime. I came away from that trip with much food for thought.

It would be wrong for me to try to summarise that trip in a few moments. However, I shall make some brief comments. Initiatives sometimes referred to by the inaccurate general term of "zero tolerance" were launched in New York City and in Newark, and involved a major alliance of political and civil society, the police and the criminal justice system working together to address a common problem. It will be essential for us to work together, whether we try to address those problems in Northern Ireland, England or anywhere else. We have to be particularly mindful of the crucial role of the criminal justice system and the courts' sentencing policies.

The inadequacy of the sentences being handed out bears down heavily on the morale of the police force, particularly after officers have gone to great trouble and effort and have faced other difficulties, often at personal risk, to bring people to court and get a conviction. I urge the Northern Ireland Office and the Westminster Government to look at that matter closely, because it is still their responsibility.

Although the nominal number of police officers is more than double what it was in 1969, I am aware, as most Members are, that the numbers actually serving are very low. For that reason, the Ulster Unionist Party has consistently taken the line that the future of the full-time and part-time reserve must be secured to give its men and women some contractual certainty for the time being. Police numbers should be reviewed in a few years, in the light of the numbers who leave and join the force. In the meantime, we need every available police officer, and they must be given that certainty of tenure.

I endorse the comments of my Colleague, Sir John Gorman, and those of Members of the DUP, who said that Sinn Féin's amendment, as usual, tries to re-present

the issue. It clearly implies that there is something wrong with the current police force. I reject that assertion: the police have been, and are, doing a commendably good job in exceedingly difficult circumstances. I support the motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that time is moving on, and, because the debate is limited to two hours, I ask the remaining Members to limit their speeches to four minutes.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. It is important that we raise the issues and talk about crime detection rates and why we need more police on the streets.

Sinn Féin sits in the Assembly decrying the new police force by saying that it does not represent the community. The more we hear that, the more we realise how discriminatory and two-faced that party's comments are. The changes recommended in the Patten Report were not designed to catch more criminals; indeed, they have had the opposite effect. They have caused crime to increase. There is more crime on the street; more people are under threat from criminals and many people's insecurity has increased.

Sinn Féin thinks that the police force is not representative of this community. It is representative of the community. To take this comment to its logical conclusion, there would have to be a minority of Protestants on the police force for it to be acceptable to Sinn Féin. According to the policing provisions in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, 50% of the police force must be Roman Catholic, and the other 50% must be made up from the other religions in Northern Ireland. Surely Sinn Féin should be crowing with delight that this institutionalised discrimination was made legal by the Patten Report.

3.30 pm

Sinn Féin has also ensured that its old adversaries in Special Branch and the CID have had to leave because it does not consider them to be the kind of officers that are needed in peacetime. Perhaps the real reason that they had to leave is that those officers know far too much about certain Members and Ministers. The removal of many of those officers and anyone over 30 serving in the worthy and honourable Royal Ulster Constabulary has left this country on its knees. Youths and organised criminals have taken over night by night. We hear stories of elderly people being beaten and robbed in their homes; joyriding accidents leave families across the Province grieving; and the knife culture is getting out of control.

There have been two knife-related murders in my constituency in the past two months. We must ask why that is happening. It is happening because Sinn Féin has reduced the numbers of PSNI officers on the street, disbanded the RUC and taken away its name. The police

force has been reconstructed. If Sinn Féin thinks that it has fooled anyone apart from its own people, it is breathing the thin air that some of its colleagues are breathing in Colombia. It is in Sinn Féin's interest never to support the Police Service. In that way it can give its old IRA buddies something to do by providing them with a weak and overstretched target to have fun with, while trying to cover up what is going on in Colombia with civil disturbances and riots in flashpoint areas. By withholding support from the new Police Service, Sinn Féin can ensure that it does not hit one of its own when orchestrating riots or community attacks.

As I said, two people have died as a result of stabbing incidents recently in my constituency. The increased use of knives worries me. The police cannot respond because of the numbers they have — or do not have — on the streets. People are having their property damaged by vandals who cannot be caught because there are not enough officers to patrol the streets, and people are being beaten, stabbed, shot and intimidated because the police force does not have enough officers to ensure that it knows what is happening so that it can safeguard people against crimes.

My constituency of Strangford is a large area with crime rates that make it sound like the wild west. Post office robberies are a source of concern. Elderly people are victims because the offices are targeted on pension day. The area has a proud tradition of people from both sides of the community and both religious persuasions joining the police. The situation is indefensible. We need officers, but unfortunately we cannot get them because Sinn Féin has depleted the force and left the whole country susceptible to the baser side of the human race. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome this timely opportunity to debate the vital issues of the rise in crime and the acts of Sinn Féin and the Republican movement over the past few months. The Westminster Government are weak on policing. I welcome the Secretary of State's initiative of creating a task force with a remit to tackle organised crime. It has had some notable success. However, a concerted effort is needed to right the wrongs in our society, because every time the police force has been successful, it has had its wings clipped.

Cash robberies here amount to one fifth of the UK total. The amount of counterfeit goods seized in 2001 was greater than the total in the rest of the United Kingdom. Most of this crime is in areas where Sinn Féin's supporters reside. The extent of the problems that confront us is clear. The effects of claims are demonstrated by the overly high insurance premiums that are burdening businesses and vehicle owners alike. We know well the problems before us. Fuel smuggling, alcohol and drug abuse and thuggery have their roots in Republican paramilitary organisations in Republican areas. Being a democrat, I am opposed to all criminal

acts, particularly punishment beatings. I recognise that such beatings have become almost a daily occurrence. I urge the Government to show law-abiding citizens that crime does not pay.

As we know, Sinn Féin and its Republican following are acting irresponsibly. To support the forces of law and order would not be consistent for a party that attempted to undermine law and order in the Province for over 30 years, that has a structure of a political wing and a military wing and that believes it is judge, jury and executioner.

Most of our problems require apposite actions. It is fine for Sinn Féin to talk about getting rid of Special Branch, but what about Sinn Féin's secret special branch that targets Government officials? What sort of society do we live in when ambulance and hospital personnel constantly come under attack while carrying out their duties? Young people in north Belfast and elsewhere must no longer have a free rein to attack the security forces and citizens. Sinn Féin and its Republican army must accept their share of the blame for the situation. It is surely double standards for Sinn Féin, on the one hand, to hold the office of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, on the other hand, to allow its party supporters to intimidate people and to carry out crime at a cost to the taxpayer. Any political party that teaches and encourages young people to have no regard for law and order must answer for the consequences.

The Westminster Government must also shoulder responsibility for failing our judicial system. Even if perpetrators of crime are caught, they will probably not be dealt with appropriately. The Westminster Government are weak on administering deterrents to crime. We need more effective deterrents.

Lord Kilclooney: Does the Member agree that responsibility for policing in Northern Ireland rests not with the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Northern Ireland Policing Board but, ultimately, with the Government in London? It is the London Government, through the Patten Report, that have undermined policing in Northern Ireland, brought the manpower of the police to below 7,000 — it was 9,000 — and brought about the present increase in crime in Northern Ireland. This is why I will certainly support this motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member does not have time to respond. I ask him to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Armstrong: It is time that Sinn Féin got rid of its "special branch" and its army and let us get on with the peace process. I welcome this debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I must advise the Member that we have only one minute left before the winding-up speeches.

Mr M Robinson: The current levels of crime are extremely worrying, and, in particular, I want to draw attention to my own constituency of South Belfast, which has been experiencing a significant upsurge in crime levels. I have represented the constituency of South Belfast for the past four years and never has the issue of crime been of such prominence.

I will detail the types of crimes that have been perpetrated in my area. Only recently the body of a 39-year-old woman was pulled from the River Lagan, a murder took place in the Markets area and an armed robbery took place at a fast-food restaurant on the Donegall Road. In recent months two students have been viciously attacked in their home, elderly residents have been attacked and robbed in their homes, and there have been numerous armed robberies. In fact, the owner of a local newsagent situated close to my constituency office has been the victim of armed robbery on six occasions in the last seven months. There has been a 42% increase in sex attacks in South Belfast in this year alone. This is an extremely worrying situation, and, unfortunately, the people who suffer are the decent law-abiding citizens who live in the area.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that time being of the essence, I must ask the proposers of the amendments to make their winding-up speeches.

Mr Attwood: James Leslie was correct to say that we should compare our crime figures with those in other parts of the island. However, whatever our crime rates might be, it must be acknowledged that most people in Northern Ireland are civil and orderly. There are difficulties, and they may become more intense in some areas of the North. However, those difficulties must be considered in the context of our community's, by and large, upholding good and decent family and community values.

Sir John Gorman asked me directly why the SDLP could not support the motion. I understand why he supports the wording of the motion. However, he would appreciate that we wanted to consider its subtext, and it is clear from contributions that the motion is anti-Patten in intention and substance. It would be alien to our political beliefs and our support of the Patten Commission Report to support a motion that is anti-Patten. Given what ensued during the debate, it is inconceivable that we could support the motion.

Alex Maskey asked how the people of east Belfast and the Short Strand were to experience the new beginning to policing, given recent events in that community. I will not walk away from that question, because if any policing is wrong, we are prepared to say so and to propose corrective strategies. If there is good policing, we are prepared to acknowledge that.

Although people may demean the work of the Police Ombudsman, no investigative office in the world that

deals with complaints against the police has more powers or resources to call erring police officers and a police service to account. When the police raid houses in a way that breaches proper standards and human rights, as happened in east Belfast and in Derry after the Castlereagh break-in, we are prepared to tell the police that they should review protocols and change them, and enforce orders that govern how they conduct themselves in such raids. When police officers offend human rights substantially, and there is *prima facie* evidence to support that contention, those officers should be suspended, pending a full investigation into their activities. That strategy will correct wrongful policing. Some people hope that the SDLP gets policing wrong so that they can gain political advantage.

Norman Boyd asked about the availability of officers in police stations. That is a valid point. In too many areas of the North, there are not enough police officers on the ground.

To return to what Bob McCartney said, if Bangor were compared to a town of a similar size in Britain, the current quota of police officers in north Down would outweigh that in Britain.

Lord Kilclooney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I gave way four times during my speech; I will not give way now.

Bob McCartney referred to 20% of officers in north Down being on long-term sick leave. He also referred to the excessive numbers of police officers who are on special protection duties for notables in north Down. Many police officers are on restricted duties, and many are based in police stations and police headquarters rather than on the ground.

3.45 pm

To say that the problem is about numbers and that the numbers should be increased, thereby protecting the full-time Reserve, misses the real issue about management of manpower in the police. There are not sufficient numbers on the ground because there are too many in police stations and police buildings, too many involved in desk duties, too many on sick leave, too many on VIP protection and too many on restricted duties.

A manpower strategy is required to free more police to serve more communities in more towns, villages and hamlets around the North. Merely protecting the full-time Reserve will not get to grips with the fundamental issue of manpower.

Ian Paisley Jnr said that people from constituencies around the North, including West Belfast, were joining the Police Service. He suggested that I said it is proportionate to the numbers living in those constituencies. It is not. In every constituency people, even those who have had difficult experiences of policing over the past

30 years, now have the confidence to join the Police Service.

In her report on the Omagh bombing Nuala O'Loan said that she got five and a half out of six for what the Policing Board did. In my view, she got six and a half out of six. The Policing Board, by having a presence at board level and on the ground in Omagh, will ensure that the investigation brings those who are guilty of that crime to justice. It is a far superior model of accountability and investigation.

I challenge anyone to read what I, or Joe Byrne, have said in this debate and confirm to us what one Member claimed we said — namely, that we are anti-police, anti-Protestant and anti-Special Branch. I challenge anyone to confirm that any of those allegations are true.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Alex Maskey said, we share the concerns in the motion about the levels of crime, especially against the elderly. However, as the debate has unfolded it is evident that it is not about policing. It is about a continuation of the attempted demonisation of Sinn Féin — an attempt to make Sinn Féin a scapegoat. It is ironic that the DUP brought this motion to the Floor of the House. The first RUC man to be murdered in the past 30 years was murdered on the Shankill Road in a political climate that had been engendered by the leader of the DUP and in a political environment that it had sought to stir up against the RUC. The DUP's stated policy was to oppose the RUC because the RUC did not fulfil its desires or wishes.

There are Members on the other side of the House who were around at that time and know the input that the party that brought the motion to the House had with regard to policing in the Six Counties. It was not a very honourable policy on, or commitment to, policing, and that continues. Policing was OK as long as it was OK with the DUP. Policing was OK as long as the doors of Fenian houses were being battered down and as long as the status quo, according to the DUP, was being upheld. It is hypocritical of that party to bring to the Floor of the Chamber a motion that condemns, or attempts to condemn, Sinn Féin for its desire to bring about a proper policing service for this part of Ireland.

We should not forget that Sinn Féin participated fully in the negotiations surrounding the Good Friday Agreement and that those negotiations included elements that addressed policing. Sinn Féin was prepared to accept a compromise — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Berry: Gunrunner.

Mr J Kelly: Let him go, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We understand about gunrunning from the DUP.

The DUP attempted to undermine the Patten Commission; Sinn Féin was prepared to accept the compromise — *[Interruption]*.

I think it is coming from Séamus Shannon, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: Lest it be forgotten, Sinn Féin is committed to having a policing service — it is not opposed to that — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: Sinn Féin's amendment reads:

"and believes that it is essential that policing structures and arrangements are such that the police service is professional, effective and efficient, fair and impartial, free from partisan political control";

the kind of partisan political control that those Members and their leader on that side of the House attempted to exert on the policing service in this part of Ireland over the years. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: The amendment continues:

"accountable, both under the law for its actions and to the community it serves; representative of the society it polices, and operates within a coherent and co-operative criminal justice system, which conforms with Human Rights norms."

I ask any Member — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr J Kelly: I ask any Member to tell me what is wrong with the sentiments expressed in the amendment.

There is no doubt that the motion was tabled for one reason only — to continue the struggle and the war within Unionism. The DUP is attempting to out-manoeuvre and out-fox the Official Unionist Party. That is the aim of the motion; it is not about policing. It does not address the fundamentals of a policing service. It does not attempt to address those issues — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is the second time that I have risen. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mrs Nelis: Throw them out, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr J Kelly: This is an attempt — *[Interruption]*.

In some ways, the DUP is paying us a compliment by continually interrupting. Obviously, the truth is hitting very hard, and the DUP does not like to hear it. That is evidence of the hypocrisy in the DUP's fundamentalism — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Shannon: Gunrunner.

Mr J Kelly: I will allow the DUP Members their little bit of fun because it is interesting to listen to some of their asinine remarks.

The DUP tabled the motion in an attempt to continue to demonise Sinn Féin. However, more important is the

DUP's attempt to continue its war against the Official Unionist Party. That is what the DUP is all about; its focus is not on policing but on the next election. UUP Members should be aware of the DUP's maverick conduct — that conduct will continue for the remainder of the year.

Mr S Wilson: It is hard to know how to follow the rant of the gunrunner from mid-Ulster. Listening to what he said — and his valiant defence of the RUC — one could conclude that his party never had any intention of hurting the RUC or the police, and that when he ran guns into Northern Ireland he had no intention of their being used against those who would — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not convicted of gunrunning at any stage in my versatile career. Would the Member like to withdraw his comments? *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot hear the Member's point of order. While I am on my feet, Members must take their seats. I would appreciate being able to hear the point of order so that I can respond.

Mr J Kelly: As I was not convicted of gunrunning in my career in the Republican movement, I ask the Member to withdraw that allegation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that there is a right to respond to allegations. However, I shall examine Hansard and respond to the point of order at a later date. I ask Mr Wilson to continue, and to be wary of the language that he uses.

Mr S Wilson: Perhaps when you are looking at Hansard, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will also look at the 'Magill' magazine documentary that outlined the career of the Member who raised the point of order. What this debate has shown is that Sinn Féin runs scared of any policing issue; it always wants to pass the blame. Alex Maskey blames the police for car crime in west Belfast. The fact that, for 30 years, the party to which he belongs encouraged car theft so that joyriders could run around west Belfast, going through roadblocks, stretching police resources, has been totally ignored. Sinn Féin says that is all the fault of the police.

In the Short Strand recently, it was the police's fault that a mob, organised and led by IRA/Sinn Féin, came onto the streets. When the police respond, they are accused of beating young Nationalists. Sinn Féin want to be treated as democrats; however, when they see any acceptance of the police materialising in Nationalist areas, they create the situations that led to the confrontation that resulted in the police's having to take action to defend themselves and a vulnerable Protestant community on the outskirts of the Short Strand. Such action enabled Sinn Féin to say that the police have not changed.

Those people have manipulated circumstances in Northern Ireland to ensure that the police are not accepted, despite all the changes that have been made. John Kelly's rant is an indication that Sinn Féin does not like to be faced with the truth of its attitude and actions towards policing in Northern Ireland.

I wish to address some of Alex Attwood's points. I accept that the SDLP has made sacrifices by signing up to the Policing Board, yet I do not agree with everything that it has done or said. The Policing Board has conducted robust debates. Nevertheless, I accept that the SDLP has at least been prepared to play a part in policing. It is a pity that, after the speech that he made, Mr Attwood felt the need to hang on Sinn Féin's coat-tails. He talked about suspending police officers because of the crescendo of cries from Sinn Féin representatives when the police enter areas to take action against rioters. That will only help to demoralise the police further.

When talking about police numbers, Mr Attwood says that it is not merely about protecting the full-time Reserve — he steers away from that difficult question. The SDLP will have to make up its mind. What do we do with 2,500 officers who are needed on the streets, but are demoralised because their contracts have not been renewed, and who are treated far worse than any other workers that I know of in Northern Ireland?

The SDLP will have to make up its mind about what it will do about those officers.

4.00 pm

I expected some washing of the hands in this debate by Ulster Unionist Party Members. It was odd to hear Billy Armstrong talk about the political and military wing of IRA/Sinn Féin and the fact that it was a scandal to have a Sinn Féin Health Minister who allowed crime — a drain on the Northern Ireland taxpayer — to continue. However, how did the Minister of Health achieve her position? Billy Armstrong — from what I remember — walked through one of the Lobbies to put her there. One cannot condemn Sinn Féin/IRA for its attitude to policing on the one hand and, on the other, put them into ministerial positions.

Mr Campbell: You can if you are an Ulster Unionist.

Mr S Wilson: Then perhaps you can.

Mr Leslie said that the Ulster Unionist Party had tried to engage in damage limitation. God help us if it thinks that the Patten Commission and the Patten Report amount to damage limitation — they have destroyed the police. We are told that it is because the Government, once again, broke faith with the Ulster Unionist Party — they did not abide by the terms of the agreement that they had signed. I remind Mr Leslie of the agreement's terms of reference on the establishment of a police commission, to which he agreed:

"Its proposals on policing should be designed to ensure that policing arrangements, including composition, recruitment, training, culture, ethos and symbols, are such that in a new approach Northern Ireland has a police service that can enjoy widespread support".

Every aspect of the Patten proposals was involved — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr S Wilson: — in those terms of reference, which the Ulster Unionist Party not only negotiated but sold to the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, it cannot now wash its hands and blame the London Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member bring his winding-up speech to a close?

Mr S Wilson: Sinn Féin tried to wash its hands of its support for criminality, which has led to a decline in social structures in its community. Equally, Ulster Unionists cannot wash their hands of their responsibility for encouraging a proposal that has destroyed the police.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We now move to the vote. I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

Mr McFarland: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you clarify which vote you are talking about, as there seems to be some confusion?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that point of order. If clarification is needed, I am happy to give it. The vote is on amendment No 1 on the Marshalled List, which stands in the names of Mr Maskey and John Kelly of Sinn Féin.

Question negatived.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 2 on the Marshalled List stands in the names of Mr Attwood and Mr O'Neill of the SDLP.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 14

AYES

Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Seamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, David Ervine, David Ford, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley

Jnr, Edwin Poots, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Patrick Roche, George Savage, Jim Shannon, David Trimble, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

4.15 pm

NOES

Bairbre de Brún, Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Alex Maskey, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the increasing levels of crime and falling crime detection rates in Northern Ireland and condemns the public stance adopted by Sinn Féin to the police in Northern Ireland.

JOINT PARLIAMENTARY FORUM

Mr Ford: I beg to move

That this Assembly instructs the Speaker to nominate a number of Members to enter into negotiations with the appropriate body in the Oireachtas with a view to establishing a joint parliamentary forum to discuss matters of mutual interest and concern as detailed in strand two, paragraph 18 of the Good Friday Agreement.

[Interruption].

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: There has been much debate in this Chamber about the agreement, and doubtless that will continue. Accusations are continually levelled at those who do or do not carry out their duties under the agreement. The fact that we cannot decide whether to call it the Good Friday Agreement or the Belfast Agreement demonstrates our problems.

The motion highlights one aspect of the agreement on which there has been no progress at all. It may not be the most significant issue in the agreement — there are many more important matters — but it is one for which action is required of the Assembly. We are used to seeing party representatives wagging their fingers and accusing each other of not living up to their obligations. However, we have brought the motion because the Assembly has a collective responsibility to take action on this matter.

Paragraph 18 of strand 2 of the agreement directs

“The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas to consider developing a joint parliamentary forum, bringing together equal numbers from both institutions for discussion of matters of mutual interest and concern.”

The motion addresses that. It instructs the Speaker to nominate Members to engage in discussions with the authorities in the Oireachtas. It is not a prescriptive resolution. It does not define the outcome; it simply paves the way for the establishment of a joint forum in which matters of mutual interest can be discussed. For example, it might provide a format in which informal contacts in Committees could be maintained more significantly. It will certainly provide an opportunity for people from the Assembly to inform TDs of the real concerns of Northern Ireland's people. I have no doubt that Northern Ireland is ignorant of the realities of life in the Republic. However, ignorance in the Republic of the realities of life here is vast.

When the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation was established in Dublin in the wake of the 1994 ceasefires, Alliance was the only non-Nationalist party from either part of the island to attend, along with the independent

Senator, the late Gordon Wilson. I have no doubt that my party's presence, and the formal and informal contacts we made, assisted Southern representatives to understand the concerns of people across the breadth of opinion in Northern Ireland.

It would have been better had Unionists been there to put their own cases. I repeat that whatever ignorance there may be in Northern Ireland regarding matters in the Republic, there is no doubt that the Republic's ignorance of matters in Northern Ireland is even greater. Some of the suggestions put forward by Alliance on difficult issues, such as the recognition of Northern teaching qualifications in the Republic for anybody who wishes to move South, or the future of the Adelaide Hospital with its Protestant foundation, made some TDs and Senators sit up. That confrontation was necessary. The problems of sectarian thinking in official policy are the same down there as they are up here, and TDs and Senators must still be confronted about them. The issues of equality and human rights do not concern only Northern Ireland, but are prevalent in both jurisdictions.

The motion as it stands is a relatively easy one for Nationalists; however, it is important that Unionists also show a willingness to play their part in improving relationships across the island, without retreating into the laager mentality preferred by some of their anti-agreement members. The Ulster Unionist Party leadership must lead its followers. Having signed up to the agreement in 1998, they should put in place its full operation.

I was surprised and interested to hear on the BBC that representatives from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister discussed this matter in Dublin last night. Members have heard me complain on numerous occasions about the failings of the Executive, the inadequacies of legislation, the difficulty in bringing in the Programme for Government. Those matters are the direct responsibility of Ministers. Yet it seems — because no official spokesman for OFMDFM has denied the reports that I heard on the BBC last night — that they had time to discuss this motion in a meeting between Government Ministers. This motion has nothing to do with the Executive or the Cabinet in Dublin. It is a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas to debate.

Members from both parties that are represented in OFMDFM are in the Chamber. During the course of the debate, will they ask their Ministers to tell Members whether there was truth in the BBC's story; whether the story was leaked to the BBC by OFMDFM; and whether they discussed the motion? Will they tell us the outcome of the discussions? Will they support the motion to ensure that the Assembly lives up to this part of its responsibilities under the agreement, because that is what the motion is for, and that is what the Assembly should do? I commend the motion.

Dr Birnie: I will not support the motion. I am neither against better North/South co-operation in principle nor against gaining mutual benefit through such co-operation, but we must consider the wording of the motion carefully. It adopts an imperative tone, and talks about instructing the Speaker. That contrasts with paragraph 18 of strand two, which says only that consideration should be given to creating such a body, so Mr Ford's motion goes too far.

In opposing the motion —

Mr Ford: If that is so, will the Member say why the Ulster Unionist Party failed to table an amendment?

Dr Birnie: Although the motion may be incompetent, that does not necessarily require the UUP to table an amendment. The UUP is not against North/South discussions per se. However, we stress the need for a careful evaluation of whether a new institution should be created under the agreement. Given that several institutions have been established, it seems sensible to evaluate the potential costs and benefits of creating another one.

That is especially the case given that several organisations, such as the Civic Forum, the Northern Ireland Economic Council and the Economic Development Forum, can interact with their counterparts in the Republic to facilitate discussion on North/South issues of mutual benefit to civic society and promote co-operation.

The role of the Assembly may be raised. The Assembly has exercised its scrutiny power to maintain the budgets of the implementation bodies of the North/South Ministerial Council. Similarly, the Assembly's Committees can scrutinise the six North/South implementation bodies and the six areas of co-operation through existing agencies. Therefore, it is by no means self-evident that a further consultative body, linking the Dáil and the Assembly, would be beneficial, but we must consider the benefits against the costs — a measure for which the agreement provides.

I caution against accepting the motion because it would inevitably add to the workload of several Members and disrupt the Assembly's business. If passed, the motion would lead to Members having to attend meetings with their counterparts in the Southern institutions, and, of course, that would take Members away from plenary and Committee sessions. That point was discussed at length today in the context of how Members' involvement in other bodies might lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of the Assembly.

4.30 pm

The motion goes beyond the terms of the agreement; therefore my party will not support it.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome Mr Ford's motion. Dr Birnie's speech reminds me of the curate's egg: it is good in parts and equally bad in others.

The Good Friday Agreement imposed a duty on the Assembly to consider developing a joint parliamentary forum, and the motion points to that obligation. It is disingenuous of Unionists to claim that, technically, the motion goes too far, and it is too imperative. Dr Birnie failed in his valiant attempt to justify the Unionist position. We must properly consider a North/South parliamentary forum. I take comfort that Dr Birnie, on behalf of his party, does not reject a North/South parliamentary forum, but rather delays consideration of it.

Let us consider the benefits of a forum. As Committee members, we have met and participated in useful discussions with Members of the Oireachtas and Committees of Dáil Éireann. I am sure that my old friend Sir John Gorman recalls an interesting and productive meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Proceeds of Crime Bill with TDs and members of the Garda Síochána.

No Unionist in the House — and I include the DUP — has anything to fear from a joint parliamentary forum.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Let us speak for ourselves.

Mr A Maginness: I am sure that Rev Dr McCrea will speak for himself. He is more than capable of doing so.

Unionists have nothing to fear from engaging with parliamentarians south of the border, and vice versa. Similarly, parliamentarians from throughout Europe have nothing to fear from engaging with their counterparts in other jurisdictions. The motion is not a threat to Unionists. There is much to learn from an interchange of views. The proposal is not to establish a covert all-Ireland parliament, much as I would love to see that. Rather, it is an attempt to bring people from North and South together in politics.

We should develop a policy of good neighbourliness between the North and the South.

What is there to fear from that? Unionists will remain Unionists; Nationalists will remain Nationalists, and Republicans and Loyalists will also remain the same. The SDLP supports the motion. The proposed arrangement is part of the agreement; it is centred in the agreement, and the mandate for this House comes from the agreement. A joint forum is part of the process of reconciliation between the people of Ireland, North and South, and it is important to develop that.

Public representatives from North and South meet in other political spheres. Our councillors — and not only those along the border — whether Unionist or Nationalist, SDLP or Sinn Féin, meet with colleagues in the South. They meet under the auspices of the Local Authority Members Association (LAMA). Many Members have engaged in those meetings and found them to be productive and useful. If councillors can meet at that level, why can we not meet at the most important level of politics in Northern Ireland?

I reiterate to my Unionist Colleagues and friends that there is nothing to fear from this. The North/South Ministerial Council deals with Executive functions and policies between the two Governments. The Council is subject to the critical examination of the Assembly. However, a joint forum would involve Members of this Assembly meeting Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann to discuss all sorts of common issues. That would be of great benefit to all our people, North and South. I support the motion, and I hope that Unionist colleagues will refrain from opposing the motion and will wish it well.

Mr Campbell: First, I must make it clear that I, and many of my Colleagues, have tried to respond positively over the years to invitations from the Irish Republic to go to that country and make our views known on why we are distinct and different — why Northern Ireland is a separate entity, jurisdiction and country and will remain so over the decades and further into the future. Mr Davis frequently mentions the 1982 Assembly in the Chamber — why should he not do so? I recall, back in those halcyon days, shortly after being elected to that Assembly, going to the Republic to what was almost the shadow of the Dáil to tell people exactly why Northern Ireland would remain separate from the Irish Republic. It is a separate entity, a separate country, and it will never, ever be united with the Irish Republic.

I take the motion at face value. I do not doubt in any way the Alliance Party leader's motive for the motion or call into question his rationale for it. If a joint forum would simply promote greater dialogue on issues of mutual interest and concern between Northern Ireland and the Republic, I would welcome it. However, we must examine the evidence and rationale under the terms of the Belfast Agreement.

Some four years ago, the First Minister said that the counterbalance to the North/South pressure — the North/South Ministerial Council and the greater involvement on a North/South basis — would be involvement on an east-west basis: the British-Irish contingency.

Therefore I asked how many British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council meetings had taken place. Not to my, or anyone else's, surprise, I was told that there had been 50 North/South Ministerial Council meetings and five British-Irish Council meetings. Ten times more emphasis is placed on Council meetings on the North/South axis than on the natural east-west axis. That appears to lie at the heart of the North/South promotion.

Alban Maginness, who unfortunately is not in the Chamber, makes the case that Unionists will still be Unionists after North/South discussions, and Nationalists will still be Nationalists. He does not seem to understand that the difference is that when Nationalists take part in east-west discussions, no Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or other politician in Great Britain wants Nationalists to be British. No one engaged in east-west

dialogue wants to build a political basis that will in some way encompass the Nationalist viewpoint and make Nationalists feel that they are British. However, an examination of “North/Southerly” shows that it is designed to make Unionists feel more Irish. That is always at the root of it.

Many people in the Nationalist and Republican community want to develop education in a North/South context — an all-Ireland context. Higher education, tourism, health, agriculture, economic development, policing — there is no end to the issues that Nationalists and Republicans want to develop on a North/South basis. Is it simply to get more effective policing or a better education system? Of course it is not. If it were simply that, they would sit down with Unionists in Northern Ireland and discuss the problems. Efforts would be made to determine the fault lines in education, health, tourism or whatever, and methods would be devised to improve them.

However, Nationalists and Republicans seem to think that improvement equals “North/Southerly”; that a better education system and better economic development are possible only on an all-Ireland basis. They can approach any issue and turn it into greater North/South co-operation. For about seven years there has been a nonsensical attitude in the Irish Republic, and even in the Nationalist and Republican community, that tries to take the sharp edge off Irishness and remove aggressive behaviour on St Patrick’s Day. They do that not because they want more people to celebrate St Patrick’s Day but because they want Unionists to think that they can now embrace this sense of Irishness.

Unfortunately, although I do not attribute any of this rationale to Mr Ford or his underlying analysis for suggesting the forum, that is what lies at the root of any proposals that I have ever seen for North/South co-operation. I speak as someone who goes frequently to the Irish Republic, and who will continue to do so, not because I am open to being persuaded to do the impossible — to become an Irish citizen — or to accept that Irish nationhood can be expanded to take account of my Britishness, because it cannot — *[Interruption]*.

Mr A Maginness: Nobody is suggesting that.

Mr Campbell: Alban Maginness was absent when I spoke earlier, so I will repeat what I said briefly for his benefit. People who promote “North/Southerly” can turn everything — attitudes, Government functions, promotion of the usual co-operation and discussion that takes place between adjoining countries — into a basis for future incorporation into a re-formed all-Ireland state. However, that never happens on an east-west basis.

4.45 pm

Neither Mr Maginness nor any other Nationalist will ever go to an east-west dialogue —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: I will give way in a minute if the Member will let me finish. No Nationalist or Republican will go to an east-west set of talks and sit beside people on the British side of the argument trying to persuade them that they are British and that their sense of Irishness is misplaced. However, that is what I come up against every time I go to the Irish Republic — that I am a misplaced Irishman — and in some way they are trying to change Irishness to make me feel that I am Irish.

Mr A Maginness: The SDLP and Members from Dáil Éireann participate in the British-Irish parliamentary tier, while, unfortunately, Unionists do not. What is the difference between those forums? They may have different personnel, but they are essentially the same sort of forum. We do participate.

Mr Campbell: I was not accusing Mr Maginness or Nationalists of non-participation, but he inadvertently makes my point for me. He knows that the origin of the parliamentary tier that he refers to was the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which, like the Belfast Agreement, Unionists viewed as an attempt to make us feel Irish when we are not and never, ever will be. There is nothing that anyone can do in the Irish Republic or in the Gaelic or Irish tradition that will make Unionists feel less British. Even if the British Government do not want us, it does not matter. We will be no less British.

The Member makes my point for me when he refers to a body that was viewed with suspicion for precisely the reason that I have given — the wish was to establish a forum where Unionists could gradually, over time be shown that the Irish Republic is not the big, bad nation that they feel it to be. Perhaps over time they can get accustomed to the Irish language, the Irish culture and everything about the Irish nation state. That is the seedbed of the Belfast Agreement.

That is why we so oppose the Ulster Unionists. Whether they recognise it or not, they are blindly encompassing a scenario that will eventually — not tomorrow, next week or next month, but over a period of years — lead to them and those like them who are defeatist in outlook saying, as some already are, that perhaps Irish nationhood is not so bad now because it has been changed. Articles 2 and 3 have been dropped, and their outlook has changed.

I do not want in any way to undermine the bona fides of the Alliance Party, which moved this motion for its own perfectly legitimate reasons. I simply do not accept those reasons. I do not accept that those who would be promoting the forum, those who would be behind it and those who would find it a useful tool would simply say to the Alliance Party: “This is nice as far as it goes, and we will allow it to sit here and promote greater dialogue between North and South”. They would conveniently hitch it onto their own agenda, as they have hitched everything else. It would be used to drive forward the

North/South bandwagon, which we as traditional Unionists will resist for years and decades to come.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar na tairisceana atáimid a chaibidil inniu. I support the motion. It is surprising that Mr Campbell is surprised that Members have an agenda. That reminds me of a Member accusing another Member of making a political speech one day. Mr Campbell seems so secure in one breath in his Unionism and Britishness, yet in another breath he is afraid of the political cat.

Dr Birnie's remarks are at best unenlightened and lacking in generosity. Splitting hairs and dancing on the head of a pin is in no way convincing.

Perhaps Dr Birnie drew the short straw in the group in having to defend the indefensible. Perhaps Mr Campbell is right. Perhaps it is because of an impending election — meaning that there will be more of the same unenlightenment in the months ahead, with the rejection of specific aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, which the UUP has already endorsed. That position is neither honest nor sustainable.

I am challenged to be measured in my comments, and that is very difficult. Unionist councillors and Ministers are heavily involved in cross-border arrangements, as has been outlined by Mr Alban Maginness. Why then is the middle tier of political office not involved, given that there is ministerial co-operation and councillor co-operation? For example, Unionist councillors on Omagh District Council have their hands up to go to conferences south of the border before they even know what is at issue. Everyone in Omagh District Council knows that when Killarney or Clare, or any of the annual conference venues, is mentioned, the Unionist hands go up. It is only then that they find out what the conference is about. I will not name those Unionist members who queue up weekly in an orderly fashion in their jeeps at Emyvale, Lifford and just south of Newry for cheap diesel.

I commend the Alliance Party for tabling the motion. It is not strong enough. Why is there delay over something that should happen immediately? It should have happened yesterday. The establishment of an all-island body for Members of the Assembly and Members of both Houses of the Oireachtas is a priority for my party. It is consistent with the principles and ethos of the Good Friday Agreement, and it is accurately detailed in the wording of the motion, where reference is made to "strand two, paragraph 18". Agus as Gaeilge:

"Déanfaidh Tionól Thuaisceart Éireann agus an tOireachtas breithniú i dtaobh comhfhoram parlaiminteach a fhorbairt, ina dtabharfar le chéile uimhreacha comhionanna ón dá institiúid chun ábhair chomhleasa agus chomhimní a phlé."

"The Assembly and the Oireachtas to consider developing a joint parliamentary forum, bringing together equal numbers from both institutions for discussion of matters of mutual interest and concern."

I cannot understand the Ulster Unionist attitude on this matter, except to put it in the context of the battle with the DUP.

At the core, there is a recognition of the centrality and importance of North/South relations, the importance of national reconciliation on the island, and the need to develop consultation, co-operation and action in the island of Ireland on those matters. That is already happening in the implementation bodies established through the North/South Ministerial Council: An Foras Teanga, Waterways Ireland, Tourism Ireland, the Special EU Programmes Body and others.

A joint parliamentary forum involving parliamentarians in the Twenty-six Counties and Assembly Members in the North must be established. Why? What would such a forum do? A great deal of material could be discussed and developed with a sense of purpose and urgency. That would include the implications of 'Ireland, North and South: A Statistical Profile', a document released recently, tourism promotion and health planning and provision, ignoring the boundaries and health bureaucracies in the country for the benefit of all citizens. It would focus on the removal of duplication and double provision and on seamless provision and the cost-effective delivery of health services. It would also include the working of the North/South Ministerial Council An Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas, the study of obstacles to mobility — plenty of food for thought there — and presenting Ireland as a unit for the development of the hard-pressed agricultural sector, North and South.

We could learn how the Industrial Development Agency might secure inward investment. I welcome the fact that Alban Maginness referred to the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, Comhlacht Idirpharlaiminteach na hÉireann-na Breataine.

As an Irish citizen and an elected Member of this House, I am happy to sit on the body — it has become known as "the body", if anyone wants a laugh — in an expression of the east-west relationships, which is not my forte, as everyone will know.

I participate in the body on behalf of Sinn Féin in a spirit of reconciliation with my colleague Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, TD.

The body was formally established in 1990 as a link between the Dáil and the British Parliament, and its origins lie in the joint studies report initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Charles Haughey in 1980. In 1990, agreement was reached on formal constitutional rules. It was agreed that two plenary sessions would be held each year and would alternate between Ireland and Britain and that the structure would include four committees. The aim was to contribute to mutual understanding through the body's work and through informal contacts.

High-profile people such as John Reid and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern have been involved, and there have been high-profile addresses and exchanges. Michael Mates plays a part, as does Sinn Féin. The structure includes 25 Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords in Westminster; 25 TDs and Senators from the Twenty-six Counties; five from this Assembly and others from Wales, Scotland, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

Surprisingly, in one sense, Unionists are not playing their part in the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, with the exception of people such as Lord Glentoran. Unionists appear to have no confidence in that body, despite all the talk about Britishness, sovereignty, the future security of the Union and about Unionists playing their part. They are certainly not playing their part in the British-Irish Parliamentary Body — another political cat that they seem afraid of.

The steering committee includes two co-chairmen, the outgoing TD Michael O'Kennedy and the MP David Winnick. Sean Neeson has also become a member, and Joe Hendron, who will make a substantive contribution, will soon replace Carmel Hanna. I have attended three plenary sessions, in Galway, Killarney and England, and that has enabled me to make political and social contacts and friendships despite political differences. There is dialogue on an east-west basis, but the Ulster Unionist Party is opposed to its taking place on a North/South basis. That attitude is very unenlightened, and we may read more into it.

Where is the Ulster Unionist Party's political will to realise all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement? The delays are unreasonable and unacceptable. One of the reasons Sinn Féin is in the Assembly is the all-Ireland dimension. I am not afraid to say that, nor do I apologise for it. I am not going to dress that fact up in any way. We bought into the agreement so that that dimension could be realised. Our objective is to see the eventual establishment of a single parliament in Ireland, with jurisdiction over the entire country. We do not bury the fact that that is part of our ideology and philosophy, but we have no confidence in the Unionist will to engage.

Sinn Féin Members will meet party colleagues in the forum when it is established in the near future — and it will be established. We have much in common with TDs and Senators in the rest of the country. I congratulate my colleagues, TDs Caoimhghin Ó Caoláin, Sean Crow, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Arthur Morgan and Martin Ferris, on their five-star performance in recent elections.

Every aspect of the North/South dimension of the Good Friday Agreement must be developed across all Government Departments and as outlined in the Alliance motion.

Mr Roche: In Northern Ireland, the system of government and administration contains roughly the following: 26 councils, 108 MLAs, a North/South Ministerial Council,

an Intergovernmental Conference, 18 MPs, three MEPs, five education and library boards, four health and social service boards and innumerable quangos. The proposal is to add another element to that highly complex system.

I oppose the proposal and will speak about two fundamental issues that must be considered. The first is that that complex system of government is unaccountable.

5.00pm

Its unaccountability breeds incompetence. In particular, once someone is appointed under the d'Hondt system, which is like a lottery, it is impossible for the Assembly to remove that person, no matter how incompetent he or she may be.

The risk of incompetence that the proposal creates is highlighted by the "star performer" in the Executive's league of incompetence. Every MLA will have received correspondence from Health Service professionals who have nothing against the Belfast Agreement per se, but believe that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety lacks policies to deal with the crisis of demand for services and operates no ongoing decision-making on the annual allocation of resources. In other words, there is a core element of incompetence in the Department, which, under the complex arrangements, cannot be removed. To create further complexity would simply obscure the unaccountability of Departments and reinforce the increasing incompetence that is perceived in the Executive.

Within the North/South arrangements established under the Belfast Agreement, economic policy-making in Northern Ireland has an increasingly all-Ireland focus, which is the objective of the institutions. Focus is shifting from the United Kingdom context, the only economic and social structure that is of real relevance to Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland, as a small area of economic activity, is highly integrated into the UK context, economically and politically.

The significance of that shift of context can be discerned in agricultural policy-making. On the one hand, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development pays enormous attention to the North/South Ministerial Council and makes speeches in Brussels on matters that lie outside her competence, highlighting the more absurd elements of SDLP policy for bringing about a so-called Europe of the regions. On the other hand, two recent expensive, glossy publications, 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-Food Industry in Northern Ireland' and 'Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Business Strategy 2002' have promising titles, but contain no policy that is relevant to Northern Ireland as an agricultural community in the UK. That is highly significant, because a mid-term review will take place in June.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has developed no concrete strategic policy. Therefore,

it has not contributed to the UK negotiating position in order to represent the interests of Northern Ireland agriculture in the mid-term review. That is a crucial failure. By adding the significant dimension of another North/South or all-Ireland body, we are simply accelerating the shift away from the only context in which Northern Ireland policy should be made.

I am not the only critic of the absence of strategic policy and the concentration on insignificant all-Ireland aspects of Northern Ireland agriculture. In today's 'News Letter', Dr Brian Scott, the executive director of Oxfam said that

"it is high time that the vision document's platitudes were replaced with an honest, open and realistic public debate about the grave issues facing Northern Ireland agribusiness."

In other words, he says that the so-called vision report is devoid of any real content. The Minister has, in a sense, conceded her incapacity. In a recent statement, she referred to the limited scope of Northern Ireland representatives to shape the eventual outcome of CAP reform. The Minister acknowledged that, but what she is really acknowledging is her inability and failure to contribute real policy towards the UK negotiating position in the crucial area of agriculture. That is happening because of too much nonsensical concentration on a totally irrelevant all-Ireland context.

That type of failure under any normal system of Government would have one outcome for the Minister — she would be sacked. She would be dismissed for being entirely incapable of doing her job, but there is no way that that can be done.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way? He has plenty of time.

Mr Roche: No. I am sorry, Mr Maginness, I do not have time. In fact, I need a lot more time.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you rule on the relevance of the remarks? Is Mr Roche remaining within the parameters of the motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Member to remain within the terms of the motion.

Mr Roche: The relevance of my remarks is quite simple. We have a North/South dimension to our institutions that distracts from the proper context for policy-making, and that gives rise to vacuous government for Northern Ireland with regard to its real needs. It does not surprise me that the individual who rose to his feet does not understand that simple point. I do not think that there would be any simple point that he could understand.

To put the matter bluntly, the proposal is stupid. That should not be a surprise, given that it has emanated from the Alliance Party. I do not want to be offensive to its Members, but the Alliance Party is the party of political

stupidity in Northern Ireland. That has been a core characteristic of that party under all its leaderships, without exception. It is not only the party of — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Roche: It is not only the party of political stupidity in Northern Ireland, it is the party of moral duplicity. What lies behind the proposal is a further attempt by the Alliance Party to accommodate the agenda of terrorism on this island. That is what it is really about. It did so recently, under the self-delusion that by re-designating itself, it could somehow make some massive change in the voting systems of how appointments are made here. Having been kicked in the political anatomy by the British Government, it is still at the same old game. The party is morally duplicitous, and in terms of political know-how or savvy, it is stupid to its very core.

Sir John Gorman: I cannot possibly hope to emulate Mr Roche. I shall simply provide some observations on my experience of North/South co-operation. My first experience of it was with a charming lady, Judge Catherine McGuinness, who is the chairperson of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in the South of Ireland. When I was appointed chairperson of the Forum for Political Dialogue in Northern Ireland I made a point of meeting her. We had a most helpful conversation that bore out the point with which I intended to end my speech, which is "vive la différence". For those who do not speak French, that means, "long live the difference".

That forum was rather ineffective. It enabled political parties to set out their prospectuses, but it did not result in the dialogue that built up in the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, which I hope played a small part in creating the Assembly and the adversarial system evident in the House.

My second experience, as my friend Mr Alban Maginness reminded me, was meeting our opposite numbers in Dublin to find out how they dealt with the proceeds of serious crime, which is a matter of great concern here, as well as in the Republic of Ireland. We discovered some interesting facts, and I am sure that Members remember some of those. We found that, despite its statements about human rights, the Southern Government had never signed up to the EU's civil rights legislation. When Mr Maginness and I asked them, with genuine mystery in our minds, "How did you get away with that?" They said, "We never signed it."

It is a difference that Members may not think it a good idea to emulate. It was all good-hearted and much more positive than I am now suggesting it was, because it was effective. Never mind the human rights violations, as some might call them; this is a team that includes the Inland Revenue, social services and the taxation authorities. It is headed by a senior officer of the gardaí, and over the past two years it has recovered approximately £45

million from people who had taken money from the public. The dishonesty and fraudulence had, in many ways, resulted in many poor people losing all their money.

My third experience was perhaps even stranger. The Committee on Standards and Privileges, which is chaired by my good friend Donovan McClelland, invited the Southern Government to talk to us about what they did about standards and privileges. Since much of the conversation was privileged, it would be remiss of me to go into detail. However, I can say that Members will soon see a document that will be the product of our Committee on Standards and Privileges. It will fully cover all the possible temptations that may exist to lure MLAs from the straight and narrow path. If we follow that document, we will be all right. The Southern Government would have to agree that it is superior to what appears in the Oireachtas. I end as I began, by saying long live the difference — vive la différence.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It will come as no surprise to the Alliance Party that my Colleagues and I will be vigorously opposing the motion. I am not making a personal attack on Mr Ford. Nevertheless, he will understand that I feel that the motion has overtones ensuring that any Unionist with a sense of Unionism would have to oppose it.

5.15pm

The debate was interesting, and several points that are on the record must be addressed. Mr Alban Maginness said that there was a duty on each one of us — through the Belfast Agreement — to establish a joint parliamentary body. I want to make abundantly clear that the Belfast Agreement has put no duty on me whatsoever. I resent the Belfast Agreement, I oppose the Belfast Agreement, and I hope that the day will come soon when we can bury the Belfast Agreement. I make no apology for the stance that I take.

The debate was interesting because what developed today was a lovers' tiff between the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin — the pro-agreement parties. It was interesting that Mr Maginness said that Mr Birnie was delaying the process of establishing the joint parliamentary body. Those words are interesting, because Mr Maginness's interpretation was that it is a delay, not a desire to stop the process of establishment.

There have been several changes recently because of the impending election. Therefore, there may be a delay in setting up the joint parliamentary forum because an election is in the offing. One thing is said before election time, and another is said or done afterwards. That policy is without principle. My DUP Colleagues and I are open and honourable enough to tell the people where and why we stand on a principled policy. We make no apologies whatsoever. The people can make their decision accordingly. At least that is an honourable and principled position.

Dr Birnie: Since the Member mentioned political honour, the fact that his party is still present in this institution — and that, indeed, some of its members are Executive Ministers — casts doubt on the pristine purity and lack of hypocrisy in his party's position.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I am delighted that the Member mentioned that, because the falsehood and fallacy usually peddled by him and his party Colleagues should be buried.

A short time ago, Members stood for the Westminster election. The people knew where the DUP stood. They knew that DUP Ministers were holding offices in the Assembly, which the people gave them. I remember Dr Birnie's leader waving his hands — as he usually does in excitement — and shouting, "Why do you not get out? Get out." He would love the DUP to get out of the Assembly. He would love DUP Ministers to leave their offices, so that those two ministries could be handed over to pro-agreement "suckers for Dublin".

The DUP is honourable to the electorate. When it runs in elections for councils, Westminster and the Assembly, the people know where it stands. It will not oscillate, as a member of the UUP did in a recent election. If you were pro-agreement, he was pro-agreement; if you were anti-agreement, he was anti-agreement. That was a totally unprincipled position, and it sums up the gobbledygook mindset of Mr Birnie and his Colleagues. I am delighted that he mentioned that, because — I am sure — he will not come back for a second portion after that exposition has been given to him.

Today, Members have been listening to doubletalk — people saying, "Of course we are not against it", while believing that the situation is sufficient. Let us be honest. The current arrangements should be sufficient for them because of the North/South Ministerial Council. I am fed up to the back teeth — and I know that many of my constituents are too — with the Assembly taking up time with ministerial statement after ministerial statement. There are more ministerial statements on cross-border bodies and cross-border meetings than there are on the duties that the Ministers are supposed to carry out. Is that a tenable position? It is nothing but total interference in the affairs of Northern Ireland, which is resented by the majority of people and the Unionist population.

Sir John Gorman posed a good question. He asked how the Dublin Government got away with not signing up to the EU's civil rights legislation. They do it by adopting the policy of "Do as we say, not as we do". They interfere constantly in the activities of the police in Northern Ireland. People who talk about the police's use of batons should see how the gardaí wield them.

The Irish Government interfere in every facet of the lives of people here, and this proposal would give them even greater opportunity to do so. My time is limited

because there will be a winding-up speech, but Alban Maginness knows that I would be happy to continue the debate with him. His claim that the Assembly can make a “critical examination” of the North/South Ministerial Council is a joke. There can be no critical examination; I wish that there could be so that we could see exactly what emerges, because I can tell you — *[Interruption]*.

Mr A Maginness: The Member is given the opportunity to do that in the Assembly.

Rev Dr William McCrea: My party is given five minutes to speak in crucial debates. I have been a politician for 29 years, and I do not regard a five-minute speech as a critical examination. It may suit some people who want to cover things up and who do not want a real examination of the nitty-gritty, but I want open government whereby people must stand over exactly what they say and do. As Unionists, we cannot support the motion.

Alban Maginness said that all Committee members have gone to Dublin; that is not true. My Committee has not gone to Dublin. The purpose of Committees is to scrutinise Ministers here. As Chairperson of the Environment Committee, my duty is to scrutinise the work of the Environment Minister, his Department and the proposals that he brings before the Committee.

Other Members may think that it is more important to pay for the Irish language to be printed on a Department’s headed paper than it is to fund what really counts, for example, the treatment of people waiting for heart operations. Public finance is being wasted. Do we need another quango or an excuse for another few dinners? Some people would go the length and breadth of the world to get a free lunch. The proposed joint parliamentary body would be merely a talking shop. We do not need more of those; we need democracy in the Province. Unfortunately, we are not getting a democratic institution because the pro-agreement clique that set up and agreed the Belfast Agreement has rigged the situation.

I believe in respect. Alban Maginness said that good neighbourliness with the South should be developed. That is exactly what we want to do, but good neighbourliness is founded on mutual respect.

Mr A Maginness: Hear, hear.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Mutual respect means not claiming what is not yours. For years, however, the South of Ireland has claimed this part of the United Kingdom, and it is interfering daily in our affairs. The Irish Government claim that they have removed articles 2 and 3, but, under the Belfast Agreement, they do not need those provisions. The Belfast Agreement has given them an official, more definite position to interfere in every sector of the lives of ordinary citizens here — our health, education and tourism — and that is 10 times more valuable to them.

Many in this Province are sick to the teeth of institutions, quangos and little meetings here, there and yonder for the sake of it. That is not productive use of ratepayers’ and taxpayers’ money. We have good neighbourliness with the South of Ireland, but it is interesting to note what they do by comparison to what we are supposed to do. Mr Ahern says that he will not have Sinn Féin in his Government, but he is prepared to put it into ours. He has told us that there will be no settlement between the United Kingdom and the South of Ireland unless terrorist thugs are put into Government. He will not allow them on his patch, but he will make us have them on ours.

Good neighbourliness demands self-respect and mutual respect. If it is not good enough for him, it is not good enough for us. In any case, we should be bosses in our own houses. The majority in Northern Ireland should have control of the institutions and those who administer them. The people have been sold a poisoned pup. Unfortunately for some, but fortunately for this country, they will be able to have their say. They can be bitten once, but not twice. People are waking up and, with all due respect to Mr Ford and his Colleagues, they want no further interference pouring from Dublin. Let us rule honourably and democratically in our Province. For many, the chickens will soon come home to roost.

Mr Ford: I am at a loss to reply to the variety of contributions, but I shall try to reply to substantive points.

Mr Roche’s points were substantive and helpful. Sir John Gorman mentioned some interesting examples of the benefits of North/South co-operation. However, I am not sure whether Sir John will be voting with or against us. The examples he highlighted were different from the comments of his Colleague, Dr Birnie.

I thank Mr Alban Maginness and Mr McElduff for their support. I particularly thank Mr McElduff for saying that the motion was not strong enough. It will enhance my street cred with the DUP that Sinn Féin was dissatisfied with the motion. I was a little worried that it might agree too much with me, although some of Mr McElduff’s points about the operation of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body (BIIPB) were interesting.

Complaints about the operation of the North/South Ministerial Council were made recently by Dr McCrea. The proposal today is to introduce a little informal North/South co-operation on matters of mutual interest and concern in an area which is already covered by an east-west body. I agree with the DUP’s comments on the inadequacies of the east-west institutions. It is clearly the fault of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that not enough has been done about them. That does not mean that we should not examine the possibility of North/South links.

I thank Mr Campbell for his words of praise for my bona fides, which will undoubtedly enhance my street

cred with Sinn Féin. Mr Campbell and Dr McCrea disagreed in their approach to the issue. My understanding of Mr Campbell's approach is that although the motion, as we proposed it, is acceptable, it cannot pass because Republicans will play games with it. I understand Dr McCrea to have said that the motion was not at all acceptable. I made some notes, and it is clear that Mr Campbell, in several times praising the way in which the motion was introduced, referred to its precise contents. He is, however, unhappy about it.

I refer Mr Campbell to the example of his colleague, the Mayor of Derry, Cllr Mildred Garfield, who took President McAleese around the city of Londonderry. That was a practical example of North/South discussion of matters of mutual interest. The motion concerns such discussion. It does not concern another quango; neither is it a matter of complicating the system of Government. It proposes a forum in which people can meet and hold simple discussions on matters of interest.

For that reason, I find it particularly difficult to accept Dr Birnie's response. He appeared to allege that the motion is incompetent. I assume that I have it on your authority, Madam Deputy Speaker, and on the authority of the Speaker and the Business Committee which accepted it, that the motion is not incompetent. He suggests that the words

"instructs the Speaker to nominate a number of Members to enter into negotiations"

contradict "consider developing a joint parliamentary forum." How else could we consider it in any meaningful way? It cannot be done by sitting here. The possible benefits of establishing a joint forum can be considered only by discussion with the other partner.

5.30 pm

Therefore it appears to me that Dr Birnie — *[Interruption]*.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for giving way. The motion proposes the establishment of a joint parliamentary forum. It presupposes that the consideration of such a body will reach an affirmative conclusion, whereas the agreement specifies that a joint parliamentary forum will be considered.

Mr Ford: The words "with a view to establishing" are clearly used to allow the Members nominated by the Speaker of this House and those of the Oireachtas to consider the potential benefits of such a body and how it might operate.

The UUP, with the possible exception of Sir John Gorman, intends to end all debate. Did the UUP endorse the Belfast Agreement? Is it running scared of the DUP as it frequently does on occasions such as this? I see Dr Birnie jumping in his seat, but I will not give way again.

Dr Birnie: I was moving my chair.

Mr Ford: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, but Dr Birnie looked so enthusiastic. The UUP is running scared from that to which it agreed. It is running scared of the DUP and the anti-agreement brigade. If the UUP had any sense of what it had agreed to four years ago, it would see the motion as a way in which practical work could be done and matters of mutual interest could be discussed without any constitutional ramifications. It would enthusiastically support the motion as opposed to running fricht. Having failed to outline what Ministers may have been discussing last night, it is clear that the UUP has nothing to contribute to the debate. The motion should be passed regardless of the fear of Ulster Unionist Members.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 25; Noes 32.

AYES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Bairbre de Brún, Mark Durkan, John Fee, David Ford, Carmel Hanna, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Barry McElduff, Mitchel McLaughlin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey.

NOES

Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Patrick Roche, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

Motion made:

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

WALLACE DAY CENTRE, LISBURN

Ms Lewsley: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter in the House.

The Down Lisburn Trust area has the highest proportion of children and young adults with learning disabilities of all the trusts in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, and yet it receives the least funding. Yesterday, I spoke to officials from that board, who confirmed that the Down Lisburn Trust receives 6% less funding than any other trust.

People with learning disabilities have specific needs, and they deserve a service that reflects those needs. Identifying and assessing those needs, to assist planning and co-ordination of services, is essential. Many needs are not being met, and the situation will continue to deteriorate if immediate action is not taken. Inadequate funding is the main reason that the situation has been created.

Many people with learning disabilities depend on the service that the Lisburn Assessment and Resource Centre, formerly known as the Wallace day centre, provides. Often it is their only opportunity for social contact and the security of a structured environment that enables them to develop. Current provision is not sufficient to meet demand, and as most clients make the transition from the education system and need adult care support services, this does not bode well for the future.

5.45 pm

The centre caters for 99 people. The conditions are absolutely appalling, and it is in need of complete refurbishment and extension. Access via the main entrance is inadequate, resulting in clients having to negotiate between moving cars and buses to get to it. The front doors are not automatic, making it difficult for access to the building by wheelchair users, and there is no cover to gain access to transport. In bad weather the clients, drivers, and attendants all get soaked. A mobile unit is situated away from the main building, and there is no protection against the weather when getting from there to the centre for meals and therapy. There are too few special needs toilets, which means that clients have to queue. On many occasions, staff have to use hoists to facilitate clients' toilet needs, which is both embarrassing and an insult to their dignity.

There is so much overcrowding that wheelchairs cannot be accommodated in the room catering for people needing intensive support. They have to be placed in chairs, and their wheelchairs stored in the assembly hall.

The effect of this is that many people who are wheelchair-bound have no mobility while in the centre. The dining facility is also inadequate for the numbers attending the centre; many have to eat their lunch in the assembly hall. Frozen dinners are sent from Downpatrick, and there have been several reports of dissatisfaction with the quality of these meals. Assembly hall windows are permanently locked resulting in inadequate ventilation.

These dreadful conditions are having a serious effect on the morale of clients, their families and carers, and, above all, the staff. There is no staff room; sickness levels are high; and there is no cover for staff on sick leave, unless it is for long-term illness. This results in further pressure on staff to ensure continuity for these clients by covering the duties of their colleagues on sick leave.

Down Lisburn Trust has been operating a policy of discontinued service for clients aged over 45 to make way for new clients. That has led to much distress, because clients have been denied access to friends and their familiar, regular routines. It also creates much worry for their carers, many of whom are elderly and may be experiencing difficulty in caring for their loved ones. The policy is unfair, and contravenes the principles of equality espoused in the Good Friday Agreement. Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, it amounts to age discrimination in the Down Lisburn Trust equality scheme.

Given the announcement by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister yesterday that Northern Ireland was going ahead of Britain and Europe in extending the protection against discrimination to all disabled people in employment, I believe that Down Lisburn Trust should reconsider its policy and extend the same rights to statutory care for those who are unable to work because of the nature of their disability. These people already suffer considerable social disadvantage, and they rely on others to speak out for them. They deserve a service tailored to their needs, and security in the knowledge that the service will be continuous, if that is their choice. I believe that the right to choose is vital, and that many choices should be available to both the disabled and their carers. Facilitation is needed to enable them to take control of their lives and to achieve independence commensurate with their condition.

The social aspect is also important. Every individual is a part of our community, and as such has the right to the opportunity to develop a social network within that community. We should aim to ensure quality of life for people with disabilities and their carers and families. As many options as possible should therefore be available to them, thus permitting them to take control of their lives rather than being the recipients of what others decide should be best for them.

In February, I asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what improvements, if any,

were to be made in the provision of services and facilities at Wallace Avenue day centre. The question was AQW 2033/01. The Minister's reply stated that

"a review of the facilities at Wallace Avenue Day Centre is being undertaken by Down Lisburn Trust with a view to enhancing the physical environment and developing the service provision."

I ask the Minister: what is the timescale for the review? When will the report of that evaluation be available, and what type of consultation will be undertaken?

Mr Davis: As many public representatives in the Lisburn area have taken a keen interest in the issue, it is possible that there could be repetition, but I will carry on regardless.

Although the issue has only now been brought to the Assembly, many of the area's representatives, including the MP for Lagan Valley, have taken a keen interest in it. I am delighted that the topic has been brought to the Assembly, and I congratulate Ms Lewsley for that.

It is important to understand that the majority of people being cared for at the centre — they are called clients — do not have the ability to make choices in their lives. They are told what to eat and what to wear. They cannot support themselves.

My first point relates to overcrowding at the centre. At a meeting held in 1999, a trust representative said that the centre was suitable for only 80 people. Today, there are approximately 101 people there, and thus the facilities are seriously overstretched. It seems that the trust offers part-time care — for example, one to two days a week in the centre to some clients — in an attempt to get around the problem of overcrowding.

There are too many people of different abilities in the same room. Therefore the behaviour of some clients affects others. As a result of overcrowding, there is a lack of toilet facilities in the centre, which means that a queue system is in operation for people in wheelchairs. Is this really suitable?

It is worth noting that the dining room is too small. The assembly hall must also be used, and there is a ventilation problem in the hall. Ms Lewsley mentioned the windows. The trust claims that the windows cannot be opened for security reasons. I do not see the logic in not having them open for some period during the day.

My second point is about the mobile unit at the centre. At a recent meeting with people involved in the centre, they commented strongly about the condition of that unit. They used the term "Third World" to describe it because it is over 15 years old. I would have thought that such a deplorable environment would not be acceptable today. I suggest that the mobile unit be replaced by a permanent structure, which should be connected directly with the main section of the building. The reason for this is that clients must move between

the two separate sections in all weather conditions. Some form of corridor or protection is badly needed.

It has also been suggested to me that it can be quite hazardous moving from one section to the other during the winter, and clients' safety must be taken into consideration. Another safety concern is the main entrance to the building itself. Again, a similar situation exists because there is no covering for clients and staff when getting on and off the bus. Traffic congestion is also an issue because of the size of this area and because no automatic doors are provided for easy access to the main building.

My third point is about the section of land that Down Lisburn Trust wants to sell. The Department has commented that its policy is to sell surplus land, but I would make the strong argument that this is not surplus land, but rather it could be put to good use. For instance, it could be landscaped and developed into a garden for clients to enjoy. If this land is sold, serious consideration should be given to putting the finance obtained into the present accommodation.

Even though most of my speech has been negative, I will finish on a positive note. It would be wrong and highly unfair not to mention the wonderful work of staff at the centre. Families of clients have complained to me about the centre's resources and facilities, but they always mention the commitment and care shown by staff. They work under tremendous pressure and have to deal with the lack of resources. Their hard work must be acknowledged and appreciated.

I would like to know how many people work at the centre. Figures have been provided, but do they accurately reflect the numbers of people who work there? Staff morale must be at an all-time low due to the lack of resources and facilities.

My main concerns are: the overcrowding at the centre; the mobile unit with its safety issues, and the intention of Down Lisburn Trust to sell land at the site.

I hope that the trust and the Minister will pay attention to the debate. Resources are overstretched, and that is why the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must provide extra funds if we are to tackle these serious issues.

Mr Poots: I thank Patricia Lewsley for bringing the matter before the House: I know that she has a particular interest in disability issues.

The problems with learning disabled, and the Wallace Avenue day centre in particular have been ongoing in the Lagan Valley constituency for some time. Many of the problems outlined reflect the situation accurately. A society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable. The learning disabled are among the most vulnerable in our society, and the Down Lisburn area is not coming out too well.

I do not blame the Down Lisburn Trust. It is operating on a budget that does not reflect its needs, and that must be addressed as a matter of priority. Down Lisburn Trust is operating on a budget that — according to the formula of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board — is £9·1 million less than it should be. The learning disabled in Lisburn receive about £1·25 million less than they should. Down Lisburn Trust cannot be expected to deliver the resources required when it is underfunded by £1·25 million. We could do a vast amount of work for the learning disabled in Lisburn if we were given that £1·25 million.

We do not have enough therapists in the area: we cannot get them, and we do not have the resources to get them. Alderman Davis mentioned the mobile unit, and there is talk of replacing it with another mobile unit. That is not satisfactory, and it is not what we need.

We need a total review of the facilities in the Down Lisburn area, and I will deal specifically with the Lagan Valley area. There must be a total review of what is available for the learning disabled. The Wallace Avenue day centre, Seymour Hill, the Hillhall estate and the Beeches Vocational Training Unit should all be reviewed. The review should consider whether what is there will meet the needs of the learning disabled in future.

Lisburn covers a vast area, and it is growing quickly. Learning disability has no boundaries. The more people there are, the more learning disabled there will be. They come from all backgrounds and societies and their problems are no respecters of money, social class or religious denomination.

6.00 pm

As Lisburn grows, so the number of people with learning difficulties who require facilities will grow. Mr Davis has already said that the Wallace day centre is overcrowded. Is the centre the right place for those people? Should more money be spent on it, or should a new provision be considered — for example, a new-build, first-class, twenty-first-century centre for people with learning disabilities in the Lisburn area? We must take full account of the needs of those with learning disabilities and decide on the best way to meet those needs.

I will touch briefly on the issue of the Beeches vocational training unit. I would have liked the Minister for Employment and Learning to be present to answer questions on that burning local issue. The European social fund withdrew funding from the unit. The Down Lisburn Trust has stepped in to ensure that funding continues. However, the Department for Employment and Learning has a role to play; it is not simply a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We must consider the training element —

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the topic of the debate is the Wallace day centre and that he should stick to that topic.

Mr Poots: I am conscious of the wording of the subject of the debate. Some young people who attended the Wallace day centre have had to move to the Beeches unit because their families thought that the Wallace day centre was sub-standard. Therefore, the point that I made about the Beeches unit ties in with the subject of the debate because it affects people with learning disabilities in the Down Lisburn Trust area. Nevertheless, I will not dwell on it, other than to say that the Department for Employment and Learning should meet its responsibility and ensure that the unit is kept open.

We must provide the Wallace day centre with the necessary resources to ensure that those with learning disabilities in the Down Lisburn Trust area receive the service that they deserve. We must consider whether the centre is in the right location. If not, we must identify a new site and establish where we will find the resources to develop a purpose-built centre.

It is foolish to suggest that we should sell off land on a site that is already overcrowded. That undermines the work that is being carried out, because any development on the site would be an invasion of the privacy of the young people who attend the centre. It would inhibit them and make life more awkward for them. That is fundamentally wrong.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Patricia Lewsley for introducing this debate. Like Edwin Poots, I am conscious of the wording of the subject of the debate. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, of which I am a member, is aware of the lack of provision for adults with learning difficulties throughout the North. Groups in the Foyle constituency have lobbied the Committee, and it has taken those concerns on board and has also met with other groups. As previous Members have said, the issue has come to the fore at Lisburn Borough Council meetings not only because of the involvement of individuals but because the parent support group have brought it to the attention of councillors.

Members are aware that the Health Service is underfunded by many millions of pounds. Having taken that on board, we discover that the so-called Cinderella services that deal with mental health, learning disabilities or children seem to fall out of the loop. The issue is not emotive; it is specific to Wallace day centre's clients and their families, and therefore it does not attract as much media attention as the underfunded acute sector. That makes it easier for boards and trusts to skew funding from such services.

I accept that Down Lisburn Trust has a funding deficit of some £9·1 million, yet it is not perceived as underfunded. I am a Lisburn borough councillor, but as an MLA for West Belfast, I was more aware of the underfunding of the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. Before the inadequacy of Down

Lisburn Trust's funding was highlighted at a presentation by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, I would never have believed that its shortfall was so large. However, the trust decides how it spends its money, and it is easier to skew funds from the so-called Cinderella services.

Wallace day centre provides a valuable service to its clients and their families. It is sad that decisions are being made without considering the long-term benefits of services. I appreciate the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's attendance today. I hope that she will consider the concerns about Wallace day centre and take account of provision for adults with learning difficulties in general, including the activities of parents in the Foyle Health and Social Services Trust area.

Mr Davis and Ms Lewsley outlined the difficulties faced by the centre's staff and by its clients and their families. It is a shame that people should have to use or work at a centre with facilities more akin to those in developing countries. The poor condition of Wallace day centre, which is just 20 miles up the road, raises the crucial issue of health and safety at work. We are asking clients to use those facilities, their families to leave them there, and staff to work in the centre. Where is the consideration for health and safety?

I commend the commitment of the staff of Wallace day centre, its clients and their families for their patience and for raising the matter.

Mr Roche: I shall not repeat Members' excellent points in support of centres for people with learning disabilities, in particular, Wallace day centre. Mr Poots said that a measure of a civilised society was how well it provided and cared for people with learning disabilities. Recently, I was moved by a visit to the Beeches centre, where I saw how the quality of life and self-confidence of those with learning disabilities was improved.

The massive underfunding of Down Lisburn Trust must be dealt with, otherwise the shortfall will accumulate. In rectifying that underfunding, resources should be redeployed to services for adults with learning difficulties. I congratulate Ms Lewsley on tabling the matter, and give her my complete support.

Mr B Bell: Most points have already been made, but I am pleased to be here to support the debate. I am grateful to Ms Lewsley for raising the issue.

I am concerned about the number of people leaving Parkview Special School in the next five years. According to figures provided by the Minister of Education, 46 pupils will be leaving the school, but only 12 pupils have been identified as attending the day centre. What will happen to the other 34 pupils? For your information, Madam Deputy Speaker, this has a bearing on the Wallace day centre. Will 12 more clients be cared for in the already overstretched Wallace day centre? Will the

clients attend the centre daily for the full day? My Lagan Valley Colleague Mr Davis and I are tabling questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on that issue. We hope to meet with her soon on another matter, but we will take the opportunity to raise this issue.

A claim is made in a leaflet outlining the facilities and resources available at the Wallace day centre that a fully equipped intensive support unit is available. However, I know that that is not the case. The intensive support unit is so overcrowded that people cannot gain access to it in their wheelchairs. Very few facilities are available in the room.

I am concerned about the proposed sale of land beside the main building. As Mr Davis stressed, overcrowding is the main problem. How can the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety consider selling such land when there is a serious case of overcrowding? Would it not be sensible to use the land to extend the centre and improve facilities in the future?

I would like to pay tribute to the staff at the centre. They do an excellent job, and they deserve more recognition.

Mr Armstrong: I have no hesitation in supporting the Member for Lagan Valley (Ms Lewsley)'s call for enhanced provision of facilities for adults with learning difficulties at the Wallace day centre in Lisburn. On 7 May I asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she was aware of undercapacity in adult centres. I was concerned about the provision for adults with learning difficulties in Kilronan Special School in Magherafelt, because young people's parents have been told that they have no guarantee of a place at an adult centre and that their sons or daughters must leave Kilronan when they are 19. I have been granted a meeting with the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I will raise various concerns with her.

There is a problem with insufficient accommodation in adult and day centres. An additional tier should be provided to cater for those people who are between 18 and 35 years of age, and I call for intermediate specialised facilities for that age group. This is an ideal opportunity for Members to represent the interests of those people with learning difficulties who are unable to articulate on their own behalf.

6.15 pm

Many young people come from single-parent families, and the removal or non-provision of training can result in parents being disadvantaged, perhaps by having to give up their employment. The therapeutic value of time out of the home environment should not be underestimated, and the advantages for the parent and child are immense and well documented.

Throughout Northern Ireland, groups pay consideration to disadvantaged groups when dealing with funding applications or distribution. There are legal implications, and under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 everyone must be treated equally, regardless of any disability. If those legal implications apply to society, the House must recognise that they also apply to us.

I support the sentiments expressed by the Member for Lagan Valley, Ms Lewsley, and I emphasise the need for immediate action to address the inadequacy of services for adults with learning difficulties.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch de Bhean Lewsley as deis a thabhairt dúinn na seirbhísí a phlé a sholáthraítear ag Ionad Acmhainne agus Measúnaithe Lios na gCearrbhach, ar a dtugtar ionad lae Ascaill Bhailis de ghnáth.

Is príomhais i seirbhís Iontaobhas an Dúin Lios na gCearrbhach do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas foghlama é Ionad Acmhainne agus Measúnaithe Lios na gCearrbhach. Mar gheall ar fheabhas a chaighdeán seirbhíse, bronnadh Marc Cairte air in 2000.

Faoi láthair, baineann breis agus 100 duine úsáid as an tsaoráid. Cuirtear seirbhísí breise thacaíocht lae ar fáil ag dhá shuíomh eile: seirbhísí lae Dairy Farm ag an Pholl Ghlas agus Ionad Gairneoireachta Chnoc Seymour ag Dún Muirí. Ar na seirbhísí a sholáthraítear ag ionad Ascaill Bhailis tá tacaíocht lae, ealaíona, ceirdeanna, oideachas, áineas agus cúram pearsanta.

I am grateful to Ms Lewsley for the opportunity to discuss the services provided at Lisburn Assessment and Resource Centre, commonly referred to as the Wallace Avenue day centre. The Lisburn Assessment and Resource Centre is a key facility in Down Lisburn Trust's service provision for people with learning disabilities, and its high quality of service was recognised by a Charter Mark award in 2000. Currently over 100 people use the facility, and I wish to join other Members in paying tribute to the staff at the centre.

Additional day support services are provided at two other sites: Dairy Farm in Poleglass and Seymour Hill Horticultural Centre in Dunmurry. Fifty-two staff are employed at the Wallace Avenue, Poleglass and Dunmurry sites. The services provided at the Wallace Avenue facility include day support, arts and crafts, education and personal care. The service has close links with the Lisburn YMCA and with Stepping Stones, a voluntary day support service that can provide greater choice and diversity of day support.

There are pressures on accommodation. New places become available only when the current attendees move to new settings as a result of a change in their care needs. The Beeches vocational training unit in Aghalee is not mentioned in the motion, but the trust and the board

have agreed a funding arrangement that will ensure continued service provision there for this financial year. They are also exploring longer-term financial arrangements for that unit with the Department for Employment and Learning.

The trust estimates that, between now and 2006, 40 people will leave local special schools. Of that number, it is estimated that 16 will require places at the Lisburn Assessment and Resource Centre. The remaining 24 people will need a diverse range of placements to meet their individual needs. The trust accepts, as we all do, that facilities at the Wallace Avenue centre require refurbishment, and the trust is committed to getting funding to bring the centre up to standard.

A review of the facilities is under way. Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust is committed to obtaining the necessary funding with which to enhance the physical environment of the centre and to develop service provision. The trust has assured the parents and carers of those who use the centre that there will be full and informed consultation with them in relation to any proposed developments.

There has been regular contact with the Lisburn and district Mencap group in relation to services provided at the Wallace Avenue centre. Mencap has been advised of the setting up of a joint planning group, comprising all relevant stakeholders, to plan future day-support services in the Lisburn area. Arrangements for the inaugural meeting of that group are under way.

The trust advises that the outline planning application that it submitted for the land adjacent to the day centre on Wallace Avenue is intended to ascertain whether permission would be granted. No proposals have been put to the trust board about the sale of the land. That would require full consultation with all stakeholders. Such consultation would include an equality impact assessment. Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust has also clearly stated at meetings with relevant stakeholders and public representatives that there is no threat to the future of the Wallace Avenue centre. That remains the case. It is the refurbishment of the centre — the obtaining of funding to enhance the physical environment of the centre and to develop service provision in the centre — that is being discussed.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is aware of growing demand for statutory day care places, particularly for dependent young people who cannot access any other day activities. The Department's priorities for action state that

"Boards and Trusts should continue to expand the provision of day care and respite places for people with a learning disability".

Some of the additional funding allocated to the four boards to develop community services will be, therefore, available for that purpose. Since 1999, an additional £4 million has been allocated to the learning disability

programme. Expenditure in 2000-01 totalled just over £100 million. I await the health and social services boards' health and welfare investment plans, which will indicate how each board proposes to use additional funding allocated by the Department this year for the development of community services. It will then be for each board to ensure that the funding of learning disability services in its area reflects local need. I will look at the boards' investment plans to see how they set out their spending plans in each of the programmes of care in their trust area. As employers, they are responsible for ensuring that staff work in a safe environment and that facilities comply with the relevant health and safety legislation.

I want to ensure that people with disabilities can be supported to do the same things as their non-disabled peers. As other Members have said, that requires access to education, training and employment. It means pursuing hobbies, leisure activities and sports, and it requires co-operation among the relevant service providers in those fields. It requires statutory and voluntary sector service providers to work in tandem, harnessing their respective expertise for the benefit of the individual.

Those who need more supportive day care must be offered diversity and innovative activities that develop their skills and talents. That is the model that health and social services are pursuing and will be supporting, and which I expect to see reflected in the investment plans that I receive regarding how the extra money that is

being made available for services in the community will be spent. Clearly, as with all aspects of the service, there will be pressures. All services provided by boards and trusts will need to be looked at in that respect, but it is with a view to enhancing the services provided to users.

The development of a model that reflects the aspirations of people with learning disabilities, and that promotes the inclusive society that the Assembly supports and that is reflected in the Executive's Programme for Government, will need additional resources, and that will mean difficult choices in the determination of priorities in the 2002-03 spending review. It will also mean drawing on the expertise of service users to develop and implement strategies. Last week, I was pleased to have been asked to launch a report called 'A Fair Chance'. It is no secret that I see promoting equality and tackling social exclusion as the cornerstones of responsive and effective health and social services.

The needs of people with learning disabilities must be seen as a top priority, as they suffer some of the worst forms of exclusion from a quality of life that many of us take for granted. 'A Fair Chance' enables the health and personal social services family to improve arrangements for communicating with and consulting those with learning disabilities. Therefore, the joint planning group that is being established, which will comprise all relevant stakeholders, should assist us greatly in the task ahead.

Adjourned at 6.26 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Wednesday 5 June 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PUBLIC PETITION

Siting of a Telecommunications Mast at Somerton Road, Belfast

Mr Speaker: Mr Alban Maginness has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr A Maginness: I beg leave to present to the Assembly a petition signed by over 1,000 North Belfast constituents objecting to a planning application to site a telecommunications mast at 138 Somerton Road, Belfast. The petition cites the potential health hazards, the loss of visual amenity and the adverse impact on the general environment as good reasons for opposing the mast. I support the campaign and present the petition to you, Mr Speaker, for forwarding to Mr Nesbitt, the Minister of the Environment.

Mr A Maginness 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.

VOTING IN BOTH LOBBIES

Mr Leslie: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I notice from Hansard that after the debate on Tuesday 28 May on one elected position, one Member managed to take the subject of the debate to its logical conclusion and have his name recorded in both Lobbies. I refer to Mr McNamee who, according to Hansard, contrived to vote both for and against the motion.

Mr Speaker: I shall look into the matter, but there is nothing to prevent a Member from voting in both Lobbies. In fact, if a Member concludes that he has voted in the

wrong Lobby, the only way of correcting that is to negate that vote by voting in the other Lobby.

I shall, however, check whether this is an error in the Hansard record or, perhaps, the first time that a Member has availed himself or herself of the opportunity of voting more than once — a practice not entirely unknown in Northern Ireland outside of the Assembly Chamber.

Mr J Kelly: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. How do Members express their abstention from a vote? Pat McNamee's understanding was that, to abstain from voting, Members must vote in both Lobbies. That was the reason for his decision.

Mr Speaker: The Member is absolutely correct. The only way to ensure that an abstention is recorded is to vote in that way. There have been those in the past, as the Member will recall, who have gone to some very considerable lengths to abstain in person. It is something that is not unknown in certain parts of Northern Ireland either.

HUMAN ORGANS INQUIRY

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 outcome of the human organs inquiry.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Members have only just received copies of the bulky report and the statement on the outcome of the human organs inquiry, and there has not been appropriate time to consider them. Is there a mechanism that allows more time to be given to Members prior to —

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no requirement on a Minister to provide material in advance of a statement. The only requirement is for a Minister to present the intention and the subject of the statement to the Speaker two and a half hours in advance so that the Speaker can decide whether to permit it. The purpose of most statements is to make available new material that the Assembly may wish to debate on foot of a normal motion. It is not possible to accommodate the Member's request.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is mian liom ráiteas a dhéanamh ar thoradh an fhiosrúcháin ar orgáin dhaoonna. I ndiaidh domh an ráiteas seo a dhéanamh, scaipfear tuarascáil an fhiosrúcháin chuig Comhaltaí, chuig na teaghlaigh a tháinig chun tosaigh ar lorg freagraí, chuig an tSeirbhís Sláinte agus chuig an phobal i gcoitinne.

Inniu, tá an tuarascáil ar fhiosrúchán na n-orgán daonna á foilsiú ina hiomláine agam. Agus sin á dhéanamh agam, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Uasal John O'Hara QC, a bhí ina chathaoirleach ar an fhiosrúchán, do bhaill an fhiosrúcháin, don Ollamh Eithne McLaughlin agus do Paddy Kelly Uas, as a dhíograisí agus a bháula a bhí siad agus iad i mbun an fhiosrúcháin thromchúisigh seo. Tá sé 15 mhí ó shin nach mór ó d'fhógair mé go raibh fiosrúchán na n-orgán daonna á chur sa tsiúl agam. Ag an am, rith sé liom chomh tábhachtach agus a bhí sé beart a dhéanamh go práinneach le tacú le cearta agus le mianta na dteaghlach sin ar mór an méala leo bás duine clainne agus lena chinntiú nach ndéanfaí neamart ná faillí iontu. Ba mhian liom chomh maith muinín an phobail as na nósanna imeachta iarbháis a chothú in athuair.

Mar gheall ar an chleachtas a bhíodh ann maidir le baint as agus coinneáil orgán, ní bhíodh deis ag teaghlaigh ceadú a bhí bunaithe ar an eolas a thabhairt, rud a mhéadaigh go mór ar an mhéala agus ar an fhulaingt. Chuaigh an cleachtas a bhíodh ann sa réimse seo i gcion ar bheatha móran gnáthdhaoine anseo. Ba le deireadh a chur leis an chleachtas a bhíodh ann san am a chuaigh thart agus le creat daingean a cheapadh a bheadh mar mhúnla don chleachtas sa todhchaí a chuir mé fiosrúchán reachtúil ar bun. Tasc tromchúiseach a bhí san fhiosrúchán

seo agus tá mé faoi chomaoín ag foireann an fhiosrúcháin, a thug go bríomhar, macánta báuil faoin dúshlán. D'obair siad go gníomach i gcomhar leis na teaghlaigh sin ar bhain na seanchleachtais dóibh, agus rinne siad gach dícheall le teacht ar na fíorais agus le teacht ar bhealaí le cleachtas níos fearr a cheapadh don todhchaí.

Is cuntas cothrom, tomhaiste tuisceanach é an tuarascáil seo agus molaim go hard í. Ní amháin go ndírítear aird ar leith inti ar na heasnaimh a bhí ar an chleachtas san am a chuaigh thart, ach tugtar faoi chleachtas a fheabhsú, faoi chearta agus chosaintí nua a chur i bhfeidhm lena chinntiú go mbeidh seirbhís againn a mbeidh lánmhuinín ag an phobal uilig aisti. Cuirtear ceisteanna sa tuarascáil seo faoinár gcumas mar sheirbhís comhairliú agus tacaíocht chuí a sholáthar do dhaoine agus duine ceana dá gcuid ag fáil bháis. Cuirtear ceisteanna inti chomh maith faoi chumas ár seirbhísí sláinte freagairt go práinneach, báuil cuí nuair a tharlaíonn géarchéim nach bhfuiltear ag súil léi.

I ndiaidh domh tuarascáil an fhiosrúcháin a bhreithniú go cúramach, tá sé de rún agam a cuid moltaí a chur i bhfeidhm ina n-iomláine. Is mian liom aird a tharraingt ar chuid de na príomhréimsí i moltaí na tuarascála.

Ba chóir an tAcht um Fhíochán Daonna a aisghairm go huile agus go hiomlán. Glacaim go hiomlán le moltaí an fhiosrúcháin gur chóir reachtaíocht úr a chur in áit na reachtaíochta atá ann faoi láthair sa réimse seo. Tá mé ag déanamh bearta láithreacha le moltaí i leith reachtaíochta úr a thabhairt isteach de réir mar a mholtar sa tuarascáil. Tá sé de aidhm agam iad a bheith i gclár reachtaíochta an Tionóil do 2003-04.

Ba chóir don Roinn treoirilínte a eisiúint ar úsáid blocanna agus sleamhnán sa todhchaí taobh istigh de shé mhí agus a dhearbhu nár chóir aon taighde nua a bhaineann le hábhair dhaoonna a cheadú gan cead follasach a fháil. Roimh dheireadh na bliana, eiseoidh mé treoirilínte i gcomhar leis na coistí um eitic taighde maidir le húsáid blocanna agus sleamhnán. Eiseoidh mé fosta socrúithe stiúracha do choistí um eitic taighde níos moille i mbliana. Faoi na socrúithe seo beidh gá roimh ré le ceadú eitice le haghaidh aon taighde chliniciúil bheartaithe ina mbeidh úsáideoirí na Seirbhíse Sláinte páirteach agus atá á dhéanamh ag aon ollscoil nó ag aon fhoireann de chuid na Seirbhíse Sláinte.

Ba chóir do iontaobhais foirmeacha toilithe aonfhoirmeacha agus bileoga eolais a thabhairt isteach. Caithfear na dréachtaí deiridh a aontú le grúpa tagartha na ngaolta. D'iarr mé ar mo chuid feidhmeannach foirmeacha nua toilithe a ullmhú chomh maith le cáipéisí teorach agus cáipéisí comhairle, agus foilseofar iad roimh dheireadh 2002.

Chomh maith leis seo, aithním an ról luachmhar atá ag grúpa tagartha na ngaolta, a bhunaigh mé go príomha le tacaíocht a chur ar fáil do thuismitheoirí a bhfuair leanbh dá gcuid bás; ba sin a bhí ar intinn agam nuair a chuir mé an fhiosrúchán ar bun. Déanfaidh mé leathnú ar

a ról de réir mholtaí na tuarascála. Chuige sin, déanfaidh mé foirmealú ar an mhaoiniú a thugtar dó agus cuirfidh mé leis an am a bhí leagtha amach dó le go gclúddóidh sé an tréimhse idir seo agus teacht i bhfeidhm na reachtaíochta úire. Déanfar athmhúnlú ar théarmaí tagartha an ghrúpa a léireoidh an ról a bheidh aige san am atá le teacht.

Caithfidh iontaobhais a chur in iúl don Roinn gach bliain go bhfuil cleachtas iarbháis á chur i bhfeidhm de réir phrionsabail na tuarascála. Iarrfaidh mé forógra bliantúil ar iontaobhais maidir leis seo; agus déanfaidh mé mo mhacnamh ar cheanglas reachtúil a dhéanamh de seo faoin Acht um Fhíochán Daonna úr.

Ba chóir don Roinn tabhairt faoi fheachtas ilmheáin dhá bhliana le cur in iúl do thuismitheoirí gur féidir leo blocanna agus sleamhnáin a iarraidh ar ais. Coimisiúnóidh mé feachtas den chineál i gcomhar le grúpa tagartha na ngaolta a gcuirfear tús leis san fhómhar.

Tá moltaí ar leith ann maidir le feachtais oideachais agus faisnéise, lena n-áirítear: an Roinn an pobal a chur ar an eolas faoi scrúduithe iarbháis; oiliúint éigeantach á cur ar fhoireann chnámhseachais, ar fhoireann nua-naíoch agus ar fhoireann phéidiatraiceach maidir le brón agus méala othair; agus socrúithe ionductaithe do dhochtúirí nua, lena n-áirítear oiliúint éigeantach ar bhealaí le toiliú láneolach a fháil.

Beidh mo chuid feidhmeannach ag obair go díreach le Coláiste Ríoga na Paiteolaíochta, Ollscoil na Ríona, Béal Feirste, le Comhairle na nIarchéimithe um Oideachas agus Oiliúint TÉ agus le heagraíochtaí oiliúna eile agus le grúpa tagartha na ngaolta. D'iarr mé orthu teacht aníos le moltaí daingne i ngach ceann de na réimsí seo faoi fhómhar na bliana seo. Tá rún daingean agam moltaí an fhiosrúcháin faoi chúrsaí oiliúna a chur i bhfeidhm agus clár oideachais/feasachta pobail a cheapadh le toiseacht níos moille i mbliana.

Agus an tuarascáil agus a cuid moltaí á mbreithniú agam, chuaigh sé i gcion go mór orm an méid a bhí le rá san fhiosrúchán in alt 8.8, ainneoin go n-aithnítear an tionchur an-diúltach a bhí ag an chonspóid, ar sholáthar seirbhíse cuí paiteolaíochta:

Is de dhlúth is de inneach soláthar cuí Seirbhíse Sláinte Náisiúnta iad scrúduithe iarbháis. Tá tábhacht ag baint leo don phobal i gcoitinne, ach i gcás teaghlach áirithe tá siad ríthábhachtach.

Is fearr inniu ná riamh an córas atá i bhfeidhm anseo le toiliú le haghaidh scrúdú iarbháis a fháil ó ghaolta agus le heolas, comhairle agus comhairliú a thabhairt do na gaolta sin.

Tá ról barrthábhachtach ag scrúduithe iarbháis agus ag coinneáil blocanna agus samplaí fíocháin — ach ceadú cuí a fháil — má tá togha an chleachtais chliniciúil le forbairt agus má tá feabhas le cur ar shláinte othar. Luaitear samplaí sa tuarascáil den dóigh ar cuireadh chun

cinn eolas cliniciúil agus ar sábháladh beatha naíonán de bharr cleachtais den chineál seo.

Luaitear san fhiosrúchán agus luaigh roinnt teaghlach a dteachaidh coinneáil orgán i gcion orthu an inní a bhí orthu nach raibh na socrúithe ann le déileáil leis an tuile fiosrúchán a tháinig amach i ndiaidh an t-ábhar seo a theacht chun solais an chéadair; agus aithním an inní sin. Tá sé tábhachtach go ndéanfaidh an taithí seo ár súile dúinn sa tSeirbhís Sláinte. Chuige sin, tá mé ag scríobh chuig cathaoirligh uilig na n-iontaobhas á iarraidh orthu athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar na socrúithe atá acu le tabhairt faoi ghéarchéimeanna nach bhfuiltear ag súil leo lena chinntiú go bhfuil pleananna acu freagar láithreach, éifeachtach cuí a thabhairt ar a leithéid de éigeandáil thobann. Beidh dearbhú air seo á iarraidh agam ina bhforógra bliantúil faoi chleachtas iarbháis. Tá rún agam plean gníomhaíochta a dhréachtú ina leagfar amach sceideal do na gníomhaíochtaí atá luaite thuas, agus cuirfidh mé Coiste Sláinte an Tionóil ar an eolas faoi sin sna seachtainí amach romhainn.

Tríd is tríd, creidim gur freagra cuimsitheach ar thuarascáil an fhiosrúcháin iad na gníomhaíochtaí a chuir mé os coinne an Tí inniu. Molaim an tuarascáil agus iarraim ar Chomhaltaí a thabhairt dá n-aire na gníomhaíochtaí atá beartaithe agam lena moltaí uilig a chur i bhfeidhm.

10.45 am

I wish to make a statement on the outcome of the human organs inquiry. Following the statement, the inquiry's report will be circulated to Members, to the families who came forward seeking answers, to the Health Service and to the public.

Today, I am publishing in full the report of the human organs inquiry. In doing so I record my thanks to the chairperson of the inquiry, Mr John O'Hara QC, and to its members, Prof Eithne McLaughlin and Ms Paddy Kelly, for undertaking this difficult task with rigour and sensitivity.

It is nearly 15 months since I announced the establishment of the human organs inquiry. At the time, I was struck by the importance of taking urgent action to support the rights and expectations of families who had been touched by the intense sadness of the death of a loved one and to ensure that they were not set aside or ignored. I also wanted to rebuild public confidence in post mortem procedures. Past practice, involving the removal and retention of organs, did not enable families to give informed consent and led to a great deal of additional grief and suffering. The impact of that practice has affected the lives of many ordinary people here.

I established the inquiry to draw a line under past practices and to develop a firm framework for shaping future practice. The inquiry was not an easy task, and I am grateful to the team, which took up the challenge

with energy, integrity and sympathy. Its members actively engaged with families who had been affected by former practices and were industrious in establishing the facts and devising solutions for developing better future practice. I commend the report as a balanced, measured and thoughtful account of past practice. Its focus was not restricted to finding out where past practice had been deficient; it also considered how to improve practice and build in new rights and safeguards to ensure that the service has the full confidence of everyone.

The report raises important questions about the service's capacity to provide proper counselling and support for next of kin at the time of a loved one's death. It also raises questions about our Health Service's ability to provide urgent, sympathetic and appropriate responses when faced with unexpected crises.

Having given careful consideration to the inquiry's report, I will implement its recommendations in full. I want to draw particular attention to several key areas covered by them. The Human Tissue Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 should be repealed in its entirety. I fully accept the inquiry's recommendations on replacing the current legislation, and I am taking immediate steps to initiate the process of introducing proposals for new legislation along the lines recommended. I aim to include this in the Assembly's 2003-04 legislative programme.

The Department should issue guidelines on the future use of blocks and slides within six months, and no research involving new human material should be permitted without explicit consent being obtained. I will issue guidelines on the use of blocks and slides before the end of the year in consultation with the research ethics committees. I will also be issuing new governance arrangements for research ethics committees later this year requiring prior ethical approval for any proposed clinical research involving Health Service users conducted by university or Health Service staff.

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

Trusts should introduce uniform consent forms and information leaflets, the final drafts of which must be cleared with the Relatives Reference Group. I have asked my officials to prepare new consent forms, supporting guidance and advice documents for issue before the end of 2002. Alongside that, I recognise the invaluable role played by the Relatives Reference Group, which I set up at the same time as the inquiry primarily to offer support to bereaved parents. I will now develop its role in line with the recommendations of the inquiry, formalising its funding and extending it to cover the period up until the new legislation comes into force. The group's remit will also be recast to reflect its future role.

Trusts must inform the Department annually that post mortem practice has been in accordance with the principles of the report. I will require trusts to make an annual declaration to that effect. I will also consider making that

a statutory requirement under the new human tissue legislation. The Department should engage in a two-year multimedia campaign informing relatives that they may reclaim blocks and slides. I will commission the development of such a campaign, in liaison with the Relatives Reference Group, to be initiated in the autumn.

There are separate recommendations on education and information campaigns. They involve the Department educating the public about post mortems; obstetric, neonatal, and paediatric staff receiving mandatory training in patient grief and bereavement; and induction arrangements for new doctors, including mandatory training on obtaining fully informed consent. My officials will work directly with the Royal College of Pathology; Queen's University, Belfast; the Northern Ireland Postgraduate Council for Education and Training; other training organisations; and the Relatives Reference Group to address those issues. I have asked them to come up with firm proposals in all of those areas by the autumn. I am committed to meeting the inquiry's recommendations on training and to developing a public education and awareness programme for commencement later in the year.

In considering the report and its recommendations, I was struck by the statement in paragraph 8.8 that, despite the very negative impact that the controversy has had on the delivery of a proper pathology service

"Post mortems remain an important and integral part of the proper provision of a National Health Service. They are important to the public generally but to some families they are essential ... The system of obtaining consent from relatives to a post mortem and informing, advising and counselling those relatives has never been better in Northern Ireland than it is today."

Post mortem examinations and the retention, with appropriate consent, of blocks and tissue samples are crucial to building and developing better clinical practice and improving health outcomes for patients. The inquiry report cites examples where such practices have advanced clinical knowledge and saved children's lives.

I recognise the concerns expressed by the inquiry, and by some families affected by organ retention, that arrangements for managing the flood of enquiries when the issue first arose were deficient. It is important that the Health Service learn from experience. With that in mind, I am writing to all trust chairpersons, asking them to review their arrangements for dealing with unexpected crises to ensure that they have plans in place to respond quickly, effectively and appropriately to any sudden requirement of that nature. I will be asking them to include an assurance to that effect in their annual declarations regarding post mortem practice.

I intend to draw up an action plan to provide a schedule for the actions that have been outlined, and I will share that with the Assembly's Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the coming weeks. I believe that, taken together, the actions that I have outlined today represent a comprehensive response to the inquiry

report. I commend the report and invite Members to note my proposed actions to implement its recommendations in full.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I remind Members that this is an opportunity to ask questions, not to make additional comments or statements.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the human organs inquiry, which was chaired by Mr John O'Hara. I also welcome the Minister's statement that she will take on board all the report's recommendations. However, I am disappointed that, as far as I am aware, neither my Committee colleagues nor I had a chance to examine the report or the Minister's statement earlier this morning. However, it is important that the report has been published. I also take on board your point, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I hope that the report and the implementation of the recommendations will bring to an end almost two years of heartache for families. The psychological trauma has been massive and many hospital staff have tried hard to help and console those most directly affected. There must be proper and informed consent.

The Minister referred to the repeal of the Human Tissue Act (Northern Ireland) 1962. The Department issued guidelines on the retention of blocks and slides and uniform consent forms throughout Northern Ireland. The Minister and the Committee have commented on that. Has a specific timetable been drawn up? The Minister has said that she will consult with the Committee. How will she ensure that the Committee is fully consulted and that it will have a part to play in advising the Minister on actions to be taken by her Department?

Ms de Brún: This morning, I asked officials to inform the Committee Clerk that I will send the action plan to the Committee. I will work with the Committee, and I will ensure that it is involved fully.

With regard to a specific timetable, it is clear that if we want to include legislation in the 2003-04 Assembly timetable, we must examine the recommendations immediately. We must work with all those that the inquiry has recommended in order to ensure that the usual processes are progressed so that legislation can be included in the timetable.

Rev Robert Coulter: I recognise the efforts that are being made to alleviate the pain and grief of the next of kin. However, will the Minister assure the House that the time taken to return organs after a post mortem will be reduced to an acceptable level, including a specific date for the return of the organs so that families can plan the second part of the funeral service?

Ms de Brún: I will ensure that the best of current good practice is used throughout health and personal social services. Coroners' post mortems are not within the remit of the Executive — we have no powers over coroners. However, I will send the report to the coroners and to the Northern Ireland Court Service, and I expect it to be an important input into the review of coroners' powers and duties.

Mr Paisley Jnr: According to the report, the scandal has resulted in fewer people consenting to post mortems, fewer people agreeing to donate their organs after death, and a decline in the number of pathologists because of the "siege" that they appear to be under. What is the Department doing to

"encourage doctors to think afresh about careers in pathology"?

Will the Minister give us the relevant statistics on the decline in the number of pathologists, the number of post mortems that have been refused and the number of organ donations?

11.00 am

Paragraphs 6.30 and 6.31 of the report are entitled 'What do the Relatives want?' That section states that relatives want recognition and apologies for what happened. Can the Minister, to use the word that seems to be avoided at all costs — "sorry"— express her sorrow to the relatives, as that would be very helpful to them?

Ms de Brún: I draw the Member's attention to the public apology I made on TV earlier this year when I announced that the inquiry was to be set up. I have no difficulty in ensuring that the relatives hear it again today, as I ensured they heard it then. I am extremely sorry for what happened, and I will make every effort to ensure that our service is carried out in a way that enables the next of kin to give fully informed consent. I shall ensure that all the matters drawn to the attention of the inquiry are fully addressed.

I do not have the relevant statistics to hand; however, the current problems in paediatric pathology are not specific to the North. I recognise the difficulties being faced by the paediatric pathology service and the additional pressures on it since the issue of organ removal and retention was highlighted. It is crucial that confidence in the service be restored if we are to attract new medical students to pathology. The report makes several recommendations, and an action plan is being prepared to put those recommendations into effect. In the meantime, my Department is working with boards and trusts to try to resolve the current difficulties and to restore full services as soon as possible.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and for her commitment to implement the report's recommendations in full. It is almost 15 months since the scandal

first came to light and since the Minister took action. Will those who are responsible for past failings be held accountable, because there is an issue about future breaches of practice? Queen's University failed to declare that it had retained organs or tissue until the eleventh hour. Has the Minister had any contact with the Minister responsible for Queen's University? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms de Brún: The report has not called for any specific action to be taken against individuals. However, if any evidence of inappropriate conduct by specific individuals is brought to my attention, I shall consider it carefully. The main focus of my follow-up action will be to ensure that identified system failures are put right and that deficiencies in the legislation are corrected.

The report made recommendations about the Human Tissue Act 1962 and proposed introducing new legislation. A new law will be drafted to introduce legal sanctions that will be used in the event of individuals and organisations acting in breach of the Act's provisions.

The report mentions several organisations. However, I have not spoken to Carmel Hanna about Queen's University. I said in reply to a previous question that I will send a copy of the report to the coroner and the Court Service. I shall also send a copy to Queen's University.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party welcomes the report. It is unfortunate that so many families have suffered such unnecessary pain, especially in recent days in the wake of further revelations. That has put enormous strain on the families concerned. Let us hope that the report's implementation will — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McCarthy, are you coming to your question?

Mr McCarthy: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Minister's apology to the families on behalf of the Department. I hope that it will go some way towards alleviating their worries.

Does the Minister agree that the outcome of this sorry saga has been a severe reduction in human organ donation throughout Northern Ireland, thus depriving many patients of that life-saving facility? If so, what action will she take to increase the number of organ donations to a reasonable level?

Ms de Brún: I would not like to give the impression that the levels of organ donation have become unsatisfactory — they are far from it. I am pleased that people continue to donate organs. In the past year, I have done several things to promote organ donation, and I shall continue to do so.

Ms McWilliams: I welcome the Minister's statement. It may go some way to address the grief that parents have been through because of bereavement.

I note that the Minister said that the Relatives Reference Group may be included in the now mandatory training

for obstetric, neonatal and paediatric staff, as well as in the induction arrangements for new doctors. After all, nobody is better placed than the parents to be involved in that training. It may not be enough for the Department to speak to the Royal College of Pathology and to the Postgraduate Council for Education and Training. On all future occasions, where possible, we must continue to involve the relatives.

Will the Minister answer Mr Coulter's question on the time lag with post-mortems that exists as a result of the stress that the paediatric pathologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital has been put under? I have received letters from parents who are still grieving because they have not received the results of post-mortems — the wait goes on and on as a direct result of what has happened.

It is not sufficient for the Minister simply to send a copy of the report to the coroner. That is not joined-up government. Although the matter is reserved, we must take devolution seriously. I ask the Minister to include the coroner in any interdepartmental arrangements for implementing the recommendations, because the recent scandal over Queen's University's discovery that it had not submitted all its evidence had to do with the fact that some of that evidence comes directly from the coroner's office —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I believe that the Member posed a question at the beginning of that personal statement.

Ms McWilliams: Mr Deputy Speaker, everything that I said led to a question. If you look at Hansard, you will find that there was no statement. Everything I said led to a question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms de Brún: I have no difficulty whatsoever with people from the coroner's office taking part in any group that I set up to examine future practice. However, I reiterate that the Executive have no powers over coroners. As I explained when the details of the inquiry were announced, coroners' post-mortems are covered by separate legislation — they are not within my remit as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, I shall do all that I can to ensure that we have the best possible practice.

With regard to the time lag, I have already said that I shall do all that I can to ensure best practice and to ensure that relatives can have the results of post-mortems as quickly as possible. I shall also ensure that, through future work and through addressing the recommendations on respect to the Relatives Reference Group, relatives can become fully involved in future work if they wish.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's statement. I hope that it gives closure to those parents who were so sadly bereaved. Having attended the first public inquiry, I saw real grief on the faces of the young people who had to give evidence. It was quite traumatic. I also

witnessed chief executives say that they were guilty and that they were sorry. I hope that such an inquiry need never happen again.

I am glad that the Minister took the opportunity this morning to apologise once again to those relatives. How will she ensure that grieving parents will have all the information that they require before being asked to sign for a post-mortem? Last week's disclosures of the amount of tissue and the number of foetuses laid aside were disturbing. Will the Minister ensure that there will be no more disclosures of that nature?

Ms de Brún: I reiterate that matters of practice at Queen's University are the responsibility of the Department for Employment and Learning, and are for the Minister to comment on. A thorough and open investigation will lay the foundation for the future and will help to ensure that public confidence is restored.

The key improvements will include developments in post-mortem practice and procedure, and the introduction of new legislation that ensures that the principle of fully informed consent is at the core of the service. There will be new accountability arrangements, development of training for all staff involved in patient care and post-mortems and public education and information programmes aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the practice of post-mortems.

I am confident that the inquiry's recommendations will, when implemented, work towards increasing public confidence in the service and ensuring the highest possible standards.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's statement. The subject is highly sensitive and emotive, and I urge the Minister to consider, and perhaps outline to the House, methods by which we can investigate ways in which coroners' reports and research carried out at Queen's University can be made subject to the new regulations. The matter remains one of great concern to many people. The House and the public will be reassured if real joined-up government can be brought into effect on that matter.

Will the Minister confirm that post-mortems that include the removal of the heart will be subject to the new regulations? Will she confirm that relatives will be informed of all procedures affecting their loved ones before and after they are carried out? Are the dates given by the Minister for the repeal of the Human Tissue Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 and for the introduction of new legislation the earliest on which that can be done? Must blocks and slides be reclaimed or will they be automatically returned to the relatives?

Ms de Brún: The inquiry has recommended that there should be a two-year multimedia awareness campaign to ensure that relatives are aware that they can reclaim blocks and slides. It emerged during the inquiry that

some people do not wish to be approached, and that the appropriate way forward is to make the information available so that those who wish to reclaim can do so.

The dates that I have given for the introduction of new legislation are the earliest possible dates.

As regards coroners' reports and the research at Queen's University, I shall do my best to ensure joined-up government. However, I am here to answer questions on matters that fall within my remit. It is not that I do not wish to answer other questions. I am neither able nor empowered to answer questions on matters that fall within the remit of another Department. I shall do my best to ensure that everything that I have responsibility for will be done.

Work has already begun on measures to standardise procedures for post-mortems.

I made it clear that all hospital post-mortem examinations must be covered by fully informed consent. That has been endorsed by the inquiry. I have asked departmental officials to review the Human Tissue Act 1962 in line with the inquiry's recommendations. Other measures will be required to develop how consent to a post-mortem is obtained and by whom, ways in which health professionals can respond and how post-mortems are recorded and reported. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will work with health professionals, trusts and other key interested parties to ensure that those important measures are expedited. By working with the Relatives Reference Group, the Department will ensure that the measures are developed appropriately.

11.15 am

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: Points of order will be taken at the end.

Mr Kennedy: I refer the Minister to my point about the removal of heart organs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Ms de Brún: Work will be undertaken with all key stakeholders to determine how we proceed with new guidance.

Mr Gibson: The idea of organ donations has been seriously damaged by the discovery made 15 months ago. How does the Minister propose to restore confidence in that successful and essential way to extend useful life?

Ms de Brún: In 1999, there were 20 organ donors. In 2000, there were 21 and, in 2001, there were 33. The figures speak for themselves. The number of organ donations continues to rise. I refer the Member to answers that I gave this morning on public awareness of the issue and on the greater weight that is being given to asking people to donate their organs.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I preface my question by thanking the inquiry membership and staff for this comprehensive report, and I thank the Minister for her comprehensive statement. It is hoped that both those statements will begin to put to rest the emotional trauma that the scandal of the organ retention issue has caused the families of those affected. I also welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning's attendance this morning. Her presence will perhaps mark the beginning of addressing what happened at Queen's University and the trauma that was caused by its late disclosures on organ retention.

I thank the Minister for her support for the families and the Relatives Reference Group. Does the Minister intend to put in train compensation for those who have been affected by the scandal?

Ms de Brún: Individual families may decide whether they wish to pursue compensation.

Dr Birnie: Alongside the crucial point of trying to alleviate the suffering of concerned relatives, the Assembly should also recognise the value to medical teaching and medical research — hence the long-term health of the entire population — of having an archive of blocks and slides. Considering that, does the Minister agree that where the identity of materials cannot be established and where families do not ask for the return of organs after the two-year publicity and media campaign proposed in the report, the archive collections — as at Queen's University Belfast, for instance — should be maintained for the general good?

Ms de Brún: I recognise the benefits that arise, and I have referred to them in my statement. The inquiry dealt specifically with that issue. In future, any research that involves human materials for which explicit consent has not been given should not be permitted. The inquiry's terms on that are very clear. As part of its recommendations, it requests a two-year multimedia campaign to ensure that those who wish to reclaim tissue and organs that are being held know that they can reclaim them. The inquiry was explicit in recognising that it would not be of benefit that that possibility should be lost to medical science.

Mr Morrow: The report clearly defines that there has been a loss of confidence in the system as a result of the revelations about past practices. There is a target date of 2003-04 for the implementation of new legislation. Can we have an assurance that the new legislation will be the Department's number one priority? How realistic is that date? Public confidence should be restored; that is paramount. Every effort must be made to ensure that the target date of 2003-04, which is going on to the legislative programme, will be met. It is only by the introduction of new legislation that some degree of confidence will be restored to the public and, in particular, to those who are most affected.

Ms de Brún: It is my aim that the legislation should be included in the Assembly's 2003-04 legislative programme. However, that is not the only issue that the Department will address. In reply to an earlier question, I reported that key improvements will include not only the introduction of new legislation but new accountability arrangements, development in post-mortem practice and procedures and a public education information programme to make next of kin aware of what a post-mortem consists of and the safeguards that are in place. There will also be training for all staff involved in patient care and post-mortems.

In the next few weeks, I shall announce new proposals that arise from the consultation document 'Best Practice, Best Care'. They will be aimed at ensuring that appropriate governance arrangements are in place in health and personal social services to provide assurances about the quality of health and social services delivered here. That will include arrangements for improved governance covering research conducted by, or within, health and personal social services organisations.

EXECUTIVE POSITION REPORT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement on the Executive position report.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Deputy First Minister and I wish to make a statement on the issues that will affect the Executive's work to develop a Programme for Government and Budget for the financial year 2003-04 and beyond.

In his statement to the Assembly on 4 March 2002, the Minister of Finance and Personnel identified the main stages for this year's Programme for Government and Budget cycle. A key first phase is the development of the Executive's position report on the Programme for Government and Budget, which has been made available to all Members this morning.

The position report reflects our commitment, under the agreement, to agree each year a programme that incorporates an agreed Budget. It gives the Executive an opportunity to outline for the Assembly's consideration the key issues affecting public services, which should influence the preparation of the next Programme for Government and the Budget that will support it. The report formally launches the consultation, with the Assembly and others, on the next Programme for Government and the Budget.

The position report is distinct from the annual report; the number of reports on this subject can result in confusion. The annual report, which will be produced before the end of this month, outlines the Executive's performance in the past year on their first Programme for Government: where progress has, or has not, been made; reasons, where appropriate, for any lack of progress; and the action that has been taken. The position report projects how the Executive can refine their priorities in the Programme for Government to target more effectively the resources in the Budget in order to deliver progress.

The development of the Programme for Government has been continuous. Less than six months ago, the Assembly endorsed the current programme, which focuses on the financial year 2002-03, and its implementation began just over two months ago. The current cycle represents an important opportunity. For the first time, we intend to set plans for a three-year period, which will be informed by a more thorough analysis of the needs and effectiveness of our major public service programmes. Our approach will depend on the conclusion of the negotiations on the Treasury spending review, which will be known next month.

In December, the Executive indicated, through their spending plans for 2003-04, their determination to change the pattern of public services in order to reflect more

fully the priorities of the Programme for Government. In addition, the reinvestment and reform initiative, which we launched on 2 May, adds several new dimensions to the debate that is needed on how our public services develop under the Executive and the Assembly, in co-operation with the North/South Ministerial Council and the other structures created under the agreement.

The development and annual revision of the Programme for Government, incorporating the Budget, is the core task of the Administration. Through that, they set out their policy direction, plans and priorities for the years ahead. Those plans and priorities will, in turn, inform budgetary decisions. We seek to develop, among the four parties in the Administration, a collective direction of agreed priorities, through which we shall continue to build the basis of the new democracy. Through discussion, debate and consultation, in the Chamber and further afield, we seek to draw together the views of the Assembly and society on the priorities for Northern Ireland.

The position report reflects clearly the Executive's desire to focus debate on the quality of our public services, and to ensure that those are fairly and effectively administered. We emphasise the need for investment in infrastructure; the desire to improve service delivery; the importance of tackling social exclusion, especially poverty; and of working in partnership with others. We want to deliver reinvestment and reform that will result in high-quality public services. The reinvestment and reform initiative provides an opportunity for us to invest substantially in improving and modernising our infrastructure. In allocating resources, we need to identify closely the reforms that may be required and their potential outcomes. The Executive are already committed to reviewing the structure of public administration, which involves considering the types of structures that best serve the needs of Northern Ireland and how we might improve efficiency to allow resources to be focused where they are most needed.

11.30 am

As we said in our statement on the reinvestment and reform initiative, resources and reform must go together. The position report makes that clear. It sets out the Executive's determination to articulate their vision for public services and to explain how they might reform those services and improve their quality. The position report also underlines their commitment to ensure that everyone can share the benefits that should flow from the investment and reforms that they want to see.

The Executive recognise that, for too long, poverty has blighted the lives of too many people. They remain committed to developing policies and programmes, to allocating resources to support them and to focusing on areas and people in greatest objective social need — in line with targeting social need (TSN). The position report also recognises the need to see how different Departments can best work together in that and with other partners.

The Executive rely on others, such as local government, business and the voluntary and community sectors, to help them to deliver the Programme for Government. It is right that those relationships should be developed.

The Executive's work to develop and agree the Programme for Government and the Budget does not take place in a vacuum. Important contextual issues need to be understood, reflected in the Executive's work and taken account of by the Assembly and others in response to the position report. First is the financial context. The position report explains that the spending power available to the Executive for the years 2003-04 to 2005-06 will be largely determined by the outcome of the 2002-03 spending review. It is understood that that will be announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July 2002. The Executive's key reference point, and the baseline for the entire process, will be the spending plans for 2003-04. Those were first set out in the spending review for 2000 and were updated and converted to resource accounting and budgeting stage 2 classifications to provide the foundation for that spending review, which will set revised plans for 2003-04 and new plans for the two succeeding financial years.

The Chancellor's Budget announcement on 17 April 2002 has already provided significant additions for the period from 2003-04 to 2007-08 — arising from the application of the Barnett formula to the allocations for services in England and Wales. The Chancellor has also given signals of the likely outcome of the spending review. He has confirmed that the Treasury envisages real growth in spending over the spending review period — growth that is over and above the provision that has already been made for the Health Service. That suggests that there will be further limited additions for public expenditure in total and hence, through the Barnett formula, for Northern Ireland. The precise amount will depend on the outcome of discussions with, and within, the Treasury.

Even limited growth in spending could lead to substantial additional spending for Northern Ireland in 2004-05 and 2005-06 if the Chancellor applies the increase to spending areas that are comparable with our programmes. However, if he is obliged to use the spending power that is available for annually-managed expenditure, such as social security benefits or debt interest, or for spending on defence and other non-comparable programmes, additional amounts available to the Executive will be much more limited.

There are, of course, other contexts for our work. With regard to the economic context, it is encouraging that over the past year our economy has performed well. Employment is at a record high, and unemployment is approaching the lowest level for a generation. However, the impact of foot-and-mouth disease and global economic uncertainty have constrained progress in some areas — Northern Irish firms face difficult trading conditions, particularly in industries in which there has been a

worldwide decline in trade. That has contributed to problems in manufacturing output. Agriculture and tourism have also experienced declines in earnings as a result of foot-and-mouth disease and the wider economic and fiscal environment. While there has been a modest improvement in the past year, farming is still well short of levels seen during the mid-1990s.

The outlook for the economy over the next few years is reasonably benign. Growth is expected to accelerate in 2002-03. However, the Assembly needs to understand the conditions in which we currently operate. We need to be able to identify the economic challenges we are likely to face, and we need to develop our proposals for tackling those challenges as we take forward the Programme for Government and the Budget.

We also need to be aware of the social and environmental contexts — we know the challenges too well. I have already highlighted our determination to focus on poverty and social exclusion, but our work must also reflect responsibilities to promote good relations within and between communities. We also need to be aware of wider environmental issues and ensure that the principle of sustainable development underpins everything that we do.

The position report, which Members will be considering in Committees in the weeks ahead, recognises the importance of ensuring that the Programme for Government reflects the economic, social and environmental challenges that we face. It provides an appropriate, relevant and evidence-based policy framework for decisions on financial allocations and for departmental work programmes. To that end, the Programme for Government must set out a thorough analysis of the context in which we work.

The report also needs to explore, and seeks views on, the Executive's priorities and sub-priorities. It is important that the priorities we set reflect and keep pace with the changing environment. The current priorities, which have received broad support here and from social partners, continue to provide a useful framework for our work. However, we want to explore ways in which we might refine our overall economic and social strategies.

The Executive are not solely content with setting out a work programme for the years ahead. We are also committed to maintaining a focus on measuring results and assessing impact. Our first two programmes have sought not only to explain the policy priorities that we have identified, but have also clearly set out the actions that we will take to deliver those priorities and the sub-priorities that support them.

We have gone further. The priorities incorporate public service agreements (PSAs) that aim to set out targets reflecting the key outcomes that Departments want to achieve with the resources voted to them by the Assembly. The PSAs are, in turn, supported by service delivery agreements (SDAs) for each Department, which explain the actions that each Department will take in order to

deliver its Programme for Government commitments and PSA targets and to raise standards.

Open and accountable government is, and should be, a defining characteristic of the Executive. We want to be responsive, to listen to the views of others and to ensure that the Assembly and the public can see the benefits that a locally accountable Executive can deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. The position report, therefore, seeks views on current arrangements for measuring results and the effectiveness of those arrangements.

To further underline that commitment to open and accountable government, we will shortly be bringing a full report on the progress made during the first year of our programme to the Assembly. It will provide information on the actions contained in the programme and the targets in the 11 departmental PSAs. We will also be making the report more widely available so that the public can assess our progress.

We are also determined that the programme should continue to reflect our responsibility to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. The position report, therefore, seeks views on the equality aspects of the issues that we have raised and how those can best be taken into account as we develop the Programme for Government and the Budget.

Today's statement does not only provide a starting point for the Assembly's consideration of the position report; it also represents the start of a process of wider consultation on those issues. It is crucial that we have the views of the Assembly on the issues raised in the report. But in keeping with the theme of partnership that I mentioned, it is worth noting that we also recognise the value of a wider debate. For that reason, we intend to make the position report more widely available following this statement, sharing it with our social partners and our colleagues in local government and with other interested organisations and individuals.

The position report sets out the timescale for providing views on the issues that it raises. We will need comments from Committees on issues that relate to the Programme for Government before the end of August. As was the case last year, the Committee for Finance and Personnel will co-ordinate the comments on the associated resource issues, and we will be seeking those comments before the end of July. We look forward, of course, to receiving the views of Assembly Committees and of individual MLAs.

I have outlined some of the key issues that we must address as we develop the Executive's Programme for Government. The Deputy First Minister will now elaborate on some of those matters, particularly those that relate to the financial context in which we operate.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I support the First Minister's statement, and I will develop some of the themes that he covered in his opening remarks. In

particular, I would like to focus on the financial context in which we find ourselves and on the resource issues that the Executive have highlighted in their position report on the Programme for Government and the Budget for 2003-04 and beyond.

The Budget that was agreed by the Assembly in December 2001 set "indicative minima" figures for Departments for 2003-04. By holding back some £125 million of available spending power at that time, we retained the option of making changes in our expenditure programmes to reflect local needs and priorities and to maintain a significant degree of flexibility.

Aside from the money that remains unallocated from the Chancellor's Budget, we are committed to maximising other immediate sources of funding available for allocation to services. For this Budget cycle and for the longer term, we are taking important action to improve the quality of public services and get better value from the resources available to us. That includes the needs and effectiveness evaluations, which are being carried out in health and social care, education, housing, training and vocational education, financial assistance to industry and culture, arts and leisure. Those six areas account for about 75% of planned public expenditure here.

Important issues must also be addressed in agriculture, regional transportation, water and sewerage services, long-term unemployment and the work of the employability task force, hospital services and the review of post-primary education. The Executive are scheduled to receive evaluations on those major areas of work in the next couple of months.

The evaluations will also be important for informing the Executive as they make funding decisions about the 2002 Budget. Although changing strategic direction or skewing resources to new areas of expenditure takes time and careful planning, the Executive are determined to make a real difference and to reshape public expenditure to support key priorities. Reports from each study will be made available to the Assembly and more widely.

The First Minister referred to the reinvestment and reform initiative or RRI, which will provide a unique opportunity for a substantial infrastructure investment programme. Many of our services, especially health, education and transport, require levels of capital investment far in excess of the available resources if they are to be funded in the traditional manner.

From 2004-05, a new borrowing power will give the Executive and the next Assembly the option of using additional revenue sources. That will make possible a multibillion-pound programme for the coming decade and beyond to address our most acute infrastructure needs.

Those resources will help to meet a pressing need, but money alone will not produce the scale of change that the Executive are seeking. It will be just as important to

take a highly innovative approach to managing and financing the infrastructure programme, so that resources will be used wisely and will complement our existing programmes.

The Executive have decided to create a new organisation in the form of a strategic investment body to ensure that strategic infrastructure is planned and delivered in a way that makes the most of all the available means and resources. It is intended that the strategic investment body should have the necessary expertise and resources to serve the Executive's programme of strategic capital investment. By using the new body, the Executive hope to provide the best possible opportunities to promote the effective use of all the various means available.

11.45 am

More work is required to settle the detailed arrangements for that body. As a first step towards securing the best possible approach, we have invited our Executive Colleagues to nominate representatives to a project board. That board, which will work closely with an Executive subcommittee to scope the way ahead, will be asked to work within a tight timetable.

If Northern Ireland is to be a better and more prosperous place in which to live and work, the means of delivering the priority commitments in the Programme for Government must be established on a sound and equitable basis. The rating policy review examines the appropriate distribution of the revenue burden between households and businesses, and in each sector. The review will address the inequities and anomalies of the current system in order to produce a fairer and more equitable one. That will be of fundamental importance, should the future Executive and the next Assembly choose from 2004-05 onwards to raise more finance locally to fund reinvestment in our infrastructure through the borrowing power.

The First Minister, the other Ministers and I have often been asked in the Assembly to address the shortfall in public services by securing bonds or increasing our block baselines. The short-term position can be addressed by negotiating that package. We must now decide the extent to which we want to avail of the borrowing power. That decision must be based on priorities. Aside from our own sources of revenue, we shall explore all possible means of financing and providing affordable public services that deliver value for money and provide effective solutions to meet our needs. The use of public-private partnerships (PPPs) is a possible means of addressing the needs of our public services. Other options are provided by the creation of the strategic investment body and the possible use of borrowing financed by local revenues. In that new context we have examined all options carefully and objectively to develop a clear policy and to learn from national and international experiences. We will consider carefully the responses to

the Financing Our Future consultation exercise before settling an Executive policy on PPPs, and so forth.

Against that background, the position report highlights various issues that must be addressed as we begin to develop the Programme for Government and the Budget for 2003-04 and beyond. The Executive are determined to make a difference through the services and policies for which they are responsible. We want to break away from approaches that are no longer effective or relevant to the best interests of this community. Not surprisingly, despite a recent trend of rising spending in real terms, spending pressures have intensified. We must face up to significant backlogs in investment and the great demand on some programmes. For that reason we have emphasised in the position report the need to consider seriously and extensively the scope for reprioritising spending. We must focus more carefully and effectively on the Administration's top priorities, the region's most strategic requirements and the most pressing needs of our community.

The position report concludes with a short summary of the strategic issues faced by each Department. The summary highlights the many substantial demands being made on future spending power, together with a host of useful and desirable purposes for which additional resources could be allocated. However, many of the departmental pressures outlined in the report and in the individual position reports provided by Departments to their corresponding Committees will have to be absorbed through reprioritisation in a departmental budget, or simply not be met. Nevertheless, as we move to develop our Programme for Government and Budget, we must consider some of the strategic issues faced by the Executive.

In agriculture, key challenges include progressing the work of the vision group and ensuring that Northern Ireland's views are represented effectively in negotiations on the reform of the common agricultural policy.

In education, consideration must be given to the future reorganisation of post-primary education following the Burns review, though we do not expect that there will be any significant expenditure implications in the 2002 Budget. Other strategic studies to be either concluded or undertaken in that timescale include a curriculum review and an assessment of the local management of schools (LMS) common funding formula.

There is a need to implement strategies to address long-term unemployment, to improve adult literacy and to meet the changing skills needs of the local economy. We must enable the economy to respond and to increase employment through business expansion and inward investment. Increased participation in education and training, especially by those at the bottom of the economic and social ladder, can have significant economic and social impact. Progress has been made locally on that through the student support review, but more must be done, not least in further education.

The creation of Invest Northern Ireland (INI) provides new opportunities for us to facilitate the development of large and small businesses that can compete and win business in global markets and in the face of changing consumer demands. However, INI will face several strategic and operational pressures as it seeks to implement new strategies and to establish new relationships and methods of operation, particularly in the areas of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Our agenda for modernising the devolved Administration and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery is also wide and challenging. Key initiatives will be developed and implemented in the areas of public procurement, Government office accommodation and e-government. We will also implement the review of public administration and determine our policy framework for public-private partnerships following the current consultation exercise.

Health and personal social services continue to demand our attention. The acute hospitals review and the measures needed to address capacity problems in the acute sector, including winter pressures and waiting lists, remain the most significant issues. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will shortly issue a consultation paper on the proposed way forward.

We must introduce a large volume of EU environmental Directives to Northern Ireland legislation and implement them through monitoring and enforcement. If the risk of infraction proceedings is to be reduced, it is essential for work on EU Directives to be further advanced. We also want to modernise the planning framework to ensure that that development takes place in line with the principles of sustainable development and that it can contribute to a quality environment and meet economic and social aspirations.

The regional development strategy has outlined the strategic planning framework for the spatial development of Northern Ireland and is designed to shape our social, economic and environmental well-being between now and 2025. The ten-year regional transportation strategy is an important component of the regional development strategy. Consultation on the proposed transportation strategy was recently completed, and we must consider its implications.

Key challenges for the Water Service include the development of a leakage strategy and a water efficiency plan. Considerable investment in water and sewerage infrastructure is needed to secure a proper service for the public. That will also ensure that we comply with EU Directives on water quality and waste water standards.

To fulfil our social agenda, we will continue to drive forward the welfare reform and modernisation programme, keeping pace with similar developments in Great Britain. In line with targets in the Programme for Government, strategies for neighbourhood renewal, the Belfast regener-

ation initiative and regional town centre reinvigoration are emerging.

We also want to focus on culture, arts and leisure issues, including consideration of the future role of the public library service. Several reviews have been planned during the 2002 Budget period, including an examination of museums and galleries and a community arts review.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will implement several strategic measures. They include the arrangements for the appointment of a commissioner for children and young people; a children's strategy; a new community relations strategy; and work to implement the commitments and actions identified in the victims strategy.

I hope that those remarks have helped to contextualise the important work that the Assembly will undertake in the summer when it scrutinises and reviews the Executive position report. We accept that the timetable is tight, but that is a necessity. However, as the First Minister made clear, it is important that there be debate in Committees and between Members on the issues that the position report highlights. It is also important that this debate translate into comments and suggestions that can inform the Executive's work in the coming months so that the Programme for Government and the Budget can be developed.

The First Minister mentioned the Programme for Government's role in building the basis of a new democratic society. The philosopher John Dewey said that "democracy is born in conversation". Conversation and debate are needed in the Assembly and elsewhere. We assure Members that Ministers, their Departments and the Executive will consider carefully their comments and suggestions. Those comments will be used to inform the Programme for Government and the Budget for 2003-04 and beyond.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been advised that copies of the statement were not made available to Members before its delivery. The Ministers will be aware that Standing Order 18(1) provides that if a written copy of a statement has not been made available to Members, an explanation will be given to the Assembly. Will the Ministers clarify that now?

The First Minister: We are sorry that the statement was not available in advance. However, the position report was available to all MLAs this morning. The statement was delayed because of the long bank holiday weekend, which meant that the final revisions were done early this morning. I had the final revision in my hand only 10 minutes before making the statement. I am sorry that the printer did not give us enough copies for one to be put in every Member's hand before the statement was delivered.

Mr Dallat: Will the Ministers go a step further and tell the House whether there is an unallocated nest egg? If so, how do they propose to spend that nest egg?

The First Minister: There are monitoring rounds at various times of the year, depending on departmental expenditures. With regard to a nest egg, the only thing to which I can refer the Member is the table on page 21 of the Executive position report. That table sets out how we arrive at the baseline, and the significant figure that refers to the Chancellor's Budget additions is at the bottom of the table. Those Barnett-related additions have become available as a result of the Budget, but have not yet been allocated formally.

The Budget that the Assembly agreed in December 2001 set indicative minimal figures for Departments. That involved holding back sufficient funds at the start of Budget 2002 to provide a clear starting point for the Budget and an opportunity to address local priorities. We adopted that approach in anticipation of limited increases in public expenditure so that we could retain some flexibility. The Executive have recognised that it may be necessary to restore some of the amounts that have been held back, but resources are not available to restore all those amounts.

Mr Paisley Jnr: No nice gloss can be put on this bad news story for Northern Ireland today. It means taking a scalpel to Departments and cutting back resources. Ten million pounds will be cut from the Housing Executive and £9 million will be cut from public transport. Despite there being a rates increase, £4.4 million will be cut from local government services and £21 million will be cut from the budget for recurrent schools' problems. It is little wonder that there are 100 redundant schoolteachers in my North Antrim constituency.

12.00

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

I wish to consider the policies and resource issues identified under the section for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Again, as regards policy, there is no agreed version of rural proofing, which is very disappointing — the Department has had some time to put that in place. There is a proposed overall decrease of £8.8 million and that will affect the two most important areas: rural development, which will be cut by £1 million; and food and farming. Are those cuts not inconsistent with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's stated aims? The cuts will have an immediate impact on 40% of the population. More than 40% of the population lives in rural areas, and yet the rural development programme is being reduced.

I am also disappointed to see that the Government are —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his second question?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Yes. The Government have shown that the vision group needs resources, but no resources have been identified for it. I am also disappointed that there

has been a change in the language used. The first statement mentioned an end to the beef export ban —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I realise that the Member has already asked two questions. If he has a third question, I would like him to ask it instead of making a statement.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am coming to the question. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister explain why there has been a change in language between their first statement, which considered the issue of an end to the beef export ban, and the current report, which calls for a relaxation of the ban? Why has there been a change in the language used? Are they no longer committed to achieving an end to the beef export ban?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has asked the three questions.

The Deputy First Minister: I return to the Deputy Speaker's question of why our statement was not available. Preparing and clearing joint statements is more difficult for the First Minister and me than it is for individual Ministers because we must agree who will make certain points so as to minimise repetition and maximise complementarity. It is also important to remember that the Executive position report came before the Assembly only last week. The Assembly receives the report from the Executive hot off the presses, which really is a sign of just how transparent the new arrangements are. What is being published is exactly what came before the Executive.

I do not know how many times we shall have to explain the nature of the exercise to the Member and the people in his party. This is a position report, drawn from Departments' assessments of their priorities and pressures. The Departments have consulted and engaged with Committees already, and there will now be significant consultation with Committees. This report is in advance of Budget planning; we are setting out the issues before the draft Budget in September.

With regard to the Member's nonsense about proposed cuts to various programmes, I refer him to what the First Minister and I said about the indicative minima set out in last year's Budget. The indicative Budget for 2003-04, which we introduced in December 2001, set indicative minima so that we would not commit all the resources in the indicative Budget for 2003-04.

Who told us not to automatically commit all the money to the Departments because that would make them think that they need not do anything? Members told us that. Members told us to take £10 million from every Department to make more money available for priorities. We managed to take £125 million from the indicative Budget for priorities, including, possibly, the priorities that the Member mentioned. Who agreed with that approach to indicative minima? All the Ministers agreed to taking £125 million from next year's Budget

so that it could be available for what would then be our priorities, after full consultation by the Executive, the Committees and the Assembly.

That is a good government story, not a bad news story.

Mr Maskey: I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for presenting the report; however, the Members did not see their comprehensive statement beforehand. I welcome their comments that we need time to examine and debate the report. We must consider properly the many serious and fundamental questions that it poses, and both Ministers invited the Committees and the Departments to do so. I look forward to taking that opportunity.

The needs and effectiveness evaluations represent, for the Departments concerned, around 75% of planned public expenditure. How soon shall we be able to see the conclusions of those evaluations, which will determine Members' budgetary considerations and the financial implications?

How do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister envisage the operation of the strategic investment body? The agency is a welcome development, but who will hold the decision-making power? Will it lie with the Executive, or could it be held by the strategic investment body, which would not be fully democratic?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for acknowledging that the report was available, although Members may have found it a challenge to absorb its 141 pages in the time that was available before the statement.

We presented the report as quickly as possible to maximise the time in which to debate it. The report was presented to the Executive only last week. Time is constrained by the Budget timetable: we shall not know the outcome of the spending review 2002 until July, and we shall have to start to take decisions on the Budget in September or October.

The timescale for needs and effectiveness studies will be constrained also. The studies are in their final stages and will be discussed by the Administration, among the Departments, and between the Deputy First Minister, the relevant Ministers and myself, culminating in decisions by the Executive. We shall then have to consider the budgetary implications. The timescale will, therefore, be extremely tight, but the Administration will want to have the broadest possible discussion — internally and with others.

We are well aware of the sensitivities that Mr Maskey highlighted as regards the strategic investment body, and he is not alone in raising those points. Another party, which takes a slightly detached position with regard to the Administration, raised the same issues. That is partly why we have invited the parties that participate in the Administration to nominate Members to the project board of the strategic investment body. We are glad that

parties have made nominations, and we hope that their involvement will enable the strategic investment board to proceed.

The strategic investment body will be crucial to the delivery of the Administration's programme — the key word is "delivery". It will seek solutions to financial problems. The Executive will make decisions on the programmes and priorities, while the strategic investment body will exist to seek solutions, and to implement and deliver them. The practice of that structure remains to be seen.

Mr Close: To put it on record, I join with other Members in expressing disappointment that the statement was not available before the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister rose to speak. It is not an exception; it is happening more often that Members are obliged to respond to a statement without having it to hand. I hope that my interpretation of the reason suggested for the delay by the Deputy First Minister is wrong; that it was due to a lack of agreement as to what they would say. I hope that that was not the real reason. No doubt he will correct me if I am wrong.

In the statement, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister correctly states the need to identify more closely the reforms that might be required and the outcomes that might be achieved from such reforms. I welcome that. I want to know when the Executive propose to give Members some idea of what outcomes are proposed from the different reforms. For example, as regards the review of public administration, are the Executive aiming towards the type of resources that could be released from a proper review of public administration? I could repeat that comment with respect to the other ongoing reviews, such as on procurement et cetera. It would be useful to have a quantifiable figure that we knew was possible to achieve through saving and making better use of resources.

My understanding is that needs and effectiveness evaluations act as a tool to advise the Executive on policy and priorities. As they have not yet been completed, I have difficulty in knowing exactly what value to place on a document that develops the Programme for Government. If we are not yet sure about the outcome of the needs and effectiveness evaluation, there may be some flaws in the document. Perhaps the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister could elucidate.

My final question refers to the reinvestment and reform initiative. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister assure the House that negotiations are ongoing with the Treasury to ensure that we are not getting a pig in a poke, and that these gift horses will not have bad breath and cause problems in future years with our departmental expenditure limits across Departments through capital charges, cost depreciation and the cost of making good?

The Deputy First Minister: I was always warned not to look gift horses in the mouth; now, I seem to be being advised to smell them in the mouth.

The delay was not a result of disagreement as to what was to be said, we were trying to ensure that we have a reasonably coherent and balanced statement. In answering the questions, the key point is the position report itself. In our statement, we have summarised and highlighted aspects of the position report and not used any different inflections other than those in the position report itself.

The Member asked several questions. We hope to have stage one of the review of public administration completed by next March. In many ways, work in stage one will determine whether we can indicate amounts of money that might be saved or the targets that should be put in place. Given that many in the House said that they wanted the review to have as much independence as possible and not be dictated to or constrained simply by Ministers and the Executive, we did not think it appropriate, or a good basis, to fix an amount of money that we wanted to save, or outline a particular way. The review of public administration is an open review. I am glad that people want to ensure that that review leaves us in a situation where less money is spent on structures and systems and more of our public expenditure goes to services.

We definitely want to achieve that, and it was one of the underlying motives behind the review.

12.15 pm

There is never a time when negotiations with the Treasury stop. There are different aspects of the reinvestment and reform initiative that we shall continue to deal with, and there are other aspects that we shall return to the Treasury on. We shall not make any headway with the Treasury if we do not start to play our part in the initiative and to take advantage of our opportunities. That includes setting up the strategic investment body that will provide financing solutions to meet policy needs and project priorities determined by Ministers and the Executive.

The Assembly, the Executive and Ministers will commission projects and spending priorities, and the strategic investment body will deliver the best financing solutions to ensure that we spend money to meet as many of those needs as we can. We are engaged in developing the Programme for Government, and in sharing it with the Assembly and the public. It is an ongoing reform. The position report is a pre-draft Budget consultation document, and there will be further consultation following the draft Budget. The position report is shared with the Assembly, its Committees and a wide range of community interests. As far as key community interests are concerned, it is an exercise in joined-up government, joined-in government and joined-with government.

Ms McWilliams: The Executive's position report states that the Executive are scheduled to receive five of

the needs and effectiveness evaluations in June and July, and we are already in June. Will the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister say which evaluations will be reporting this month, so that Members can do some work before the recess? The deadline will be the end of August or September, and we must have the evaluations as soon as possible.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are inviting Executive Colleagues to nominate a representative to the project board. What does "representative" mean? Does that mean an MLA, a party member, a Minister or someone else? If democracy is based on having conversations — to paraphrase the John Dewey comments at the end of the Deputy First Minister's statement — why is it limited to representatives of the Executive parties, given the difficulties that the Executive face in getting collaboration from all the parties on it?

Would the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider sending the report to the Civic Forum? It would be more than glad to be consulted. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: I have no problem with sending the position report to the Civic Forum. Our concluding comments showed that we want to distribute the position report as widely as possible. The object of the exercise is to develop discussion and debate.

The position report gives Colleagues a snapshot of the position immediately before the Chancellor makes his decisions on the spending review 2002, so that it will be easier for them to work out what the possible impact of the spending review 2002 will be.

The needs and effectiveness studies are being finalised. The Member said that the evaluations are scheduled to report in June or July. I hope that they will all be with us in June, and that the deadline will not become July.

Ms McWilliams will gather from my remarks that we expect to get the reports soon. Significant discussion and debate will then have to take place within the Administration, and we shall have to consider precisely how to act on the reports.

We were not prescriptive about who the parties should nominate to the project board of the strategic investment body. We approached the parties in the Administration because the implementation of the decisions that are made, departmentally and collectively, will relate to the Administration's work. It is entirely open to the parties concerned to make nominations. I think that I am right when I say that we have received three such nominations.

We were not prescriptive because we wanted the board to be open to a party, if it wishes, to nominate someone who has particular expertise in financial matters — financing programmes et cetera. It will be open to parties to nominate an MLA, if they so wish. We do not consider that failure to do so will in any way detract

from accountability to the Assembly. Ministers will make decisions, and they are accountable to the Assembly. The strategic investment body will examine the most cost-effective way to deliver those decisions and solutions. That will require a degree of expertise, but it will also require the parties in the Executive to work together, which is why we look to them to form the basis of the project board.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the First and the Deputy First Ministers' policy statement on the approach to government. I also welcome their intention to have an innovative approach to managing and financing the infrastructure programme, and note that a similar approach has been adopted south of the border. Can we be assured of collaboration?

The Deputy First Minister: Mrs Courtney has made an important point by emphasising what must be done to manage infrastructure. We have often heard in the Chamber about the historic deficit that we have inherited with regard to investment in infrastructure and other key public service fabrics. That is one of the reasons why we negotiated a package with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that will allow us to undertake significant investment programmes. As that involves our capacity to undertake capital expenditure far in excess of what would have been possible under existing funding lines and current patterns, it is right that we look at an innovative way to manage that new level of expenditure and consider a strong means of driving investment on such a scale. For that reason, we opted for the concept of a strategic investment body. By coincidence, people came up with the idea of establishing a similar body in the South to drive a significant infrastructure investment programme — proof that great minds think alike. Taking advantage of facilities such as the common chapter and using the devices available to us through the North/South Ministerial Council, it is right to compare notes where possible, and to co-ordinate investments and co-operate where we can. That is particularly fitting, given that both bodies will want to consider not only how they can use the moneys from managed public expenditure, but to see what other moneys can be levered in from elsewhere. Such money might come from not only the domestic private sector but from further afield. It would make sense for the two bodies to know what each other is doing and to ensure that our strategic investment plans, especially for infrastructure on the entire island, complement each other and are well co-ordinated and well matched to ensure that everyone gets the best possible return on that significant investment opportunity.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is not surprising, given the cuts suggested in the report, that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister did not release the statement before the debate. I trust that Members will have picked up on the details of the report's figures, in respect of the potential disastrous impact on support to

district council resource grants if the figures are reflected in the final Budget. The combination of not carrying forward the 2002-03 grant levels and the impact of the indicative minima would represent a drop in overall grant from £20 million to £13.6 million in 2003-04.

I have the unanimous support of the Committee for the Environment when I say that such a cut would undoubtedly have a major impact on district rates and on the services available in many district council areas. As resource grants only apply to the poorest councils, I ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to explain the justice of such cuts, as they blatantly contradict the Executive's policy of targeting social need. Will the Ministers give a commitment to the House to re-examine the issue as soon as possible? A sizeable increase in the £105 million to the Department of the Environment would be marginal in the Northern Ireland block grant of some £7 billion, but would have a significant impact on the protection of the environment. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should seriously examine those issues.

The First Minister: We are aware that there are problems on councils, especially on environmental issues that arise from EU Directives. The position report provides for a general resources grant, which consists of a derating element compensating for loss of rate income due to the derating of properties, and a resources element. In the latter part, a total of £50 million has been allocated for distribution in 2002-03, determined by a statutory formula.

However, the Member must bear in mind the indicative minima that the Deputy First Minister explained in his first response. They involved an initial withholding of £125 million across the Departments. If I remember correctly, it is the Member's ministerial Colleague who has talked about the need to pare and, indeed, withhold more money from Departments. One must question the consistency in those matters.

As the Member knows, this is a progress report, which sets out the position as it is at the moment. It is not the draft Budget. There will be plenty of opportunity for further discussion and consultation. It ill befits a Member who belongs to a party that talks about the need to cut left, right and centre, and the amount that can be cut, to come and complain when there are attempts to find flexibility. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

EMPLOYMENT BILL

Second Stage

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Employment Bill (NIA 11/01) be agreed.

Before explaining the substantive provisions of the Bill, I shall set those provisions in context. Improved quality of life is a key issue for all. We each have competing demands on our time, and we have to juggle priorities in our social, domestic and professional lives. The traditionally held view of success is that it can only be achieved by adopting a working culture of long hours and hard graft. However, the conviction is gradually spreading that that is not necessarily the case.

Instead, it is increasingly being recognised that greater productivity is achieved by employers and employees working together in effective partnership. This is about developing people's knowledge and skills and about innovation and finding better and smarter ways to work. Those are essential from the point of view of employers and employees — especially employees with young children.

12.30 pm

A huge segment of the population is involved in rearing young children. In Northern Ireland, 17% of households have at least one child under the age of six. That equates to 120,000 people who are parents of a young child or of a child with a disability. Those parents have a key role to play in the economy, as their children will one day.

It should not be necessary for anyone to feel that they have to choose between being a good parent and being a good employee. The Employment Bill addresses the real-life problems of work and parenting. It introduces a series of measures designed to help employees balance their family and employment responsibilities while taking account of the need for businesses to compete in an increasingly competitive market. Specifically, the Bill provides for new rights to paid time off for fathers and adoptive parents, extends the amount of paid and unpaid leave available to new mothers, and gives a new right for parents of young children to request flexible working conditions. These measures mirror provisions in the Employment Bill currently before Parliament at Westminster and will ensure that our employers and employees have the same family-friendly employment rights as are enjoyed by their Great Britain counterparts.

Other related measures, such as revised paternity pay arrangements that correspond to social security provisions in the GB Employment Bill, are included in the social security Bill being brought forward by the Department for Social Development.

The Department for Employment and Learning carried out extensive public consultation on the proposals in the Bill, and they received widespread support. A summary of the responses received is on the Department's web site.

Social inclusion and equality of opportunity are at the heart of the Executive's Programme for Government. Advancing the social inclusion agenda is also a key priority for my Department, and I am pleased to say that an assessment of the equality impact of the proposals in the Employment Bill has confirmed that they will have a positive impact on promoting equality of opportunity. For example, they will enable single parents to participate more fully at work by recognising the particular difficulties that they face. I am sure Members will join me in welcoming this.

We need to avoid, where possible, imposing burdens on businesses. There will be some costs to employers, for instance, in setting up systems to administer the new arrangements and facilitate requests for flexible working, but there will also be advantages. Members will be aware of the difficulty for businesses of recruiting and retaining skilled staff. Research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reveals that the cost to an employer of filling a vacancy is, on average, £3,500. To lose a trained and skilled person because no effort was made to try to accommodate his parenting responsibilities does not make good business sense.

The Work-Life Balance campaign managed by the Department for Employment and Learning has demonstrated the benefits to business of enabling employees to achieve and maintain a better balance between work and other aspects of their lives. Employers are discovering for themselves the wide-ranging benefits from working with employees to find mutually agreeable solutions tailored to particular circumstances. Businesses that do that tend to attract talented people, and they have a more motivated workforce with reduced stress and sick leave and a lower staff turnover. These are the very real benefits as a consequence of addressing employees' needs as a whole, not just at the workplace.

I will take a few moments to comment on the core elements of the Bill. With regard to paternity leave and pay, the Bill provides for a new right to two weeks' paid paternity leave following the arrival of a new child. That will allow new fathers more time to care for the child and build a relationship with the child and offer support to the mother. The payment mechanism will be standardised with that of maternity pay, thus making for simplicity. In Northern Ireland, around 12,000 employed fathers will qualify each year for the new right. However, many employers already voluntarily provide paid paternity leave. The costs associated with paternity leave will be low for most employers, as the majority will be reimbursed. As with maternity and adoption pay, businesses qualifying for small employer's relief may recoup 100% of paternity

leave pay, plus an additional 5% compensation for administration costs.

The Bill has the effect of simplifying the arrangements for maternity leave. That was a key priority for employers — particularly small employers — who responded to the public consultation. Most of the changes will be implemented by subordinate legislation. Ordinary maternity leave will be extended from 18 weeks to 26 weeks with the option of additional unpaid maternity leave of 26 weeks. Members will welcome anything that can be done to make the system easier for women and their employers to understand. Increasing the amount of leave available to new mothers will provide them with greater choice about when to return to work. Enabling mothers to take a longer time off work allows them to return when they are stronger, and it allows them more time to secure appropriate childcare arrangements. At the margin, that will enable some mothers to remain in employment, with recruitment and training savings for their employers. Detailed arrangements for the changes will be set out in the Regulations, but it is appropriate to mention them now in the context of the suite of measures planned to support working parents.

For the first time, under the provisions of the Bill, adoptive parents will have the right to paid time off work to care for their children. The introduction of paid adoption leave is a valuable step in recognising the important role that adoptive parents play. An adoptive parent will be able to take 26 weeks' paid leave and 26 weeks' unpaid leave, which is the same as women on maternity leave. As with maternity and paternity pay, small employers will recoup 100% of adoption pay plus additional compensation for administration costs.

With regard to flexible working, I have already commented on the need to ensure that the world of work allows people to combine home and employment responsibilities. Flexible working arrangements are viewed as a potential means of relieving pressures that arise from trying to combine family life and work. I feel strongly that flexible working has a role to play in enhancing working arrangements in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to note that the majority of responses to the consultation agreed with the proposal to legislate to give parents of young children the right to request flexible working conditions.

I have said that I appreciate that employers may have concerns about the potential financial burden that the measures may entail, and I accept that there will be some costs for employers in processing applications and accommodating requests. Businesses that have not yet explored the potential of flexible working hours will need time to familiarise themselves with the processes involved in considering requests from staff. Small businesses, in particular, will need assistance in implementing the proposals. I intend to ensure that my Department addresses

their needs through the provision of comprehensive guidance.

It is difficult to estimate the extent of likely uptake of the right to seek flexible working hours. I fully expect costs to reduce significantly as the principles of a work/life balance become imbedded in our business culture. I anticipate that such practices will become commonplace as employers adapt to the needs of modern society. The availability of the new right may well contribute to the development of innovative ways of working, rather than always accepting traditional practices. For example, new technology provides rapidly increasing opportunities for different approaches. Change is an inevitable process in all our lives, and it should be welcomed, not feared.

A change of mindset should be encouraged in business, with employers being open to new ways of organising work and using new technology. Communication between employers, managers and employees is a key component to good employment relations. The new flexible working conditions do not oblige employers to introduce flexible working arrangements. I recognise that some small firms may find it impossible to accommodate such requests. However, employers are being asked to consider carefully the possibility of meeting the requests of staff. The employee has a duty to consider how the employer might accommodate the request for flexible working without any detrimental impact on the business. That is where dialogue, good employment relationships and open communication between employers, managers and employees are vital. Ultimately, the Bill must be viewed not only from the narrow perspective of its impact on employment rights, but in the wider social context of its potential to contribute to a better society in Northern Ireland.

I firmly believe that businesses must address work/life balance issues if they are to succeed in the modern economy. Providing support for working parents is not only about retaining their skills and experience in the workforce, it also creates more opportunity for mothers and fathers to spend more time with their children at key points in their lives. As a working mother, I know only too well the challenges that parents face as they try to reconcile their home responsibilities with the demands of their professional lives. The Employment Bill will provide parents with greater choice, in turn leading to a more flexible, motivated workforce. I am confident that by encouraging employers to put the work/life balance on the agenda, the provisions of the Bill will contribute to Northern Ireland's business moving forward in a modern, socially aware twenty-first century.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. There have been several Committee actions on issues addressed in the Bill. For example, in a letter to the Minister on 21 January, we stated that the Committee was broadly in agreement with proposals outlined in the

Work and Parents Taskforce's 'About Time: Flexible Working' report, produced for the Department of Trade and Industry in London. The Committee also had no objections to Statutory Rule 135/2002, the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002, which enabled parents of children born or placed for adoption up to five years before 15 December 1999 to take parental leave between now and 31 March 2005.

The Committee notes the broad principles of the Employment Bill, which have been outlined by the Minister: first, the proposals to attempt to retain working parents in the labour market as a key element in the strategy; secondly, the commitment to a work/life balance, and thirdly, the proposal to introduce rights for working parents in Northern Ireland that will match those provided by the forthcoming Employment Bill in Great Britain.

I may have to declare an interest, as some of the issues have become of personal interest to me in the five weeks since I became a parent for the first time. Several MLAs and many others in the labour market could, and hopefully will, benefit from some of the provisions.

Some considerations that are likely to be taken at Committee Stage include the position of low-paid workers, self-employed workers and other non-employees, the costs of the provisions to other workers, and issues of possible discrimination. The Committee is also likely to consider the cost of the Employment Bill to employers. It wants to ensure that compliance costs for the corporate sector are kept as low as possible. Ideally, flexibility arrangements between parents and their employers should be made by mutual agreement. The regulatory touch should be light, as in the GB legislation. The Committee has also noted a new report, issued in May 2002 by the Better Regulation Task Force in London, which calls for a review of the overall effects of the employment legislation on firms.

12.45 pm

The Committee notes the parity with the Westminster Bill, which the Minister has rightly pointed out. The Department for Employment and Learning's Employment Bill is intended to come into effect simultaneously with the GB Employment Bill on 6 April 2003. The provisions of the Department for Employment and Learning's Bill correspond with clauses in the GB Bill with regard to paternity leave and adoption leave, statutory paternity pay and statutory adoption pay, administration and enforcement of pay, rights during and after paternity leave, and flexible working. Other provisions in the GB Bill are not included in this Bill. The Committee noted — as the Minister also pointed out — that the Department for Social Development's social security Bill, which will be progressed simultaneously with the Employment Bill, includes provision for statutory maternity pay in relation

to rate, period and entitlement, maternity allowance rate, work-focused interviews for partners, and use of information for or relating to employment training, all of which correspond to clauses in the GB Bill.

I welcome the opportunity of moving the Bill forward to Committee Stage.

Madam Deputy Speaker: May I take this opportunity to congratulate the new father?

Dr Birnie: Thank you.

Mr Dallat: The issues outlined by the Minister are fundamental to building a society in which the rights of all workers are respected and protected by employment laws. Scenes of mothers who have not fully recovered from giving birth leaving carrycots at the homes of childminders in the early hours are inappropriate in a modern society. It is not fair to those mothers and it is not in the best interest of their children, whose umbilical cords have perhaps not yet healed. That can hardly represent the best circumstances for employers.

The SDLP hopes that the Bill will address the difficulties that arise when parents have to cope with work and parenting, and believes that it will address some of the fundamental issues of equality of opportunity and social inclusion. However, my only concern is that the new legislation might impose an unfair burden on small and medium-sized businesses, which do not have the same resources as large organisations. We must be reassured that there will be advantages for those employers. I am pleased that the Minister has outlined some of those in her introductory remarks.

I am particularly pleased that paternity leave has been built into the legislation. However, is two weeks' paid paternity leave sufficient for a father to contribute meaningfully to parenthood? What happens if the mother is suffering from post-natal depression and needs the father's support for longer?

However, maternity leave is the core issue. Although an extension from 18 weeks to 26 weeks is welcome — with an additional 26 weeks without pay included in the proposals — there is still inequality. That is particularly true of low-income and one-parent units. It is now better understood that differences between children with regard to academic achievement begin long before they reach school age. The Assembly must be mindful of that when provision is made for extended maternity leave, especially if children have special needs or are not born with a silver spoon in their mouth.

One of the greatest injustices done to working mothers in the last decade by some employers, especially some larger employers in the retail sector, has been to compel them to work antisocial hours when they should have been at home with their children. Does the Bill address that problem? Have the details been worked out? I ask again that small employers be fully supported when

implementing the legislation so that they are not driven out, to the delight of the multinationals.

Employees should have every opportunity to update their training so that their work can be addressed in different ways. They should always be able to seek jobs that are more appropriate to their needs while they are parenting. I welcome the Minister's statement, especially the recognition afforded to adoptive parents.

Can the Minister assure us that the Bill will genuinely advance the cause of equality and social inclusion among people who require it most? They are responsible for bringing the next generation into the world. The Government have a responsibility to address those people's needs when they are most vulnerable and to protect them through legislation.

The Bill is going in the right direction. I support the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Carrick): Before I comment on the Second Stage of the Employment Bill, I must declare an interest in that my wife is an employer with a small retail business in the Craigavon area.

I recognise the positive aspects of the Bill, given the social contexts in which it is brought forward, especially modern domestic arrangements and the objective of establishing a more realistic work/life balance with the creation of family-friendly work practices. I also recognise the aspects that mark parity with legislation in other parts of the United Kingdom. However, having said that, other matters must be closely examined in the Committee Stage, because they could have an adverse effect on the performance and, indeed, the viability of some small businesses here. For instance, in March 2002 the final report on flexible working of the Work and Parents Taskforce said that

"Employers will have to manage the high number of requests for flexible working and will have to rearrange work patterns where parents are granted flexible working. That will impact on small businesses in particular, which usually have less flexibility than larger organisations. It is likely that there will be increased management costs both in dealing with requests, appeals and industrial tribunals and in managing work."

That highlights the increased costs. Indeed, the regulatory impact assessment shows that the total impact on employers here is estimated at between £1.6 million and £3.8 million in recurring annual costs. There are additional start-up costs of between £200,000 and £800,000, so there will be additional overheads for small businesses here that they can ill afford.

The Committee has already said that many small businesses and their proprietors are unpaid tax collectors already. They operate the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) scheme for National Insurance and income tax. Recently, the tax credit scheme was imposed on employers, and the operation of statutory sick pay and statutory maternity pay and the

collection of student loan repayments are additional administrative burdens on the small employer. We must be careful that we do not impose the final straw that breaks the camel's back.

The Minister must listen carefully to what the small businesses say on the subject. They operate in a highly competitive world, and, in the global economy, they suffer from competition from multinationals. However, they are the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy, and we do not want to impose additional burdens that will impact adversely on their ability to trade.

Will the Minister elaborate on her statement, published in 'The Irish News' on Wednesday 29 May, that

"The costs in relation to the adoption, paternity and maternity provisions are not overly burdensome, and can be recouped in full by small businesses"?

The House should have her explanation of that statement on record.

Will the Minister tell us what she thinks about the inequality of a system where people who look after young children have the right to request flexible working, but those who care for elderly parents or relatives do not? That issue is of particular concern, given that we have an ageing population. Does the Minister have plans to include paid leave for those who must look after a terminally ill family member, for example?

Does the Minister have any plans to address the inequalities faced by the self-employed? Self-employed people have children and families too, yet there seems to be no provision in the Bill for them. How will they be gathered into the net?

These matters will be subjected to close scrutiny at the Committee Stage. Members of the Committee have asked questions during the discussions that led up to today's debate. I trust that, when the Bill reaches Committee Stage, the Minister will take cognisance of the valid case that will be presented.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Two further Members wish to speak in the debate, and the Minister will make a winding-up speech. As it will not be possible to conclude the debate in the time available, the Assembly will suspend for lunch and will resume business at 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Bill, although its title is something of a misnomer. The Bill concerns the equality rights of working parents, and it might have been better named “The Parenting Employment Rights Bill”. The Bill also concerns parity, and I have serious reservations about parity Bills. Contrary to what some Members may believe, we are not as British as Finchley, nor could social and economic circumstances here be compared to those in Finchley. Our situation is different in many ways. To begin with, I understand that our birth rate is the highest in Europe. Our social and economic structures are different.

That said, however, I welcome the broad principles of the Bill. It increases paid maternity leave for working mothers to 26 weeks, and provides two weeks’ paid paternity leave. I should have liked paternity leave to be extended, especially where more than one child is involved. I also welcome parity for natural and adoptive parents.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, in respect of flexible working requests, we could start with the Assembly and all Departments. The legislation could, however, be more specific and a little stronger. It allows parents of children under six years old to request flexible working, but not to compel its provision. The Bill does not state that employers must comply. I ask the Minister to explain what options have been considered for employers. Giving parents the right to work reduced hours for as long as they wish following maternity leave, and the payment of maternity pay directly to mothers, must be a step in the right direction, but the legislation is weighted heavily in the employer’s favour.

Neither does the Bill distinguish between small and large employers. It is not clear how small employers can recoup the administration costs involved. Will the additional burden on employers encourage discrimination against pregnant women in job opportunities? Those are serious questions, because the track record of discrimination against pregnant women has not been fully examined or properly recorded. The Bill is not clear about maternity and paternity leave for parents on training schemes or on fixed-term contracts.

Nevertheless, I welcome the Bill as a first step in the recognition of parental rights and the importance of creating a balance between work and home. It will certainly ease the anxiety of working parents during pregnancy, at childbirth and afterwards. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms McWilliams: I welcome the Bill with a sense of near déjà vu. So many of us who campaigned 25 years ago for such parental rights now face the Bill’s introduction when our children have grown up. It is important because many of us never thought that such legislation would

see the light of day. Obstacles were put in its path, especially by employers who felt that increasing regulation was a burden to their business. It should not be seen in that way. Mr Carrick said that those points were made in 1970 against the introduction of the Equal Pay Act and in 1975 against the Sex Discrimination Act. It was argued that equal work for equal value would cripple businesses to the extent that they would go out of business. Far from it; we have been able to recruit and retain more women in business.

I agree with Mary Nelis that the Bill’s title is rather drab and is something that the Health Committee may consider revising. A problem with the devolved Assembly is that it gives innovative and original Bills generic titles that do not describe their intentions. Therefore, it would be interesting if Members could decide on a short title that truly explains that the Bill will legislate for parenting rights.

Members referred to statutory maternity pay and the introduction of statutory adoption pay and statutory paternity pay. It may not have been possible for those who financially costed the Bill to include the reduction of statutory sick pay, but Members must consider it. Given that the proposed rights, especially 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, were not available in the past, employees took that time off as sick leave. Often, to get a certificate from their doctor that would allow them to claim statutory sick pay, they had to find an illness with symptoms similar to their own. I look forward to the days when such practice is no longer necessary. That measure may create a saving, although others may see it as a cost.

I welcome that another saving has been recognised. There has been an annual reduction of £2.45 million in recruitment costs due to the predicted increase in the number of mothers who return to work after pregnancy. Therefore, although there are costs, there are benefits. As we push through the legislation, it will be important for us to monitor whether statutory sick payments are reduced as a consequence.

I have one concern. Will the Minister outline the practical reasons why those who choose intercountry adoptions are not entitled to the same rights as those who choose domestic adoptions? Members need to know those reasons in order to explain them to people who discover that they are not entitled to the same rights. The term “intercountry adoptions” is more applicable than the word “abroad”. The Health Committee recently considered legislation on intercountry adoptions, and it found that those adoptive parents do not see their children as coming from abroad.

I hope that employers will comply with the legislation. The Equality Commission states that most complaints come from pregnant women who are not given their entitlement under current legislation. The Equality Commission says that it spends many hours dealing with such complaints, many of which result in tribunals. In

order that the public and those who run small businesses are not overly alarmed by the introduction of such welcome legislation, will the Minister state when the comprehensive guidance will be available? It is important that it is available as soon as possible.

The Bill is welcome. I am pleased that the Assembly is finally recognising the role of all parents — natural and adoptive. For many years, those who could not have children and therefore adopted children, whom they reared as though they were their own, were not entitled to the same rights as natural parents. It is good that Northern Ireland has introduced real rights for adoptive parents.

Ms Hanna: Members have referred to a wide range of employment issues. The Bill's core principle is that it is important to realise that what is good for employees can also be good for employers. The best employers offer the best conditions for their workforces, and that is no coincidence.

Successful employers need valued, skilled and committed employees — as does the economy as a whole — and my Department's role is to spread that successful model throughout the economy.

Northern Ireland needs modern, productive workplaces that can meet the challenges of the new century. That is why the Bill is aimed at helping parents to balance the competing demands of work and family, so that they have a choice of continuing their careers if they wish; increasing maternity leave; introducing paid leave for fathers and adopting parents; simplifying the procedures to claim those payments; and giving parents of young children the right to request working hours that will allow them to balance their professional and home lives more effectively.

The modern economy faces the potential long-term problem of needing to increase the supply of skilled and unskilled workers. Much of that supply could come from women, who, traditionally, have taken long, and often involuntary, absences from employment. Any provision that makes it easier for women to return to work should be welcomed and encouraged, as long as it is properly balanced. It is also important to recognise the key role that fathers play in raising their children.

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for his welcome of, and agreement with, the Bill. I assure him that we shall look into the issues in much greater detail at Committee Stage. Mr Dallat and Mr Carrick referred to the impact that the Bill would have on small businesses, and Mr Carrick specifically mentioned my press release of 20 May. I should explain that larger firms will be able to recoup 92% of maternity, paternity and adoption pay. Smaller businesses will be able to recoup the full amount of paternity and adoption pay, plus an additional 5% to cover administration costs.

It is difficult to estimate what the costs of flexible working would be, especially for small firms. However, I hope that the Bill will encourage employees and employers to reach sensible and mutually acceptable arrangements that will minimise the costs. As I mentioned, some of the costs will be offset by reductions in the cost of such matters as training, recruitment, and time off due to stress.

Mr Dallat queried whether two weeks' paid paternity leave was sufficient. The provision is intended to support the father at the time of the birth to allow him to become more involved in supporting the mother and caring for the new child. Two weeks is a balance between the interests of the employee and the employer. It will be necessary to keep the period of leave under review as we gain experience of how the provision works in practice. Of course, fathers may take up to four weeks' parental leave in a year, although it would be unpaid.

Mr Dallat queried the Bill's impact on low-income families. I presume that he is concerned about those fathers, or parents who adopt, who do not meet the earnings qualifications for statutory paternity pay. Relatively few fathers will not qualify for such pay. We must remember that the Bill is intended to help ease the problems of combining work and parenting. It does not seek to deal with the entire range of social security issues. Other forms of financial support, such as the new tax credits, will be available to working families in 2003. Of course, fathers who have the relevant continuous service with their employers will be able to take paternity leave, even if they do not qualify for paternity pay.

Mr Carrick asked about what I am doing to facilitate the work-life balance of individuals other than parents. I support flexibility in the workplace for all, but I see helping parents of younger children to achieve a better balance between the needs of their work and children as a priority. My Department continues to fund the national 'Work-Life Balance' campaign, which asks employers to consider the business benefits of enabling all their employees to achieve and maintain a better balance between work and other aspects of their lives.

Mrs Nelis also asked about small businesses, and I hope that I have answered that question. On the wider consultation, we came up with similar suggestions and proposals to those in Great Britain. Mrs Nelis also mentioned that the introduction of more family-friendly policies might have the unintended consequence of harming younger women's employment opportunities. However, I would be surprised if most employers did not opt to employ the best person for the job.

2.15 pm

Monica McWilliams spoke about the Bill's title. It may be possible to consider an addition to the title that would better describe what the Bill will do.

Children adopted from abroad deserve exactly the same chance to spend time with their new families as those adopted here. Adoption leave is designed to allow all parents time off work to spend it with the child so that they can adjust to their new relationship.

Northern Ireland needs a modern, productive workplace that can meet the challenges of the new century, and that is what the new Bill aims to achieve. It is designed to help parents to balance the competing demands of work and family so that they have the option of continuing their careers if they so wish.

This Bill is very important. I am convinced that greater partnership and trust between employers and staff are key to enhancing productivity. As Ms McWilliams said, we should have had the Bill years ago, but I am pleased that we have it now. I wish that we had had it many years ago when I was a young staff nurse with four small children, but I welcome it today. It covers a range of issues with a common thread — better employment arrangements for everyone. The package offers a balance of rights and responsibilities; provides for a workplace reflecting a modern economy; encourages the retention of skills; extends help to working mothers; and recognises the role of fathers. It will reduce stress and conflict at work to the benefit of society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Employment Bill (NIA 11/01) be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill now stands referred to the Committee for Employment and Learning.

ENTERPRISE BILL: CONSUMER PROTECTION MEASURES

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now move to the next item on the Order Paper. The Minister will make a statement, but we shall break at 2.30 pm for Question Time.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of extending the consumer protection measures in the Enterprise Bill to Northern Ireland.

I seek the Assembly's endorsement of the principle that certain transferred consumer protection measures in the Enterprise Bill be applied UK-wide. If endorsed, that will be done with the agreement of the Department of Trade and Industry in Great Britain by inserting certain clauses into the Bill during its Report Stage. The relevant measures in the Bill are mostly outstanding items from the consumer affairs agenda set out in the 1999 White Paper entitled 'Modern Markets: Confident Consumers'. The measures mainly amend and replace corresponding provisions in the Fair Trading Act 1973, which was given UK-wide effect under direct rule, despite the fact that consumer protection was and remains a transferred matter.

I seek the Assembly's agreement to notify the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry that those measures and other related consumer protection measures included in the Bill should be considered by the UK Government and introduced at Westminster. I wish to explain why it is sensible that one instrument in one place should carry all those necessary amendments.

A key factor in my consideration is to strike the right balance between establishing local accountability and securing the benefits of utilising UK-wide legislation for the advantage of Northern Ireland consumers, especially when it can be secured at no local cost. Another key factor in my consideration is the proposed establishment of a new authority with extensive expertise — a new fair trading authority — whose remit might be extended to include Northern Ireland, again at no local cost.

The legislative approach that I propose would have the effect of maintaining the status quo, whereby the Fair Trading Act 1973, to which I referred earlier, would continue to operate on a UK-wide basis even though it would be dealing with transferred matters. That approach will ensure that consumers in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged in any way as regards their standard of protection compared with people in England, Scotland and Wales.

Members should also be aware that to adopt the proposed approach would not preclude the Assembly from taking a different approach at a future stage and introducing its own legislation. If that is seen as the desired longer-term preference, it will be facilitated. In the mean-

time, I propose to have my Department conduct a review that will address the unusual policy and legislative situation that has arisen in Northern Ireland concerning consumer protection matters and make recommendations on the best way forward in the longer term.

I should now like to inform Members of the details of the particular consumer protection measures in the Enterprise Bill that I propose should be applied throughout the UK. First, part I of the Fair Trading Act 1973 will be amended to replace the Office of the Director General of Fair Trading with a new statutory authority. That authority will exercise the director's current functions of consumer protection, which is a transferred matter, and competition, which is a reserved matter, in a more effective and efficient way.

Secondly, part II of the 1973 Act will be repealed. That part was intended to provide a means of dealing with new trade practices that might develop and that might have an adverse affect on consumers. It has not been successful and has not been used since 1977. The two Orders already made under part II, the Consumers Transactions (Restrictions on Statements) Order 1976 and the Business Advertisements (Disclosure) Order 1977, would remain in place.

Thirdly, part III of the 1973 Act will be reformed to enable the new statutory authority and other enforcement bodies, such as my Department's Trading Standards Service, to take proceedings to obtain a court order against traders who do not comply with their legal obligations to consumers. That will be possible if the provision is extended to Northern Ireland. The new remedies available to enforcing bodies, and the procedures to obtain them, will be included in the Bill. That will make it much easier for trading standards officers to take effective action against rogue traders.

Fourthly, the powers of the new statutory authority will be enhanced to approve and monitor industry codes of practice, which safeguard and promote consumer interests. Fifthly, the new statutory authority will be given a broad power to produce and disseminate educational material on matters affecting consumers' economic interests, or otherwise to take part in educational activities. Finally, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will be granted a power to fund third parties to provide consumer advice, information, and educational activities.

To conclude, there are sound reasons to vote in favour of the motion. As Members may be aware, the Fair Trading Act 1973, which is one of the key foundation stones of consumer protection in Northern Ireland, operates across the UK. If the Enterprise Bill's new consumer protection measures were not to be extended to Northern Ireland, the 1973 Act would continue to apply unchanged in Northern Ireland until the law is amended. The result would be that there would be the anomalous situation of the Office of the Director General

of Fair Trading being retained in Northern Ireland even though it would be abolished and replaced by a new authority in Great Britain. Secondly, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry would continue to operate the 1973 Act in Northern Ireland while operating the Bill's new powers in Great Britain. Finally, and in my view the most serious deficit, Northern Ireland consumers would be forgoing the enhanced levels of protection offered by the Bill until such time as a Northern Ireland measure could become law, which could take two years or more.

I am pleased to confirm that the Executive have endorsed, subject to Members' approval, the proposal that those transferred consumer protection measures be applied throughout the UK. I also confirm that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, at its meeting on 29 May, agreed in principle with the consumer protection measures in the Bill and that Northern Ireland be included within the Bill's scope. I commend the motion to the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): The Committee considered the proposals at its meeting last week, and it supports the endorsement of the Enterprise Bill. It is important to recognise that this is a special situation. The Committee's one reservation, which I am sure that the Minister would appreciate, is that it would prefer to see home-grown legislation. As the Minister said, the proposals do not preclude that happening.

The Committee consulted the General Consumer Council, which is in favour of the proposals. In many ways, it is a method of fast-tracking. The Minister and the Department are determined to strengthen consumer protection law in Northern Ireland, and they recognise its importance. At its meeting this morning, the Committee supported the Department and the Minister in the four bids to obtain extra funding to strengthen consumer protection. The Committee is in favour of that and looks forward to an extended consultation on further necessary consumer protection law.

One consumer protection issue that I would like to be considered is whether the laws that deal with public transport could be strengthened, in much the same way as there is a regulator for electricity prices.

The Committee supports the endorsement, and I call on the Assembly to support the Minister.

Dr McDonnell: I shall be brief. Time is short and my speech was disrupted by Ireland scoring in the ninety-third minute. We live to fight another day, but that is perhaps for a different occasion.

I strongly endorse the Minister's recommendation, which has the full support of the General Consumer Council. Consumer protection must be strengthened here. The 1973 arrangements must be upgraded for several

reasons, because life has changed considerably in those 29 years. In the past few weeks, I have said on the record that an energy agency should be set up. Although we stopped short of doing that, nevertheless all the issues contained therein and the fragmented nature of consumer protection concern me.

I support the Minister in his efforts to strengthen the hands of trading standards personnel against rogue traders, and those who are less than honest and honourable. There is a need for better educational efforts across the range of consumer entitlement, because we often buy goods when we are away from home, in places we are unsure about or when we are on vacation. All too often it is more bother than it is worth to take action if those goods are faulty. There should be a mechanism to deal with that. The funding of third parties would go a long way to addressing that issue.

My time is running short, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful to you. On my behalf and on behalf of my party, I fully endorse the Minister's efforts.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, please take your ease until 2.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 9, in the names of Mr McCarthy and Mr Dallat respectively, have been withdrawn and do not require a written answer. Question 7, in the name of Mr McGrady, will receive a written answer.

Permanent Representation in USA and EU

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give details of the permanent presence that his Department maintains in the United States of America and in the European Union. (AQO 1485/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): My Department maintains a presence in the United States — in Chicago, San Jose, Boston, Atlanta and New York — through Invest Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. A European presence is maintained in London, Düsseldorf, Brussels and Dublin. Staff in the New York office of the Tourist Board will transfer to Tourism Ireland Ltd soon.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister undertake to carry out an audit of the official and non-official, formal and informal channels for networking in the EU and the USA, and to consult the public, who may have a useful input?

Sir Reg Empey: Our presence outside Northern Ireland is under continuous review. I have no plans to hold a full consultation on the location of European and American offices, except as part of the recent consultation on the corporate plan for Invest Northern Ireland. However, I accept that the public can provide good advice and that it is useful to listen to their views.

The new board of Invest Northern Ireland takes seriously its responsibilities for overseas representation. I, too, take an interest in that, and I assure Mr Hamilton that any advice or shared experience will be taken on board.

Mr Shannon: What job opportunities and investment have been created as a result of the permanent presence of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the United States of America and the European Union?

Sir Reg Empey: It would be impossible for my Department to operate without a presence in the United States of America, which is our major trading partner outside the United Kingdom. Personnel are needed in the United States to secure investment. For example, in the past two days I have met, in the USA, companies that are considering

investing in Northern Ireland or expanding their businesses there. Without legwork in areas where we have a significant trading partner or potential sources of investment by our representatives, who know the individuals and who watch the competition from other developing countries and regions, we would be handing opportunities to our opponents.

Last year, I decided to open an office in Dublin. In recent months, we have carried out work in Brussels. The situation is reviewed constantly, and I believe in meaningful overseas representation to promote Northern Ireland as a major inward investment opportunity.

Mr Dallat: Can the Minister confirm that the manager of the New York office of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board was reprimanded for credit card irregularities, despite his making a statement in the 'Belfast Telegraph' on 30 May in which he denied that his Department rebuked him?

Sir Reg Empey: That question is not relevant to the initial question that was asked. However, I will be happy to reply in writing to the Member in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions should be based on the questions on the Order Paper.

ADSL Internet Access in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in West Tyrone

4. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many small and medium-sized enterprises in West Tyrone have applied for ADSL Internet access under the pilot programme headed by Invest NI.

(AQO 1478/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) satellite broadband pilot programme has received eight applications for support from companies from West Tyrone, out of a total of 73 applications to date. Of the eight applications received, three have been rejected, two are under consideration and three have resulted in letters of offer.

Mr Byrne: I am disheartened that so few SMEs in West Tyrone have applied. Is the Minister confident that Invest Northern Ireland is doing everything practical to encourage SMEs in places such as West Tyrone to make full use of ADSL Internet access? Can he assure the House that there are no administrative or other impediments that discourage SMEs from adopting that IT facility?

Sir Reg Empey: Far from creating obstacles for SMEs, we are all doing all we can to give incentives to them. Financial support of up to 50% of set-up and first-year running costs up to a maximum of £1,500 is being offered. Five Invest Northern Ireland officials are going around businesses to point out the advantages of the technology and the concept of broadband. In addition, an e-solutions business centre is based at the former

Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) offices in Lisburn with every conceivable form of technology on display. People can come in off the street, see that technology and get advice from officials.

The chairman of Invest Northern Ireland and I have made statements and speeches at every opportunity to draw the attention of the business community to the benefits that can be accrued by availing of those technologies. I assure the Member that our objective is to get at least 200 applications approved, and we have the resources to do that.

Furthermore, a second initiative is being launched to encourage the aggregation of demand in local areas. Thanks to resources from the Department of Trade and Industry, a further sum of money can be made available for, for example, the establishment of wireless networks in certain areas. That is important, and I encourage the Member to do anything that he can in his area to get as many people as possible to apply.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister considering the introduction of technologies such as those available in the e-solutions business centre? Will he consider the concept of teleworking between his Department and constituencies? In particular, does he intend to set up a regional office in the Foyle constituency?

Sir Reg Empey: Within Invest Northern Ireland, and its predecessor organisations, growing use has been made of hot-desking, and practices that allow employees to access e-mails and messages from external locations. I hope that such innovations will increase, because our Department has several e-government targets to meet. Clearly, the Department must set an example, and a major project is already well under way to achieve that.

I assure the Member that no stone will be left unturned in fulfilling our desire to ensure that maximum use of these systems is made. We do not specify or promote a particular technology, because one technology may suit one client, while another may suit somebody else. In built-up areas with a significant density of activity, ADSL Internet access can be provided. The exchange in Londonderry is being converted to make that provision available, and I welcome that, but in rural areas that technology is unaffordable, hence my response to Mr Byrne that a different type of technology may be suitable there. One of the key objectives of the Department and Invest Northern Ireland is to ensure competitiveness in businesses by encouraging them to take up the opportunities provided by those new technologies.

Skilled Workforce in East Antrim

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to develop the high level of technical and research skills present in the workforce in the East Antrim constituency. (AQO 1484/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There is a strong collaborative effort between my Department, Invest Northern Ireland and the Department for Employment and Learning in the development of workforce skills, not only in East Antrim, but also across Northern Ireland. However, Invest Northern Ireland has a particular remit for the manufacturing and tradeable services sectors, and aims to create a range of new and relevant programmes across the broad spectrum of business development and improvement.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his interesting answer. However, he is aware that the workforce in East Antrim possesses unique technical, research and development skills. Some of that number have been made redundant through the closure of local branches of multinational companies. What redeployment of that skilled workforce has occurred, particularly into new and locally based businesses? Will the Minister, in conjunction with his ministerial Colleagues, ensure that a range of alternative reskilling and training courses exists in order to position workers to benefit from any global upturn in the economy?

Sir Reg Empey: I understand the Member's anxiety. His constituency has experienced several setbacks in the last 18 months with one or two large employers in the area. The Member knows that my Department and the Department for Employment and Learning provided significant back-up and went out of the way to establish tailor-made training programmes for certain companies. Significant amounts of money have been advanced through the Department for Employment and Learning and my Department's company development programme. There is no doubt, therefore, that the Government have shown their commitment to provide the companies with the skilled employees that they demanded.

Unfortunately, some people completed their training only to find that they had been made redundant. That was a deep psychological blow. From correspondence that I have received from the Member and other Colleagues, I know that it was felt widely throughout the constituency. I am pleased to be able to say, from anecdotal information that has been given to me, that several people have been redeployed. Once a skill has been learned, it will travel. Those who show the flexibility to leave one form of employment to be retrained and move into another are in demand in the economy, particularly if they have technical skills.

I assure the Member that we will continue to keep the provision of assistance in his constituency under review. It is frequently the case that, in letters of offer to new investors or to existing investors who are expanding, a training package is included.

Invest Northern Ireland

6. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the primary focal

points of the new Invest NI agency; and (b) the ratio of client executive personnel to administrative personnel.

(AQO 1477/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest Northern Ireland's primary focal point is meeting client needs through a client team approach, integrated sector strategies in domestic and overseas markets, and strengthened local-office delivery. Staff with direct client-facing roles account for 49% of Invest Northern Ireland personnel. The remainder provide a mix of client support and administrative functions.

Dr McDonnell: It is no secret to the Minister that the perception in the street and in large parts of the new agency is that the IDB has swallowed up the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) and LEDU.

Will the Minister reassure the House that his sterling efforts of the past — which have my full endorsement — and those of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the House will result in a new, dynamic, client-orientated, results-driven agency, and that those who are at the cutting edge will not be subverted or strangled by the bureaucracy that potentially exists there?

2.45 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I do not agree that IDB has swallowed up IRTU and LEDU. I refute that, because the purpose of the changes resulting from the Industrial Development Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 was to achieve a quantum shift and change, as the Member said. He was one of the strongest supporters of the measure when it came before the Committee and the House.

The new board took office in April. Members will be aware that a new and dynamic chief executive has been recruited. He has come into Northern Ireland after many years' international experience, and he has set to work to create client teams. He is creating a new approach and aims to create teams of people who have certain skill sets so that they can be "client-facing". He intends that the team will deal with a client, rather than one person with one skill doing part of the job before bouncing the client off to someone who has another skill. That should mean that the client gets a more seamless service.

The chief executive is anxious to increase the percentage of client-facing staff. Inevitably, a certain amount of work will continue to be backroom or overseas work. However, I determine that all overseas work is client-facing — I have seen evidence of that in the past 48 hours.

There is a certain amount of administration that cannot be avoided, particularly when public moneys are being expended, when there are accountability issues, and when special expertise, such as land management, is required. As the months unfold, the advisability of this course of action will become apparent, and I assure the Member that there will be a single and new culture for Invest Northern Ireland. It will not inherit the culture of any one of the other organisations.

Invest Northern Ireland and Derry City Council

8. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that Invest Northern Ireland will give recognition to the Derry City Council area by establishing a regional office in the city. (AQO 1490/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest Northern Ireland has a local office in Shipquay Street in Londonderry. The board of Invest Northern Ireland is fully committed to using the local office network to deliver its services to businesses and economic development partners in the north-west.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his response, but having asked Leslie Morrison a similar question the other day, I expected that answer. Nevertheless, I am sure that once a direct focus is established on employment we will quickly recognise the changes that the new Invest Northern Ireland will bring.

Sir Reg Empey: Invest Northern Ireland has considered the matter at board level. I said during the passage of the Industrial Development Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 that there would be a significant regional dimension to Invest Northern Ireland's activities. The Invest Northern Ireland offices in Northern Ireland were formerly offices of LEDU. They dealt with one particular client base. The offices that Invest Northern Ireland will be operating must deal with a broader base. That means that the skills of the people in those offices will have to be added to and enhanced to provide a broader range of activity. I hope that the Member will shortly hear from Invest Northern Ireland on its proposals.

I am confident that the proposals will meet the vast majority of Members' concerns: I am conscious that some areas of the Province do not have offices. While I am not in favour of widespread proliferation simply for the sake of it, there should be outreach in areas where there is economic activity or the potential for it. Potential clients should have access to the agency and its skills. I look forward to an early response from Invest Northern Ireland on that range of matters.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister assure the Assembly that the offices will be proactive and that officials will not be sitting in those offices waiting for people to come to them? Will he assure us that the offices will be bases from which officials will go into the community, particularly the rural community, to pass on their skills and knowledge to other bodies?

Sir Reg Empey: I am pleased to give the Member that assurance. The intention of Invest Northern Ireland is to change the character of the area. As I said to Mr Byrne, five Invest Northern Ireland officials are concentrating on trying to promote the satellite broadband scheme in rural areas. They are meeting their client base and pointing out the benefits that can be achieved by using the technology. They are also pointing out the financial assistance that is available.

I recognise the thrust of the Member's question that it is no longer adequate for people to sit in an office waiting for someone to arrive. I assure him that that is neither the intention nor the desire of Invest Northern Ireland. I am assured that they intend to run their offices with evangelical zeal. They have to get out and do work that is similar to some of the better enterprise centres. People from such centres have been going into the local community and generating activity; they have not been waiting for people to come to them. If we achieve nothing else but that, it will have been worth the effort.

East Antrim and New TSN

10. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 1628/01, whether he is planning to redesignate parts of East Antrim as New TSN areas in light of recent unemployment figures.

(AQO 1459/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is working to finalise revised New TSN area maps that will be informed by the Noble Report, 'Measures of Deprivation in Northern Ireland'. Other relevant factors, such as unemployment levels, are also being taken into consideration. Details of the new maps will be published shortly.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that there is a perception in parts of my constituency that TSN criteria are not being applied equally? Areas in the west of the Province with half the unemployment rate of areas in my constituency are currently being designated as eligible for TSN funding, while areas in my constituency are not.

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the Member's anxiety, and it has been expressed to me on several occasions. I said that we are working to finalise revised New TSN area maps. We are looking at a range of issues because the Noble measures of deprivation are a much more flexible instrument than the previous Robson index, although my Department uses the Robson index together with unemployment data. As an integral part of the revision, we are using the unemployment measures in addition to the Noble Report.

In some of the boroughs that the Member represents, the unemployment levels have been stubbornly and persistently high, and that will form part of our consideration prior to the publication of a revised map. The Noble index gives us the flexibility to add in and take out. If a particular area is currently in a map, it does not mean that it cannot subsequently come out. Likewise, areas that are currently not on the map can come in, so the Member will have to be patient for a little longer.

Pension Funds and Inward Investment

11. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to what extent Northern Ireland pension funds are used for inward investment in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1474/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The answer is that they are not used. However, I understand that Northern Ireland venture capital funds have invested in a small number of inward investment cases. The Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) has also invested in the new Viridian growth fund, which became operational in January this year.

Mr Neeson: The Minister is aware that when we visited Montréal last December, we were impressed by the large amounts of pension funds that were being invested in local economic regeneration. Does he agree that there is a need for greater investment of pension funds — not only local funds but also national and international funds — in economic development in Northern Ireland? Does his Department have any plans to try to attract more inward investment from pension funds?

Sir Reg Empey: I sympathise and largely agree with what the Member has said. In the United States, local pension funds are effectively obligated to invest up to 5% of their funds in local businesses, and that makes sense. We have at least made a breakthrough with the Viridian growth fund because NILGOSC, which is a well-financed pension scheme, has put resources into it. That money will be used to finance the growth and expansion of new or existing businesses, and I welcome that.

I would encourage and support further involvement. I accept that a pension fund, by definition, has to spread its assets widely and that its primary purpose is to protect the long-term interests of pensioners. However, that does not preclude wise investment in the local economy, which should, in turn, benefit the future pensioners of such a fund. I would support any measure that encouraged local companies to take a modest risk — and we would only expect a modest risk — in supporting local industry. That is entirely consistent. It works well in other countries, including the United States, and there is no reason why it cannot work here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not see Mr McHugh or Rev Robert Coulter in the Chamber, so we cannot proceed at this stage. I ask Members to take their ease until 3 pm.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that Questions 3, 12, 16, and 17, which stand in the names of Ms Lewsley, Mr McGrady, Mr Gallagher and Mr McHugh respectively, have been withdrawn. They will receive written answers.

Research and Development

1. **Mr A Doherty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to increase funding for research and development in higher education.

(AQO 1504/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I can give no commitment to increase overall provision for research and development in 2002-03 because the Budget has already been agreed and adopted by the Assembly. With regard to 2003-04 and beyond, additional funding for university research is a key bid in my Department's submission to the spending review.

Mr A Doherty: Given that the Minister is unable to increase the mainstream research funding available to universities in 2002-03, will she confirm whether her Department is making any other research funding available to them in the current financial year?

Ms Hanna: In addition to its mainstream research funding of £26.65 million in 2002-03, my Department will sustain its funding of the support programme for university research (SPUR) and will commence funding for the science research infrastructure fund. That amounts to around £7 million over the two-year period, 2002-04. Both those funding streams are designed to improve research and infrastructure at the universities and to build on research of international excellence. In addition, my Department has bid for Executive programme funds to secure funding for a second support programme for university research. The Department has also bid under the reinvestment and reform initiative that was launched recently for university research capital infrastructure funding.

Mr Davis: Will the Minister liaise with her Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to create opportunities to develop locally-based businesses from the research and development work that is carried out in institutions of higher education?

Ms Hanna: My Department already works with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on training and employment and will continue to do so.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister plan to address the current difficulties at Queen's University? Her Department's lack of funding has resulted in an announcement about the closure of the Irish studies department and two others.

Ms Hanna: Queen's University is an autonomous body, and it must decide how it spends its funding. The Department is aware of the "star rating" that was awarded to Queen's in a recent research exercise. As I have previously stated, the Department has bid for substantial additional resources.

Essential Skills Strategy

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on the consultation process for the essential skills strategy. (AQO 1476/01)

Ms Hanna: The consultation process that commenced on 17 April 2002 is being managed by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). Several consultation seminars have been held across Northern Ireland and have been attended by a range of stakeholders. The 'Essential Skills for Living' strategy document contains many targets relating to curriculum, numbers of learners and timetables. The consultation process will finish on 21 June 2002, after which officials will review all responses and draw up an action plan. I shall establish an essential skills committee to drive the strategy forward, to ensure that key targets are achieved and, indeed, to ensure that literacy problems do not continue to be a huge factor in social exclusion.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for her reply and acknowledge that the consultation process that commenced in the middle of May is an essential exercise that will upgrade the capacity of Northern Ireland's citizens and prepare them for work. How many seminars are being organised as part of the consultation, and where will they be held? Will they be so located as to ensure that the process is inclusive?

Ms Hanna: To date, 14 seminars have been held, and a further four are planned for the next few weeks. The seminars were planned to ensure widespread geographical coverage and to include representation from all key stakeholders in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. The closing date for responses is 21 June. The Educational Guidance Service for Adults will then provide a summary of the responses, which my departmental officials will analyse before producing an action plan to implement the strategy by September 2002.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kennedy, Mr John Kelly, Mr Fee and the Rev Robert Coulter are not in the Chamber. We shall therefore move to Question 8, which stands in the name of Mr Hamilton.

Further Education Colleges: Financial Difficulties

8. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action she is currently taking to resolve the financial difficulties being experienced by several further education colleges. (AQO 1489/01)

Ms Hanna: I am pleased to announce that the 2002-03 overall percentage increase in the main recurrent grants to colleges amounts to 10.2% over the 2001-02 grant.

Before continuing, I shall check whether I have responded to the correct question, because Mr Hamilton looked at me rather quizzically.

If a college gets into financial difficulty, it is required to engage in a clearly defined process, including the development of a financial recovery plan with the assistance of external financial advisers, the purpose of which is to restore it to financial health within an agreed period.

Mr Hamilton: I assure the Minister that I always look quizzical — at least my wife says that I do.

Does the Minister not believe that it is time to review the funding of further education institutions and colleges with a view to ending the unreal situation whereby colleges must earn such a high proportion of their funding? That situation is more relevant to the south-east of England than to Northern Ireland.

Ms Hanna: Colleges are aware of the importance of operating within their budgets. The Department has set out the principles to which they must adhere and has written to the newly appointed governing bodies. However, the Department is carrying out a review of further education, which will consider the funding issue also.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Neither Mr Savage nor Mr Foster is in the Chamber. We shall move to Question 11. Minister, you have established quite a reputation for getting through questions, but today you may qualify for 'The Guinness Book of Records'.

Financial Assistance: Upper Age Limits

11. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail her policy on upper age limits for the provision of financial assistance to those in further education. (AQO 1471/01)

Ms Hanna: There are no upper age limits on any departmental initiative to financially assist students in further education colleges. However, trainees and learners taking part in vocational initiatives such as Jobskills and learndirect may be subject to age limits and differentiation.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response, although I am surprised that she did not explain why age limits might apply to certain courses. Undoubtedly, many would believe that age limits are a form of age discrimination from which we should be moving away.

Many older people continue to make a contribution, through employment and voluntary activities. We have also been told of the need for people to continue in employment for potentially longer than they did in the recent past. Given those factors, is it not important that her Department ensure that grants continue to be available to people over 60 years of age?

Ms Hanna: My Department is committed to lifelong learning, but we must continue to aim assistance at those who need it most. There is no upper age limit for access to learndirect centres. However, people who are disadvantaged and want to get back into the labour market should receive the maximum support. Courses are free

of charge to all, but the Department encourages 18- to 60-year-olds and those who need to obtain employment to get back into work and onto further education courses.

Sixth Forms/Further Education Colleges: Course Co-ordination

13. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action she will take to improve co-ordination between sixth forms in schools and local further education colleges regarding the provision of courses. (AQO 1469/01)

Ms Hanna: Responsibility for provision for 16- to 19-year-olds is divided between my Department and the Department of Education. Local colleges and schools are responsible for co-ordinating the courses on the ground. The improvement of the current arrangements will be a subject for discussion between the two Departments in the light of the post-primary education review. That highlights the need for a coherent strategy between the two Departments, and it is essential that they co-operate and collaborate.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the fact that the Department for Employment and Learning will discuss the issue with the Minister of Education. Does the Minister accept that too many courses are chasing too few students in some areas, which is perhaps a waste of public money?

Ms Hanna: I agree with the Member's remarks. Officials from my Department have already met with Department of Education officials, and I met with the Minister of Education recently to discuss the Burns review. We agreed that it was time for our Departments to broaden the review to include 14- to 19-year olds. The Member is correct to say that there is unhealthy competition for students between schools and colleges of further education. My Department must work closely with the Department of Education to address those issues of competition and duplication to ensure that we have integrated planning, funding and management of the policies for that 16- to 19-year-old group. A review of the provision for that group will be included in the reconsideration of the strategy for further education that I am undertaking.

Dr Birnie: Given that the Burns Report suggested that the so-called collegiates should take on several roles currently exercised by further education colleges, such as careers advice and business to education linkage, does the Minister not think that it is regrettable that the report suggested that further education colleges should not be part of the collegiates?

Ms Hanna: The Burns Report is out for consultation, so no decision has been taken on collegiates yet. My Department has met with the Department of Education to ensure that there is an integrated approach to 16- to 19-year-old provision, because there must be strong

co-operation and collaboration, whether or not the institutions are part of the collegiate system.

Mr Dallat: The Minister has referred to a strategy on several occasions. What progress has been, or will be, made on that strategy, given that vocational education deserves equality with academic education?

3.15 pm

Ms Hanna: I agree that vocational education deserves parity of esteem. My Department and the Department of Education have already met to discuss their respective policies and to ensure that an integrated approach is taken to provision for 16- to 19-year-olds. It is too early to report on the Department for Employment and Learning's further education review.

Further Education Colleges: Governance

14. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether she has any plans to alter the current method of governance of further education colleges. (AQO 1488/01)

Ms Hanna: I intend to review the governance arrangements during the new term of the governing bodies of further education colleges, which began in April 2002.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for her rather brief answer. I welcome her intention to review college governance. Given that colleges use many public resources, will the Minister further assure me that she will consider increasing the professional input to the appointments procedure for lecturers in further education colleges as part of the general review?

Ms Hanna: The general review will comprise all aspects of provision. The arrangements for the governance of further education colleges, as set out in schedule 3 to the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, specify that 50% or more of the members of a board of governors should be business representatives or professionals. Other members are the principal, one or two elected staff, an elected student and two persons nominated by the local education and library board. Up to two people can be co-opted. Those arrangements came into effect in 1998. A major review of the further education strategy will include governance arrangements.

Employability and Long-Term Unemployment Task Force

15. **Mr O'Connor** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQO 1088/01, to give an update on the work of the task force on employability and long-term unemployment. (AQO 1483/01)

Ms Hanna: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have lost it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister?

Ms Hanna: I am very sorry but I seem to have lost the Member's question. It is grouped with No 6; I do beg your pardon. Fortunately we have plenty of time, and I can answer it now.

The Deputy Speaker: I understand the reason for the confusion, Minister; it should have been taken along with question No 6.

Ms Hanna: The task force considers carefully how it will deal with the areas of Northern Ireland that have the highest incidence of long-term unemployment. Its action plan is being rigorously drafted, and the final draft will be issued to the Committee for Employment and Learning and, subsequently, to the Executive before the summer recess. Targeted initiatives are certainly being considered.

Mr O'Connor: I welcome the Minister's answer, given that unemployment is increasing in the boroughs of Larne and Carrickfergus in East Antrim, the constituency that I represent. Moreover, the incidence of long-term unemployment has increased in those boroughs. Will the Minister consider introducing pilot schemes to rectify that problem?

Ms Hanna: I shall consider that option. However, the action plan is nearing completion, and I would prefer to report on it to the Committee first.

New Deal Programme

18. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether she has any plans to introduce regional alternatives to the New Deal programme that would reflect local experience. (AQO 1502/01)

Ms Hanna: Although New Deal is a national initiative, enhancements have been introduced to meet the needs of Northern Ireland participants more effectively. An enhanced New Deal programme, titled 25 plus, which comprises features that are unique to Northern Ireland, was introduced in April 2001. A review of the New Deal programme for 18- to 24-year-olds has just been completed, and enhancements, including Northern Ireland variations, will be introduced in 2002-03.

In addition, Focus for Work, which was introduced last year and is unique to Northern Ireland, provides services to unemployed clients.

Mrs Nelis: I appreciate that the New Deal initiative is being reviewed. The latest report from UU states that New Deal is failing the unemployed, especially those who face multiple barriers to employment. Does the Minister accept that it may be time to examine some of the alternatives to New Deal, such as the excellent proposal from the Lenadoon Community Forum, which the voluntary and community sectors have suggested?

Ms Hanna: The evaluation studies found that perceptions of New Deal were positive and that there was evidence

that participants considered it to have had a beneficial effect on their job prospects. However, the Member is correct to say that weaknesses were identified. If there were other barriers to employment, the New Deal programme did not work as well. That is one of the main issues that the task force on employability and long-term employment will consider. It will identify new and innovative ways to tackle unemployment.

Widening Access Policy

19. **Mr McNamee** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an assessment of the success of the widening access policy. (AQO 1501/01)

Ms Hanna: Widening access to, and increasing participation in, higher and further education is a key priority for my Department. Between 1999-2000 and 2000-01, the number of mature student enrolments at further education colleges increased by more than 8%; the number of disabled student enrolments increased by 11%; and adult basic education enrolments increased by 4%. The percentage of Northern Ireland applicants from lower socio-economic groups who are accepted on degree courses is the highest in the four UK jurisdictions.

Mr McNamee: Will the Minister confirm whether additional resources have been made available to fund the widening access policy? Or, is the widening access policy being resourced from existing funds, thus placing increased pressure on the funding available for third-level education?

Ms Hanna: The widening access policy is aimed at increasing and facilitating the participation of those groups that are under-represented in the higher education sector. It is especially aimed at students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities and students with learning difficulties. The Department is addressing the issue of widening access to higher education through several broad policies and a range of specific target actions. The strategy of promoting lifelong learning overcomes barriers to increased participation in education by traditional non-learners through the provision of access to good information and advice. Northern Ireland is piloting foundation degrees, which are a new vocational higher education qualification. The Department has introduced a widening participation premium for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and it is providing a widening access premium for students with disabilities. It has allocated special funding for projects for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. To make access to higher education available to under-represented groups, it provides special project funding to allow universities to test their strategies and approaches. The Department also supports projects aimed at developing partnerships between universities and those schools that traditionally have low levels of higher education participation.

New Deal: Gateway

20. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether she has any plans to revise the Gateway component of New Deal. (AQO 1467/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department proposes to enhance the Gateway component of the New Deal programme by providing more support to clients who face complex and multiple barriers to employability.

The principal enhancements will include extended time on Gateway for clients with specialist needs and additional training for specialist personal advisers to support those clients.

Dr Birnie: A couple of months ago, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that Gateway would now be piloted in Great Britain for people aged 25 and over. Will the Minister consider a similar pilot scheme here? I congratulate the Minister for answering all her questions.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member. Following the review of the New Deal 25 plus provision in the spring of 2001, the Gateway component was extended from 13 weeks to 16 weeks to bring it into line with New Deal for 18- to 24-year-olds. It is proposed that the enhancements will apply to both programmes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There being no further questions to the Minister, I ask Members to be at your ease until 3.30 pm.

3.30 pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 3, in the name of Mr Ken Robinson, has been withdrawn and does not require a written answer. Questions 2 and 12, in the names of Ms Lewsley and Mr McGrady respectively, have also been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Housing Executive: Commercial Sales

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive will review its policy on the sale of its commercial properties to tenants.

(AQO 1468/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): A review carried out in late 1998 concluded that the Housing Executive should not sell any commercial properties unless there were good reasons for doing so. There are no plans for a further review.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his brief and concise reply. It looks as though he may equal the previous Minister's achievement in answering questions quickly.

Where commercial tenants are willing to invest in the development of properties owned by the Housing Executive, public funds would benefit if those tenants were allowed to buy those properties and develop them as normal commercial enterprises. Now that we have a new Minister, the matter merits reconsideration; a different policy might be devised in the Executive.

Mr Dodds: I compliment the Member for the concise wording of his question. Most commercial properties owned by the Housing Executive are shops or garages that it has built or inherited. Some are derelict buildings acquired under the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme. The current policy is to sell only if it makes good economic sense to do so, and providing that there would be no detrimental effect on tenants. The rationale for the retention of such properties is that, when the last review was carried out, it was thought desirable for the Housing Executive to retain control over the nature of the outlets. This is to ensure, first, that a mixture of shops is maintained; secondly, that the residents benefit from local shopping facilities — these properties are mainly in or near housing estates; and, thirdly, that the risk of problems associated with particular types of outlets is minimised. In addition, rent from such outlets contributes to Housing Executive income over a longer time.

Once such properties are sold, covenants governing the use of the shops are valid for only three years, after which time, market forces dictate use. That is not necessarily in the interest of the community. However, I note the Member's remarks and am happy to give the matter further consideration.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not see Mr Gerry Kelly in the Chamber, so we will move to the next question.

Housing Executive: Sales to Tenants Over 60

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive will review its policy on the sale of homes to tenants aged 60 and over.

(AQO 1472/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has consulted on proposals for changes to its house sales scheme, including that element concerning tenants over 60 years of age. My Department awaits the Housing Executive's submission of a revised scheme for approval.

Mr McCarthy: The present policy discriminates against tenants because of their age. Like discrimination of any kind, it must be made illegal as soon as possible. Will the Minister encourage the Housing Executive to scrap this discriminatory regulation at the earliest opportunity?

Mr Dodds: The exclusion from sale of pensioners' and old people's dwellings has been the subject of a recent judicial review. It was accepted in court that there is an objective and reasonable justification for the exemption

from sale of dwellings suitable for the elderly. It was also accepted that there is a reasonable relationship of proportionality between the means employed and the aim.

However, until the Housing Executive submits proposals for changes to the scheme, and my Department and I consider them, I cannot say what any revised scheme might provide for generally, or for those types of dwellings in particular.

Mr O'Neill: During the process that the Housing Executive is engaging in, will the Minister ensure that due consideration is given to protecting any new scheme from the abuses that this scheme suffered? Equally, will he ensure that the equality requirements, which are on all Departments, are covered as well? If this scheme is made more open to sale, will the Minister give us an undertaking that sufficient resources will be put into new build, whether through housing associations or whatever, to ensure that there is a good stock of houses available for old age pensioners in our community?

Mr Dodds: Equality provisions are a matter of law, and Departments are bound by the provisions in the legislation — that goes without saying. As far as stock for the provision of accommodation for senior citizens is concerned, I want to see as much money as possible in the general housing budget to cover not only the needs of the elderly, which are a priority, but also the needs of the homeless, people on waiting lists, and people in housing need across the board. That should be a priority for the Assembly.

While focus has naturally, and, in some cases, inevitably, fallen on areas of public policy in recent times, one should not forget the enormous contribution that housing makes — not just in providing a roof over people's heads, but also in contributing to their general well-being, their health, their education, their social inclusion, and so on. It is important that the issue remain a priority for the Assembly and the Executive as regards budgetary provision. Finally, I will certainly provide the Member with the assurances he seeks on the other matters

Mr M Robinson: Could the Minister summarise the elements of the scheme which are being considered for change?

Mr Dodds: The main issues that the Housing Executive has been considering have been subject to a lengthy period of consultation and review. The Housing Executive has yet to submit them to the Department, which will consider them in due course. The main issues cover things such as a requirement for joint purchasers to be resident in a property; the capping of discount; the exclusion of dwellings suitable for the elderly from sale in any circumstances, and a new residency period of two years after which applications can be made to purchase a Housing Executive home.

Mr Hussey: I have a great deal of sympathy with the thoughts expressed by Mr McCarthy, and I understand the difficulties that the Housing Executive has in matching stock to potential clients. Will the Minister take local situations into account during the review? There are areas where there is ample stock, and Housing Executive area managers could be given leeway to release suitable housing stock to the over-60s in particular areas.

Mr Dodds: I hear what the Member says on the issue of allowing local circumstances and discretion to dictate what happens. However, as all tenants would not be treated equally under such a policy, it could fall foul of equality legislation. Mr O'Neill raised this very issue earlier. For example, under the sort of proposal that Mr Hussey has spoken of, those living in dwellings for the elderly in some parts of the Province might be eligible to buy, while those in other parts of the Province would not. That would pose serious legislative difficulties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not see Mr Savage in the Chamber, so we will move on to the next question.

Social Housing: Management Transfers

7. **Mr O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Development how management transfers impact on the allocation of social housing, especially on those who are homeless; and to make a statement. (AQO 1479/01)

Mr Dodds: The points-based design of the common selection scheme incorporates transfer cases. However, the management transfer policy allows district office managers the discretion to transfer tenants, under certain circumstances, without reference to their points status under the common selection scheme. That can mean that tenants are transferred to available accommodation ahead of other applicants to facilitate the best use of stock and for the redevelopment or clearance of a particular block or area. Vacancies that arise may be available for allocation to other applicants, including the homeless, if the vacancies are in an applicant's area of choice.

Mr O'Connor: Does the Minister not agree that this is a wholly iniquitous system that allows the Housing Executive to bribe people with £1,800 to move out of a perfectly good house that they do not want to move out of and then to move them into another area ahead of people who are homeless? Surely the homeless must be in the greatest need, and management transfers should take account of that. In my area, in the district of Carrickfergus, people who are homeless take precedence. Areas have been knocked down, but they can wait. In Larne, it seems to be the reverse. The Housing Executive is paying people to move out of houses so it can knock them down, and other people continue to remain homeless as a result.

Mr Dodds: I am always interested to hear from any Member, particularly the Member who has just spoken,

about any specific cases that they wish to draw to my attention. There are circumstances in which management transfers can be made and in which district offices can exercise their discretion and create such transfers. Those operate within certain guidelines. There are exceptions to the general rule of allocation to the applicant with most points. For instance, applicants who have been awarded priority status under the previous selection scheme and who retained that status when the new scheme was introduced can be offered a tenancy before those with a points-based priority. In addition, rent arrears, illegal occupation of a dwelling or involvement in serious antisocial behaviour can militate against the offer of a tenancy, regardless of the number of points awarded.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

There should not be any question of inequity. There may be justifiable cases where a management transfer can ease a housing problem and allow a situation to be unblocked that would otherwise cause serious housing difficulties. It is not a case of unfairness. The common selection scheme was designed to be fair and open, and it gives applicants a greater choice of areas in which to live. As far as management transfers are concerned, the common selection scheme sits alongside, and does not always take precedence over, other policies designed to make the best use of existing stock and to facilitate, for instance, regeneration or redevelopment.

Mr Shannon: There are occasions when the management transfer discretion is important and should be used. The Minister mentioned the review of the common selection scheme. Can he give some indication of the timescale for completion of the process, the criteria that will be used, and the people who will be consulted on the common selection scheme? When does the Minister anticipate conclusions from the report?

3.45 pm

Mr Dodds: The evaluation of the common selection scheme began in December 2001 and has involved the Housing Executive, housing associations and my Department. It is envisaged that it should have reached its conclusion, with the findings summarised and circulated for wider consultation, later this year. As part of the consultation process, Assembly Members and agencies that contributed to its design, including housing associations, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and my Department, will be involved. There will be an opportunity for Members who have shown an interest to make a contribution in the House.

General Consumer Council

8. **Rev Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the reports he has received in

the last two years from the General Consumer Council; and (b) the action he has taken based on these reports.

(AQO 1493/01)

Mr Dodds: The General Consumer Council has produced several reports in the past two years, dealing with a range of issues. The two most relevant to the work of my Department are the one on improving the house-buying process and 'Frozen Out', which addresses fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

The report on improving the house-buying process made several recommendations, and many were relevant to other Departments. My predecessor wrote to other Departments to commend the report to them and to encourage them to adopt whatever recommendations were pertinent to their areas of responsibility.

'Frozen Out' makes several recommendations on fuel poverty, and my Department is already introducing measures to address that. The report's recommendations will be considered as part of the integrated strategy that my Department is producing for wider public consumption.

Rev Robert Coulter: Is the Minister happy with the remit of the General Consumer Council, and will he undertake to consult his Colleagues as regards supplying whatever expertise is needed to enable the council to arrive at informed comment across its range of reporting responsibilities?

Mr Dodds: My Department is happy to co-operate with those who wish to discuss or produce a report on areas that are of concern to it. Whether I, as Minister, am happy with the remit of the General Consumer Council is not for me to say, as that lies without my departmental responsibility. I am interested in receiving reports from the General Consumer Council and other organisations that have contributions to make in areas that affect the work of my Department.

The home-buying process and fuel poverty are two areas of great public concern and matters that have been raised in the House. I look forward to working with the General Consumer Council, and I am sure that other Departments do as well.

Mrs Courtney: Has the Minister any plans to extend the warm homes scheme, which helps with fuel poverty when it is applied?

Mr Dodds: The warm homes scheme successfully reached 4,311 households in its first year of operation. This year it will deliver approximately 4,150 energy efficiency measures and 2,100 heating installations at a total cost of £7.95 million. We must address the fact that participation in the warm homes scheme has been greater in some areas than in others. We should ensure that the scheme is publicised; for example, public representatives in areas in which there has been a low uptake could advertise the scheme.

It is a good scheme, and it has been commended by many who work to combat fuel poverty. If we had more money, we could do more. I am keen to ensure that as many resources as possible are used to address an issue that affects so many people each year and causes the deaths of so many in Northern Ireland. In this decade, we must press ahead with plans to eradicate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Support for Carers

9. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to ensure that carers looking after family members are not left in poverty when opting to give up careers to attend to the needs of their loved ones. (AQO 1462/01)

Mr Dodds: In autumn 2000, a package of measures was announced to introduce enhanced social security provision for carers. From April 2001, the earnings limit for invalid care allowance was increased to the level of the lower earnings limit, and the carer premium paid through income-related benefits was increased by more than £10 a week. I hope that the remaining provisions, including allowing carers over the age of 65 to claim the allowance, will be in place by autumn. From 6 April 2002, carers can avail themselves of an additional state pension through the state second pension.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that many are still left out of the loop, including relatives who leave professional jobs to care for their loved ones, thereby losing their pension rights? Does he agree that legislation that encourages people to care for their sick and elderly relatives must be updated constantly?

Mr Dodds: I am sure that all Members share Mr Dallat's concern and would pay tribute to carers, especially family members who have made sacrifices to care for a relative. People accept that burden for many reasons, and their enormous contribution should be recognised by everyone in society.

I accept the need to constantly review the legislative regime that affects people in that situation. The issue has arisen before; therefore, Mr Dallat and other Members will recognise that this part of the United Kingdom, and others, have a parity system.

In April 2002, the state second pension was introduced as a replacement for the state earnings-related pension scheme (SERPS) to assist low and moderate earners, carers and people with a long-term illness or disability to build up an additional state pension. That should help in the circumstances to which Mr Dallat referred.

Benefits in Northern Ireland vs Great Britain

10. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any cases where Northern Ireland

departs from the norm in the payment of housing and other benefits, compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQO 1494/01)

Mr Dodds: Social security legislation in Northern Ireland closely mirrors that of Great Britain, and provision operates on the principle of parity between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Mr Hamilton: Given that brevity is required, that reply might become the record.

I recognise the importance of Northern Ireland's keeping in general step with the rest of the United Kingdom on issues such as housing and other benefits. Are there any avenues that would enable the Minister to exercise discretion as regards such benefits? If so, would he permit such leeway in the local interpretation of Regulations?

Mr Dodds: First, the parity principle is not new. It has been maintained since the inception of social security. The Member will be familiar with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which gave legislative expression to parity for the first time. The 1998 Act requires the Secretary of State in Great Britain and the Minister for Social Development in Northern Ireland to run single systems of social security, child support and pensions to the extent that they agree to do so.

The Member asked about the issue of flexibility of payments; I caution him and other Members to be careful. Parity means that people in Northern Ireland pay the same rates of income tax, make the same National Insurance contributions and, in return for that, have the same range of contributory and non-contributory benefits, paid at the same rates and subject to the same rules and conditions as people in Great Britain. If that were to change, it would have a major financial implication in that the money to establish that extra provision and the computer systems to operate it would have to come out of the Northern Ireland block. It would also have implications for the easy movement of citizens between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK with regard to their entitlement to benefits. We should hesitate before going down that line. Members will recognise that the principle of parity has served the people of Northern Ireland well over the years. We tamper with that at our peril.

Warm Homes Scheme: West Tyrone

11. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Social Development how many households in West Tyrone have benefited from the warm homes scheme. (AQO 1480/01)

Mr Dodds: The information is not available in the precise form requested by the Member, as work under the warm homes scheme is categorised by postal code area. However, 320 households have benefited from the warm homes scheme in the postal code areas that equate approximately to the constituency of West Tyrone.

Mr Byrne: Is the Minister satisfied that enough administrative staff are available to process warm homes scheme applications? Are there enough select tender-approved contractors available to carry out the installation work on approved schemes?

Mr Dodds: The number of administrative staff available and the number of contractors on select tender lists have not been an issue for the Department for Social Development in seeking to fulfil the objectives of the warm homes scheme. The Department has no concerns on that matter. However, as I said earlier, I am concerned that we should ensure that as many people as possible across the Province take up access to the scheme. Thus far, £340,000 has been spent in West Tyrone, which is low in comparison to other constituencies and other areas.

We must try to improve knowledge of the scheme so that people can access it. As public representatives, we all have a role to play. The scheme's managing partnership has been running a continuous promotional campaign since the scheme began in July 2001.

ENTERPRISE BILL: CONSUMER PROTECTION MEASURES

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of extending the consumer protection measures in the Enterprise Bill to Northern Ireland. — [*The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey).*]

4.00 pm

Mr Wells: I am glad that I was not called at 2.30 pm because I have just heard the sad news that Germany did not win the match in the World Cup. I happily walked into the Chamber believing that the Germans were leading 1-0 only to find out that a certain other unmentionable country had equalised. The shock has worn off, and I have more or less recovered my equilibrium.

I support the Minister's proposed legislation on consumer protection. The Enterprise Bill is a parity issue. The Committee has looked at it and is reasonably happy with it. All Committee members would have preferred home-grown legislation made and tailored to the needs of Northern Ireland, but they accept the circumstances and that this is the best that can be done.

I hope that the Minister will not join the cohort of his Colleagues who are introducing legislation in great dollops leading up to the recess. I do not know what is in the pipeline, but I hope that this is the first of a few Bills that are coming up between now and the end of the month rather than many.

I especially welcome the tightening of legislation on rogue trading. That is a great problem in many areas, particularly those close to the border. I had a meeting with the local divisional police commander the other day, and he told me that the police raided a certain Sunday market somewhere in south Armagh, which will also remain nameless. In that raid, 60% of all the seized goods were counterfeit, fake or stolen. That is a remarkable statistic, because it shows that 40% of the goods were not counterfeit, fake or stolen. I do not believe that anyone who goes to that market is under any illusion that the stuff is from the top shelf. He knows that the stuff was brought in by unusual means. That is having an effect on genuine traders; in many cases the genuine traders cannot compete, so the legislation needs to be tightened.

I was a member of the old Assembly between 1982 and 1986, and one of its successes was the establishment of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. That organisation has worked well, but there is a need to increase its powers and scope, and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is more than happy with anything that does that. It will watch the progress of the legislation with interest and hopes that it gets a speedy passage.

Mrs Courtney: The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has already spoken about the Committee's discussions and its welcoming of the Bill. It has received backing from the General Consumer Council, given that it contains several advantages for business and consumers, and that it paves the way for business across the United Kingdom.

Under the reform of part III of the Fair Trading Act 1973, the new enforcement bodies will have the power to obtain a court order against traders who do not comply with their legal obligations to consumers. The amendment will make it easier to take action against rogue traders. The Bill may also help to target social need as the new provisions are likely to benefit vulnerable and disadvantaged groups that suffer at the hands of rogue traders.

The Bill makes provision for the Office of Fair Trading to become a more proactive body. It grants the Office of Fair Trading a stronger input into codes of practice for formal approval, and there is the requirement to monitor and withdraw approval if necessary. The Bill will also grant power to the new enforcement bodies to produce and distribute educational materials on matters that affect consumers — economic or otherwise.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will be unable to fund third parties to provide consumer advice, information and education. There is a new super complaints procedure. Under the new legislation, consumer bodies will have the right to bring a super complaint to the Office of Fair Trading for investigation when the market is not working. That should improve efficiency and increase the protection of consumers' rights.

If the Assembly embraces the Bill in line with the rest of the United Kingdom, it is unlikely that there will be additional costs, as the Minister has said, since the Trading Standards Service will enforce the new measures in line with its other operational priorities. If, however, the Assembly does not support the Bill at this stage, the cost could ultimately be far greater for the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I have no hesitation in supporting the Enterprise Bill and its expeditious inclusion in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I thank all the Members who contributed today. I hope that the Member for South Down is not indulging in purchases from the top shelf — that would not send out the right messages. However, I welcome his support. When the Official Report is printed, I shall ensure that Members receive a written response to any matters that I have omitted.

The main purpose of the debate is to give Members an opportunity to endorse the principle of extending the consumer protection measures in the Enterprise Bill to Northern Ireland. Agreeing to such an extension is the best way to ensure that Northern Ireland consumers are not disadvantaged in any way as regards their standards

of protection compared with consumers in England, Scotland and Wales. However, that in no way removes the right of the Assembly to look afresh at measures in future and to introduce our own legislation. I have become increasingly concerned that that is an area in which the law is confused, as we have a transferred matter with regard to consumer protection that is regulated by primary reserved legislation — the Fair Trading Act 1973. Therefore, in the autumn, I shall establish a review of all consumer legislation in Northern Ireland to clarify that and to ensure that we have proper protection for consumers. If remedial action were necessary, I would not hesitate to introduce measures.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will introduce more legislation; I shall propose two further measures next week, and I hope to introduce major legislation on energy in the autumn. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of extending the consumer protection measures in the Enterprise Bill to Northern Ireland.

ADJOURNMENT MOTION: STORMONT ESTATE

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that Dr Adamson, who had succeeded in having a topic for the Adjournment motion chosen, has advised me that he cannot be present for the debate. Therefore, the Adjournment motion, although it will be put, will not be the subject of a debate at the end of the sitting. I understand that he has a requirement to be in another place.

FUTURE OF EUROPE

Mr Speaker: Before I call the junior Minister, Mr Leslie, I remind the House that I expect it to stick to the motion. I say that not for the benefit of the Minister; this is a debate on the Laeken declaration and the establishment of the Convention on the Future of Europe, not an opportunity to talk about all sorts of other matters that may be connected with the European Union. I wish to ensure that the House sticks to the motion within reason. I have no doubt that the Minister does not require any such injunctions.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Leslie): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Laeken declaration and the subsequent establishment of a Convention on the Future of Europe.

Mindful of your comments, Mr Speaker, the key words are “Convention on the Future of Europe”. The aspects that may be considered were included in the declaration, a copy of which has been circulated to Members.

I welcome the opportunity to initiate the debate. It is a subject of some complexity, but also of potentially great importance for all that are in the EU and for the accession countries that plan to join over the next few years.

Today’s debate is the start of the process, not the end. We are not offering the Executive’s views on the issues raised by the future of Europe debate. During the summer, the Executive will consider their view on the future of Europe and prepare their report, which will serve as input to the work of the convention. Any consideration or response made by the Executive will take account of the views expressed today, as well as those expressed at the conference planned for 27 June and any other views that are put to us in the coming weeks. Views can be offered through the web site that we shall establish on the future of Europe debate. That will provide an opportunity for people to contribute their views, and for others to read and offer comment.

The importance of having a debate in Northern Ireland is highlighted in our EU strategy framework, which is the first step towards developing an EU strategy for the Executive. The future of Europe debate is an important part of that strategy, and we want to look at the contribution that we shall make to the Convention on the Future of Europe.

The Nice Intergovernmental Conference in December 2000 launched the debate on the future of Europe in light of the challenges that the European institutions would face upon enlargement. At the Laeken European Council in December 2001, the European heads of Government decided to call a convention that would supplement the national and regional debates with a

Europe-wide forum to debate the issues and to agree a conclusion within a year.

The convention will be chaired by an ex-President of France, Mr Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, and it is currently in what is described as its listening phase, which is likely to last until September or October 2002. The convention will then enter an analytical phase before producing recommendations. Those recommendations are expected to emerge in the spring or summer of next year. That will inform an intergovernmental conference on the future of the EU, which will be held in 2004. At that point, decisions will finally be taken on the issues that we discuss today. It is therefore vital that we consider what contribution we should make to that debate.

We need to be clear about the nature of our role. As one region among many in the EU, we must recognise the limits of our influence and seek to deal with issues that are of fundamental importance to Northern Ireland. We do not have to reach a view on all the elements of the debate. However, we must identify what matters to Northern Ireland and deal with those issues.

We recognise that there are different views in the Assembly on the EU, as there are in wider society. The debate focuses on the reforms that are needed in order that the EU can operate effectively after enlargement, so that it can be more meaningful to its citizens. It may be difficult to reach a consensus on all issues, but we do not need to address them all. None the less, the process of debate will bring out many of the factors that we need to consider.

We must try to agree the way ahead on the role of the regions and their place in the EU. A decade ago, the EU established a new advisory institution, the Committee of the Regions, to give a limited place for sub-state authorities within the European institutions. Northern Ireland has two representatives on that Committee, Mr Dermot Nesbitt and Mr Alban Maginness. Although we are conscious that the status and composition of the Committee of the Regions has been criticised, it is an advisory rather than a decision-making body. In recent years, the devolution of parts of regions has occurred in many member states, most notably in the UK, Spain and Italy.

The increase in the number of devolved regions and the increase in the powers that they exercise have yet to be fully recognised by the EU. At present, Northern Ireland’s role in decision-making in Brussels is limited and indirect. That gives rise to some questions. Should regions such as Northern Ireland make their voices heard in the EU? Is there sense in our seeking to co-operate with similar regions to maximise the influence that we can bring to bear? Should the regions have direct access to some EU institutions? Should the EU recognise the growth of regional power in relation to how it seeks to regulate for its member states?

It is clear from the discussions that my Colleague Mr Haughey and I have had in Brussels that that question is currently exercising the Commissioners. We must bear in mind that although the United Kingdom has devolved regions — as do Spain and Italy — there are various European countries that work on an opposite principle.

4.15 pm

In considering the matter, we must be pragmatic about what is achievable. Irrespective of one's views about Northern Ireland as a region, nothing should diminish the importance of the principal member states in the EU. When trying to determine the role of the regions, we should be mindful that an enhanced position — imagined or otherwise — for the regions might enable the Commission to divide and rule. When it deals with the major member states only, it can find that more difficult. We must therefore carefully consider the cause and effect of any proposals.

We shall continue to contribute as actively as possible to the development of the UK Government position, concentrating specifically on areas in which we identify interests for Northern Ireland. The Joint Ministerial Committee is the vehicle for doing that. The Committee meets regularly at Westminster; indeed, it meets next week. It draws together Ministers from across Whitehall and the devolved Administrations to consider what the UK line should be on European matters.

The Laeken declaration essentially raises four matters. First, who does what in the European Union? Linked to that are questions about what the balance should be among the EU institutions, the member states and the regions, and how any changes can be made. There is, therefore, a specific context for discussing the role of the regions.

Secondly, there is the matter of EU laws. Many Members feel that too much regulation comes from Brussels and that there should be greater flexibility in its implementation by member states. To take that further, there should be further flexibility within member state regions. The entire business of who produces the law, and how much of it is produced, has major implications for the consideration of where sovereignty lies. That is a source of considerable interest and debate.

Thirdly, issues arise concerning democracy, transparency and efficiency. Specifically, those involve looking at the balance of power within the European institutions — among the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. Again, the question is raised as to whether the regions should have a more direct voice in those institutions than that which the Committee of the Regions provides. That is an area in which the impact of enlargements on the workings of the EU is most significant. If one considers the issues that are raised by having 15 member states, and the difficulties in getting the sort of demographic expression that we would understand to

bear on the decisions, it will be much more difficult if there are 25 or 30 members.

The fourth question raised in the declaration is whether there should be a constitution for Europe and whether the Charter of Fundamental Rights should be incorporated into the treaty. Those questions go to the heart of the way that the European concept and the associated institutions will develop over time. Again, that raises significant issues of sovereignty.

All those issues impact on Northern Ireland. Issues such as a constitution of Europe will affect all parts of the EU similarly. Others, such as the possible incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, could have unpredictable outcomes in Northern Ireland because we already have a complex framework of rights and equality law, which is derived from the Human Rights Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and local anti-discrimination law. That could lead to a classic situation whereby the sovereignty that has thus far been exercised on our affairs is in conflict with measures arising from a constitution for Europe as a whole.

I hope that the debate will begin to tease out the Assembly's thinking on Northern Ireland's key interests in the future of Europe debate. It will set the tenor for progressing a wide-ranging discussion in Northern Ireland on the future of Europe. That will include a conference on 27 June that will include social partners, academics, the non-governmental sector, local government and Assembly Members.

An issue that may occupy the attention of that conference is the conspicuous absence in the Laeken declaration of any reference to economic and financial matters. Those clearly have a bearing on the structure and future of the European Union and are significant to the single currency. Although that is not within the scope of the debate, none the less one cannot make any sensible judgements on the future of Europe unless economic issues are considered carefully.

When the United States suddenly starts to protect its steel industry and enhance support for its agriculture industry, we must ask ourselves what kind of playing field we are on and where that leaves the World Trade Organization. The free trade area in Europe must decide whether it is working to protect its own trade bases or working on a wider worldwide free trade basis. Those issues cannot be left out when the future of Europe is being considered.

The debate also signals our determination to engage meaningfully with the Assembly on major European policy issues. That will be followed by discussions with the Committee of the Centre, although I appreciate that other Committees have areas of specific interest on European matters. We are also finalising our response to the Committee of the Centre's EU inquiry report, which

was debated some weeks ago, and we expect to agree broadly with its recommendations.

In addition to our engagement with the Assembly, we are also determined to draw in civic society, of which our planned conference is one element. In his winding-up speech, my Colleague Denis Haughey will provide more detail on the progress that has been made with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe (NICE) to ensure that we can utilise to best effect the expertise available to the Executive. The debate marks a start to an important discussion.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): The Committee of the Centre welcomes the motion on the Laeken declaration and the subsequent establishment of a Convention on the Future of Europe. The issue goes to the heart of how Europe will be organised and managed. The Committee therefore welcomes the proactive approach taken by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in assessing the views of the Assembly. It gives the Assembly an important opportunity to make its views clear.

We also welcome the conference to be held on 27 June by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. That will involve wider civic society in Northern Ireland in the debate. Greater involvement of civic society was an area of major concern in the Committee's recent EU inquiry report, and the conference is a welcome indication that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is beginning to take it on board.

The European Union will be enlarged in the near future, with the potential for a further 10 countries to be added to the current 15. The future of Europe debate is about how the European Union will meet that challenge.

The Laeken declaration agreed to set up a convention to consider changes to the European Union's treaties; its working methods after enlargement; and how it can find a role for itself in a rapidly changing, globalising world. However, many see the convention's biggest challenge as how the widening gap between European institutions and citizens can be tackled. There are no easy answers to those complex matters. The convention has outlined 64 separate questions that cover a wide range of issues and it expects to get a large number of diverse responses.

The Committee of the Centre's consideration of those matters has allowed it to identify several major themes. The first of those is the simplification of the treaties. There is widespread agreement that the four EU treaties are extremely complex and should be simplified. Objectives, powers and policies are spread across the treaties, and the many amendments that have been made to them over the years have left them a tangle of regulation. However, the treaties are complex because they cover the concerns and issues of 15 member states. The Committee of the Centre agrees that simplification is

needed, but not to the extent that it eventually leads to some type of constitutionalism.

Some form of common standard and text that the ordinary person can grasp is needed. Making the EU easier to understand is, perhaps, a first step in tackling the widening gap between the citizen and European institutions. However, a major concern of the Committee is how simplification can be achieved, given the impact of the enlargement of the treaties.

The second issue that the Committee of the Centre looked at was the delimitation of competences — who does what in the European Union. Critics hold that the current system is imprecise and unclear, with the result that it is often the courts that decide who can do what. That imprecision and lack of clarity is seen as enabling the EU to legislate in areas in which it is not competent to do so. The Committee agrees that there must be clarity on that issue. Some 60% of our regional legislation arises from EU law. Are we sure that the EU has a right to create so much of our legislation? The Committee wishes to see the roles of the EU, the member state and the region clarified, but it agrees that any system that is developed must be flexible.

Of all the issues to be explored by the future of Europe debate and the convention, that of subsidiarity and proportionality is one of the most important. There is a view that the lack of definition in that area has led the EU to legislate in areas in which it may not be needed and to go beyond that which is necessary to achieve its objectives. The Committee of the Centre expressed most interest in that concept as it applied to ensuring that a distinctive Northern Ireland viewpoint is heard when appropriate. The Committee recognises that the devolved institutions will not always agree with the position taken by the UK as member state, especially in respect of agriculture and fisheries — such disagreement is quite common in other UK and European regions. Although difficult to attain, any strengthening of the regional position is to be welcomed. There are more than 200 regions in the European Union, a number that will increase after enlargement, so how can the EU take account of the differing needs of so many regions? The Committee of the Centre wishes to see Northern Ireland have a stronger voice and receive greater EU accountability, but it recognises that that would be difficult to achieve. The Committee also applied that reasoning to the convention's structure. With so many regions and interest groups contributing to the convention, it will be a difficult task to ensure that the Northern Ireland viewpoint is heard.

4.30 pm

There are limited routes to the convention open to us. We can provide input via the two UK parliamentary representatives on the Committee of the Regions. We can only attend the convention as observers only or access it through a web-based forum. The Committee of the Centre

has decided that it will provide input to the convention through those two UK parliamentary representatives, and to that end it has invited them to meet the Committee on 20 June.

The issue of achieving more democracy in the EU is being explored Europe-wide through ideas such as having a second chamber, a President of the European Commission and/or the European Council, with more openness and transparency in the Council's decision-making process.

It has been suggested that the main role of a second chamber would be to give national and regional Parliaments a say in EU power structures by allowing them to police the subsidiarity principle. The Committee of the Centre does not feel that a second chamber is a viable option for increasing democracy in the EU. It feels that that could be better achieved by increasing and strengthening the role of MEPs.

The Committee recognises that the concept of an elected President of the Commission and/or the Council probably appeals to those who believe in a federal Europe. The current system whereby each country has a six-month presidency works well, although it may not be so suitable following enlargement.

The Committee of the Centre finds that the current system works well. It allows the Committee to invite the UK ambassador of the country that holds the presidency to come to the Committee and give an authoritative view on the priorities of the presidency. Therefore, the Committee can check that Northern Ireland is prepared. Twice each year the Committee can check that Northern Ireland is keeping up with EU priorities and is prepared for the EU agenda. That would be much more difficult if the president were to be elected.

The real power in the EU lies with the European Council. As regards the openness of the Council, the Committee of the Centre sees no reason why almost all of the European Council's sessions should not be held in public, particularly those applying to legislation. Public meetings would allow regional Parliaments to see whether their viewpoint had been noted by member states and to see how member states voted on important issues such as the common agricultural policy.

Briefly — and taking off my Committee Chairperson's hat — I do not support further federalism in Europe. There is much concern among my community that the EU has undermined the sovereignty of the national Government and that that will be further eroded as the EU vests more powers in itself.

I trust that the debate will be open and will not be used to create further federalism. I hope that the debate will genuinely reveal whether there are issues of subsidiarity for national Parliaments and not be about the EU taking more power for itself. The EU has a

major role to play and, whether we like it or not, we are members of the EU and must therefore be bound by it.

The UK is the fourth largest economy in the world and it must not wholly tie itself to the EU. We must keep our options open: we must look to our historical links with the Commonwealth and north America. I recently attended a function held by the British Ambassador in Washington at which it was indicated that more than £100 billion of trade takes place between the United States of America and the UK. Exchanges on the money markets because of investments between the UK and the USA are even greater. It is, therefore, important that our country retain its national independence and integrity. The debate offers the United Kingdom the opportunity to make its mark and to assert that, although it wants to be in Europe, it wants to be a nation in its own right and does not want its sovereignty to be undermined.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the junior Ministers for tabling the motion and note the proposed conference on the future of Europe, which will take place later in June, as an indication of a positive response from the Executive.

The establishment of a convention to consider the future of Europe is a defining moment in the life of the European Union. It is made necessary by the accession of 10 member states, mostly in central and eastern Europe. Chaired by a former French President, with two former Prime Ministers of Italy and Belgium as his deputies, the convention is a serious body and no mere talking shop. Driven by a presidium that meets twice a month, it possesses an inbuilt mechanism for forward momentum. Therefore, the direction that it takes is critical. Representatives of the national Governments and Parliaments heavily outweigh the representatives of the Commission and the European Parliament by almost three to one. That is a critical equation and demonstrates that the vision of a Europe of co-operating nation states has prevailed over a centralised bureaucratic vision, which is a good start. It is how Britain has always seen it and it is how France and other member states are increasingly seeing it.

The Laeken declaration says that

"European institutions must be brought closer to its citizens".

It addresses the democratic challenge that faces Europe, the need for Europe to be less unwieldy and rigid and to be more efficient and open. It also says that

"citizens also feel that the Union is behaving too bureaucratically... the basic issue should continue to be proper operation of the internal market and the single currency, without this jeopardising Member States' individuality."

It further states that Europe should be about

"opening up fresh opportunities, not imposing further red tape."

and that what the people expect is

“more results, better responses to practical issues and not a European superstate or European institutions inveigling their way into every nook and cranny of life”.

The convention is a great window of opportunity to mould the future of the European Union. Europe is a treaty-based free association of states, which is why a constitution for Europe is wrong; it logically presupposes the existence of a superstate. It is counter to the expectations of the European people. People want to gain advantages from Europe and to see tangible benefits from its mutualism. On the other hand, bureaucracy is a disease. Under the guise of being logical and organising affairs better, it is a parasitic organism that grows at everyone's expense.

A balance must be struck between the benefits of organising the affairs of state, both economic and political, en masse and the democratic deficit and sense of disempowerment that over-regulation and bureaucracy cause. Therefore, the Laeken declaration is a crossroads. We must establish a European Union with the light touch of networking and mutual benefit, not the heavy hand of bureaucracy. A protracted, detailed debate on the form and structure of a European constitution would be time-consuming. That time would be better spent focusing on how to make Europe less bureaucratic and more democratic.

The desire of the European institutions and national Governments to jealously guard their competencies against encroachment is understandable, but their shared willingness to exclude regional input is unforgivable and represents a weakening of their declared aim of greater involvement with the citizen. It would be remiss therefore of the Assembly, given its local experience with agriculture and fisheries, not to make the case for a stronger regional voice.

As a constitutional region, it is important that we use the opportunity to play a full part in the crucial debate on the future of Europe. We must therefore use all three channels that are available — the European convention, the Committee of the Regions, even if it is an observer to the convention, and the forum that runs parallel to the convention itself.

Having said that, we in the regional Assemblies, which have proliferated all over Europe, must assert our role in that new Europe. The regional Assemblies and Governments have an immediacy that enables them to relate to Europe more directly, more responsively and more effectively than a national Parliament can ever hope to. The essence of how those regional Assemblies and Administrations can interface with Europe is through networking. The House will recall that a Committee of the Centre report on how Northern Ireland could interface more effectively in Europe said that informal, as well as formal, networking was the key. That is a function of size and immediacy, part of that informality generated by smaller, more local and less formal regional Assemblies, as compared with national Parliaments.

It is a question of scale and of tailoring economic and governmental packages to suit the specific needs of a particular province or region. There must be a dynamic and vibrant relationship between the regional Assemblies, such as this one at Stormont, the national Parliaments and the European Parliament. Westminster is in danger of becoming a bit of a backwater as it increasingly rubber-stamps the many decisions that are made in Europe in the first instance. Strangely, the less formal regional Assemblies interface better with the central European institutions, the European Parliament and the European Commission. More democratic accountability, the creation of an upper chamber of the European Parliament fed by members of national Parliaments, with an injection of democratic accountability for the Commission and the Council of Ministers, may be a way to achieve this.

That course, however, is fraught with danger for the nation states. As the European Parliament became a focus of real democratic accountability and, therefore, of power, it would increasingly challenge the independence of the national Governments and Parliaments. Power moves with spending power; that is the way of the world. That is why we must craft a new post-Laeken Europe with care, for every opportunity contains a threat, and every threat contains an opportunity.

Mr O'Neill: Some interesting comments have been made, and I am inclined to think about the origins of the European Union. It began as an economic unit, instituting the coal and iron ore agreements. The parliamentary tier was introduced later, and that provided a role for representation. Now, some 50 years later, we stand at a crossroads, facing two basic challenges about where we should go in Europe. One of those challenges comes from inside the union, and the other from outside, as has been mentioned already. There is a challenge in Europe to make the institutions more relevant, more accessible, and more identified with the needs of the people. Matters under discussion with regard to a revision of those institutions include changes in representation, a further chamber, which has been mentioned in the debate, and different forms of election and representation.

For me and my party, however, it is the outside pressures that dictate one of the great reasons for the existence of the European Union, and one of its great successes — and it has been tremendously successful. There have been no major European wars since it was established. That was not the case in the previous centuries when the European Union did not exist. The European Union has also succeeded in economic development. It is now a major international player and may be one of the richest communities in the world. We must remember those major successes.

4.45 pm

The nation state is not a suitable form of government in the modern world. For example, the head of cabinet at

the European Commission's environment private office, Rolf Annerberg, recently reported to the European Commissioner for the Environment, Margot Wallström, that 84% of European citizens consider environmental protection to be a priority. In a situation such as the Chernobyl disaster, which affected many countries and was dealt with internationally, an individual nation state would be powerless. The same applies to whaling, which the EU has dealt with effectively. Such issues motivate us to hold greater expectations for the European Union in creating environmental policy or preventing crime, for example. More can be done through international co-operation. All transnational issues could be dealt with in an improved way, and much work remains to be done.

After the destruction of the Berlin Wall, many thought that major international tensions, divisions and wars might end. Yet, on 11 September we saw another frightening aspect of international violence. Europe has a potential peacekeeping role to play, which could be developed, possibly to create a European foreign policy. Such areas are open for discussion.

The Convention on the Future of Europe opened on 28 February, and the SDLP believes that it should provide a draft treaty that would serve as a European constitution. Perhaps it is time to take a bold and positive step by designing a constitution that would not need to be substantially altered every few years. The constant process of treaty revision through successive intergovernmental conferences may have reached its limit. Such a constitution would have to address certain issues.

The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights should be given a constitutional basis and status. The enhancement of the political and social rights of our citizens must be a top priority, and Europe should never become indifferent to injustice. A key test for any new constitution will be its capacity to bring citizens closer to the European Union and its institutions, and that is a major internal problem for the EU. That will not be easy, given Europe's unique structure — it is not a state, but it has many of the characteristics and functions of one. The respective powers of the EU, the member states, and the regions of Europe should be delimited — a matter that is under consideration in the European Parliament.

Given the debate over the democratic legitimacy of the institutions of the EU, the possibility of direct or indirect elections for the presidency of the European Commission should be examined thoroughly. Although it is clearly a matter for each member state, there should be a minimum set of standards — for scrutiny by members in state Parliaments — for the activities of Government representatives in the Council of Ministers. That may be an accountability gap, but a set of standards could overcome many of the concerns of member state Parliaments about their role in the EU decision-making process, and obviate the need for another tier of organisation in the EU.

The distinctive feature of the EU is its commitment to providing decent social conditions for all its citizens — a commitment often defined by the term “the European social model”. The SDLP believes that that model must be maintained and enhanced, as an EU limited to a free trade zone is not desirable. To that end, it is also important that the powers of the Council of Finance Ministers are balanced by an enhanced role for the Council of Employment and Social Affairs Ministers. In particular, employment and social indicator targets should be given comparable status to economic and monetary targets. The position of employment policy, health, education, equality, industrial relations and the treaties must all be upgraded.

The SDLP strongly believes that the single market and single currency are only sustainable if the citizens of Europe are assured of high levels of employment and social standards. It is also important for the political legitimacy of the EU that its citizens be convinced that it pursues economic prosperity and social justice.

Moreover, in a more global world, transatlantic relations cannot be a one-way street. Europe must provide greater assistance to those seeking peace and justice, which is one of the other issues identified as being a problem. Globalisation cannot go unrestrained: we must take hold of it and render it positively to democracy, and it must be regulated in an ethical manner.

All constitutions require periodic review and amendment, and we must ensure that that takes place in an adequate, open, and democratic fashion. The SDLP believes that a European constitution should be put to the people for acceptance. That would be a time for real decisions, and I hope that we do not lose the opportunity to make them.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I understand that it is essentially a take-note debate dealing with the Laeken declaration, but I want to make some observations that relate directly to Northern Ireland.

Devolution provides a major opportunity for us to ensure that our citizens benefit as much as possible from the EU. I am a member of a newly formed organisation called Northern Ireland into Europe, which recognises the role of the regions in relation to membership of the EU. I welcome the growing realisation among Members of the importance and impact of the EU. A recent debate on a Committee of the Centre report was helpful, constructive and worthwhile.

There are two main issues in the declaration. The first is the Europe of the regions. As Minister Haughey knows, I acted as an alternate on the Committee of the Regions for several years; it was a worthwhile experience.

The second issue is the enlargement of the European Union. We have all come to accept the effect that the European Union has on our everyday lives through its many Directives. However, European Union bureaucracy

must be considerably reduced. European Union instruments must be simplified. Reform of the European Union is not only desirable, it is essential in developing national, regional and European institutions that are effective, efficient and democratic.

I welcome the establishment of the convention to discuss those issues and to consider the needs of European citizens in the twenty-first century. Europe today is very different from 50 years ago, when the first moves were made towards European co-operation. The needs of twenty-first-century citizens must be taken into account.

As the Laeken declaration suggests, it is vital that European institutions be brought closer to Europe's citizens. The declaration rightly questions the need for so many EU Directives, and it also acknowledges the need for greater regional consultation. This is one of the issues that has given the European Union a bad name. Many of the European Union Directives can be very helpful. Recently in the Chamber, I spoke about the European Directive on energy and on equalising cost to consumers throughout Europe. That is good legislation. However, talking about bananas does nothing to encourage association between the European Union and its citizens.

I have been concerned by the antipathy and ambivalence of many here towards the European Union. The European Union must now create a sense of ownership towards its institutions and between its citizens, not just in Northern Ireland but throughout the EU.

James Leslie spoke of the conference on 27 June. I am pleased that a broad spectrum of people will be involved in it. I also welcome the involvement of the Committee of the Regions to feed the views of the regions of Europe into this vital debate.

5.00 pm

I look forward to the enlargement of the European Union, and Northern Ireland should look on that as an opportunity rather than a threat. Like other Members, I regularly receive 'The Parliament', and recently it has been assessing the developments in those countries that would like to be considered for accession. I am impressed by the progress in their economies, social development and democracy. It is encouraging to see that, for many of those countries, accession to the European Union is a major incentive.

Finally, Ministers and the Executive should note that all Members want to be involved in this debate. We can be constructive, and I look forward to further debate on this vital issue.

Ms Morrice: I declare an interest. I am a former head of the European Commission Office in Northern Ireland, a member of Team Europe, a speakers' panel, and, like Sean Neeson, a member of Northern Ireland in Europe.

I am one of the few — although I hope the numbers are growing — designated Unionists in the Chamber

who is ready, willing and proud to be described as a truly committed European. The term "European Unionist" springs to mind, but I do not think that traditional party politics here is ready to embrace, let alone understand, that concept of political inclusivity — at least not for a while anyway.

As a European, I have become totally disillusioned, as Sean Neeson said, by the half-hearted approach that Northern Ireland has had to the hugely important and enormously exciting project that is the future of the European Union and Europe in general. Our entire demeanour has been to milk it dry and cry foul any time it asks us to do anything in return, such as clean up our beaches, ensure that our animals are free from disease or even label our children's toys correctly.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that some local councils, such as Newtownabbey Council, have been actively engaged in the expansionist aspect of Europe to the east in the town of Rybnik in Poland, and that many people in Northern Ireland are involved at that level?

Ms Morrice: Superb stuff and more of the same. I appreciate exactly what Mr Robinson says, and I shall refer to some of his remarks. Several Unionists here are beginning to see the light with Europe.

As the junior Minister said, one of the key problems is how we simplify the law-making procedures, the framework Directives, et cetera. However, although that is important, it is also important to start allaying some of the misconceptions about those procedures. All too often when good things happen in Europe we say that we are wonderful. However, when bad things happen, we say that the Brussels bureaucrats are interfering again.

People must understand how the system works. Interfering Brussels busybodies do not make the laws. Laws are decided at European Council meetings where the UK representative is the democratically elected Minister. More often than not, thanks to devolution, that Minister can be from here. If Brid Rodgers were in the Chamber she could testify to that, as she has attended meetings several times to negotiate for Northern Ireland.

There is no doubt that Northern Ireland has reaped tremendous benefits from belonging to the European Union. This debate is about giving something back. We have had peace programmes, a common agricultural policy, structural funds, cross-border initiatives, INTERREG — the list is endless. I agree that we have not always spent the money wisely. A new industry is growing here — consultants are teaching us how to access the money rather than how to make it.

That said, we must realise that we should be using the funding not as a sofa but as a springboard; we have not done that often enough. There has been discussion about enlargement. We know that the money will run out in 2006. What will we do when those more needy

countries — the 10 in the first raft to enter the European Union — get preference? That is part of the debate on the future of Europe.

For example, do we follow Sinn Féin's line — I am sorry that none of its Members is present — in the Nice referendum, and do everything in our power to keep Eastern bloc countries out so that we can have more spoils for ourselves? Or do we begin in earnest to play a constructive role in building the future of Europe?

Northern Ireland is described as a constitutional region of the European Union, and its people are being asked their opinion on the future of Europe. In my vast experience of European affairs, I have never before known the people of Northern Ireland to be asked that. It is hugely important.

What is our reply? According to the motion, we "take note". We should be doing a great deal more than that, and I welcome the fact that we are doing so. We must take positions on the main issues.

What is the problem? For many in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the European Union, Brussels is foreign, faceless, and far too far away. I shall repeat that because Members who have just entered the Chamber may appreciate the description. For many, Brussels is foreign, faceless and too far away.

There are simple remedies. The problem is that the Laeken declaration describes those remedies as the delimitation of power, status of charters, et cetera. All that Euro-talk is far too hard to understand. Let us deal with the problems: foreign, faceless and too far away.

How do we deal with Brussels being too far away? I agree with Mr Ken Robinson that the role of the regions should be strengthened. We must bring Europe closer to home and to its citizens. Thus, it becomes less far away.

We had a debate on subsidiarity, but we should come out of the closet and mention the "F" word — federalism. In the days of Margaret Thatcher, we were taught that federalism was a centralisation of power in Brussels. However, the German, Spanish and Belgian examples show us that federalism is not about centralising power in Brussels — it is about decentralising it. Sure enough, it means less power to the capital of the nation state and more power to the regions. That is an interesting concept that we must debate more fully. We should not be afraid of that debate. I appreciated Éamonn O'Neill's contribution that he was not sure that the nation state is a suitable form of government in the modern world.

The debate on federalism should be brought out into the open. In the United Kingdom, it is called devolution; the European Union calls it subsidiarity as a means of avoiding the "F" word. However, it is important that we debate it.

The next consideration is the idea that Europe is faceless. Some of the questions that have been raised

today are valid. Why are meetings of the Council of Ministers not held in public? It is wrong that they are held behind closed doors. I was a journalist in Brussels behind those closed doors, hoping to get stories about what was coming out of those Council sessions. The UK Minister would tell us one story, and the French Minister would tell us a totally different one. We never knew who won and who did not. If the meetings are open, we can judge for ourselves, which is very important.

The notion of an elected President is fascinating. That would certainly get us more involved in European affairs. Perhaps a President would have more powers.

It would be worth examining the idea of a second chamber. I am disappointed that, according to Mr Poots, the Committee of the Centre has ruled that out. A second chamber with representatives of national Parliaments would bring it closer to home and make it less faceless.

Many other ideas have been mooted, but I shall not take up more time than both Ministers together. We want more transparency and to bring Europe closer to home. We have something to offer. We are a region that is emerging from conflict, and the means by which we are making that transition with help from our European and American friends could serve as a tremendous example to other regions in the world. We should start to flex our regional muscle and contribute to the debate on Europe. Foreign matters can be a cause of fascination, not a cause of fear.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Gibson): I am not sure that it is wise to engage in a take-note debate at six o'clock in the evening. There have been some ridiculous comments about Europe.

Mr Speaker: The Member is operating on Brussels time.

Mr Gibson: I was simply hoping to get home early. However, I did hear the SDLP abandon Nationalism. Suddenly, they have become Unionists, and Éamonn O'Neill says he wants to be a European Unionist. National Socialism and Republicanism are no longer relevant; there has been a volte-face, and the SDLP has left the junior Minister on his own. Its members have suddenly become European Unionists. That is interesting, because then I have heard someone else speak who was a Unionist one day, became something else for the next, but is back to being a Unionist this afternoon. We are becoming well used to conversions and lapses.

Let us look at what is happening. The Convention on the Future of Europe has been called because Europe is in a mess. It has no relevance to people. The number of people who participate in European elections declines every election year. Europe must look at how it can become relevant again. The convention has set out a three-stage process but asks 64 questions. In the 'European

Voice' magazine we can see how the disparity and disagreements begin. The Centre for European Reform has suggested that

"The danger is that we will end up debating abstract points of principle rather than the concrete problems that enlargement in the Union will face. The debate could also be incoherent, owing to the number of voices competing to be heard."

5.15 pm

It is apparently not enough that 104 people be part of this convention — it was suggested in the debate that the 240 regions of an extended Europe be included. There will not merely be competing voices, there will be a large number of competing voices. There will be great difficulty in answering the 64 questions sensibly and coherently.

Peter Hain, the United Kingdom's Minister for Europe, set out the United Kingdom's position. Speaking to the Scottish Parliament, he said:

"I hope there will be a way in which the Scottish Parliament, Scotland and other regions of Europe can contribute and have a dialogue to the convention rather than on the convention floor which would not be practical as the convention would be massive if each country had original representatives. There would be an opportunity for structured dialogue in which the regional dimensions, which are important, can be heard. The principal vehicle for British and Scottish input will be the British Government, as the matter is reserved."

That is our position exactly. Let us not get carried away into flights of fancy and rainbow politics. Let us deal with what is being offered in this take-note debate.

In an answer to me earlier this year, the junior Ministers stated:

"The convention will inform the thinking of the heads of governments about the inter-government 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's views to the development of the United Kingdom position. In the convention there is also scope for conveying Northern Ireland views to the convention through the Committee of the Regions and the convention's parallel forum."

The convention's parallel forum is a web site. Members who are IT-minded can make a substantive contribution that way.

Members are invited to make their contributions at a conference on 27 June. Ideas are emerging to make Europe more easily read by simplifying the treaties. Gattinara and Monsù say:

"The numerous revisions of the last 50 years have led to an impressive increase in treaty provisions, turning them into a tangle of regulations sometimes dating back to different historic periods not always co-ordinated. Some articles contain reference to concepts that are obsolete such as the title on economic and monetary union, even now the European euro is already in existence. Besides the treaties, there are also various protocols for obtaining exemptions and reservations on countries' positions in certain matters which undermine the unity of the system and above all the clarity of the rules."

That is the reason for the convention. Europe has become a stack of uninterpretable protocols and Directives, some of which are getting into the system in spurts and gulps. Some of our Departments are having difficulty in meeting their deadlines. Northern Ireland will be heavily fined by Europe if it cannot deliver on time.

Some people claim — and Mr Éamonn ÓNeill made a great point of this — that we are getting a great deal of money from Europe. However, the United Kingdom is a net contributor to the extent of around £1,900 a head. In 1973, we were net contributors of around £500 a head. It now costs us almost four times as much to be Europeans. We do get money from Europe, but the reason for this convention — and I welcome it — is the fact that we shall get an opportunity to put forward a different perspective from that of rainbow politics.

Europe does not have a record of being successful on any unified front throughout history. The first great attempt at unifying Europe was by the great Church, and that ended in disaster. Since then it has fragmented. What has been suggested under this great convention of the regions would take us back into history to the great Christian state of the Holy Roman Empire, which did not even have 240 regions. What has been suggested is, therefore, a historically backward step rather than a forward one.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre was correct to point out that the American Business Association, which is the largest single business grouping, did more business with the United Kingdom than with any other region. Therefore, all those who hail commercial importance and global activity should not think in European terms only. Commercially, we think globally, but we should not put all our eggs in one European basket, given that we have to spend three years and three stages deciphering the present ritual of protocols. By 2004, we will have as many more protocols and Directives to be simplified, and it will take another four years to make sure Europe is in a real mess.

The conference will be a great opportunity to debate and discuss six areas of concern, rather than having three areas to discuss. Europe needs to be examined and considered — but considered with reality.

Dr Birnie: The Laeken declaration starts with some expansive claims about how the European Union and its predecessors have promoted prosperity and peace in Europe. The first page of the declaration states that

"The European Union is a success story. For over half a century now, Europe has been at peace. Along with North America and Japan, the Union forms one of the three most prosperous parts of the world."

I want to evaluate the contribution that the European Union has made to prosperity and peace in Northern Ireland, because we are thinking today about Northern Ireland's unique input to that convention. It is true —

and many Members have referred to it — that we have been net financial beneficiaries from Europe to the order of several hundred million pounds a year in transfers from Brussels, mainly through the farming policy. However, as Mr Gibson has pointed out, the United Kingdom as a whole is still a substantial net financial contributor to the Union.

There are two aspects of overall unified policies across Europe that do not seem to have worked well for Northern Ireland. It could be well argued that, in the long run, the prospects for the farming and fishing industries here would be much better if the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, which in the past week has been subject to reforms and revisions, were to collapse.

It is likely that they will unravel, given their cost and the impact of EU enlargement to the east, which is a driver behind the Laeken declaration and this process.

Mr O'Neill referred to the need to use the European Union to give an ethical steer to globalisation. The outlook for the Third World, especially parts of Africa and Latin America, would be much better if the European Union, the United States and Japan did not distort world agriculture patterns, especially the food trade, to such an extent.

The Laeken declaration emphasises Europe's peace-building role in Northern Ireland. The impression is sometimes given that the European Union was a major broker of our so-called peace process. That is almost certainly an exaggeration, although some help was undoubtedly given, for which we should be grateful. However, the impact of the so-called peace and reconciliation money, derived from the Delors packages, will become clear. It is feared that some of that funding will have a limited effect. Similarly, it is absurd to claim, as the Laeken declaration seems to suggest, that the EU is the main cause of peace in western Europe since 1945 — I should imagine that the Cold War and NATO had a part to play in that regard. Furthermore, it could be argued that aspects of foreign policy that arose from the EU had a malign effect on Yugoslavia during its disintegration and troubles of the 1990s.

The best position on the future of Europe is one of Euro-realism: we are part of the European Union, but that does not mean that we should give all its institutions a blank cheque, as some of them have damaged the interests of Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom, or both. Culturally and geographically, we are part of Europe, but we have strong links with the rest of the world, especially the United States and the Commonwealth. We shall rely mainly on our own efforts to build peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. Although the European Union is important, it is a facilitator, at best, for such activity.

I wish to concentrate on the questions that were posed at the convention. First, how can the EU treaties be simplified? That seems to be a good aspiration; however, I doubt whether it could be achieved if we continue to strive to fulfil the increasingly impossible goal of achieving policy harmony among all European Union member states. Harmony among the 15 members is difficult to achieve; therefore, I cannot imagine how much more difficult it will be if, or when, the European Union expands to comprise 20, 25 or 30 member states. If the European Union is to survive as a confederation of states it will have to accept a good deal of variable geometry — I apologise for using such Euro-jargon. In other words, subgroups of member countries would form different "sub-clubs" with common standards on certain issues, while other member countries would opt out. That structure already exists with respect to the euro; it could also apply to immigration, farming or fisheries policies.

The relationship between the EU institutions and the member states is a further issue. The Blair Government seem to oppose a delineation of competencies between, for example, the Commission and member states. In theory, the idea of setting cast-iron limits on the total powers of the Commission is attractive; however, in practice, any such barriers would be breached progressively.

In the United States, notwithstanding the constitutional provision that all powers that are not declared as resting at the centre — Washington DC — remain with the governments of the states, powers have drifted to the centre over the past 200 years. That is one reason why I disagree with the praise that Ms Morrice gave to so-called "federal systems". Historically, in practice they tend to centralise over time.

5.30 pm

Similarly, on the third question relating to the Laeken declaration, regarding so-called subsidiarity, I recognise the apparent attraction of the ideal but doubt its practicality. Subsidiarity can be a "weasel word" because of the problems of defining and enforcing it. The Assembly must be careful about recommending the pursuit of separate regional negotiating lines by, for example, the component parts of the United Kingdom. Occasionally, Northern Ireland is best served with regard to relative bargaining power within the EU by a common United Kingdom position.

The fourth question relating to the Laeken declaration addresses the Charter of Fundamental Rights. I remain to be convinced about it. If each member country has already incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), as the United Kingdom has done, it is unclear to me what additional protection is provided by the EU itself subscribing. Incidentally, the Republic of Ireland has yet to subscribe to the ECHR.

The final question relating to the Laeken declaration is to do with how “more democracy” can be promoted within the EU institutions. As Mahatma Ghandi said of Western civilisation, “It would be a good idea”. There are great concerns with that. Like Ms Morrice, I wonder why Council of Ministers’ meetings cannot be held in a more transparent way. The European Central Bank in Frankfurt am Main is an example of how massively significant decisions are already being made in a way that is well out of touch with many of the peoples of Europe. Is the common interest rate that is set across the euro zone truly appropriate for the South of Ireland, which is threatened with inflation and a rise in the price of houses and other assets?

The long development of the euro will probably require not just the centralisation of monetary policy-making, the setting of interest rates, and so on — and, indeed, a common European exchange rate relative to the dollar and the Japanese yen — but the centralisation of fiscal policy, such as taxing and spending power. In that regard, there may be a time bomb ticking away that has worrying implications for Northern Ireland and the entire United Kingdom. Many continental European social security systems, and particularly their pension systems, have large liabilities building up. It must be asked whether, if the United Kingdom joined the euro, Northern Ireland would become liable for bailing out the Italian, German or French Governments by funding their state pension schemes in the future — leading to our citizens becoming poorer.

Even the d’Estaing Convention on the Future of Europe is less than wholly open, because a 12-member presidium decides which issues will be discussed by the convention, rather than the 105 members as a whole. The word “presidium” is interesting because, I believe, the old Soviet Union’s governing Cabinet was called that.

I do not think that an elected President would be a good thing. Obviously, those who favour euro-federalism can look towards that. I do not think that there is a sufficient common European political culture to warrant it, although perhaps the Prime Minister is looking for his next job — for when he leaves UK politics.

The Laeken declaration and associated convention are important. However, there is a danger that they will remain a babble of conflicting voices. Perhaps I should say a “Babel” of conflicting voices — separate voices on pro- or anti-federalism or on whether the EU is viewed as a destination or a final process. The d’Estaing convention is unlikely to parallel the convention of Philadelphia, which produced the United States constitution in the late 1780s. Europe is not now, and perhaps never will be, ready for a United States of Europe.

Mr Armstrong: Many people believe that the treaties on which the EU rests have become a tangle of regulations. There is a serious lack of clarity surrounding the European

articles. It is, therefore, necessary that the treaties be simplified for the sake of open and accountable government.

It is in everyone’s interests that the EU’s objectives, powers and policies be unambiguous. There must not be codification. I do not want a European superstate, nor a one-size-fits-all approach.

Devolution was meant to give us accountable and representative government. Therefore, any future convention must respect the important role carried out in the Assembly. I call for a greater role for regional Assemblies to help maintain producers’ incomes, encourage more guarantees in food safety and quality, and preserve our rural landscape. The EU was set up for practical reasons, and we must ensure that it does not stray from those purposes. It should not become something in its own right. I urge the Commission to simplify and clarify the common agricultural policy, reduce the need for red tape and help farmers. There must be an urgent review and fair implementation of EU laws.

Our sovereign state still has a very real part to play in today’s society, especially in the light of the massive turnouts for the recent Jubilee celebrations. In the aftermath of the Laeken declaration, I call for a more accountable EU that will not impinge on matters concerning our regional and national legislatures.

Mr Shannon: The Laeken declaration broke new ground when 15 Prime Ministers referred to constitutional regions and invited them to play their full part in the debate on the future of Europe. As individuals and elected representatives, we are probably more familiar with EU regulations than most. In the past, there have been issues about square strawberries, correctly coloured carrots and the diameter and shape of bananas. Indeed, it has been said that there is too much chocolate in our chocolate.

Although we are aware of those issues, we also find it difficult to understand why regulations should come from the EU to do away with things that we have had and that have been of no harm to anyone. Those highly publicised issues astounded many of us. People wonder what real impact the EU has on their daily lives. The Laeken declaration has made a move to at least discuss, and, I hope, to address, the problems and the perceptions of the EU held by many people here.

The Committee of the Regions should be given more powers, which should be enhanced and built upon. People see the EU as a source for grants, whether they are for farming or other issues, or for peace money to address community problems. That is the perception that many people have of the EU. As some Members said, it is a way to get money to use here. We are all aware that we pay out more than we receive.

Our Objective 1 status will disappear in a few years. In tandem with that, other countries will be admitted to the EU, which will directly impact upon everyone. The

Laeken declaration has provided a forum to discuss the changes.

The declaration looks at the simplification of the treaties, as has been mentioned. No one can say that that has happened in the past. Indeed, it has been quite the opposite. A tangle of regulations exists instead. People see Europe as a bureaucratic nightmare or a web that prevents them from getting in or out of the process. They also see it as a place where decisions are made, but far divorced from where we live and our problems. If European citizens knew what their constitutional rights, were that would be an enormous advantage. If this process becomes a pretext for centralising power and creating a superstate, no one will be interested, so we need to be careful what goes forward.

In relation to the limitation, many feel that it lacks clarity, with the result that European citizens find it difficult to understand how powers are divided between the European Union and the member states. They have the impression that the European Union intervenes in areas in which it should not and, conversely, does not intervene in areas in which action at European level is necessary.

Some of the issues are raised in the Laeken declaration. Subsidiarity is one of the biggest worries, and Members have all commented on it. People have said that decisions are taken, and I will give one example; other Members have given examples that are detrimental and create hardship for, for example, the fishing industry. EU decisions are taken in Brussels that ignore Northern Ireland as being on the periphery of Europe. That has a direct impact on jobs, the economy and our business sector. Where is the accountability? That is what we want to see coming out of this process — accountability. Where is the responsible attitude that should be given and, indeed, offered? If it turns out that the Laeken declaration is only to be a talking shop, our paper mountain will be disastrous. For many of us and for many of the people whom we represent, the EU is over there, and we are over here. If the Laeken declaration can address that issue, at least we are starting to move. I want to see European decisions that affect our constituents being discussed openly and in a transparent fashion, and with the regions, before any Directive whatsoever from Europe is made.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): It is with great pleasure that I rise to close this debate on the future of Europe. It is important to point out at this stage that I am only closing this debate in the House. The debate generally in Northern Ireland and Europe on the future of Europe is only just beginning. I welcome the contributions made by many Members today, and I would like to respond to some of the issues raised. First, however, I want to talk about the context in which we approach the issues raised in the debate.

James Leslie drew attention to our desire to engage the Assembly and, indeed, wider civic society in Northern Ireland on the issues involved in the whole question of the future of Europe. Today's debate is part of our engagement with the Assembly, and, in addition, we will be talking about this regularly to the Committee of the Centre. The conference that we plan for 27 June is part of the process of working with civic society. It will focus on the future of Europe, but its purpose goes wider than that. The conference will be the first step towards an EU forum, which will draw in the key sectors of our society, and enable us, not only to consider the future of Europe, but to address regularly and continuously the question of how we work together to deal with the issues that arise out of our membership of the European Union. It should also help to maximise our contribution to the European Union and the benefit that we derive from membership.

There is a need to take a step back from the day-to-day activity of politics and life and consider Northern Ireland's place as a region of the European Union and what its place should be. The European Union institutions cover a huge range of issues. Some have greater importance and resonance here than others do, but we need to focus our reference on what is really important to us. To attempt to range over all the issues addressed by the European Union would be futile and a waste of our efforts.

5.45 pm

To that end, I am pleased to report that last week the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, working with the Department of Finance and Personnel, agreed projects on which the assistance of the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe (NICE) would be sought. Members have consistently pointed out the need to use the expertise that NICE has built up over years — in my case, they have been pushing at an open door. For a considerable time, I have been convinced that the Executive must supplement their existing efforts by using people with expertise based on experience derived from working with key players in the European scene and from dealing with European matters in Northern Ireland and further afield.

We have put a means of utilising that expertise into place. In the coming months, NICE will lead, and seek to support, a process from which we hope a vision of Northern Ireland as a region of the EU will emerge. NICE will work in participation with the key sectors. The work will be publicly available, and I look forward to a tangible outcome that will assist the Executive and the key sectors in Northern Ireland society to develop new thinking and new ways of doing things. It will be an outward-looking expression of our role.

Minister Leslie has already reflected on our work to develop an EU strategy. That strategy will draw together departmental priorities and needs alongside the wider

EU policy context. We have met departmental Ministers to identify the issues to be addressed, as well as the clear priorities already established in areas such as agriculture and the environment.

The strategy, on which we shall elaborate, will also examine our influence on the UK Government's position overall and our means of interaction, both with the other devolved Administrations in Cardiff and Edinburgh and with the Government in Dublin.

The debate will deal with the core issues of how the EU can be accessible to the people of Europe and how a better connection can be made in the context of enlargement and against the background of citizens who feel increasingly remote from Government, particularly from the EU institutions. The debate is very important, and I am glad that Jane Morrice emphasised that so vigorously. We cannot afford to stay out of the debate; we should enter it and think our way through it.

As members of the European Community, we have a voice on how Europe should be shaped for the future; that voice should be heard. As Europeans, we have an interest in how an enlarged EU will operate and what that will mean for Northern Ireland.

As a region, Northern Ireland needs to consider what place regions should have in an enlarged EU. That was a constant theme in the contributions to today's debate. We must also reflect on the influence we have, and on how that can be best targeted for maximum impact.

Those are among the core questions to be addressed in the debate. Today we have begun to debate them, and they will be discussed for some time to come. It was not our intention to reach conclusions today, but rather to open up those ideas for further examination and exploration.

I want to reflect on some of the ideas that today's debate offered. First, I welcome the contribution by Mr Poots on behalf of the Committee of the Centre. I am sorry that he is not present. His measured contribution helpfully teased out several core issues for the Convention on the Future of Europe, and those will help in the wider debate we seek to develop. As the debate moves forward, I look forward to further discussion with him and with the Committee of the Centre.

Rather than deal with the contributions in detail, I will refer simply to the themes that arose in the speeches. Common to almost all contributions was, first of all, an insistence on the need for less bureaucracy in European decision-making and policy processing. Secondly, Members stressed the need for greater simplification of structures and instruments to bring the EU closer to people by making it more user-friendly and easier to understand. Thirdly, almost all Members who spoke were in favour of greater accountability and transparency — democratisation — of the EU's processes, although there were differing opinions as to how that might be facilitated.

Several Members, in particular Ken Robinson, stressed the need for formal and informal networking. Mr Robinson made the interesting point that that is easier for regional legislatures, such as our own, than it is for national Parliaments. Also, the need to strengthen the role of the regions and to bring decision-making closer to the ground, where practical, through the subsidiarity process was a constant theme.

Different opinions emerged on the overall objective and final shape of Europe. Several Members, including Jane Morrice, favoured greater integration of Europe, moving towards a more federal, or confederal, model.

Members disagreed on the need for a draft treaty or a constitution for Europe. Éamonn ÓNeill suggested that, if there were such a process, there should be a referendum to give the new European arrangements greater legitimacy. Jane Morrice mentioned the possibility of having an elected presidency in Europe to give greater popular involvement in decision-making. The possibility of a second chamber was mentioned, and there was constant reference to the need to more clearly delineate the competencies of the various levels of decision-making in the EU.

Éamonn ÓNeill referred to the need to balance the regulation of the free market and the promotion of industrial and economic development with the continued elaboration and development of a European social model. He spoke of the need to have regard for the EU's global responsibilities for international development and peacekeeping. He also dwelt on the issue of human rights and equality. However, not all Members who spoke agreed with him.

Oliver Gibson made an interesting point about the SDLP abandoning Nationalism. I am sorry to contradict him, but my party continues to believe in the national ideal of a united Ireland, and that is what Nationalism means in the context of Irish politics. However, Nationalism in Europe means something quite different. It represents tattooed bully-boy skinheads in jackboots who enforce racist views that would not find widespread sympathy in this community. Mr Gibson also accused my party of abandoning National Socialism. Given that it has never adopted a National Socialist model, I find that theory interesting.

Dr Birnie made a considered speech that gave me food for thought. I understand his point about the federal model in the United States and the gradual and seemingly inexorable expansion of federal power. If the United States model were the only federal model, that would be a fair point. As Dr Birnie said, latent power in the United States lies with the federal Government, and only specified powers rest with the states. The reverse is the case in Canada and Australia, for instance. The powers of the federal Governments in those countries

are delineated in their constitutions, and all latent or residual powers lie with the provinces and the states.

Dr Birnie: I may be wrong, but I understand that that is precisely the situation with the American constitution: it confers defined powers to the federal Government. It is principally the provision on the regulation of interstate commerce that, over the past 200 years, has allowed the gradual drift to Washington DC.

Mr Haughey: I was going to make that point. The Supreme Court has been the motor for the expansion of federal power in the United States because its expansionism rests on provisions such as interstate commerce. The exact case that gave rise to that was the *Schechter Poultry Corporation v. United States* — I am showing off slightly there.

However, Dr Birnie raised several interesting points. He legitimately questioned the effect of the net inward transfer of resources from the European Union. He questioned the extent to which that has been responsible for economic development here, and whether its contribution was a lasting one. Net inward transfers have made a useful input to our infrastructure's development. However, they have not been as important a factor in our economic growth as they have been in the Republic of Ireland, where they have made a useful impact. If net inward transfers of wealth were the key factor in generating economic growth, then, given that every year we derive approximately £4.5 billion more from the Exchequer in London than we generate, our economic growth rate should be about 10 times that of the Republic — but it is not. One must question where the wellsprings of economic growth are. Dr Birnie appropriately raised the matter, and it requires further debate.

I also recognise Dr Birnie's point about the limitations of a common currency on countries such as the Republic in determining interest rates, and so forth, to regulate the economy and combat inflation. The last time that Europe had a common currency was under the Roman Empire, when the denarius was used from the Black Sea to the Atlantic. I am not sure what they did about interest rates in those days. We need to explore those issues, because economies can be regulated in ways other than manipulating interest rates.

Having gone over the general themes that arose in the debate, I welcome Members' contributions. This is the first stage of a debate that will continue until at least 2004. We have not sought to set the terms of or limit the debate in any way; we have simply reflected the fact that the Executive will need, in time, to consider their contribution to the Convention on the Future of Europe under the chairmanship of Giscard d'Estaing. We will then be able to draw on the views raised in this and further debates, in our discussions with the Committee of the Centre and in exchanges we conduct in any other forum.

We want any input that we make from the Administration to the convention to reflect as closely as possible the views that are widely held in this society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Laeken declaration and the subsequent establishment of a Convention on the Future of Europe.

Adjourned at 5.59 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 June 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PUBLIC PETITION

Reduction of Funding in Hollybank Primary School, Newtownabbey

Mr Speaker: Mr Ken Robinson has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr K Robinson: The petition was signed by more than 600 residents of Monkstown and the adjoining areas, who oppose the reduction of funding to Hollybank Primary School, Newtownabbey. It cites the serious impact that the reduction will have on the school as regards staff redundancies, larger classes and the quality of education provision, in an area that already suffers from a high level of social deprivation. I express my concern about the situation and support for the campaign.

Mr K Robinson moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

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

RAILWAY ACCIDENT AT DOWNHILL

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the recent accident on the Londonderry to Belfast railway line.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I am grateful to be able to make a statement on the accident involving the 12.50 pm Londonderry to Belfast train at Downhill on Tuesday 4 June 2002. I am sure that all Members share my relief that this serious incident did not lead to more casualties or to fatalities. I express my best wishes to the 22 passengers and two crew members who were on the train at the time of the accident, which was a terrifying experience for them. Eight people were admitted to the Causeway Hospital for treatment, and all but one were discharged that evening. The train driver was discharged last Thursday on the understanding that he will report to Altnagelvin Hospital tomorrow for a further examination of a suspected broken leg.

I have received initial briefings and visited the derailment site. I was accompanied on my site visit by the managing director of Translink, who briefed me on the circumstances of the accident. At approximately 1.21 pm on Tuesday 4 June, at Downhill, the 12.50 pm Londonderry to Belfast train struck a large boulder that had fallen from the nearby cliff face onto the track. The train was travelling at approximately 60 mph — Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) states that that is the normal speed of travel on that section of the track. The impact caused the derailment of all three coaches of the class-80 rolling stock.

I have been advised that the sequence of events immediately before the derailment was as follows: a motorist who witnessed the rockfall contacted the police; the police registered that call at 1.16 pm and contacted the NIR control office at 1.19 pm; the two clocks may not have been synchronised, because NIR registered the call at 1.17 pm. The duty controller tried to communicate with the train by contacting the Castlerock signaller, but the train had already passed the last stop signal at Magilligan. He also made several attempts to contact the train driver using a VHF radio, but was unsuccessful. NIR times the derailment at approximately 1.21 pm.

Within one minute of the derailment, the guard on the train contacted the NIR control office by mobile phone and requested emergency services, which arrived quickly at the scene. The Causeway Hospital in Coleraine then initiated its emergency procedures.

The weather at the time of the accident was overcast, with heavy rain. Initial views are that the heavy rain caused a small landslide from the cliff near the railway line. Several boulders were dislodged, one of which fell down the cliff face and across two public roads, coming

to rest on the railway line. Translink advises that the driver of the train was able to begin to stop the train only after seeing the boulder on the line.

NIR does not own the cliff face near the track at Downhill. The landowner has been in contact with Translink and the Roads Service. He has expressed concern about the possibility of further slides from the cliffs, and he informed the Department for Regional Development that he has engaged an engineer to report on the state of the cliffs.

At the site of the rockfall, the railway runs on an embankment beside Downhill beach. The A2 Seacoast Road from Castlerock to Limavady runs parallel to it on the landward side. Beside and above the road, the cliff face is some 40 to 50 metres high. At the site of the rockfall, the unclassified Bishop's Road leaves the A2 and travels inland, climbing the escarpment steeply.

Traffic on both routes travels reasonably slowly because of the road width and alignment. Both roads have remained closed since the incident, as a precautionary measure. However, the A2 Seacoast Road will reopen soon, and the Roads Service will inspect it regularly to detect any further fallen stones and to remove any obstructions. This monitoring regime will be kept under review. Bishop's Road will remain closed in the meantime.

Translink has initiated its own formal investigation into the circumstances of the accident. The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland visited the scene of the derailment on Wednesday 5 June. This was a serious accident, which, under slightly different circumstances, could have had horrendous consequences. The relative lack of serious injury does not diminish my concern about the incident.

On the basis of the information available to me, the cause of the accident appears to be reasonably clear. However, I have a duty to discover the extent to which, if at all, the derailment was preventable, and I am anxious to ensure that all possible lessons that may be learnt from this event will be taken on board. The House will want to identify all practical steps that may help to prevent the recurrence of accidents such as this. I have, therefore, asked Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate to investigate all the circumstances of the accident, to report its findings and to make recommendations. The investigation, to be conducted by Mr Gerard Kerr, will begin immediately. Until recently, Mr Kerr was the Principal Railway Inspector for Scotland.

I am finalising the terms of reference for the investigation. They should be: to investigate all the circumstances pertaining to the derailment at Downhill on 4 June 2002, with particular reference to the extent to which, if at all, the circumstances were foreseeable; the extent to which, if at all, the derailment was preventable; the extent to which, if at all, communications problems contributed to the accident, and whether the condition of the rolling

stock or the track was a factor. The inspector, where appropriate, should invite people who appear to him to be able to assist his investigation to submit further evidence. I place on him no limitation as to who he takes evidence from, how he conducts his inquiries or the issues that he deems it appropriate to investigate. On the basis of the investigation and the consideration of any further evidence, the inspector should report his findings and recommend steps to address any safety deficiencies that he identifies.

I undertake to disclose to the Assembly the outcomes of Translink's formal investigation and the separate investigation by Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate. It is in the public interest that those matters be conducted in an open and transparent manner, and I am determined that that will happen. Likewise, the investigations must be thorough and comprehensive. On receiving the reports, I will want to reflect carefully on whether the need arises for a further inquiry, and if so, the nature of any further investigation. I want to keep my options open, but, before I take a decision, I will consult the Committee for Regional Development.

Rail services have been substituted by a bus service between Londonderry and Coleraine. Translink has advised that the damaged section of the track at Downhill will be reinstated by 17 June.

The operational decision to reinstate rail services on the line will be made by Translink's managing director, who will want to satisfy himself fully on all safety matters before the service recommences. He may impose a speed limit on that section of the track, pending the outcome of the investigations.

Railway safety is paramount. There can no question of compromising the safety of the travelling public, railway employees or people near the railway network. This accident demonstrates the need for constant vigilance on safety issues. Tomorrow, the Assembly will debate the Consideration Stage of the Railway Safety Bill, which is a key aspect of the Department for Regional Development's ongoing strategy to assist Translink to improve constantly the safe operation of the railway network in Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to the public-spiritedness of the motorist who contacted the police, to the members of the emergency services for their professionalism in responding to the incident and to the local people who provided care and comfort. I will inform the Assembly further on this matter in due course.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the Minister's statement on this unfortunate accident. I associate myself with the Minister — as I am sure do other Committee members — in extending best wishes to everyone who was involved in this terrifying accident, in particular, the two members of staff involved.

As Chairperson of the Committee I am greatly disturbed by one matter: the apparent failure — and I emphasise the word “apparent” — by NIR’s duty controller to make radio contact with the train driver.

12.15 pm

That must be investigated thoroughly. That aspect of communication must be central to any recommendations that result from the investigation of the accident. It was disturbing to hear that the driver was unable to be contacted through the VHF radio system.

Finally, I welcome the investigation by Her Majesty’s Railway Inspectorate. The investigation must be truly independent, thorough and transparent in getting to the root cause of the accident, and the inspector should report in a forthright manner to the Minister, and, through him, to the House.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development for the position that he has adopted. He asked specifically about the inability to contact the driver of the train. He will have noted that I have asked the Railway Inspectorate to examine the extent to which, if at all, communications problems contributed to the accident.

I referred to three elements of communication, each of which the Railway Inspectorate will want to consider. It will also look at how difficult it is to obtain a signal in a train in such a remote area and whether that problem applies to mobile phones as well as to VHF radio. By the time contact was made with the last signalling post the train had already passed by. Those are all matters to be considered in Translink’s inquiry and in the independent inquiry by the Railway Inspectorate.

I have kept my options open, and the next steps, if any, will depend on the outcome of the two inquiries.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the speed with which he has brought the matter to the Assembly. I, too, have concerns about the lack of communication. Also, how regularly does the Roads Service inspect the road and how often does Translink inspect the lines? A major human tragedy has been averted only by the grace of God.

Mr P Robinson: I agree that there could have been a much more serious tragedy. Several people were injured, but the number could have been much greater.

The Roads Service would say that its regime operates slightly differently. There is a legal duty on drivers to travel with sufficient due care and attention to enable them to stop to avoid any obstacle on the road. Nonetheless, now that we have clear evidence that there is a problem in the area, the Roads Service must satisfy itself on those matters. The term “regularly” means as regularly as is necessary. That will depend, among other things, on the report that the landowner gets from the engineers, as well as our own assessment of the situation.

Translink has had network-wide investigations in the past. I do not want to go into the details, as the inspector will examine their extent and the reports. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt the inspector’s conclusion.

Mr Hay: We all have sympathy for those who were hurt in the incident. I congratulate the emergency services, who got to the scene very quickly. I also welcome the fact that there will be two investigations. Does the Minister have a timescale for their reporting to the Assembly and the Committee for Regional Development?

Mr P Robinson: My priority is for thoroughness rather than speed. We want to learn any lessons that are to be learnt as quickly as possible, but I do not want to place any time constraints on the inspector or the investigators. It is important that they move with all due haste, taking into the account the need to look thoroughly at the matter in a way that instils public confidence.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom gach dea-mhéin a ghuí leis na paisinéirí agus na hoibrithe uilig a bhí ar an traein nuair a tharla an timpiste seo. I welcome the Minister’s statement.

I send every good wish to the passengers and staff who were on the train when the accident occurred. From the Minister’s statement, it appears that less than 10 minutes elapsed between the blockage of the track by a boulder and the accident. Given the shortness of that time, we must be thankful that there was not a much more tragic outcome.

The Minister referred to the condition of the rolling stock and the contribution that it might have made to the accident. If we had more modern rolling stock and better track, the train could have been travelling at more than 60 miles an hour, which would have had major consequences. I ask the Minister, during the inspectorate’s investigations, to examine several issues. The Minister and other Members mentioned communication. The early warning system for contacting drivers must be examined to see whether it can be improved.

The Minister said that the landowner involved has expressed concern about the condition of the rock face and the potential for further landslides. During the investigation, will the Minister ascertain whether concern was expressed about the condition of the rock face before, and whether there has been any monitoring of the risk of a landslide on that stretch of road and track? Does Translink consider spells of heavy rainfall when determining the frequency of general track inspections? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: We may wish to examine communications when considering new rolling stock. My early enquiries indicate that any new rolling stock would have a much improved communication system. However, its

suitability will be judged in the light of the conclusions of the inspector's report.

I do not think that Translink had any indication of problems with the condition of the rock face, but the inspector will consider and report on that. I intend to make available to the Assembly copies of the report arising from Translink's internal inquiry and that by the Railway Inspectorate. Therefore, Members will see an unabridged copy and be able to reach their own conclusions.

Mr Neeson: I am glad that the Railway Inspectorate's report will be made available to the Assembly, because in recent years NIR has been secretive about other incidents — particularly on the Lisburn line. What damage was done to the train, and what impact will that have on the rolling stock, which is already obsolete and insufficient? What other sections of railway track in Northern Ireland have speed limits due to the state of the track?

Mr P Robinson: The Member mentioned the railway line at Lisburn. I am thinking of the Antrim to Knockmore line in particular, because the Assembly is being asked to keep that line open, even though the Department for Regional Development and Translink have said that it is coming to the end of its life — unless a great deal of money is spent on it. Safety must be the top priority, and if money is not going to be made available for that track, it is clear what sort of decisions will have to be made.

There will be no secrecy as regards the report. It will be made available to the Assembly and scrutinised by Members. It is essential that that happen. The inspector will look at Translink's previous position on the inspection of lines. It would not be helpful for me to make statements in the House on issues that will be subject to investigation. Members should await the results of the inquiry. Mr Kerr arrived in the Province today, so there will be no delay in getting the investigation started.

Mr Dallat: On the day of the incident I visited the Causeway Hospital to thank the medical staff and to speak to some of the injured, and I wish them continued recovery. I agree with the Minister that, but for the grace of God, people on the train or in the vicinity would have been killed. Can the Minister assure the House that there will be ample opportunity for all questions to be asked during the investigation? Why were trains permitted to travel at speeds of up to 70 miles an hour past the spot where the Road Service has erected signs to warn motorists of falling rocks?

Mr P Robinson: The public and elected representatives will be able to provide information to the railway inspector, and he will determine the extent to which he takes evidence from individuals. The Department for Regional Development will be happy to provide Mr Dallat, or anyone else, with the contact details of the railway inspector.

I join Mr Dallat in thanking the medical staff and the emergency services. They responded excellently in the circumstances.

It is not uncommon for the Roads Service to alert motorists to any likelihood of a rockfall. It is proper that it should do so. A risk assessment must be made on every part of the railway track. The managing director of Translink considers the risks involved, and the inspector will look at that. It is appropriate that Translink and the inspector do that, and not Members.

12.30 pm

Mr Campbell: I join with other Members in thanking the Minister for his comprehensive statement and the speed with which he has brought the matter to the Assembly. I also commend his comments on the emergency services. I visited them at the accident site and at the Causeway Hospital on the day of the event.

During his comments the Minister mentioned that the line may be reopened next week, and, presumably, rail services recommenced between Londonderry and Coleraine. Will he pursue vigorously the possibility of the speed restriction he mentioned in his statement being imposed on that section of the line for the duration of the inspectorate's investigation?

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

Mr P Robinson: The managing director of NIR and Translink will decide when rail services will recommence. As he is responsible for the risk assessment, he will be responsible for making decisions on any speed restrictions. Having spoken to him, I am convinced that if or when he decides it is appropriate to start the services again, there will be some speed restriction until the two reports are available — the internal Translink report and the report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Railways.

I will always support the managing director of Translink if he makes decisions to curtail railway services on safety grounds, even if that inconveniences customers; railway safety must come first. Therefore, whatever decision he makes must be based on safety grounds, and safety grounds alone.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I wish all the passengers a speedy recovery, particularly the train driver.

Will the Minister accept that, in the terms of reference of the investigations, it is crucial that the circumstances are foreseeable? On that stretch of track there is a high cliff adjacent to the railway. Can Translink erect a permanent barrier at the track side, which may prevent any unforeseen incidents?

Mr P Robinson: I do not want to rule in, or rule out, such a possibility. In this incident the boulder managed to get across two roads and onto the track. Therefore, whether there is a barrier at the track or the road is an

issue that we will have to consider when we have the inspectorate's report. I would not rule out something like that; however, I will wait until I have the reports from Translink and the inspectorate.

Mr K Robinson: There are other stretches of the Translink system that run along coastal areas, in particular in my constituency of East Antrim between Carrickfergus and Whitehead. Can the Minister assure me that the safety of those sections of track are being investigated? If not, will they be investigated in the future?

I add my comments to those made around the Chamber regarding the safety and well-being of the passengers and drivers involved in the incident. Due to the geography on the north coast, it was fortunate that there was something of a soft landing. However, I am concerned that in other areas a soft landing may not be available.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful for the hon Member's final comments. From time to time, Translink carries out surveys of the entire network to determine its safety, or it employs consultants to do it on Translink's behalf.

Having spoken to the managing director, I have no doubt that all those matters are constantly under review. As Members might expect, given the circumstances of 4 June 2002, they will be at the top of his priorities over the coming weeks.

The Member has drawn the attention of the House to the fact that the topography around many parts of the railway track would lend itself to that kind of incident. Therefore, vigilance is required. I am sure that Translink will take that on board.

Mrs Courtney: I too welcome the Minister's comprehensive statement and his assurance that no stone will be left unturned to ascertain the cause of the accident.

There is no doubt that the large boulder on the track contributed to the accident. However, it has been quite common to see small pieces of debris and stones on the track. That has led people to believe that it was an accident waiting to happen. The landowner was concerned that a landslide might occur because of recent heavy rainfall. It has already been mentioned that no attempt was made to contact the train driver directly. I am glad that the Minister has assured the House that contact will be attempted in future. If contact had been made, the train driver might have managed to slow down.

A photograph in the 'Londonderry Sentinel' graphically illustrates the extent of the crash, how serious it was, and what the circumstances could have been had people been on the beach that day. There could have been many more serious injuries. Accidents cannot always be prevented, but I hope that something like that will never happen again.

Mr P Robinson: Again, the point has been made about communications. The Assembly should not concentrate so much on that issue. Although I have referred directly

to four particular areas that I have asked the inspector to look at, he is not restricted to those areas only. I stress again that I have placed no limitations on the inspector regarding how he conducts his inquiry, whom he speaks to, or, indeed, the issues that he thinks it is important to follow up. He will have all the support necessary from the Department for Regional Development, the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo), Translink and NIR.

Mr Hamilton: I add my support to the Minister for the action that he has taken on the matter. I am sure that he has the support of the House. I wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. The Minister made reference to the fact that the landowner has expressed concern about the possibility of further slides, and that he has engaged an engineer to report on the state of the cliffs. Can the Minister assure the House that his Department is as satisfied as is humanly possible that the A2 coast road, and the railway line that runs parallel to it, are safe to travel?

Mr P Robinson: If that question had been put to me on 3 June 2002, I would probably have said that to the best of my knowledge they were because no one can tell what might happen, given the day, the weather or other circumstances.

In relation to the land, there are liability issues. The Department is taking legal advice. So too — as I read in a morning paper — is Translink. However, the Department cannot simply go onto someone's property and work on it. There are legal issues in relation to that. However, given the circumstances that the Department faces, the Roads Service will have to reach its own conclusions about risk on the road. Translink is legally required to reach its own conclusions. It is not, therefore, a matter for my Department, but for those two agencies. It is essential that when they reach their conclusions, they take into account the topography of the land, the likely weather conditions, the speed of traffic — either on road or rail — and all other circumstances. I would not second-guess the decision that they must take, but they will be better informed to take those decisions as a result of the investigations that are being carried out.

PLANNING (AMENDMENT) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 12/01] to amend the law relating to planning; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

LOCAL AIR QUALITY MANAGEMENT BILL

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 13/01] to make provision for implementing Council Directive 96/62 EC and for otherwise preventing and controlling air pollution; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

INSOLVENCY BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 14/01] to amend the law about insolvency; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

COMPANY DIRECTORS DISQUALIFICATION BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 15/01] to amend and consolidate provisions relating to the disqualification of persons from being directors of companies, and from otherwise being concerned with a company's affairs.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

SUPPLY RESOLUTION FOR THE 2002-03 MAIN ESTIMATES

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

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £4,962,077,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003 and that resources, not exceeding £5,710,516,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(a) and 3(b) of Table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2002-03 that was laid before the Assembly on 31 May 2002.

I move the motion in order to seek the Assembly's approval of the spending plans for 2002-03, as set out in the Main Estimates volume, which was laid before the Assembly on 31 May 2002. The resolution is proposed under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to bring proposals to the Assembly that lead to cash appropriations from the Consolidated Fund.

12.45 pm

In doing so, I act on behalf of the Executive as a whole, and the spending allocations reflect the Executive's decisions. The main spending plans were approved by the Assembly in the Budget debate on 11 December 2001. That followed a period of scrutiny of the proposals after the presentation of the draft Budget on 25 September 2001. My Department and I have sought to provide all the briefing and analysis requested in relation to those proposals since then to allow the maximum possible opportunity for consultation. I am satisfied that last year's process has been improved, and I want to build on those improvements in the Budget 2002 process with which we are currently engaged.

The main purpose of the motion is to seek the Assembly's approval of the use of resources by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Assembly, the Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman and the Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003, as summarised in the Estimates booklet that was laid before the Assembly on 31 May. The motion also seeks the Assembly's approval for the issue of a cash sum from the Consolidated Fund for the financial year 2002-03, as detailed too in the Estimates booklet.

The amounts of cash and resources covered by today's motion are in addition to the Vote on Account approved by the Assembly in the Supply resolution debate on 11 February 2002, which was followed by the passage of

the Budget (No 1) Bill. When the amounts in today's motion are added to the Vote on Account, the total cash and resources contained in the 2002-03 Main Estimates amount to some £8,898 million and £10,197 million respectively.

I remind the Assembly of the significance of the motion for which I seek support. It is the way in which the legislature, in the form of the Assembly, authorises spending by Departments, the Assembly itself, the Audit Office and other bodies to enable them to carry out their various functions. One of our most fundamental responsibilities is to authorise expenditure and hold Departments to account for how it is used. This is one of the main means of ensuring that we deliver on the commitments set out in the Programme for Government.

We recognise the importance of ensuring that the Assembly, its Committees, and especially the Committee for Finance and Personnel, have the best possible opportunity to scrutinise the Estimates. The timescale for the exercise is limited, but every effort is being made to ensure as much time as possible for the Committee's scrutiny. To that end, the Committee was provided with a working proof when it became available four weeks ago.

We have also worked to address concerns about the complexity of the Estimates. At the request of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, officials delivered a presentation to MLAs on 22 May on their structure and content. Some presentational changes have been made to assist readers to navigate through the document, and in the longer term, we will consider changes to improve the presentation further.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has taken a keen and constructive interest in finance issues and has played a helpful role at several key phases in the financial cycle. I want to acknowledge the confirmation by the Committee that there has been appropriate consultation on the spending plans reflected in the motion.

Before I turn to more detailed issues, I will put in context what we seek to do today. The debate covers expenditure in 2002-03. The Supply resolution is the means by which the Main Estimates can be examined by the Assembly, thereby implementing the Budget that the Executive agreed and the Assembly approved last December. It will pave the way for us to consider the stages of the Budget (No 2) Bill, which, subject to the approval of the Assembly, will provide the legal authority for Departments to incur expenditure this year. These steps, therefore, represent a key stage in the 2002-03 Budget cycle.

It is important that a clear distinction be drawn between these processes and the development work for the Budget 2002. The Supply resolution and Budget Bill provide the legislative authority and funds for the Executive's Budget that the Assembly agreed last December.

The figures in the Main Estimates and the Budget Bill differ from the Budget that was approved in December. However, no new resources have been allocated since December. I want to stress that the spending plans that the Assembly approved are the basis for the Estimates and the Budget Bill.

I will explain briefly the main differences that occur and why. The December Budget concentrates on expenditure within the departmental expenditure limit (DEL), which the Treasury sets. The Budget brings together all the expenditure and revenue that relate to what we can do within the DEL to finance public services. The Estimates set out what that means for the drawing of cash by Departments from the Consolidated Fund and their use of resources in relation to their objectives.

In addition to the DEL, the Estimates include some annually managed expenditure (AME). Two main items fall into that category: social security benefits, some of which are subject to annual appropriation or authorisation and some of which are charged under legislation to the National Insurance fund and, hence, do not feature in the voting process; and expenditure under the common agricultural policy (CAP) because it is fully funded by the European Agriculture Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF).

As well as those AME items, some aspects of expenditure, nominally attached to the DEL, are ring-fenced by the Treasury. These include, for example, expenditure under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

Some social security expenditure is handled outside the voting system, because there are standing authorisations in the form of specific legislation that allow money to be drawn from the Consolidated Fund, or another fund, to provide a service. A further example of that is when a Department makes a loan under some statutory power. In most cases, the issue of the loan will count towards the DEL. However, where there is a standing authorisation for the making of loans outside the Estimate, the loan would not need specific Assembly approval through the Estimates and Budget Bill system. Some important aspects of the Budget are funded in that way, as distinct from the Supply procedure that we are considering today.

I now turn to the detail of the Estimates, which are produced on a resource basis. In the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the total net resource requirement is £263 million. Resources of some £177 million are sought in request for resources A. That provides for ongoing regional services and support measures, including £76 million for development of agriculture and agricultural products industries and for scientific and veterinary services.

Approximately £56 million, including £2.4 million that is allocated under the Executive programme funds, is sought for farm support, enhancement of the countryside,

animal disease compensation and processing and marketing grants that are totally funded by the European Union. Central administration is allocated £13 million, including information technology and specialist accommodation services, and £9 million is for the rural development programme.

Approximately £11 million is for structural funds and the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, and £12 million is for non-cash items such as capital charges, depreciation costs and notional interdepartmental charges. Various market support measures administered under the common agricultural policy, totalling approximately £158 million, are also accounted for under request for resources A. Those are fully funded by the European Union receipt and, therefore, cancel within the Estimate.

Resources of some £86 million are sought in request for resources B. That includes £24 million for the Rivers Agency, the Forest Service and fisheries services. Another £3 million is for central administration, the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. The remaining £59 million is for non-cash items such as capital charges, depreciation costs and notional interdepartmental charges. Various market support measures administered under the common agricultural policy, totalling approximately £1 million, are also accounted for under request for resources B. Again, those are fully funded by the European Union receipt and, therefore, cancel within the Estimate.

When the resources requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is seeking cash of some £211 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure seeks resources of £85 million. That includes £26.7 million for expenditure by education and library boards on public libraries; £11.4 million on the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland; £8.8 million for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and other miscellaneous support for the arts; and £3.4 million for sports. The Estimate also provides £1.1 million for the Northern Ireland Events Company; £3.6 million as Northern Ireland's contribution to the North/South language body; and £3 million for Waterways Ireland. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department requires £81.8 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

Turning to the Department of Education, resources of some £1,383 million are sought in request for resources A, which covers schools. That includes £1,040 million for recurrent expenditure by education and library boards and £39 million for boards' capital projects. It also provides £155 million for recurrent expenditure in voluntary grammar schools; £36 million for recurrent

expenditure in grant-maintained integrated schools; and £67 million for capital projects in voluntary and grant-maintained integrated schools. Approximately £12 million is being made available under Executive programme funds, and £2 million will be made available under the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

In request for resources B, which covers youth services and community relations for young people, resources of £29 million are sought. That includes approximately £17 million for recurrent and capital expenditure by education and library boards; £2 million under Executive programme funds; and £3 million under the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

1.00 pm

When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and departmental capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking cash of £1,425 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate. Resources of £92 million are being sought for teachers' superannuation, with a corresponding cash requirement for the same amount.

In the Department for Employment and Learning a net resource of £390 million is sought for resources A and £197 million for resources B. Capital provision of £106 million is sought for resources A and £0.2 million for resources B. Request for resources A includes over £150 million for colleges of further education; £171 million for local universities and colleges of education; net resources of £60 million for student support, including £12 million from Executive programme funds for the Higher Education Bursaries Scheme; and capital provision of £106 million for student support.

Request for resources B includes £34 million for New Deal measures, mainly in New Deal for 18- to 24-year-olds and New Deal for 25 plus. Just over £60 million is to guarantee training places for 16- and 17-year-olds under the Jobskills programme. A further £16 million is for other training and temporary employment programmes to get 3,000 places for long-term unemployed adults who are not eligible for New Deal.

When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department requires £689 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

In the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment £287 million is sought for resources A to cover economic support and regeneration measures. That includes £188 million for Invest Northern Ireland to support business growth and inward investment, promote innovation, research and development and company training. Also included in that request for resources is £16 million to support the tourist industry and £13 million for economic infrastructure to develop world-class telecommunications and support the development of the Northern Ireland Science Park.

The request for resources B, which covers the Department's regulatory services, is for £14 million. When the resources requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department requires £269 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The Department of Finance and Personnel is seeking £33.7 million for resources and £0.1 million for capital for resources A to cover its administration of the public expenditure system and its responsibilities for European structural funds programmes. The sums of £94.6 million for resources B and £20.7 million for capital are sought to cover the services that the Department provides to other Departments such as central personnel, statistics accommodation, construction, purchasing, telecommunications and business consultancy.

In its request for resources C, the Department is seeking £19 million for resources and £1.5 million for capital to support the administration of services to the public, including rateable valuations, the registration of births, marriages and deaths and land registration.

The resources requested by the Department will enable the delivery of planned services in all the areas that I have mentioned and will support the next stages in a range of reviews, including reviews of rating, public procurement, promotion and recruitment to the Senior Civil Service, accommodation, and the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking just under £145 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is seeking over £2,321 million. That figure includes £2,230 million to be spent on delivering an effective, high-quality health and social care service to people in need; £60 million for fire services; and £31 million for departmental administration. When adjusted for capital payments and non-cash items, the net cash requirement is just over £2,330 million. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Main Estimate identifies £41 million to meet the cost of the health and personal social services superannuation scheme. The net cash requirement for that Estimate is also £41 million.

A total net resource requirement of some £122.6 million is being sought by the Department of the Environment, together with almost £2.7 million for capital investment. That increase of £9.8 million above the resources that were available last year reflects the continuing need to resolve historical underfunding of the Department's functions. Around £6 million of the additional resources will be used to help meet international environmental obligations, including waste management and the transposition and implementation of European Union Directives.

The remainder of the increase — some £4 million — will be directed in a variety of ways, including assistance

to district councils, the continuing effort to reduce road casualties, and support for the planning process. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking just over £111 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The Department for Regional Development's Estimate comprises two requests for resources with a total net resource requirement of £1,768 million, together with £170 million to meet direct departmental investment in capital projects.

Request for resources A, which covers the roads, transport and the strategic planning functions of the Department, along with related central administration, amounts to some £1,287 million. Of that, almost £1,041 million is attributable to non-cash costs such as depreciation and cost-of-capital charges, substantially in respect of the roads network.

Provision is also made for capital expenditure of some £57.5 million, mainly by the Roads Service. That figure includes an allocation of £11.5 million from the Executive programme funds to enable five high-priority road schemes to progress.

With regard to transport, request for resources A includes some £56 million to fund capital expenditure by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company on the railway infrastructure service. This is included in the grants column on the resource side of the Estimate. Some £18 million is needed for other railway services, and some £26 million for road passenger services, including concessionary fares and rural transport.

Request for resources B relates to the provision of water and sewerage services, for which a net resource of some £481 million is needed. Depreciation and cost-of-capital charges amounting to £372.5 million are catered for. The £113 million needed for capital investment in the water supply, treatment and sewage disposal infrastructure includes £1.5 million allocated from the Executive programme funds. After accruals to cash adjustments are made, the Department for Regional Development's net cash requirement for the year is just under £520 million.

The Department for Social Development has sought £2,552 million for resources A, which covers its social security and child support programme. That figure is made up of non-contributory and income-related benefit expenditure of £2,365 million, £158 million for administration and £29 million for non-cash items such as notional interdepartmental charges, capital charges and depreciation costs. Included in the administration costs is some £41 million to enable the Department to progress its welfare reform and modernisation programme.

The sum of £294 million is being sought for resources B, which covers the housing programme. That figure includes programme expenditure of around £289 million,

administration costs of £2 million, and £4 million for non-cash items. When net borrowing and the Housing Executive's rents and capital receipts from house sales are taken into account, the gross resources available for housing will be over £632 million. For resources C, which covers the urban regeneration and community development programme, £71 million is being sought. That figure includes programme expenditure of £53 million, administration costs of £6 million and £12 million for non-cash items.

Within programme expenditure, £31 million will be provided to promote and implement a comprehensive approach to tackling physical and social regeneration and £8 million for grants to voluntary bodies. The sum of £8 million will be made available under the European Union's peace and reconciliation programme, of which £6 million will be funded from European Union receipts. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash figure and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department for Social Development is seeking £2,845 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is seeking total resources of £39.2 million. Some £15 million is to support the Executive in making and implementing well-informed and timely policy decisions and improving public services, while £23.3 million is to promote equality of opportunity and human rights, to improve community relations, tackle poverty and social disadvantage and meet the needs of victims. When adjusted for capital and non-cash items, the net cash requirement is £38.9 million.

The Assembly seeks £40.4 million to cover Members' salaries, expenses and administration costs. The net cash requirement for this Estimate is £39.9 million. The Ombudsman and the Commissioner for Complaints seek £0.9 million to investigate complaints against Departments and public and local bodies and to provide an investigative resource for the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The net cash requirement for this Estimate is £0.9 million. The Audit Office seeks £5.4 million to provide independent assurance to the Assembly on Government expenditure. The net cash requirement for this Estimate is £4.9 million.

Finally, the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas is seeking £0.1 million. This includes provision to cover salaries and other costs associated with gas-related work, which, as it falls outside the current licensed area, cannot be financed through licence fees. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, £0.05 million is required to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

1.15 pm

The Estimates and the Budget Bill will set the framework for our spending plans for 2002-03 based on the Budget position approved in December. However, we

already know that there will be quite significant funding changes in the coming year, which will need to be reflected in the Supplementary Estimates.

In addition to the normal in-year monitoring round — significant changes in themselves — the Executive will shortly be making funding announcements about the reinvestment and reform initiative and the infrastructure fund. Those will be followed by later announcements on the Children's Fund, the new innovation and modernisation fund and the social inclusion/community regeneration fund.

The spending plans that we are debating today represent another important step in the evolution of the Assembly. The Estimates and the Budget Bill consolidate what we have already achieved and establish the framework for our expenditure in 2002-03 and the delivery of public services.

We now have many important issues to look forward to. We will know the outcome of the UK spending review in July, and we will then know what resources will be available to us for the next three years. We will be setting plans for our expenditure in the Budget 2002 process, which I explained in my timetable statement on 4 March earlier this year. These plans will cover the three-year period from 2003-04, so that we can begin to move towards more stable, longer-term planning in line with our Programme for Government. The Programme for Government sets out our most important priorities alongside issues such as equality and new targeting social need, which cut across all our policies and initiatives.

In commending this Supply resolution to the Assembly, I am conscious that, as a devolved Administration, we have a clear responsibility to ensure that our spending plans address our agreed needs and priorities. The allocations that we are asked to agree today reflect priorities set and agreed by the Executive and the Assembly. That is not an insignificant point, and we should continue to be aware of the Assembly's responsibility to meet the needs of our people across the full range of public services. We also must ensure that there are appropriate levels of management and control over the use of these resources.

Our expenditure decisions affect directly the life of every citizen in Northern Ireland. Perhaps that is an obvious message, but it is worth reminding ourselves of our responsibilities and of the impact of our decisions. Debates and decisions that come from this Chamber impact on the daily lives of the people of Northern Ireland; that might not be visible every day, but nonetheless the impact is real. We share a duty to make that impact as positive as we can.

This is particularly pertinent at a time when sectarian forces persist in their attempts to deepen divisions, inflame old hatreds and set sections of our communities against each other. The message from the Assembly to the people of Northern Ireland should be that by working

together we are achieving positive results, and we will achieve even more than we did in the past by continuing to work together.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Beggs): I welcome the Supply resolution debate to formally consider and approve the Main Estimates. The Main Estimates are the further development of the figures that were approved in the revised Budget last December. I agree with the Minister that minor improvements in the format of the Estimates have been made, following representations by the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The Minister has also stated his willingness to further consult with the Committee about other possible improvements and simplifications before next year's Estimates.

The Finance and Personnel Committee will readily act as a conduit for other Committees or Members who have suggestions for further improvements. At the Committee's request, the Department of Finance and Personnel held a seminar on the Estimates procedures for Members and staff recently, and further information will soon be distributed to those who were unable to attend.

Members' attention is needed on the current Estimates and Budget process. They should scrutinise them and hold the Executive to account for their spending priorities and plans for future years. That must be an ongoing exercise, not just a one-off measure relating to a key debate such as the Budget or the Estimates. Spending priorities must reflect the Government's objectives, and moneys must be spent effectively to achieve the desired outcomes and ensure that performance targets are met.

Statutory Committees can effect that scrutiny throughout the year: as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I value that role. Members can also pose probing questions to Ministers throughout the year to ensure effective expenditure. This should not be a set-piece debate: our attention should remain on it during the year.

The Executive's recent position report, 'Developing the Programme for Government and the Budget for 2003-04', will allow for six months of informed debate about hard choices on how to spend public funds, the Barnett allocation, and how we spend funds in the coming year. It is not simply a matter of saying that more money is required for everything. Difficult choices must be made, and informed debate should occur so that the best choices can be made.

On a more personal note, I welcome the increased resources set aside for health and social services, and the significant bids envisaged for that in next year's Budget. However, it is important that we deliver additional funds and ensure that the money is spent effectively. I look forward to the imminent publication of the needs and effectiveness analysis. That will assess how the money has been spent to date and ensure that money is better spent.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the opportunity to discuss and approve the Supply resolution. The public knows that the needs of society far outstrip the resources received from the Treasury.

One of the few ways of raising funds for health, education, roads and other necessary services is rates. Therefore, it is important that we approve the Supply resolution. However, it is also important that we support and approve the action of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who does a difficult and complex job. His professionalism on these issues is commendable.

The Assembly, Committees and the Executive must work ceaselessly in pursuit of the goals of the community. We must build, innovate, develop and continuously improve our activities. We must continuously question the use of resources in every Department, asking whether they represent value for money. We need to ensure that our public procurement is used in ways that satisfy our needs and, where possible, liberate opportunities for our people and our economy.

I welcome the Minister's statement as a sign that devolution is truly bedding down. However, that brings with it a responsibility on Members to deliver on the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. Local responsibility and local decision-making is not a responsibility-free zone.

I welcome especially the funds that have been allocated by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to improve community relations, and I hope that people on the streets will soon witness an outcome of the use of such funds.

We have heard, and will undoubtedly hear today, appeals for more funding to be made available for particular projects and Departments. However, funds are severely limited. Some progress has been made in examining alternative and innovative ways to introduce new spending ability to the system, and that must be welcomed. The reinvestment and reform initiative offers an opportunity to begin to address the serious infrastructure backlog, which is a matter of record in the Assembly.

Moreover, the review of public-private partnerships in Northern Ireland is moving ahead. I hope that as many people as possible will take the opportunity to contribute to debates on that review, the review of public administration and the review of the rating system.

Much can be done to increase our spending power, within our system and resources, that can be added from outside. None of the advances that I mentioned release the Minister from his task of achieving the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland from the spending review. He needs the backing of all parties and Departments.

It has been said frequently here, and mentioned just now by Mr Beggs, that health services need resources. That is true, but the House must be assured that funding

for health is spent as effectively as possible. The ongoing needs and effectiveness evaluations by several Departments are vital. I support the motion.

Mr S Wilson: The way in which the Estimates have been presented to Members is bewildering. Roy Beggs said that minor changes had been made; however, I am sure that the language used in the Estimates could be simplified so that they are more accessible, not only for debate in the Assembly, but to the public. When it comes to accounting measures there is a need to use accounting terms. However, many of us are still getting our heads around AMEs and DELs when we are hit with RFRs and FOCSS and CFERs et cetera.

Sometimes I wonder whether the Department invents much of the terminology, to make those matters unnecessarily obscure. The presentation of the Estimates must be much more user-friendly in future.

I noted Ms Lewsley's comments about the need to examine expenditure, but also to support the Minister as regards rates. She pointed out that resources outstrip needs in our society. That will be a familiar call in years to come as the local tax, which this Administration impose, begins to increase. I do not accept that we should unnecessarily increase the sources of funds in Northern Ireland. In doing so, we sometimes stymie enterprise. We have before us almost £9 billion of expenditure. It is not impossible, with that amount of expenditure, to make sure economies as would enable the most pressing capital needs and other needs to be met without imposing a further local tax on those who seek to create jobs and provide economic development in Northern Ireland.

1.30 pm

We are in the middle of the spending cycle that the Estimates refer to. Ms Lewsley said that we have seen the Administration bedding down and that Northern Ireland is moving into a new era promoted by the agreement. However, it is becoming clear that what is contained in the Estimates is being altered as a result of what has been going on in the streets over the past few months.

This year, 250 houses will have to be bought up under the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme. That has not been factored into the Estimates. Seventy-five of those purchases — almost £7 million worth — will be the result of the activity of the armed wing of a partner in the Administration. As a result of the raid on Castlereagh by the IRA and the way in which that compromised the security of policemen, 75 families have had to move house, and 75 houses will have to be bought under the SPED scheme. That is just one incident; add to that the number of people who have been put out of their homes as a result of terrorist activity on the streets.

It is obvious that the best-laid expenditure plans are being unravelled and damaged by some who sit on the

Executive, who draw up the budgetary plans and introduce the expenditure Estimates. At the same time, plans for housing — to give one example — are being disturbed and affected by the activities of those who sit here and pontificate as politicians while their less-savoury friends are out on the streets destroying houses and putting people out of their homes.

How many other spending plans will be affected by that kind of activity in the coming months? The Minister of Finance and Personnel's party continues to reward those who put a spanner in the works and who damage the manner in which spending in the Province is undertaken. It rewards them in many ways. It is best illustrated by the SDLP's and the Alliance Party's rewarding of a member of the political group that is at the heart of the street disorders that are rampant in Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson, you are straying from the item of business.

Mr S Wilson: I hope that I have explained myself, Mr Deputy Speaker. It probably hurts when the finger of blame is pointed at those who have rewarded Sinn Féin/IRA in Belfast City Council. However, housing expenditure will be severely damaged. Members have heard that £600 million — including grants and capital receipts — is available for housing in Northern Ireland in the next year. However, the Housing Executive must buy up houses from people who have been intimidated, repair houses that have been wrecked and improve security on houses so that people can live without fear. That is as a result of the activities of parties represented in the Assembly and who, presumably, approved the Estimates.

I hope that the Estimates will become more user-friendly. I know that it is the job of Committees to examine Budgets at the stage when they are presented to them, and they do that. Before we impose further tax burdens on the public, I hope that we will look at what economies can be made in the £9,000 million represented in the booklet.

With regard to those who engage in activities across the Province that, in effect, drain resources away from much-needed areas of expenditure into unnecessary areas of expenditure created solely by their activities, I hope that they will not be rewarded in future and that everyone in the House will treat them with the disdain and contempt that they deserve.

Mr Close: This is one of the most important issues to come before the Assembly, because it literally affects every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland. Looking around the Chamber, a dozen or less representatives are present. In many ways that is an indictment of us and of how seriously we take our functions, because this affects everyone in some way or other. It is important that all Members, without exception, take an interest in the Estimates, the Budget and the expenditure of taxpayers' money, and it is in all of our interests that that be done.

With that in mind, I welcome, and for the Minister's attention I emphasise "welcome", the efforts that have been made in the past 12 months to make the Estimates more user-friendly. For example, the colour-coding is beneficial when examining each section and getting the meaning behind it. I also welcome the efforts, which the Minister referred to, to provide courses for Members and officials as a sort of guide through the Estimates. That is welcomed and is beneficial to all of us.

However, further improvements could be made. Mr Sammy Wilson referred to the language used, and it should be more user-friendly. He gave some examples, and I accept that there are certain terms that are established in accountancy and that trying to change them would create more confusion. However, we have introduced new language — for example, CFERs. Let us call receipts "receipts" and sales "sales" wherever possible, rather than using other terminology or jargon, which only makes understanding more difficult.

I would also like to see an easier read-across from one year to another. Last year's Estimates booklet does not co-ordinate with this year's. There is no straight read-across, and there should be. We are moving away from Government accounting to more commercial accounting. In company accounts there is a direct read-across from one year to another. There is no reason why that should not happen with our Estimates.

Mr McCartney: Does the Member not suspect that the failure to provide clear comparisons between one year and another is not accidental, but a method of burying unpalatable truths?

Mr Close: There are many occasions when bad news can be hidden in one way or another. However, I cannot judge whether it is the reason behind this, because I am not a Member of the Executive.

A simple read-across would help. For example, the sequencing of the presentation of the Departments — the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, then the Department of Finance and Personnel — should be the same from one year to the next.

That is not the case this year. I mean that as a constructive criticism, to try to help Members to further understand finance so that we can have a greater input and better represent those who sent us to the Assembly. I am saying this to ensure that there is best value for money and more interest in finance, which can be a boring topic. Finance is always boring except when it is your own. There are some small areas in which improvements could be made to help Members better understand the topic.

Another idea would be to highlight, with an asterisk, large differences between one year and the next. I am not talking about common inflationary increases; Members

know that normal administration costs, for example, rise from one year to the next. However, as you flick through the document, you wonder why there are such large increases in some areas. For example, why is there a 15% increase in central administration under some of the votes? Adding an asterisk, and an explanation — if there is one — would certainly help Members, and would, perhaps, make those with suspicious minds less suspicious. It would remove the clouds of suspicion that may hang over certain figures.

The document has around 300 pages. I know that all efforts are being made to increase the time available to Members to do their jobs. That is all we are asking for — time to do our jobs. I admit that I have not had enough time to scrutinise the 300 pages properly. I have not had enough time to go through them in detail, and I am sure that I speak for several Members.

Members are working to tight deadlines. However, that should not be used as an excuse to bury us in paperwork that will lead to confusion. More effort must be made to give proper input into our timetable. The old cliché is very true: if a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well. Due to time restraints, Members do not have adequate time to do their jobs properly, and everyone, therefore, loses out.

Other areas that the general public and taxpayers will be interested in when they consider the document are whether the Assembly is making any real difference; whether the general public is getting real value for money; and whether the Assembly has got its priorities right.

As regards priorities, the Assembly is, by and large, getting its priorities right. Health is the Assembly's priority, and must continue to be so. The general public would support that. However, they would be justified in asking how translating priorities into action actually works. If they see that the health budget has increased by around £200 million from last year, they can justifiably ask why waiting lists are still increasing. They could ask, "Is there a hole in the bucket?" The old song goes: "There's a hole in my bucket dear Liza, dear Liza." Well, "dear Liza" — or dear Bairbre — needs to fix that hole, and fix it quickly. The general public is becoming more and more concerned.

I recently received the Eastern Health and Social Services Board's quarterly service agreement — its monitoring report. Despite additional money being spent, the board had to report that at the end of April 2002 the number of delayed patients was 18% higher, and delayed days were 40% higher, than at the end of April 2001. Something is wrong if that happens. There is a problem that needs to be fixed.

There are other areas in which priorities must be questioned. For example, why are road safety services down almost £1 million on last year when the environment and heritage services are up by £5 million, or almost

15%? Priorities have not necessarily been properly established in that respect.

1.45 pm

Much concern and alarm has been expressed about the Water Service, yet its allocation is down £2 million, while the administrative costs in vote B in the same Department are up 50%. Where are the priorities? Have we got them right?

Other Members will probably mention administrative costs, so I will be conservative in my comments. Almost £1 billion is being spent on administration. Depending on the calculation, and on whether other areas that would not necessarily be included under administration costs in the Estimates are incorporated, there could easily be in excess of £1 billion being spent on administration. Is that real value for money?

The Minister will mention, with some justification, the ongoing review of central administration. However, since the Assembly was established some four years ago, many reviews have been thrown into the wheelbarrow. Mr Deputy Speaker, you know what to do with a wheelbarrow — you push it in front of you, you never really get to grips with it, you keep pushing it forward.

The general public and the taxpayers are anxious to see the Assembly really making a difference. There will be a growing question about the efficiency and the effectiveness of this place until actions and resolutions on those reviews come before the House and until we get to grips with £1 billion being spent on administration.

I want the Assembly to work. The people who sent me here want it to work. They want value for money and to see money being spent on proper priorities. They do not want to see their money being lost or dissipated and scattered round foolishly.

I disagree with Mr Sammy Wilson, who said that we probably do not need additional sources of revenue. Considering that the infrastructure deficit is some £6 billion, we probably do. With the best will in the world, the savings that can be made need some form of revenue. That revenue should not come from rates; it should come from local income taxes. That is where I disagree with Mr Wilson — an additional source is needed. If we are going to make the difference —

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member not agree that if the economies that he describes were made, the infrastructure fund, for example, could be entirely serviced from those economies, rather than having to levy additional taxes?

Mr Close: The extent of the bite that one attempts to take from the cake in dealing with infrastructural problems will dictate the amount of loans and finance that will be required in any particular year. However, a conservative estimate is that between £100 and £200 million could potentially be saved in the figures that we are considering.

If rates and local revenue-raising were done away with, that would not be enough to service the debt.

There must be a local revenue stream. Rates are the wrong way to do it because they are regressive, although I will not go into that argument. To continually increase rates by 6% or 8% will lead to negative financing, because people will be driven out of business.

A new stream of resources must be considered. My preferred option would be local income tax. We should continue to argue that. I have said this before: I wish that the Executive had used the opportunity for review to put that on the table and have it properly costed and examined. An opportunity may well be lost unless the Executive change their mind and allow economists and others and those giving evidence to consider the potential of local income tax.

Another area of resource wastage that I have touched on is the expenditure of millions of pounds on the "glossy brochure" syndrome. That is still ongoing. Since I spoke about it, a couple of organisations have contacted me and asked for suggestions. I am not against consultation but I am against wastage through consultation. It should not be beyond the wisdom of the Executive and those behind them to target the people they seek to consult, and to do that succinctly and wisely. They need only an exercise in marketing. I am against throwing money away by sending out hundreds of documents to every citizen who happens to be on an equality list or whatever. Proper targeting brings the best results. A recent consultation document on radon gas was sent all over the place, yet only a few per cent responded. We have no resources to waste, so targeting must be specific.

I have referred to reviews, to the need for savings and to everything that we as an Assembly must do. I am glad that the Minister and Sammy Wilson touched on the vital message that must be sent to the thugs and gangsters who waste money in almost every Department. Mr Wilson referred to housing. We have seen the television footage of young thugs systematically wrecking house roofs. That will possibly cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to put right. We hear daily of attacks on ambulance men and their vehicles. How will that increase the number of nurses and doctors? People are dying, and thugs and gangsters attack ambulance men. It is crazy.

Mr McCartney: Is the Member aware that central Government subsidise a proliferation of organisations that are inextricably linked to those who are involved in paramilitary and terrorist activity? The aim is to bribe them, but it does not work.

Mr Close: I sympathise with the Member. The paramilitaries have had long enough to decide whether they want to be proper democrats, and they cannot sit astride two horses. In promoting the paramilitary horse they have fallen off the democratic one. Society has borne it for long enough. The Good Friday Agreement

is being implemented, as are the changes. Although today we must focus on the Estimates, the destruction taking place has an effect on every Department. It is time for us collectively, as democrats and elected politicians, to say that enough is enough and to call on all terrorist organisations without exception, and on those who claim to have their ear, to get off the fence, stop and disband. We cannot afford to pour money into the black hole of terrorism, which destroys ambulance men, firemen and their vehicles, and attacks the police, and some parties do not even criticise the fact that a young policeman was almost killed a day or two ago.

Mr Morrow: I am impressed by the Member's points. He is an honest individual who gives of his best in any debate and holds sincere views. How does what he says today sit beside the decision of his three comrades in Belfast city hall last week to support the very people he now castigates? Will he give the reasons for that decision to the Assembly? The public do not understand it, Mr Close.

Mr Close: To get to grips with the problems, Members must stop playing games with them. I am making an unequivocal, unambiguous plea to everyone across the political spectrum to ask those who call themselves paramilitaries — I call them thugs and gangsters — to cease their terrorism, to disband their paramilitary organisations, and to reassure us, when we spend money and consider motions such as this, that that money will be spent in the interests of society. To enable us to build a better future for the people of Northern Ireland we must ensure that the thugs and gangsters who belong to paramilitary organisations will not waste not only life and limb and blood and sweat but scarce resources.

Mr McCartney: To paraphrase Mr Micawber, if your income is £1 and you live on £1 0s 6d, it is misery, and, if you live on 19s 6d, it is happiness. As is often the case, Mr Close referred to several topics, some of which I will not dwell on because he covered them so completely, and one or two others that I will attempt to amplify.

It is a matter of regret that a debate of this kind should warrant the attendance of a single member of the largest party in the Assembly in the form of Mr Beggs; that apart from one fleeting, swallow-like appearance of Mrs Nelis, there has been no representation from Sinn Féin — *[Interruption]*.

Mr S Wilson: I would hardly describe Mrs Nelis as a swallow.

Mr McCartney: I will not develop that point.

[Laughter].

However, perhaps it is a reflection of the attention span of some Members that they are not here.

The Estimates contain an enormous amount of jargon and technical terms that would puzzle even the most acute mind and those who are interested in the subject.

To those who have only a passing interest in financial matters, the Estimates are utterly bewildering; perhaps that is one reason for the paucity of Members in this place today.

Of course, the matter is open to some simplification. What makes up the income of the Executive and the Assembly? It consists of the block grant, several other minor matters, the possibility of raising money locally via rates and, possibly, charges for the supply of water or the discharge of effluent. What are our debts? They are the massive black hole of underinvestment in the infrastructure of Northern Ireland. Most of them were incurred by central Government, which for many years underinvested in the infrastructure of Northern Ireland with the result that our water system is in the last stages of decay, with upwards of 40% of our water disappearing into the ground. It is, perhaps, a blessing that we naturally have a plenitude of water here, but nevertheless, that represents a huge loss. The sewerage system in many areas of Northern Ireland is decayed and decrepit. Housing developments in some areas have been stopped because the sewerage system is inadequate.

2.00 pm

Our waiting lists are an abomination. Not only are our hospital waiting lists 50% higher than those of any other region of the United Kingdom, they are the worst in Europe. We have an education system that requires reform but has been plunged not into reform so much as into proposed revolution. A vast amount of money will be required to commit to any new system and to repair the deficit of funding for school buildings and other ancillary equipment.

That is on the debit side. I have said repeatedly that those who negotiated the Belfast Agreement — *[Interruption]*.

Dr Farren: There were others.

Mr McCartney: Yes, those who negotiated it. The Minister does not want to hear about that, because he was one of the brainboxes involved.

The British Government wanted to devolve the problem, and they might have been willing to pay significantly for money that they saved by short-changing the people of Northern Ireland. There was a perfectly valid legal and moral case for saying to them that if they wanted us to take over this place, they ought to have provided some means, whether by direct grants or interest-free loans, to make good that deficit. None of that was done. The result is that the annual block grant under the Barnett formula is barely sufficient to meet Northern Ireland's annual running costs, let alone provide money that could be saved or put into capital investment.

What did the Executive do when, late in the day, they discovered the deficiency? They went to the British Government and told them, somewhat disingenuously, that they had sold them a pup. The Executive said that hospitals, schools, the water supply, the sewerage system

and roads in Northern Ireland were in a mess. Some roads leading to the most important areas, such as the docks, have become a hindrance to business development. The Executive told the British Government that they had left them in a mess and asked what they would do about it. Judging from subsequent actions, I assume that they were told that public-private partnerships would be one half of a panacea for those difficulties and that the British Government's provision of loans, on which significant and substantial interest must be paid, would be the other.

From where will that interest be paid? Apparently, it will not be paid from any money that is recoverable from the block grant, but by the imposition of local taxes. What are those local taxes? In his previous statement, the Minister of Finance and Personnel talked about resource streams and funding streams. He meant rates, water charges and, possibly, effluent charges. Those sources of income were originally designed to provide for local services; they were not intended as a means of general taxation. Ms Lewsley let the cat out of the bag when she said that we need money to fund education, health and the environment from these resources.

As Mr Close said, when Governments get into bother they suggest a commission or a review, which puts everything on the long finger. He suggested that it is like putting something into a wheelbarrow and continuing to move; it is kept constantly ahead of oneself.

What have the Government done here? They have produced a review of rating policy, which, we are told, is purely a consultation document that nobody need get upset about because nothing is on the table or off it. The core objective of the rates policy review is to increase vastly the money to be screwed out of the ratepayers of Northern Ireland, perhaps by 50%, 100% or 150%. The document suggests that rates should be raised on the capital value of properties.

Everyone knows that the capital value of the property may not represent its value to the occupants, who could be a young family who have taken out a 90% mortgage so that they can live in a better environment in which to bring up children, provide a future nest egg, or even a pension. It is proposed that the full value of the property be taxed through rates, as if it were owned completely, when in fact only 10% of the property maybe owned. At the other end of the scale there are pensioners and other families on a fixed or limited income whose house is their only asset. Those folk, who may have spent their lives paying off their mortgage, will be taxed on the full value of their pension.

Dr Farren: What is the relevance of the Member's points?

Mr McCartney: The Minister is questioning the relevance of this. The debate is about the Estimates, the money to be raised and the money to be spent.

Upwards of £1 billion — I suggest that the figure is nearer £1.2 billion — is to be spent on administration costs, bureaucracy and an overwhelming welter of civil servants that has increased exponentially since the Assembly came into being. Northern Ireland used to be run by six Departments — there are now 10, plus a “Department of the Centre” that was never officially a statutory Department, and which spends £40 million on administrative costs.

We have a block grant of £9 billion, to be spent on running the entire gamut of Government services — education, health, environment, agriculture, the regions and culture. Out of that £9 billion, possibly £1.2 billion — getting on for 15% — is to be spent on administrative charges. The Health Service is in a dreadful state, with the worst waiting lists in Europe. The sewerage, water, and roads infrastructure is in a state of dereliction, and almost £1.2 billion is spent on administration. Then, when the problem is raised, we are told that there is to be another review of administration.

In Northern Ireland we have three MEPs, 18 MPs, 108 MLAs, 26 district councils with 560 paid councillors, and 120 quangos with 2,000 members, all for a population of 1.6 million. Mr Close pointed out that we could save money by reducing wastage on administration. Unless we do that, we will have the following scenario in the future. The infrastructure deficit — which is not £5 billion, but in excess of £10 billion — will be solved in two ways: by public-private finance or by borrowing from central Government billions of pounds, on which interest will have to be paid.

Public-private finance is simply a form of hire purchase. The Executive will ask private financiers to build a hospital, a school or some other public utility, and rent it to them on hire purchase. The Executive will have to repay not only the rate of interest on the money that the private financiers borrowed from the City in the first place, but the profit addition on the borrowed money. Private financiers are not philanthropists; they are in the business of public-private finance to make money. Therefore, we plan to get out of our difficulties by doing what we advise every young family not to do, and what Mr Micawber would have advised them not to do, which is to get up to the neck in debt.

The other source of income is central Government’s altruistic offer to lend us £5 billion over the next 10 years; however, interest will have to be paid on that. Where will that money come from? Apparently, it will be raised from rates, and possibly through charges on water and sewerage. The people who will pay for that are those who have saved throughout their lives to put a roof over their family’s heads, to improve their social and living standards, and to provide a nest egg and possibly a pension for the future.

The review document tells us that 52% of people will be winners, and that only 32% will be losers. However,

if the total amount of money received from rates is to increase by 50% to 100%, the losers will be enormous losers, and any winners will be meagre winners. The entire plan is a nightmare. Unless the problem is properly addressed soon, the future for this and the next generation in Northern Ireland will be extremely bleak.

I agree with Mr Close that rates system does not provide suitable or even true assessment of wealth for the purposes of imposing general taxation. The system was never intended as a source for general taxation. Mr Close suggests a local income tax as an alternative. That would be a much fairer method of imposing general taxation because tax would be imposed on people’s disposable income rather than on an asset, such as a house, which is not disposable. People are trapped in their homes and are being taxed to death on them. They cannot dispose of them because people need houses in which to live and to raise their families.

The difficulty with local taxation is that no one will like it because it is a clear imposition of tax. Although the devolved Government in Scotland have been given the power to raise local income tax, they have yet to use that power because they realise that, electorally, it would not be wise to do so.

2.15 pm

Now, in Northern Ireland, since we do not have any true democracy — we do not have Governments that, if they displease the people, can be put out at the next election — broadly speaking, the same parties will be returned after each election. The parties will nominate the same Executive, or a variant of them. They can impose local taxation, and, since they will not be harmed by it, they can literally say “To hell with how the electorate feels.” However, is that wise? Is it wise to use an undemocratic system to impose a tax?

In conclusion, as Sammy Wilson and Mr Close said, the Estimates show massive scope within the amount of money available for real economies, especially in administration, which should be effected with the greatest possible dispatch. They should not await the outcome of some interminably delayed review, which merely exacerbates the problem without dealing with it. Secondly, if a tax is imposed, it should definitely not be on the rateable value of premises.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr O'Neill.

Mr O'Neill: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, I must have nodded off.

Mr McCartney: Cheap, that is cheap.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the motion before us today as a sign of the success of devolution. There is no better way to measure a devolved Government’s success than by examining how well their finance system operates. This has been a successful year, as were the previous ones, for running our Budget, for providing moneys for

the Departments and for ensuring that we deliver for the people whom we represent. I thank the Minister and his officials for their hard work in that regard.

I sympathise fully with Sammy Wilson's remarks on the waste of money as a result of intimidation — money that has to be spent on the SPED programme. It is an unnecessary drain that would stop if we got rid of this evil of intimidation. Incidentally, to correct Mr Wilson, this evil is happening on both sides of the community, with many people being forced from their homes. Perhaps he intended to suggest reverting to the old situation in which money for SPED was provided initially by the Housing Executive but recouped from the security budget later. There is an argument for using that system still.

I was pleased that Mr Close avoided mentioning his most imaginative solution of last year, which was to take £10 million from each Department and to spend it all on health. He appears to have moved away from that simplistic solution. Perhaps the £1 million reduction in the road safety service has shown the truth of what I said to him then — if you slice off money from all Departments, you will affect health in many other ways. I also used the example of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the benefits of a healthy sporting programme on health and, therefore, on the Health budget. One cannot deal with Budgets so simplistically.

I was also a bit surprised by the introduction of an elitist approach to consultation; that is not the normal approach. I would have thought that Mr Close would be able to advocate full consultation involving everyone on all important issues.

Mr Close: By welcoming such documents, is Mr O'Neill advocating the wastage of money through brochures that are admittedly thrown into waste paper baskets throughout this country?

Mr O'Neill: I am not sure what Mr Close does with the consultation papers that he receives, but I attempt to read mine, although I admit that it is burdensome. Nevertheless, Mr Close said that a specialist list — in fact, an elitist list — of consultees should be honed, rather than having general consultation. That is why I used the word "elitist", and I was surprised to hear Mr Close use that term.

I was also much amused by Mr McCartney, who arrives in the Chamber occasionally and then proceeds to take an awful long time to say what he says every time.

Mr McCartney: I am like Mr Hume.

Mr O'Neill: Are you?

Mr McCartney: Yes, I have a single transferable speech.

Mr O'Neill: There is the same degree of recognition but a different angle.

In fairness, some Members referred to the point that I am really interested in: as we have completed the process for this year, how can we be sure that things are being done in the best possible way? Our serious interest is in attempting to ensure that we get the best and most economic approach. Has the Minister any plans for improvement? Does his Department analyse the success of each Department in bidding for, and then delivering on, its budget? Internally, Departments may consider that themselves, but does the Department of Finance and Personnel not need to take an overarching look at that and try to ensure that that is done? Does the Minister have any plans to deal with that?

As Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I am particularly interested in that Department, which is entirely new. Other Departments have inherited substantial areas of a former department's responsibility en bloc. However the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure comprised bits and pieces of responsibility that derived from various departments. Therefore, it was difficult to pull those aspects together. Now, after several years, I would be interested to know how the Minister would analyse the success of that Department's budgetary process and spend. I hope that we could use that kind of approach to learn and make improvements as we move along.

Rev Dr William McCrea: We will probably be moving on in five minutes, and therefore I will be able to commence my remarks only. If Mr O'Neill thought that Mr McCartney's speech merited nodding off, I do not know what he thought of his own. It certainly did not rivet anyone to the seat nor excite people in any shape or form.

Mr McCartney made a thoughtful contribution, worthy of serious consideration if we really want to tackle the finances that are available to the Assembly and if we are serious about protecting the community.

Mr O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr William McCrea: Mr O'Neill has just spoken, so he would not want to hold us to our seats for another few moments.

However, Mr McCartney's points were worth repeating, and many of them would be worthy of the Minister's attention.

It was very sad that Mr Arthur Doherty was the only Member on the SDLP Bench for most of the Minister's speech, and that Mr Beggs was the only Member on the Ulster Unionist side. Sinn Féin/IRA has two Departments that represent almost half of the Budget, and no Member of that party was present when the Minister was speaking. That is a serious matter. As Mr Close said, this is one of the most important issues that has come before the Assembly. The lack of importance that the Members of the parties in the Executive place on the issue is reflected by the fact that the Minister sat almost alone. I am not referring to Executive Members, but to the real supporters of the Belfast Agreement and the heralders of

this exercise. They thought that it was so important that they did not go away — they stayed away. Many are embarrassed by the wastage of resources in this country.

Whether it is repetition or not, it is not acceptable to have 11 Departments wasting money in creating jobs for the boys to keep different parties happy with ministerial posts. That must be tackled. If we are serious about getting our finances right, we must look at that situation, and it should not be allowed to continue.

We have a multitude of quangos in this country, to be paid for out of limited resources. We are told, after a full term of the Assembly, that it is under review and it will be looked at. The full term of the Assembly has passed — a year was added on. No one knows what that means, and how serious Members are about tackling the situation that is costing our society a tremendous amount of money. The cost of financing the North/South ministerial bodies has to come out of the limited resources available. We are facing serious wastage, and that should be tackled. We have limited resources to begin with. We talk about the block grant.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr McCartney made the point that those who negotiated the Belfast Agreement sold the people of Northern Ireland short by not telling the Westminster Government that more money was necessary to carry out responsibilities in this country, because of neglect over the years. Many of them were so anxious to get their hands on positions of power that they were willing to let the financial aspects go. We have inadequate resources to meet the real needs of our community, whether in health or farming.

The first part of this debate is about to be brought to an end, but we will continue where we left off later.

Mr Speaker: We shall resume the debate at 4.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: Question 4 in the name of Mr Bradley has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Mrs Courtney is almost in her place.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

1. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when the sites named in the reinvestment and reform initiative will be transferred to the Executive. (AQO 1566/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): No dates have yet been set for the transfer of any of the sites identified in the reinvestment and reform initiative. Ebrington Barracks is still used by the Ministry of Defence, but it is expected to be ready for transfer early in 2004. All the major sites are to be transferred free of charge to the Executive. We wish to use local experience and expertise to advise us on how to use those strategically important assets. We also wish to consult and involve local community and business groups in developing ideas for their future use. Such extensive estates offer us many possibilities for major economic and social regeneration. We shall consider the options carefully, so that we achieve dynamic development, working in partnership with local communities.

Mrs Courtney: Is the First Minister aware of the encouragement and reassurance that people in Derry got from the clear and firm leadership of the Deputy First Minister and himself when they launched the initiative and appointed the excellent joint chairpersons of the partnership panel? Will he assure the House that, come what may, the resolve will be maintained and that petty bureaucracy from any source, including the Department for Social Development, will not be allowed to slow down such an important initiative?

The First Minister: Like the Speaker, I was delighted to see the Member in her place, otherwise we might not have been able to answer the question. We were conscious of the broad welcome for the initiative and its impact on the Ebrington site when the Deputy First Minister and I were in Londonderry for the announcement. Indeed, it was the Deputy First Minister who said that it was “thinking outside the box” that enabled us to negotiate the arrangement with the Treasury, and “thinking outside the box” will enable us to get maximum benefit from it. We are considering how the site should be developed and what legal and administrative arrangements will be needed in all the sites of strategic value to get most benefit from them.

In doing that, we shall work closely with local communities and interests. We are grateful to Dr Alan McClure and Ms Una McGillion for agreeing to act as co-chairpersons of the partnership and regeneration panel for the Ebrington site.

Mr B Bell: I welcome the announcement by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, especially as the Maze Prison, which is in my constituency, is involved. However, the development of the special investment board and the reinvestment and reform initiative are critical to the success of the programme. What progress has been made on setting up the board?

The First Minister: The strategic investment body will be crucial to the development of the initiative. As with the precise legal and administrative structures that we may need for the development of strategic sites, we are still considering how that will be done. However, as a means of demonstrating that progress is being made, we announced that we would form a project board for the strategic investment board. I am happy to tell the Member that that project board has been filled and that we have nominees from all four parties in the Administration to carry out that important job on behalf of the Executive. We are glad that all four parties made nominations. The board will meet for the first time tomorrow, and I am sure that everyone will welcome that clear demonstration that all four parties in the Administration are continuing to work closely together.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): Does the Northern Ireland Office wish to maintain the Maze Prison site for a while longer? If so, will the part of the site over which the Army had control become available immediately and will the other site become available later?

The First Minister: Discussions are ongoing on that matter. I do not know whether it would be to the Executive's advantage to take part of the site now when they may be unable to develop one part in isolation from the whole site. The object of the exercise is to get the best value for the community from the sites and to see that the strategic potential is recognised. Therefore, the Executive must tread carefully. I am not surprised that the Member was not prepared to endorse, or at least he omitted to endorse, his party's decision to participate in this important initiative by nominating to the board.

Mr Speaker: I have just been advised that question 5, which stands in the name of Mr McElduff, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Executive Meeting Agenda

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline the agenda for the next meeting of the Executive. (AQO 1521/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): It has not been the Administration's policy to disclose in advance the agenda of forthcoming Executive meetings.

Mr Hamilton: Subjects that are to be discussed at Executive meetings are not publicly disclosed, but will the Deputy First Minister inform the House if those discussions are likely to be, or have already been, hampered or soured by Sinn Féin's continuing with organised street violence. That party has two Ministers in the Executive and it does not support the PNSI.

Mr Speaker: If I may clarify for the Minister, I think that the Member was referring to the PSNI rather than the PNSI.

The Deputy First Minister: I had guessed that for myself, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

The Executive's future business has not been marred by the difficulties that have been witnessed on the streets. However, everyone must recognise that the future conduct of the process, the Administration and the future good operation of the institutions will be soured if Members do not move to arrest the difficulties that are manifesting themselves on the streets. Those difficulties include unwanted and unwarranted sectarian attacks on vulnerable communities, difficulties that have seen PSNI recruits being subjected to murderous attacks. All those attacks deserve Members' complete and comprehensive condemnation.

There must be no dissemblance about any attacks. No one should try to create an impression that there is some factor that makes the inexcusable excusable or the unjustifiable justifiable. Members must take care in responding to the attacks; they must show leadership and sensitivity. We must condemn what needs to be condemned without dissembling or suggesting that people who should be blamed and criticised for doing something are not to be criticised or blamed because other people were involved. Members must move beyond that sort of "whataboutery" if they are to give people the clear-headed leadership that is needed in circumstances in which hotheads are trying to drive the agenda.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Deputy First Minister tell the House whether the Executive have sent congratulations to the new Irish Government? If not, will they be doing so at their next meeting?

The Deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I, in a recent meeting with the Taoiseach, conveyed our congratulations on the election outcome. As far as I am aware, individual Ministers have offered appropriate congratulations to Ministers who were appointed when the Cabinet was announced last week. The Executive have yet to meet since that announcement, and I do not wish to pre-empt what the Executive might decide.

Mr McCarthy: I am disappointed in the short response from the Deputy First Minister. As I said the last time the pair were before us, if they have nothing to hide they should let the people know what they are discussing. Now they will not even tell us what is on the agenda.

Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider at their next Executive meeting a matter that the Assembly agreed last year and which has not yet been implemented: the formation of an interdepartmental working group to tackle the scourge of illegal paramilitary flags, sectarian graffiti and kerbstone painting of all sorts?

The Deputy First Minister: Mr Speaker, if I had not been economical with my answer, the Member would not have been able to ask such a long question.

The Executive do not hide their business, and Committees are informed by their Ministers when issues are likely to be discussed at Executive meetings; there is no attempt to withhold information in that way. Last week, the First Minister and I decided that in the next series of Executive meetings we shall be dealing with the needs and effectiveness evaluations. It is not a matter of our doing business in secret; we also produce press statements on our discussions.

The point that the Member raises is not, as far as I am aware, on the agenda for discussion soon at an Executive meeting. However, that does not preclude consideration of it. The Member suggests an issue on which he feels we should focus. Sectarian displays will be considered, given recent ugly and vicious sectarian attacks.

Euro Referendum

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what recent discussions have taken place with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in respect of scheduling a referendum for the introduction of the euro into Great Britain and Northern Ireland. (AQO 1507/01)

The First Minister: No joint discussions have taken place with the Government on this matter. The scheduling of a referendum is a matter for the Government.

Mr McGrady: I thank the First Minister for his economic answer to an important economic question. Does he agree that membership of the European Union and the single market is of vital interest and importance to industry, manufacturing and commerce in Northern Ireland, as we export 54% of our production — over £2·04 billion? Does he also agree that the further expansion of industry in Northern Ireland is hampered by the difference in currency in the North and South of the island? Will the First Minister use his best endeavours, and those of the Executive, to alleviate that situation or come to a unique arrangement, similar to that in the Assembly but in an economic field?

The First Minister: Mr Speaker, I like to think that my answers are efficient rather than economical, and not economical with the truth, but that is by the by.

The problem with the Member's suggestion is that the euro will be discussed on a United Kingdom basis; therefore the scheduling of such a referendum is not open to us. However, it is right that we discuss the differential rate between sterling and the euro. There is a consensus among economists that sterling is overvalued against the euro, in which case it is not in the interests of any part of the United Kingdom to go into the euro with an overvalued currency because we would lock ourselves into an economically disadvantageous arrangement. A change to the currencies would be beneficial; however, how does one drive down one's currency in an open market? There is no answer to that; it cannot be done to the benefit of one's own economy. There are some inescapable economic factors at work, even though they cause problems occasionally.

2.45 pm

Mr Shannon: Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that a referendum on the euro in Great Britain and Northern Ireland should take into account the impact that the euro's introduction would have on Northern Ireland's economy? Will the First Minister provide details on how much that would cost the economy? Will he further state whether he is in favour of the introduction of the euro?

The First Minister: In any referendum campaign there will be a debate. The factors that the Member has mentioned would not form part of that debate. I regret that I cannot give him any figures on the matters that he has asked me to quantify. Indeed, I am not sure how one would approach that issue.

With regard to the position that individual parties and persons adopt on such a referendum, no doubt some parties will have to follow the party Whip, and some parties will not. It may be akin to the situation that existed in Northern Ireland at the time of the referendum on the UK's continued participation in the European Economic Community in 1975. Who knows what will happen? At present, it is a purely academic question.

Executive Meetings Outside Stormont

6. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline (a) any evaluation made of holding an Executive meeting outside Stormont and (b) any plans to hold further meetings outside Stormont. (AQO 1567/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive are there to serve all the people of Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, appropriate that they hold occasional meetings outside Stormont. However, the benefits of Executive meetings flow from the work that is done. By their nature, and the decisions that they have taken, the Executive have clearly demonstrated their inclusiveness and effectiveness in serving all the people of Northern Ireland. The Executive

will consider the location for each meeting, as and when appropriate.

Mr O'Neill: Bearing in mind the warm public response to the first meeting that was held outside Stormont, and the morale boost and profile provided for the chosen venue — the Verbal Arts Centre in Derry — will the Deputy First Minister and his Colleagues consider holding an Executive meeting at the wonderful Saint Patrick Centre in Downpatrick? Does he realise how important an endorsement that would be, particularly in the current tourist season, in which the number of overseas visitors is falling due to a decline in transatlantic airline passenger traffic?

The Deputy First Minister: As I said, the location for each Executive meeting will be for the Executive to decide. To take the Member's point, the meeting that was held in the Verbal Arts Centre in Derry was a useful demonstration of the Executive's ability to get out and about. It was also notable that we expedited our business in perhaps a more ready manner than we do when we meet in our traditional venue. All Ministers are aware of the benefits and would have an eye to holding further meetings elsewhere in the future.

The Executive will decide on future locations and venues, and any decision would depend on whatever other business Ministers had. The meeting in Derry coincided with several Ministers' having business in the area. It was, therefore, convenient. However, I am not stating that the Executive are open to bids for all sorts of locations and venues to come in from every constituency. I know what used to happen when there was talk about decentralisation. I do not want people to replace the call for Government offices in every district town with the proffering of a list of venues for Executive meetings. We shall consider other locations in the future, and we certainly do not rule out the venue suggested by the Member.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Deputy First Minister inform the House whether Belfast city hall has been considered as a venue for the next meeting of the Executive? If so, has the opinion of the First Minister been sought on such a venue? Has he stated whether he would oppose attending a meeting in such a place, in keeping with his party's decision to veto the Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Belfast, and to ensure that he is isolated and left to himself alone? Perhaps, when the Deputy First Minister answers that question he might state whether, if Mr Maskey were to be nominated for the position of Minister of Education, the First Minister would boycott the Executive in keeping with the manner in which his party Colleagues have treated Mr Maskey in Belfast City Council?

Mr Speaker: I must advise the House and the Deputy First Minister that that is not entirely a ministerial responsibility. However, I invite the Deputy First Minister to answer the rest of the question if he wishes.

The Deputy First Minister: The answer to the first part of the question is "No"; the answer to the second

part is, "No"; and the answer to the third part: "Not for me to speculate".

Meeting with Taoiseach

7. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on their recent meeting with the Taoiseach in Dublin.
(AQO 1555/01)

The First Minister: The Deputy First Minister and I met the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 27 May in Dublin, in what was our first formal joint meeting with the Taoiseach since we took office in November last year. We congratulated him on his recent success in the general election and welcomed the prospect of working closely with the new Government in the coming months.

In addition to a general political discussion, we discussed preparations for the forthcoming summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which will be held this Friday in Jersey, and the progress that we hope to make on aspects of the North/South Ministerial Council. We also outlined our thinking on the reinvestment and reform initiative and how we envisaged that being advanced.

Mr A Maginness: Was there any discussion with the new Government about the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum for British-Irish consultation, as provided for in the agreement?

The First Minister: The matter was touched on, together with several other aspects of the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council. We imagine that the matter will be discussed further at the forthcoming plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in institutional format. The Member will remember that the issue was debated in the Assembly a few weeks ago, and he should bear in mind the result of that debate.

Mr McClarty: Did the First Minister raise the issue of the ongoing Republican behaviour, both North and South, with the Taoiseach? Will he confirm that the Taoiseach shares my opinion that such agitation is inconsistent with the Mitchell principles of peace and non-violence?

The First Minister: The Member, no doubt, noticed that during the press conference immediately after our visit I endorsed the position that the Taoiseach has taken on the Republican movement. As the Member knows, the Taoiseach called on the Republican movement to complete decommissioning before May 2003 and to advance rapidly the disbandment of the IRA.

Interface Conflict (South and East Belfast)

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps the office has

taken to tackle problems of conflict at interface areas in south and east Belfast. (AQO 1551/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We condemn the recent violence in east Belfast that has terrorised both communities. We stand ready to support any local initiative aimed at allowing communities to resolve their differences peacefully. As in north Belfast, the solution will be found only in dialogue.

Our office has provided support through the Community Relations Council for several groups and projects aimed at improving community relations. Those include the work of the Belfast Interface Project with the Inner East Interface Group, whose members are drawn from both the Short Strand and Newtownards Road communities, and the Ballynafeigh Community Development Association's social energy project and partnership in the five areas advice project, which includes Donegall Pass, the Markets, Ballynafeigh and the lower Ormeau Road.

We utterly condemn sectarianism and we will seek to counter it wherever it occurs. The Executive, in the Programme for Government, have committed to putting a cross-departmental strategy and framework in place for promoting community relations and ensuring an effective and co-ordinated approach to sectarian and racial intimidation.

Mr Maskey: Although I welcome some of the initiatives outlined, much of that work has been ongoing for some considerable time.

It is interesting to note that two Ministers in the Executive represent East Belfast and South Belfast respectively. One wears the culture, arts and leisure hat, and the other has the economic portfolio. There are obvious problems with cultural diversity and how that sometimes manifests itself negatively. There are also problems with areas of disadvantage, which both east Belfast and south Belfast endure. Are the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister embarking on any work with those Ministers at departmental level to mainstream those initiatives? Most of those mentioned are not mainstream but temporary and, like the five areas advice project, last year had to fight for a renewal of funding. They could perhaps be mainstreamed through Departments.

The Deputy First Minister: The answer to the question necessarily reflected initiatives in which the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is involved. It is not for us to assume that initiatives are taken because the Members for certain constituencies happen to be Ministers. That is neither a proper and sound basis for steering departmental involvement nor for the commissioning of input from particular Departments. All representatives, be they Ministers, MLAs, councillors or community activists, have a duty to provide clear and

responsible leadership in facing down sectarian impulses and practices. We have recently witnessed latent violence and blatant sectarianism in different locations, and we must be united in our unambiguous condemnation and repudiation of those. Apart from sectarian attacks, we must also deal with the concerns of people in various communities and interface areas, where concerted action across the devolved Administration might address and improve their problems. With local representatives, we will attempt to find ways of doing that, but not by contriving something on the basis of finding out which Ministers belong to which constituencies. That would not be the concerted, collective, long-term action rightly recommended by the Member.

I take the opportunity to congratulate the Member on his recent elevation to Lord Mayor of Belfast.

Mr Foster: These are indeed sensitive times. Have the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister any plans to encourage Mr Maskey, in his role as Lord Mayor of the city of Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, to realise the first citizen's great responsibility to co-operate, and to encourage co-operation, with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Her Majesty's security forces to enable them to curtail, control and stop the regrettable riotous scenes in parts of this great city and in other places? That would bring peace, harmony and contentment to many troubled residents.

The Deputy First Minister: People have suffered in many ways in all the recent difficulties. There have been incidents in which the dead have not been allowed to rest in peace, the bereaved have been unable to mourn in peace and people have not enjoyed the peace due to them in their own street and in their own homes. We have seen sectarian confrontation and paramilitary violence, with the use of weapons as well. That must be repudiated. Those situations require police action and intervention. The police should be there properly and competently to uphold the rule of law and, as far as possible, to maintain people's peace and safety in difficult circumstances. They deserve our support in their attempts and, where they fail to perform their functions adequately, they deserve our advice and observations as appropriate.

Dr McDonnell: Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that all politicians have a crucial role to play in improving community relations by providing constructive leadership and by working to respect all traditions? Will they further agree that at such sensitive times all politicians, particularly Ministers, have a duty to be mindful of what they say and to avoid inflaming situations?

Mr Speaker: I regret that I shall have to ask the Ministers to give an answer to that in writing. The time for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is now up.

3.00 pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: Question 7, in the name of Mr Savage, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. *[Interruption]*.

Order.

Strangford Ferry

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will increase passenger capacity on the Strangford ferry, particularly during the early morning. (AQO 1536/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The new purpose-built ferry, MV Portaferry II, which was introduced in December 2001, holds 260 persons and 28 cars. That represents a 33% increase in car-carrying capacity over the MV Strangford, which can carry a similar number of passengers but only 21 cars. Normally, MV Portaferry II operates the service, but, if demand justifies it during busy holiday periods and summer weekends, both vessels operate. I understand that it is only rarely, such as during Portaferry gala week, that pedestrian capacity is fully taken up, and even that would occur only for a maximum of four trips each way on the final evening of the event.

The Roads Service has monitored vehicle capacity since the introduction of the new vessel. It found that a capacity problem occurred at Portaferry only when more than one large vehicle, such as an HGV or a low-loader, turned up at the slipway during the busy morning periods. As that happened only on one or two occasions, additional sailings would not be justified. There were no instances of a lack of capacity for the Strangford departures.

I can advise Mr McCarthy that the customer satisfaction survey due to be carried out later this month contains a question on the potential demand for an earlier sailing each day during the working week. The response will be assessed on completion of the survey.

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

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. The problem lies with the early morning sailings that the Minister mentioned briefly. Residents appreciate the recent introduction of the faster MV Portaferry II, resulting in more local people using the ferry service, which is what we want to see. Those customers depend on the ferry to get to work on time and cannot afford to be left at the quay, even for 15 minutes. Will the Minister consider starting sailings 10 minutes earlier and, given that we have a faster vessel, sailings every 10 minutes? Those measures would, I hope, ensure that all customers could get to work on time.

Mr P Robinson: The Member is right: we want to increase the use of the ferry service. I trust that the results of the customer satisfaction survey will indicate whether customers want either an earlier start, by changing the time of the early sailing, or an additional early sailing. The Department will respond to customer needs, and the survey is one way of determining them.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister outline his contingency plans for days on which the Strangford ferry, for whatever reason, cannot operate?

Mr P Robinson: Fortunately, there have been very few teething problems with the new ferry service. In February, there were some mechanical difficulties about which the hon Member made public comments. That showed the Department that there were circumstances in which the MV Portaferry II might be taken out of operation for a short time. Therefore, we retain the MV Strangford, which can operate in its place, and there is another ferry that can be used if that is also out of operation.

One of the issues raised in February, along with the service being taken out of operation without an alternative being available, was the lack of information. Steps have been taken to ensure that information about any change in the services, whether as a result of mechanical problems or weather conditions, is made available. We hope to have the new signage erected, which will greatly assist in that regard, and we hope to extend that over the coming months and years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn and will receive a written response.

Regional Development Strategy

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he intends to widen consultation on the regional transport strategy to include greater representation of groups/individuals affected by disabilities. (AQO 1529/01)

Mr P Robinson: Extensive consultation has been carried out over the two years of preparation of the proposed regional transportation strategy. My Department specifically consulted organisations that represent people with disabilities as well as the public. Consultation on the proposed strategy was completed in mid-April, and the comments received from those organisations and others have helped me to finalise the strategy that I intend to bring to the House before the summer recess. A list of those who were consulted in the development of the proposed regional transportation strategy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Ms Lewsley: Will the Minister outline how he would make transport more widely accessible — without focusing on the disability aspect? What stage has the Committee for Regional Development reached in its discussions on concessionary fares for the disabled?

Mr P Robinson: I share the Member's view that an extension of the concessionary fare scheme would be welcome. Indeed, my Department has communicated with the Department of Finance and Personnel on the matter. Legislation in Britain includes several disability groups, and we would like to have that facility in Northern Ireland legislation. I hope, subject to finance, that we will be able to put forward proposals on the matter. Ms Lewsley may wish to wait until the regional transportation strategy is brought before the Assembly to see how successful we have been in earmarking funds for that purpose.

Mr Shannon: Has the Department considered or agreed additional or increased funding for the disabled that can be included in the transportation strategy?

Mr P Robinson: The proposed regional transportation strategy recognised that a significant increase in the funds available for roads and transportation was necessary across the board. Indeed, we put forward proposals on how we could meet the additional infrastructural need. The strategy, which will be put to the House, will take on board several comments that disability groups and others made.

I had the pleasure of touring north and west Belfast with disability groups on Friday, and I saw the type of problem confronting them. In many instances, it would be difficult to argue the case for putting resources into that activity on a value-for-money basis. However, when one sees the immense difference that funding makes to individuals' lives, I believe that it can be justified. I ask my Friend to wait for a few more weeks — until the strategy is published — to see what we have been able to do.

Mr McFarland: Is the Minister aware of a report by the Omnibus Partnership that is due out shortly regarding Easibus transport for the disabled in north Down? Will he confirm that his Department approves of continuing financial support for those services that are vital for the disabled in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: I had the honour of going to north Down to meet that group. I must say that they were persuasive and articulate. I heard stories about people who had been almost prisoners in their houses for several years until the service came along and empowered them.

A strong case can be made. Following my meeting with the group, I spoke to my departmental officials, and the Member will see some flavour of the group's influence when the transportation strategy comes forward.

Several similar groups exist. I visited the Peninsula Community Transport organisation with my hon Friend who has just left the Chamber. These groups pick people up from their doors or nearby and provide a beneficial service that I support. The extent to which I can provide financial support will depend on the support that my regional transportation strategy receives from the Assembly.

Fermanagh Roads

4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Regional Development what the projected cost is for the maintenance and repair of roads in Fermanagh in the next two years.
(AQO 1563/01)

Mr P Robinson: Maintaining the structure and surface of public roads and footways is a top priority for the Roads Service. The cost of a proper maintenance regime for Northern Ireland's road network is £86 million a year. Unfortunately, the amount made available to my Department for that work falls far short of what is required. There is, therefore, a structural maintenance backlog amounting to £145 million.

That trend is reflected in County Fermanagh. Using the same method of assessment, it is estimated that the structural maintenance requirement for the Fermanagh District Council area is around £6.7 million a year. Current spending on structural maintenance in the area is around £3 million a year.

The proposed regional transportation strategy recognises the importance of maintaining the highway asset and recommends an additional £250 million for structural maintenance across Northern Ireland over the next 10 years. Meanwhile, I will continue to press for additional resources for structural maintenance at every opportunity. My Department has submitted a bid for £40 million under the reinvestment and reform initiative. I can give an assurance that the Roads Service will continue to make the best use of currently available resources to develop and maintain the roads infrastructure.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Cross-border traffic in County Fermanagh makes a big impact and causes much damage to the roads, such as the Roslea road and the A509 from Aghalane to Enniskillen. Is the Minister prepared to meet his Southern counterparts to ask them to contribute to the maintenance or upgrading of those roads?

Mr P Robinson: I would be nervous about the proposition that, because traffic comes from another jurisdiction, the relevant Government should contribute to those roads. I might end up with a bill, rather than sending out an invoice to the Republic of Ireland's Government. We do co-operate with the National Roads Authority in the Republic of Ireland, and I am prepared, at any stage, to meet my counterparts in the Irish Republic, whether for co-operation to our mutual advantage or to exchange information beneficial to people in Northern Ireland. I might get a dusty response if I were to go, cap in hand, to ask for money because visitors from the Republic of Ireland come into Northern Ireland.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative: Bids

5. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister for Regional Development what was the total amount of bids made by his Department under the reinvestment and reform initiative. (AQO 1557/01)

3.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: My Department entered 38 bids under the reinvestment and reform initiative, amounting to £277 million, of which £99 million related to 2002-03 and £178 million for 2003-04.

The detailed list of bids was made available to the Committee for Regional Development, and I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Assembly Library. The list includes 15 projects put forward for support in April under the infrastructure Executive programme fund. The schemes include strategic road improvements on major routes throughout Northern Ireland. These include upgrading the eastern seaboard corridor, including the A8, the Westlink and the M1; schemes on the A1, including converting the road between Newry and the border into a dual carriageway; the building of the proposed Skeoge link; and the completion of the final stage of the Omagh throughpass. I am also seeking significant investment in new buses and have bid for the funds required to continue work on the railways, including the Antrim to Knockmore railway line.

With regard to water and sewerage, I am seeking resources to replace defective water mains and sewers to reduce leakage, improve water quality and enhance environmental protection measures.

Mr McMenamin: I thank the Minister for a comprehensive answer. It is interesting to note that his Department's financial needs exceed the amount available under the first element of the reinvestment and reform initiative. With that in mind, how will the Minister identify potential sources of funding to undertake necessary infrastructure projects?

Mr P Robinson: The total amount of money available under the present bids is £270 million. The Member is right to point out that £200 million is available under the recently announced package, although £125 million of that is derived from a loan. The rest is our own money, but in addition to that is the combined bid from the Department for Regional Development for infrastructure Executive programme funds under each of those areas. I have made bids for the whole pot because my Department's infrastructural needs are greater than those of any other in Northern Ireland. The Department for Regional Development is responsible for the infrastructural needs of Northern Ireland, so it has the prime claim to these funds. I hope that the Assembly will support my bids and that many of them will be successful.

In the case of unsuccessful bids, I must obtain money from my existing departmental expenditure limit (DEL)

funding, through private sector initiatives or by means of a charging mechanism. All those other matters will be seen in the context of the regional transportation strategy, or will soon be seen in the context of the water strategy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Close: The Minister has set some of my constituents' hearts a-flutter with his assurance that the continuation of the Knockmore to Antrim railway line is included in the bids. On behalf of my constituents, I am grateful. May I tease the Minister a little more? He submitted 38 bids, but did he prioritise them? Can he assure me that the Antrim to Knockmore railway line was near the top of that list — preferably at the top?

Mr P Robinson: I have serious reservations about the Member ever becoming the Minister for Regional Development if he really thinks, given all the needs of that Department, that the Antrim to Knockmore railway line is my priority. If it were, it would be more important than the roads maintenance problems that we have heard about today, the leakage problems and the need to implement the water strategy, or the transport needs across the Province, including those for the disabled.

I thought that I would provoke Mr Close to his feet by mentioning the Antrim to Knockmore railway line. Let me make it clear that it is not my Department's top priority. If we are to retain the railway line, we need additional funding — we simply cannot make do with what we have. That is all the advice that I have received from the Department. Whether the Assembly is prepared to fund that is a matter for Members, and principally for the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

We have put in the bid, which will test whether the Assembly wishes to keep the railway line open. If it does not, I will have to make alternative arrangements for the safety of passengers.

Bus Lanes: M1 and Saintfield Road

6. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to study the impact of bus lanes on the build-up of traffic entering Belfast via the M1 and the Saintfield Road. (AQO 1527/01)

Mr P Robinson: Surveys have been carried out on the M1 and the Saintfield Road to ascertain whether there has been any increase in bus patronage due to bus lanes being provided on these routes. The surveys show that at peak periods bus patronage has increased by 7% following the introduction of the M1 hard shoulder bus lane and by 10% following the introduction of the southern quality bus corridor on the Saintfield Road. Vehicle flows have remained fairly constant on both those corridors over the past three years.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the figures showing that bus usage has increased since

the introduction of bus lanes. Several people, particularly those from Strangford who use the Saintfield approach to Belfast, have told me that, in their belief, the introduction of bus lanes has increased traffic congestion. Does the Minister plan to advertise the fact that the introduction of bus lanes is resulting in a decrease in car traffic?

Mr P Robinson: I do not think that there is any argument that the introduction of bus lanes leads to an increase in car traffic. It is theoretically possible to have a reduction in the use of cars and an increase in congestion. Experts in my Department tell me that as bus lanes halt before traffic lights and junctions, there should be no congestion — cars can go into the two lanes at that point. However, experience indicates that some drivers are not keen to move into the inner lane, because other drivers may not be willing to let them out again when they get to the other side of the junction. That can cause congestion. If proper use were made of the bus lanes at the traffic lights, where people could alternatively feed out, there would certainly not be an increase in the congestion, and public transport could move more quickly.

The bottom line is that we are going to have congestion, if not gridlock, in the years ahead unless we can encourage more people onto public transport. One way of doing that is to ensure that public transport has a freer and quicker route into the city centre. I hope that Mr Hamilton and others will encourage the use of public transport for that purpose. The Assembly must also provide the funds to update the vehicles and make it more attractive.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister agree that one way of encouraging less congestion on the roads, while at the same time maintaining private transport, is to have people use motorcycles rather than motor cars? As an incentive, will the Minister tell us when he intends to permit motorcyclists to use bus lanes?

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that the Member has no vested interest in this matter or he would have declared it to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I accept that a significant section of the community uses motorbikes. Some weeks ago I announced to the Assembly that, in principle, I agreed that motorcyclists should be allowed to use bus lanes. However, the procedures are such that it will probably be another six to nine months before we have completed those procedures, and Mr Wilson will be able to get to the Assembly quicker.

Omagh Throughpass: Third Stage

8. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the commencement date for the construction of the third stage of the Omagh throughpass; and to make a statement. (AQO 1508/01)

Mr P Robinson: The commencement date for the construction of the third stage of the Omagh throughpass

is dependent on the satisfactory completion of the statutory processes and the funding position at that time.

In May 2001, my Department's Roads Service held a public inquiry into the environmental statement, which examined the effects of the proposed scheme. The departmental response to the inspector's report on the inquiry was published in the local press on 17 May 2002.

The Department is also obliged to hold a further public inquiry to deal with objections received in response to the draft direction order. Unless those objections are withdrawn, it is expected that that inquiry will be held later this year. Subject to the successful completion of the direction order process, statutory procedures to procure the land required for the scheme will begin. It would be inappropriate to pre-empt the outcome of the consultation process, but the scheme has a high level of local support, and I hope that, with a fair wind, the statutory processes can be completed during the 2003-04 financial year.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer, but I am deeply disappointed by its content, given that the Omagh throughpass proposal has been on the drawing board for 10 years or more. Does the Minister accept that there is great concern in Omagh and the west Tyrone area about the completion of the throughpass and deep anxiety over undue delays thus far? Can the Minister assure me that all statutory procedures will be expedited so that this significant road project for Omagh can be realised as quickly as possible?

Mr P Robinson: I am sympathetic to Mr Byrne's comments. He will begin to appreciate the frustration that I feel when I want to proceed with road schemes but have to go through all the necessary procedural hoops. I have been considering ways in which we might be able to pull together several of those inquiries. In the future, rather than having several separate public inquiries, we could have one that covers two or three issues. The Member will see that those are legal requirements that we must meet. I will, however, consider issues such as whether preparatory work can be done to save time as soon as the statutory processes are completed. In particular, I will consider the acquisition of land.

Use of Harbour Commissioners' Land

9. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in the light of recent Executive support for shipbuilders Harland & Wolff, what plans he has for the strategic use of land owned/overseen by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. (AQO 1550/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Belfast Harbour Commissioners have statutory responsibility for the management and development of the harbour estate, which consists of approximately 2,000 acres of land. Around half of that area is dedicated to port activities; the bulk of the

remainder of the land is already leased to tenants for a variety of business purposes or has been zoned for development.

As I explained in my statement to the Assembly on 20 May 2002, my Department will be involved in the master-planning process linked to the Titanic Quarter area. However, primary responsibility for that rests with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Titanic Quarter Ltd, the joint developers. The development proposals that emerge are likely to entail mixed land use, but they will be the subject of public consultation and the normal statutory planning process. More generally, future land use within the harbour estate will be determined by the outcome of the current Belfast metropolitan area plan process in the context of the regional development strategy.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for that response. I am particularly interested to know what the link will be between the public consultation and the Belfast metropolitan area plan consultation. I would be concerned that the recent support for Harland & Wolff could allow that company to diversify and, perhaps, to develop the site in a piecemeal way that might be contrary to the Minister's plans — which I have no doubt that he wants to carry through.

Mr P Robinson: For the whole of Belfast, there is massive potential in the port as a whole and the development prospects that now exist. As elected representatives, we must ensure that the development that takes place there is in the best interests of Northern Ireland plc. There are several different ways in which that can be done.

First, my Department has a role, as it is part of the group that considers planning proposals. Secondly, the public interest is secured by the presence of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, who comprise 50% of the developer partnership in the area. In addition, there are the normal planning processes, and Belfast City Council will also have a major role in the consultation.

3.30 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 7, standing in the name of Mr George Savage, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Question 12, standing in the name of Mr Billy Armstrong, has been withdrawn and does not require a written answer.

Planning Service Assessment

1. **Rev Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment whether any assessment or monitoring of the operation and functions of the Planning Service has taken place within the past three years. (AQO 1532/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): In December 1999, my predecessor, Sam Foster, inherited a Planning Service that was underfunded and under increased work pressures. It needed more resources and an overhaul of its policies and processes. We have secured additional resources that have enabled 103 staff to be recruited since devolution, with a further planned increase of 50 more staff during 2002-03. We have put in place programmes to deliver comprehensive and up-to-date suites of area plans and are working on 11 plans.

We have also put in place an ambitious programme to update and revise our planning policy statements completely. Each year, we process 7% more planning applications than we did in 1995-96. In addition, the consultation paper 'Modernising Planning Processes', which is the most comprehensive review of planning processes in Northern Ireland since 1973, was published in February 2002.

I am also streamlining and strengthening the enforcement powers available to the Planning Service and have today introduced a Planning (Amendment) Bill to the Assembly. That is a substantial programme of work to improve the operation and functions of the Planning Service. I shall, however, keep the performance of the Planning Service under review.

Rev Robert Coulter: What impact does the Minister expect the consultation paper 'Modernising Planning Processes' to have?

Mr Nesbitt: We aim to have a simpler, faster and more accessible planning process. There are many tensions in the Administration and in the Planning Service. People want speed but they also want public participation. They want better-quality decisions, yet the quantity of planning applications increases. Above all, we are subject to sustainable development, and that means that we must consider the economic well-being of Northern Ireland as well as the protection of the environment.

Mr Poots: What is the backlog? What was the backlog three years ago? Has there been an improvement in reducing the backlog?

Mr Nesbitt: I do not have those statistics available. However, I draw Mr Poots's attention to the increase in planning applications. There are 24,000 planning applications with the Planning Service, and we do not have resources to match them. The number of planning officials has increased by 25% since devolution; that is a measure of our determination to ensure that we have a Planning Service worthy of Northern Ireland and its people.

Townscape Preservation

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment the Environment and Heritage Service

makes of the need to preserve areas of long-established townscape in its recommendations to the Planning Service.
(AQO 1531/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department's policy on protecting the built environment is set out in 'Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage'. The Planning Service seeks advice from the Environment and Heritage Service about historic townscapes where they are relevant to a planning application. The Environment and Heritage Service, together with the Planning Service and the Construction Service's landscape architects, undertake historic settlement appraisal as part of area plan preparation. That includes an evaluation of historic landscape and townscape with a view to identifying local landscape policy areas and local policies for the protection and management of change.

It is the responsibility of the Planning Service to identify areas of townscape character to be included in area plans, and to designate conservation areas.

Mr Hamilton: I note that the Minister made reference to historic townscape issues. What criteria are used to define a historic townscape?

Mr Nesbitt: The criteria are complex. Use is made of a pattern of streets, properties and spaces that have evolved over the centuries as society has developed. Consideration is given to archaeological remains, historic buildings, and industrial, maritime, defence and heritage features. All those elements form part of the historic townscape that must be considered.

Mrs I Robinson: A current planning application from North Down Construction Ltd, awaiting a decision from the Planning Service, includes a four-storey apartment block at the Kiltonga site adjacent to the bird sanctuary in Newtownards, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Does the Minister agree that that element of the planning application should be refused?

Mr Nesbitt: For the sake of brevity and speed I can neither agree nor disagree. I am not aware of the details of the matter. If the Member writes to me, a precise answer will follow. If she had wished the question to be answered today, she should have given notice.

Radon in Water Supplies (South Down)

3. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of the Environment whether private water supplies are being regulated for increased levels of radon found in the south Down area.
(AQO 1562/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Although monitoring for radon is not required by the EC Drinking Water Directive or private water supply Regulations, my Department's Environment and Heritage Service has commissioned some monitoring work in the past. In 1995, Queen's University monitored

34 springs and boreholes. Radon levels in a range of 0.9 becquerels a litre to 87 becquerels a litre were found. Those were well below the National Radiological Protection Board's (NRPB) advisory level of 1,000 becquerels a litre.

The Environment and Heritage Service has also let a contract to the NRPB, in co-operation with Queen's University, to carry out further measurements of radon levels in water supplies to 50 homes in areas of increased radon risk. That may include homes in south Down, although the areas have not yet been fully determined. The study is due to be completed by the end of the year and will include public and private water supplies. The results will be analysed to provide information on the possible level of risk posed by radon in drinking water in Northern Ireland. They will be published when the work is complete.

Mr M Murphy: As south Down is a radon-affected area, I suggest that there should be regular monitoring and control of radon in the water supplies to ensure that the people of south Down are not exposed to further cancer-causing factors.

Mr Nesbitt: The Member's use of the word "cancer" in relation to regular monitoring of the water supply in south Down is emotive. Let me be clear about the water supply: the possibility of cancer exists. However, the level of radioactivity in the water would have to reach 1,000 becquerels a litre. There is a 1% to 3% chance of encountering that in one's lifetime. The south Down area does have high radon levels, higher in the air than in the water.

The presence of radon in the air can lead to lung cancer, but 200 becquerels a cubic metre would be required to create a 3% chance of contracting cancer. Fifty per cent of radon occurs naturally. Eighty-five per cent of radioactivity comes from natural sources; only 0.1% comes from Sellafield.

Mr Kennedy: Can the Minister give an assessment of the risk posed by radon, not only in south Down but throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: I have addressed those points in my answer to Mick Murphy. I gave the percentage chance of contracting cancer and outlined the becquerel levels that need to be in the water and in the air.

Rural Business Planning Applications

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he intends to take to ensure that planning applications for small rural businesses are less problematic after the implementation of the new area plans.
(AQO 1514/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department recognises the importance of small enterprises in diversifying the rural economy. 'Planning Policy Statement 4: Industrial Development'

provides the planning policy framework for determining planning applications for small rural businesses. The Department of the Environment is reviewing and updating that policy framework in the light of the provisions of the regional development strategy. The Department will consult widely on draft policies in due course. It is important that the rural community, and the business community as a whole, responds to that consultation. The area development plan process also provides opportunities for the needs of the rural community to be considered.

The Planning Service consults the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on all area plans. There are opportunities for the public to comment on the future of their local areas. The processes of preparing area development plans and planning policy statements will enable the needs of small rural businesses to be put to the Department of the Environment and fully considered against environmental and other considerations.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his positive answer. He obviously agrees with me that there is an urgency to ensure that as few obstacles as possible are placed in the way of industries locating in rural areas.

Does the Minister agree that, given the decline in agriculture and the need to create alternative employment for rural dwellers, he needs to be in regular contact with his Colleagues in other Departments so that they are not only singing from the same hymn sheet but also singing in the same key?

Mr Nesbitt: I agree that agriculture is going through a difficult time. The Department of the Environment needs to be in regular contact with other Departments. I am in regular contact with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Indeed, I was due to have a meeting with Mr John Gilliland, the new president of the Ulster Farmers' Union, yesterday, but I was unable to attend.

Seamus Heaney House

5. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment whether directions under article 4 of the Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 1993 were used in respect of the former home of Seamus Heaney. (AQO 1568/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department of the Environment did not invoke the provisions of article 4 of the Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 1993, which allows the withdrawal of certain permitted development rights, in respect of the former home of Seamus Heaney. Current legislation does not include demolition within the definition of development. Consequently, consent is not required for demolition, except in conservation areas and for listed buildings. The provisions of article 4 did not apply to this property as it was not in a conservation area and was not listed.

Mr M Robinson: The Department of the Environment insisted that it had tried to contact the owner of the Heaney house to facilitate listing. That is not a statutory requirement and is at odds with the listing procedure in England where a building is under threat. Does the Department intend to continue with this practice, bearing in mind the inherent danger of premature demolition?

Mr Nesbitt: There are two parts to the Member's question, so I will be brief. The Member asked whether trying to contact the owner is part of the procedure. It was what I was faced with when I first heard of the likely demolition that Tuesday evening in May. I had one of three choices. I could opt for doing nothing, or, as some people suggested, I could go for a spot listing and test the law. However, as a Minister, I did not think that I should be seen to be testing the law or running the chance of breaking the law. The third option was to try to create space and use a third party.

I viewed it as axiomatic — the developer knew what we were about. He had no direct contact with me but I am confident that he knew what we were doing because we informed him through the third party.

Will the situation continue? Mr Mark Robinson is not aware, and he should be, that I introduced a Planning (Amendment) Bill today, which will include what is euphemistically known as "spot listing". It is a building preservation notice, which enables work to be halted, after which there will be six months to decide, through the proper procedures, whether a building is worthy of listing. Having listened to Members who spoke in the Assembly and outside, I am sure that the provision will be fully approved by the Assembly.

3.45 pm

Derry City Walls

6. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will support the application to promote the city walls in the Derry City Council area as a world heritage site, in view of their historical importance.

(AQO 1523/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department of Culture, Media and Sport takes lead responsibility in the UK for the World Heritage Convention. In June 1999 the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, published the current UK tentative list of sites likely to be put forward for world heritage status. The list included 25 sites in the UK and its overseas territories. One Northern Ireland site, Mount Stewart gardens in County Down, was included.

The tentative list has a planned life of five to 10 years, and a review of the list, which may lead to new proposals, will take place no sooner than 2006. I will be happy to consider any case that Derry City Council wishes to make for including the city's walls on the list.

However, world heritage sites are required to have “outstanding universal value”, and the World Heritage Convention has stated that walled cities are already well represented on the world heritage list.

Mrs Courtney: That is a disappointing answer. When Chris Smith first came over here he indicated that the city walls should have world heritage status. I have asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure about this matter, but it is not within his remit.

Derry has put a substantial amount of money aside in trying to gain world heritage site status. The Minister’s answer is disappointing because we had hoped that we would at least have had our foot on the ladder long before 2006.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question in mind?

Mrs Courtney: Yes, but after the Minister’s answer I am not sure about the question that I was going to ask. This matter will require money. Is the Minister prepared to put money into the initiative once we get the city walls onto the UK tentative list?

Mr Nesbitt: That is a good question. I respect and empathise with the magnitude of Derry’s city walls and the part that they played in history. They were built between 1613 and 1618 during the plantation of Ulster. Londonderry is one of the last walled cities in Europe, and the walls constitute the largest historic monument in care in Northern Ireland. Since 1957 the Department has contributed £10 million towards the upkeep of the walls — so we value them. We are mindful of the terrorist activity during which they have been sustained.

Mr Hay: I support the Member for Foyle, Mrs Courtney, on this matter. The issue has been raised by my council over many years. There is total support for trying to have the city walls designated as a world heritage site. It would be the jewel in the crown for tourism in the city of Londonderry. As the Minister said, the walls have played a historic role in the city, and he is correct in saying that it is the only complete walled structure anywhere in Europe.

Today, it is still possible to walk round the entire length of the walls.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Does the Member have a question in mind?

Mr Hay: The Minister’s support for the council’s application to make the walls a world heritage site would be important. If the Minister has not walked the walls, the council invites him to do so. That might give him a better understanding of the walls’ historic importance.

Mr Nesbitt: I see a few smiles in the Chamber at the idea of my walking the walls. I understand the historic and cultural significance of the walls to the city of Londonderry.

However, I want to point out the difficult nature of the application. Twenty-five areas are being considered by the United Kingdom Government, through which Northern Ireland makes its nominations. The gardens at Mount Stewart have been nominated, although the earliest time that it will be considered — if it is considered — is 2003-04. The United Kingdom Government states that they will make only one nomination each year, as about 400 sites have been nominated for designation.

Londonderry must compete against walled towns such as Caernarfon and Verona for designation. These are the criteria for a world heritage site of outstanding universal value.

Mr McClarty: I have a great deal of sympathy with the question from Mrs Courtney, and the speech from Mr Hay. However, does the Minister agree that the walls of Derry have great historic and cultural significance for all the people of Northern Ireland and that they form part of our shared heritage and must, therefore, be accorded fitting recognition?

Mr Nesbitt: I empathise totally with the Member’s comments about the historic and cultural nature of the walls and the shared heritage that they represent. If we all in Northern Ireland shared, understood and empathised with one another’s culture and heritage, we truly would become one community, but a community that respected diversity.

Planning Appeals in North Down

8. **Ms Morrice** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the total number of planning applications appealed by property developers in north Down in the past year; and (b) the percentage that were successful.

(AQO 1513/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Between 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002, 13 appeals were made to the Planning Appeals Commission from property developers for proposed developments in the North Down Borough Council area. Two of those 13 appeals were withdrawn, and five have not been decided to date. Of the six that were decided, all were allowed by the Planning Appeals Commission. The Department has been granted leave for a judicial review of one of the six.

Ms Morrice: I tried to jot down those figures speedily as the Minister went through them. I believe that I am right in saying that most of the appeals were decided in the developers’ favour: two were withdrawn, five were undecided and the others went through. In the light of that majority, would the Minister consider allowing residents to have a say in the matter by introducing a third-party appeal system in the Bill that was introduced this morning?

Mr Nesbitt: The Member is correct. There were 13 appeals — six were decided in favour of the developers,

against advice. Queen's University has carried out research for the Department into third-party appeals in the Republic of Ireland and how they might affect Northern Ireland. The result of that tentative research is that third-party appeals seem to add to delays. Third-party appeals in the South can take about 11 months longer to deal with. That would have a considerable resource implication for Northern Ireland.

Our current level of consultation and participation is viewed as reasonably comprehensive. However, we are examining that in more detail. I assure the House that, when the research has been considered in detail, it will be passed as soon as possible to the Committee for the Environment so that it and the Department can interface on the important issue of third-party appeals.

Planning Approval

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are taken by the Planning Service to ensure that work carried out is in accordance with the approval given. (AQO 1548/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department approved 20,092 planning applications in the last financial year. Given that volume, it is not practicable for all planning approvals to be comprehensively monitored to ensure compliance. Experience confirms that the majority of developers are law-abiding and comply with the regulations. Where deviation occurs, it is within acceptable statutory and policy limits. When members of the public notify the Department of unauthorised development, it is investigated. The Department will seek in the first instance to achieve a satisfactory resolution by negotiation. Where that is not possible, the Department has statutory powers to initiate formal enforcement action.

'Planning Policy Statement 9: The Enforcement of Planning Control' sets out the Department's general policy approach to its enforcement powers. Where the Department considers it expedient to take enforcement action, it is commensurate with the breach of planning control to which it relates.

Today, I introduced a Bill to the Assembly that, among other things, will considerably strengthen the enforcement powers available to the Department. The Department is recruiting additional staff to bolster the development control and enforcement functions of the Planning Service.

Mr McCarthy: I admire and congratulate the Minister on his optimism.

To my knowledge, the Strangford constituency has one enforcement officer to cover a large area. Builders, developers and others are aware of that and seem to get away with chopping and changing the size, shape and design of buildings, to the very great annoyance of the locals, while the individual can be harassed by planning staff. Will the Minister assure us that the plans that are

submitted to his Department will be strictly adhered to, if and when a neighbour or a concerned person reports that they are not being adhered to? Does the Minister consider it an offence to commence work without planning permission or building approval?

Mr Nesbitt: I will answer the Member's last question first. The law states that it is not an offence to commence building, provided retrospective approval is sought.

It does no harm to put it on the record that there are six divisions in Northern Ireland that deal with planning. Four of those divisions have three officials dealing with enforcement, and the other two have four each. A total of 20 officials in the Planning Service deal with enforcement. In one year, 2,849 cases were brought before the system, 1,485 of which have been resolved. The number of planning staff has increased by 25%. Such was the measure of resources devoted to the environment and to planning under direct rule. I have said before that it was viewed as a Cinderella.

Since devolution, the budget of £15 million has gone up to £18.5 million. Another £1.9 million is to be used in 2002-03, and 50 more staff will be recruited. We are committed to delivering an efficient, transparent and open planning system and to having the correct laws in place and ensuring that they are enforced.

Seamus Heaney House

10. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on his Department's interventions in the case of the house on Ashley Avenue, Belfast, that was once occupied by Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney. (AQO 1539/01)

11. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the demolition of Seamus Heaney's former home at 16 Ashley Avenue, Belfast. (AQO 1538/01)

17. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department took to designate the one-time home of Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney as a building of historic and cultural heritage. (AQO 1549/01)

Mr Nesbitt: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 10, 11 and 17 together, as they are all similar.

Under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, my Department may list a building on the basis of its having special architectural or historic interest.

4.00 pm

The Lisburn Road area of Belfast was surveyed during the late 1970s as part of the first survey of all buildings in Northern Ireland. The former home of Seamus Heaney at 16 Ashley Avenue did not meet the listing criteria at that time. In October 1999 the Belfast Civic Trust

requested that the building be spot listed. My Department does not have spot-listing powers but seeks them through the Planning (Amendment) Bill introduced earlier today. Notwithstanding that, the Environment and Heritage Service carried out an external appraisal. It concluded that, although it was a fine Victorian house, a full appraisal under the second survey of all buildings, then under way, was not appropriate as the building was not of sufficient special interest to meet the listing criteria.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

SUPPLY RESOLUTION FOR THE 2002-03 MAIN ESTIMATES

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £4,962,077,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003 and that resources, not exceeding £5,710,516,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(a) and 3(b) of Table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2002-03 that was laid before the Assembly on 31 May 2002. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren).*]

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I note from the totals of each Department's Estimate that the Department of the Environment is allocated 1.2% of the total resources available. During the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates on 11 February 2002, I outlined to the House how the Committee for the Environment scrutinised the Department of the Environment's budget for 2002-03. The Minister of Finance and Personnel said then that he was impressed by that process. Unfortunately, the scrutiny concluded that there was little scope or flexibility in the Department's budget to make savings or to switch resources.

I recognise the case for increasing expenditure in some Departments; however, when will proper funding be allocated to secure and sustain Northern Ireland's environment, its primary asset, before it is too late? A sizeable increase in the Department of the Environment's budget of £115 million would be marginal overall but would have a significant and lasting impact on the protection of the environment. On the estimated figures a fraction of 1% would be meaningful, and I ask the Minister to examine the matter seriously.

Members will recall that the proposal to cut £2 million from the 2002-03 budget grant for local government resources was successfully fought by my Committee. That cut, which would have applied only to the 16 poorest councils, would have been a major injustice. The Committee was therefore horrified to learn in April 2002 that the restoration of the £2 million grant was not rolled forward into future years. I trust that that was an oversight and that the Minister will correct it by recommending that the Department of the Environment's budget meet the restoration of that £2 million. Furthermore, district council resource grant levels have been cut as a result of the impact of the current indicative minima, and it is imperative that a bid for £4.4 million to restore those

levels is met. Such cuts are in direct contradiction of the Executive's policy of targeting social need.

In conclusion, and speaking as a Member, I join others who spoke about the wastage of public funds by those who wreck and destroy our country. Every Member should remember that many of those who hold Executive positions have not only a great influence on that but carry a large part of responsibility for it, so I trust that we will call on the thugs and gangsters who are wrecking the Province and costing millions of pounds to stop and that our security forces will be allowed to take the necessary measures to bring those who have carried out such actions to immediate justice.

Mr Morrow: Having listened to Robert McCartney, Sammy Wilson, William McCrea and my Colleague Séamus Close, I suspect that most of what needs to be said has been said. They dealt very adequately with many of the issues that exercise the minds of people who are not Assembly Members. If nothing else is learnt from the debate, I hope that Members will realise that what we have is not acceptable for good government here.

We are told constantly that the Assembly is good news for Northern Ireland and that the ordinary man in the street — although I do not like that term because I do not understand who the ordinary man is — feels that he is better off today than he was three or four years ago. I suspect that if Members told people in the street that today, they would look at them in dismay and think that they were being spoken to in a foreign language, because they do not see the good results that were supposed to flow from the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Northern Ireland has 11 extravagant and expensive Departments, and most people do not understand why, but then the Belfast Agreement had more to do with political expediency than with good government. It behoves everyone in this country, and especially the major parties, to learn the lesson quickly that we must get back to democracy. We must demonstrate to everyone, whether dissenter or supporter, that good government will benefit everyone.

My Colleague Sammy Wilson touched on that when he said that approximately 75 police officers had been forced out of their homes as a result of the IRA break-in at Castlereagh. That is but the tip of the iceberg — security has been breached, and we do not know where it will end. The cycle has begun again: an attempt was made on the life of a young Catholic police constable when his car was booby-trapped. There are those in the House who tell us that they will cherry-pick the agreement and take all the things that benefit them. However, those same Members will make their presence felt in another way, in respect of issues that they feel that they cannot support.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does Mr Morrow agree that, in the light of the incident in Ballymena, it is a

shame that Sinn Féin/IRA Members of the Executive told people to treat the Police Service in the same way as they treated the RUC? If that is the advice from a party that sits on the Executive, how can we expect anything other than what happened in Ballymena?

Mr Morrow: I thank the Member for that point — I could not agree with him more. In Dungannon at the weekend those who wanted to take the law into their own hands engaged in more brutal activities. Of course, this is not the first time that that has happened; Barney McDonald was recently murdered there. When you ask the police who they think was involved, they say that they are confused and do not know. The dogs in the street know who carries out such atrocities, but the forces of law and order do not, despite the fact that it is patently obvious to anybody with half a head on his shoulders.

Mr McCartney: I am grateful to the hon Member for giving way. I am sure that he and his party would similarly condemn those involved in the attack on St Columbanus's College in Bangor, where tens of thousands of pounds worth of damage was done to a school that has been at the forefront of community education — almost 50% of each of the communities are represented on its roll.

Mr Morrow: I thank the Member for that point and for the useful information that is relevant to the debate.

The infrastructure of our water, sewerage, roads, housing, and so forth is in dire need of capital expenditure. However, every time we have a Budget report and discussion on these issues, the Minister of Finance and Personnel puts his hands up and says that we do not have the money, although I do not blame him for that. When will a concerted programme be put in place to tackle our lack of infrastructure? Can anybody say that we have a better infrastructural base or guidelines that could put a better infrastructure in place than we had under direct rule? The answer is that we do not.

In his earlier address, Mr McCartney gave some of the reasons for that. He highlighted the inadequacies of the Barnett formula, and his points were realistic. Until we get down to tackling that formula, the Minister will continue to speak to the House in the same vein, and he will be continually embarrassed that his hands are tied and that he cannot make the necessary improvements to the infrastructure. I hope that when he makes his winding-up speech he will tell the House clearly that he is not about to introduce a new taxation system. That is not what the people of Northern Ireland want or deserve, and they should not have to carry that burden.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is true that the Minister tells us that he does not have money, and the chaos with waiting lists means that people's lives are in danger. However, does my hon Friend understand why the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

recently returned more than £30 million because it was unspent? Something is surely wrong with that.

Mr Morrow: I thank the Member for that point, and I have no doubt that the Minister will want to deal with it in detail. I am sure that he listened intently to my Colleague.

This debate is one of the most important to come before the Assembly. Is it not significant that the Benches of the Ulster Unionist Party, for instance, which signed the Belfast Agreement, are empty and its Members are unconcerned about the matter?

4.15 pm

Members of the SDLP, which has been able to muster only one representative for the debate, are not concerned. Sinn Féin/IRA claims that it likes parts of the agreement; it will take the bits that it wants and will leave the rest — but it will still be in government. It has one Member in attendance, part-time, this afternoon.

It behoves everyone to take stock. What is going on among those who claim that they want the agreement? Where are all the bodies? We have empty pews right round the Chamber. That is a downright disgrace. Perhaps the situation reflects an honesty and reality that is creeping in: these parties have no stomach for this; they do not want to be identified with the Minister or to give him moral support. It looks as if they are deserting the ship and leaving the Minister to shore up the unshorable.

How much longer must we tolerate a situation where every excuse under the sun is made to explain why things cannot and will not be done? Even the First Minister could not find it in his heart to attend and back his Finance Minister. He too is conspicuous by his absence. If the debate means anything, the signatories to the agreement should be in the Chamber to give the Minister moral support rather than say “Get out there and get on with it; we know that you have a bad job to shore up, but we cannot help you because we have landed you in it.” At the next finance debate will the Minister ask his Colleagues in the Executive where they were when he was arguing his best case, as none of them was present to lend him moral support? I see that Mr McFarland is returning to the Benches; in fairness to him, he was present earlier.

If anything is gained from the debate, I hope that it is that the present system is no longer acceptable — it is out of date. We expect much better.

Dr Farren: Several Members have regretted the low attendance. I too regret that the attendance is not as good as I had anticipated for such an important motion. However, some of my Executive Colleagues are engaged in important Executive business. The First Minister is attending a meeting with the Minister for Regional Development, from which I have just returned. That meeting is dealing with important issues concerning the First Minister’s strategic vision for his responsibilities

and the means whereby that vision could be realised through various forms of funding. We should inform ourselves before accusing other Members for their absence. I defend the prior engagement of the First Minister. We could have asked why the Minister for Regional Development was not present. He is discussing matters in the Supply resolution, given the significant funding allocations made for his responsibilities. I recognise that his involvement in those discussions with the First Minister is important. I caution Members before they make wild allegations and draw inferences about the absence of our Assembly Colleagues.

The Supply resolution before the House marks an important stage in the budgetary process. It is the basis upon which the legislature, in the form of the Assembly, authorises the spending of Departments, the Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and other bodies to enable them to carry out their functions. The figures before the House are based upon the Budget that we agreed last December. It is important to recognise the stage that we have reached in the budgetary process — we are nearly at the end. If Members were serious about pursuing their suggestions for what could or should have been included, they would have raised them and put them to the House before we voted on the Budget last December.

The authorisation of the spending proposed in that Budget is one of the Assembly’s most fundamental responsibilities. It holds Departments to account as they seek to deliver on their Programme for Government priorities.

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

Rev Dr William McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Farren: I do not think that it is normal to give way during a winding-up speech, but I will.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I am delighted to inform the Minister that it is perfectly normal to give way, but I thank him. The Minister said that Members could have raised some of these points last December. Is he aware that we tried to table 12 amendments, but each one was ruled out of order, and we were not permitted to bring those before the House?

Dr Farren: We agreed on and voted for the Budget last December. Today, we are authorising the expenditure that arises from an agreed Budget.

In many, although not all, respects, this has been a useful and informed debate. Members have made many points, some of which were useful and some of which give cause for reflection and further consideration by my Department, and in discussions, particularly with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I will try to answer and comment on as many points as possible, and I will follow up in writing any that I am unable to address today.

Several Members expressed concern about the general clarity and the lack of understanding by Members of the format and content of Estimates. I encounter this problem every time such a presentation is made to the House. I accept that this is a fairly complex subject, and for that reason I offered the Committee for Finance and Personnel detailed briefings for Members from my officials. When I reflected on the statement that I made this morning and considered what was alleged to be its jargon, I found that few technical terms were used. Terms that could be described as technical were repeated for the allocations to each Department. My officials provided a seminar on 22 May to help Members to understand the details of the Estimates and to appreciate and understand the technicalities associated with their presentation.

Many Members may feel that they do not need such a session, and I am happy to acknowledge that some comments today indicate that some Members do understand this fairly complex process. However, it is difficult to know how to promote better understanding of the Estimates when initiatives are not supported. I would facilitate a further session were Members to indicate their willingness to attend. I believe that attendance at the seminar was in single figures — and was closer to one than to nine.

Mr Close and Mr McCartney also referred to the difficulty in making year-on-year comparisons in allocations. That is difficult, but we are still in the early days of the new structures introduced through the Good Friday Agreement. We have also introduced resource accounting and budgeting, which has seen a change from cash to resource accounting. I am confident that, over time, that will lead to the production of better information and improved accountability. Committees provide a real opportunity for more considered and detailed examination of such aspects of our budgeting system. Indeed, in the general presentation at the beginning of, and during the course of, the budgetary process leading up to the Vote on Account, comparisons are made between what is to be allocated in the coming year and what was previously allocated, so that Members can appreciate such increases and decreases as may be proposed.

Sammy Wilson suggested that we could finance our infrastructure investment from efficiency savings, or by reducing the cost of government. I certainly agree that we need to look hard at our administration costs as a means of addressing the deficiencies of our public services. That must be an important element of the reform dimension of the reinvestment and reform initiative. Several Members said that there was extravagance in having 11 Departments. The services are essentially the same as those delivered by the previous six Departments, and will continue to need to be delivered. I do not regard those services as an extravagance in any sense. Given that Mr Morrow was a Minister responsible for the delivery of some of those services, I hardly imagine that he would wish to describe any of the services for which he was responsible as an extravagance of any kind.

Mr Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Farren: I have already given way, and I do not intend to give way any further in the course of this winding-up speech.

The scale of savings that might be realised would fall short of meeting our needs, and that is already made clear by the total volume of bids made by departmental Ministers under the first round of the reinvestment and reform initiative. Almost £1.5 billion worth of bids have been lodged against a total fund of £270 million. Indeed, the Department for Regional Development's bids alone total £417 million, and £277 million in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

It is important to point out to Members that the Treasury has laid down clear principles under which the new borrowing power will operate. If expenditure funded by borrowing is to be treated as falling outside our departmental expenditure limit, a clear relationship must exist between the activity concerned and the revenue stream, so that borrowing is wholly self-financing.

4.30 pm

Therefore, borrowing under the proposed new powers will have to be paid for from additional income by way of local revenues, and it will be up to the Executive and the Assembly to decide whether to borrow and by how much. That does not rule out the need to root out waste and inefficiency as a means of improving our public services.

Several Members have referred to the unnecessary expenditure incurred under the scheme for the purchase of evacuated buildings (SPED). The House will appreciate that SPED is an area that is not amenable to normal forecasting by the Department for Social Development. Normal practice has been that the needs of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for the operation of SPED are addressed in-year as part of the routine monitoring arrangements by the Executive. As in the past, we will aim to try to avoid disruption to the normal housing programme as a result of SPED, subject to the availability of the necessary resources.

Several Members from all sides of the Assembly have spoken about the serious impact of the current street disorder on our public services. I want to take this opportunity to add my own condemnation of those who are inciting or inflaming the situation. I appeal to those in situations of influence to do all they can to reduce tension and fear. Every pound we must spend on rehousing people, treating the injured or repairing the damage to our buses and houses is a pound less at our disposal for our health, education and other services.

I agree strongly with those who say that we must root out waste and inefficiency. In the Programme for Government we underline the importance of modernising government and of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. With the introduction of resource budgeting,

public service agreements and service delivery agreements, we have laid much of the information basis for that change. That should enable us to get better information about the true costs of services and particularly what outputs and outcomes are being achieved.

The review of public administration over the coming months, examining all aspects of administration including the quality of service, should provide a major opportunity for improvement. The Assembly will, of course, have an opportunity to consider the outcome of that review. Likewise, the new strategic investment body should be an important vehicle for helping to deliver public service reform. However, reform must go wider. We must focus more on delivering services and on placing customer service and the needs of front-line staff first.

I do not want to see public sector budgets increase in the future without applying reform as a key condition. The public needs to know that the best management techniques are being used to deliver services, and that the minimum resource necessary is being used in internal administration.

Éamonn ÓNeill spoke of the need for the Executive to learn from their experience and analyse how we might do things better and improve the quality of our public services. Others have spoken of the need to advance the reform agenda and deliver real improvements in efficiency. We are tackling the challenge actively through our programme of needs and effectiveness evaluations. Those six studies cover around 75% of all our expenditure programmes, and the reports, which will be presented to the Executive and the Assembly over the coming weeks, will give a clear indication of the effectiveness of our current spending patterns. We will use the outcome of those studies to inform our decisions when we come to construct the Budget for 2003-04 and beyond in September.

Mr McCartney asked about the rates. I thank him for his long, erudite contribution on this issue, and I look forward to seeing his submission to the rating policy review.

[Interruption].

I am glad to hear that some Members find this rather amusing.

Mr Morrow: It is easier to laugh —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: I repeat that what happens to the rates here will depend on what the Executive and the Assembly decide over the next number of years. Consultation on the review of rating policy has begun, and that will affect the development of the policy.

Further work is needed to finalise the details of the arrangements for the Executive's access to borrowing in a way that is demonstrably fair to ratepayers here and across the water. The details will be made known when the position is clearer.

There will be no major increases in local revenue until after full consultation and until a fairer system for revenue-raising has been developed to replace the present system. The pace of change will be subject to approval by the Assembly.

The impression has been given that the consultation is closed to forms of revenue-raising other than the rating system. Mr Close is a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and he will have read the consultation document. He will know that it contains a very clear invitation to those who believe that alternatives should be considered to develop those alternatives and put them forward as part of the submissions to the review of the rating system. I look forward to hearing his party's views on that. The same invitation is extended to all other Members and to the public at large. I trust that consultations that are open to all in our society are seen as a necessary part of the democratic process.

I do not subscribe to the view put forward by Mr Close that we should target our consultations only at those whom we believe might have most to offer or be most affected. All consultation needs to be open and transparent, and we need to involve all those who wish to contribute. We must ensure that they can make their contributions. That is part of what the democratic process is about. Any attempt to limit that consultation is a denial of every citizen's right to participate as much as possible in the decision-making process in this society.

The key political concession won by the Executive is the ability to borrow. To what extent and within what time frame we use that power is up to the people of Northern Ireland and will be subject to full democratic debate in the Executive, the Assembly and the wider community.

Mr McCartney spent a long time explaining that we did not require extra resources to pay for services and then went on to recommend an increase in income tax.

Mr McCartney: I did not recommend an increase.

Dr Farren: Mr McCartney certainly made a very strong suggestion in that direction.

Mr Close sought clarification about the funding for road safety and the Environment and Heritage Service. The reduction in road safety funding reflects the transfer of certain enforcement functions to the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency and some licensing functions to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The basic road safety functions have not been reduced.

The Environment and Heritage Service has received additional funds to meet the increasing cost of transposing numerous EC Directives into Northern Ireland legislation. The most notable of those cover air and water pollution prevention and control, and waste management.

We must consider our priorities carefully in the forthcoming spending review. That is what the Programme

for Government and the Budget processes are all about. We have the right, if we choose, to spend more on some areas than is spent in England. However, the corollary is that we would have to spend less in other areas than would otherwise be possible. However, we shall not be able simply to ask for more.

I thank Members for their valuable contributions not only in this debate but through the Committees, correspondence and questions posed here on other occasions. If I have not responded to any substantive point I shall be glad to reply in writing or ask the relevant Minister to do so.

The Estimates bring together the effects of the decisions that we have already made. In this case, the basis for the Estimates is the Budget that we agreed in December 2001. Within the time constraints in which we must work, we have made considerable efforts to ensure that the Estimates have been available in time for proper and considered scrutiny. I hope that that has been helpful. We shall continue to improve on our procedures so that Members can feel at ease with the process and familiar with its language, and, by so doing, make the most-informed decisions that can possibly be made.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Supply resolution motion is subject to section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which means that the vote will take place on a cross-community basis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £4,962,077,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003 and that resources, not exceeding £5,710,516,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints for the year ending 31 March 2003 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(a) and 3(b) of Table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2002-03 that was laid before the Assembly on 31 May 2002.

Adjourned at 4.42 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 11 June 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE REVIEW

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the Senior Civil Service review.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on behalf of the Executive about the independent review report 'Appointment and Promotion Procedures for the Senior Civil Service of the Northern Ireland Civil Service' and the intention to open it up for public consultation.

The Executive agreed in late 2000 to commission an independent review. The review became a formal commitment in the Programme for Government that signified the importance which the Executive place on ensuring equality of opportunity for all. The review team, under the chairmanship of Lord Ouseley, was formally commissioned by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the team commenced work in March 2001.

Lord Ouseley is managing director of Different Realities Partnership Ltd and a former chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality. The team comprised: Rosheen Callender, national equality secretary of the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU); Dr Trefor Campbell, managing director of Moy Park Ltd; Sir Bob Cooper, former chairperson of the Fair Employment Commission; Judith Eve, chairperson of the Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland; Prof Gerry McKenna, vice-chancellor of the University of Ulster; and Dr Monica Wilson, chief executive of Disability Action.

The team operated under the terms of reference that had been agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive as follows: to review the effectiveness of current policies, practices and procedures concerning appointment to, and promotion within, the Senior Civil Service to ensure that they facilitate the business objectives of Ministers and Northern Ireland Departments by providing for the timely and efficient filling of posts with appropriate staff; to

promote the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) goal of being fully representative of the community that it serves by tackling under-representation in the NICS as quickly and as effectively as possible; to address any identified obstacles to fair participation by all sectors of the community; to match best practice in other major public and private sector bodies in Northern Ireland and beyond; to examine the roles of officials and Ministers at each stage of the selection process; to consider the appropriate level of independent involvement, taking account of the statutory role of the Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland, in recruitment and selection processes; and to make recommendations.

Although retirement age is not referred to explicitly in the terms of reference for the review, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mark Durkan, asked the review team to consider that matter and to take into account the possible implications for the entire NICS.

The independent review team submitted the report in March 2002, and the Executive considered it in May. The report is wide-ranging, and I am grateful to the team for the work it has undertaken in presenting its findings and recommendations. The team has conducted a thorough analysis during which it consulted with key stakeholders, called for a range of presentations on NICS practices, sought statistical analysis and external validation of the analyses and called for equal opportunities information from New Zealand to provide a benchmark.

My Executive Colleagues and I welcome the report, which contains 25 recommendations. They include two recommendations on retirement age; given that they have implications for the entire NICS, not only the Senior Civil Service, I have decoupled them from the report and will treat them as a separate issue. Two further recommendations are outside the legislative competence of the devolved Administration, and they will be raised directly with Whitehall Ministers. They are: recommendation 4, that the Secretary of State should seek to ensure that the Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are fully representative of Northern Ireland society; and recommendation 22, that the UK Government should be urged to introduce appropriate legislative change in relation to the nationality requirements that are imposed on those Civil Service jobs that are classed as public service posts. Therefore, 21 substantive recommendations must be considered. However, one recommendation is overarching as it refers to the need to develop an implementation action plan.

The review lasted longer than had originally been expected. That was due to difficulties in aligning members' diaries for meetings and also to the fact that the task was more complex than had been anticipated.

During the review the team commented on the dynamic nature of the environment in which the NICS operates and the progress that had been made. Consequently, many of

the specific recommendations deal with areas where work is already under way or where it is planned to meet legislative change or business need. The Executive agreed that officials should continue to progress, or initiate, action on the majority of the recommendations and that challenging targets for the achievement of those recommendations should be set out in the action plan, which will form an integral part of the further consultation process.

There are two recommendations that we believe need careful consideration through further consultation before any action is taken. The first is the recommendation that all Senior Civil Service vacancies be externally advertised. A range of equal opportunities and business considerations will be identified in the consultation paper, on which various stakeholders will wish to express their views.

The recommendation on early action to reduce the long-hours culture of the Senior Civil Service needs to be considered in a similar way. The review team believes that culture to be a serious obstacle to participation across all the section 75 groups. There are a range of legal and business issues that will be considered in the consultative paper.

The Executive, having considered the report, have decided to issue a consultation paper, which will include a detailed draft action plan on those recommendations on which action is under way and on which comments would be welcome, and request specific comments and views on the two recommendations I have highlighted — external advertising of all Senior Civil Service vacancies and long-hours culture.

At least 12 weeks will be devoted to public consultation, and the report will be published on the Internet. To allow for the holiday period, public consultation will start in July and will be completed by 31 October. I have arranged for copies of the report to be placed in the Assembly Library today. Once public consultation is completed, any equality impact assessment required in respect of proposed policy changes will be taken forward, subject to normal screening.

The Executive welcome the report and wish to make early progress on its implementation. They recognise that many of the issues raised by the review are complex and challenging. It is, therefore, important to hear what interested stakeholders have to say on the issues associated with the recommendations and action plan. Further consultation will enhance and maintain the progression towards equality of opportunity for all in respect of appointment and promotion procedures for the Senior Civil Service.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): I welcome the Minister's statement on the review and thank the review team for the work that it has done.

In view of that fact that the review has taken longer than anticipated, can the Minister give any indication

about the implementation of those aspects of the review that can be brought about immediately? Has he had any indication from Westminster regarding the timescale of the nationality question and how it could be resolved?

Dr Farren: I welcome the Member's compliments to the review team, who worked exceedingly hard. As I said, that work will be recognised in the contents of the report. It has been a complex task.

I said that it is our intention, with respect to many of the recommendations, to develop an implementation plan and to proceed with it as soon as possible. So the answer is essentially about the ongoing implementation of the recommendations that the plan will seek to address from now on. Indeed, as I said, some of the recommendations relate to actions that are already under way. However, I also said that we are not saying that, in the course of the consultation, we do not want to hear views regarding those recommendations that are already being acted on. We welcome views, comments and further recommendations regarding those particular aspects of the plan that might attract the attention of particular groups and individuals.

There is a willingness in Whitehall to address the nationality issue. It is a matter of finding parliamentary time to do so. To underline the urgency with which we want the matter addressed, after today's statement I will be communicating with my Whitehall counterparts to ensure that action is taken to address the issue through the required legislative change as soon as possible.

10.45 am

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Beggs): Does the Minister accept that all Northern Ireland citizens are treated impartially with regard to opportunities within the Civil Service whether they carry a British passport or an Irish one? Given that there is no discrimination against local citizens on grounds of nationality, why should they face additional outside competition from other European countries for appointments to the Senior Civil Service?

How will the Minister ensure that the high reputation of the Civil Service is protected against the perceived poor practice that occasionally occurs in the Republic of Ireland and other European countries?

Dr Farren: To answer the third question, there are adequate controls in place to ensure that the integrity of the Civil Service is maintained to the highest standards. Where any shortcomings are revealed with respect to those controls, steps will be taken immediately to address them. It is my experience that the highest standards do obtain, and I have no reason to question them. Members can rest assured that everything is done to ensure that those standards are maintained.

To answer the first question, arising from the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement, posts in the Northern Ireland

Civil Service should be open to people of nationalities other than British. It is a curious anomaly that Ministers can come from the other part of this island and exercise ministerial authority with no inhibitions on their attaining their posts, notwithstanding their nationality. The same opportunity should be extended to those who seek posts at the highest level in the Civil Service. When, rather than if, candidates of other nationalities can apply, they will have to meet the same standards and criteria as all others who seek appointment at that level.

The statistics contained in the annexes to the review team's report show a fairly dynamic pattern with regard to community affiliation and gender in the Senior Civil Service. The dynamic is in the right direction with respect to the balance between Roman Catholics and Protestants and between males and females. That is to be welcomed. If the Member's question implied discrimination, I would point out that the review team in no way highlights discrimination in any form, and it comments favourably on the dynamic.

Mr O'Neill: The Minister's statement is a clear indication of his, and the Executive's, commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity by opening up the Senior Civil Service to everyone, regardless of religion, gender, physical well-being or ethnic origin.

The Minister said that work is already under way in some areas covered by the recommendations. Given the proposed consultation exercise, is that not premature? How does he propose to deal with the recommendations on the age of retirement, which he has decoupled from the report?

Dr Farren: With regard to the Member's first question, many of the review team's recommendations relate to building on the equality of opportunity work taken forward to date by the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Given that that principle is central to devolution — indeed, it is enshrined in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — all of us want to promote the concept of a Civil Service that is seen by all whom it serves to be open and inclusive and which is staffed by those who can best meet the business challenges of providing support to the devolved Administration. That will be facilitated by early action on many of the report's recommendations. It will enable the Northern Ireland Civil Service to build on the work to date in developing what almost all observers regard as robust and equitable processes and procedures.

The draft action plan and timetable will be drawn up to show progress and plans for implementation, and that will form part of the consultation process. Consultees will be provided with a clear indication of the direction proposed to implement the majority of the recommendations made by the review team. As I have already underlined, in adopting that approach consultees will have the opportunity to confirm that the proposals are

acceptable, or, if otherwise, that there are other issues to consider in relation to the action plan.

With respect to the recommendations on the age of retirement, I indicated that I decoupled them simply because they affect the Civil Service as a whole. Proposals on the age of retirement for the Northern Ireland Civil Service are currently being formulated and will be brought forward separately to the Executive in the autumn, given that the implications are Civil Service-wide and not exclusive to the Senior Civil Service. The review team's two relevant recommendations will, therefore, be considered in bringing those proposals forward. I stress that the trade unions will be fully engaged in all discussions on the matter.

Mr Poots: It must be put on record that the elusive report has not been made available to Members — copies are neither in the Assembly Library nor in the Business Office. It is therefore difficult to discuss it. Nevertheless, I have some questions.

The Minister referred to the dynamic swinging in the right direction. Between 1985 and 1999, the Civil Service has swung from 58·6% Protestant representation to 53·4%, and Catholic representation has increased from 41·4% to 46·6%. Those figures suggest that Protestants are under-represented in the Civil Service. How does the Minister expect that to impact on the Senior Civil Service? If Protestant representation in the junior ranks of the Civil Service is too low, it will impact on the Senior Civil Service in later years.

Will the Minister tell the House why there was only 42·3% Protestant representation in the former Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment when he was the Minister and why there is only 45·9% Protestant representation in the Department for Social Development; 40·3% in the Social Security Agency (SSA); and 49·4% in the Child Support Agency (CSA)?

It is most inappropriate for a Minister to have so little confidence in his own civil servants that he believes that he must go out of the country to recruit people with the necessary quality and integrity to run Northern Ireland.

Dr Farren: I assure the Member that the appointment of civil servants does not rest in my hands. The Executive must ensure that equality of opportunity is available to all.

The nationality issue is pertinent and must be addressed. The record shows that many people from Northern Ireland have availed of the opportunity to rise to senior posts in the Civil Service in the South of Ireland. I see no reason why we should not open up posts in our Civil Service to people from other jurisdictions, and we should not be afraid to do so. That is a matter of equality and, as the review team recommended, it is being addressed. It is important to remember that my statement was about a report that a review team has submitted to the Executive.

We welcome many of its recommendations and have found that they are in line with our thinking.

Mr Poots referred to the composition of the statistics. It is important that we note the dynamic in the Senior Civil Service and that we welcome a Senior Civil Service that broadly reflects the balance in our community. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires us to consider not only religious affiliation and gender, which are the most significant categories and foremost in people's minds when they address the composition of labour forces, but also other categories. We are obliged to consider disability, sexual orientation, race and other important categories.

11.00 am

The review team examined not only the dynamic of the Senior Civil Service but the composition of lower Civil Service grades. There is an imbalance — incipient, in some respects — in lower Senior Civil Service grades, particularly with respect to Protestant males. There would be concern if that imbalance were to gather momentum. As a member of a political party that was founded in the context of the civil rights movement and was informed by civil rights issues, I would be concerned if there were a dynamic in reverse to that that has emerged recently. Therefore, we shall address the matter as part of the equality agenda of the entire Civil Service.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the report, but I am disappointed that it has taken so long to present it to the Assembly. The report was not in the Library this morning, and Members have little opportunity to discuss a document that they have not seen. When will the report be available?

Mr O'Neill asked about retirement age, a point that I mentioned to the Minister on several occasions. I cannot understand why the matter was not included in the terms of reference initially, but I am grateful to Mr Durkan for ensuring its inclusion later.

I am concerned that the two recommendations have been decoupled from the report. Will that not delay the resolution of this important matter until a decision is made? In the meantime, people will be forced out of the Civil Service against their will. I hope that Civil Service employees who are approaching the age of 60 will be encouraged to stay at work rather than be hounded out.

Dr Farren: I shall place a copy of the report in the Library today. I trust that Members will study it and express their views, individually or at party level. I do not intend to inhibit debate on the issues. During the forthcoming 12-week consultation period, Members will be able to deliberate on the report and the associated consultation document, which will be published by the beginning of July.

As regards decoupling, I hasten to assure Mr McCarthy that the issue of the age of retirement is not intended to create further delay. That matter applies to the entire

Civil Service; however, the review is about the Senior Civil Service in particular.

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

The retirement age issue applies to the entire Civil Service, and it is appropriate that the matter should be decoupled. It is not appropriate to suggest that my predecessor belatedly added the issue to the terms of reference — it was there from the outset. The retirement age issue must be considered in that context; it did not suddenly arise when the review was established. There has been lively debate on the matter. It was important to bear the issue in mind, as the review could have, and has, shed some light on it. The matter must be addressed urgently, and I have given a commitment that the Executive will consider the proposals in the early autumn. I hope to be able to come to the Assembly then with proposals on how the issue should be addressed in the future.

Mrs Courtney: The SDLP strongly endorses the report's recommendation that the nationality criterion be dropped. There should be no bar on anyone from entering the Senior Civil Service. The issue has been live for some time, and I urge the Minister to continue to press it with the United Kingdom Government. The Minister said that there is willingness in Whitehall to consider that viewpoint. How does he intend to raise the matter with the Westminster Government?

Dr Farren: The need for change in the nationality legislation has been brought to the attention of the UK Government. They have indicated their keenness to open up civil employment under the Crown. I have commissioned definitive legal advice on the question of nationality from the departmental solicitors' office. It is my intention to write to the Secretary of State without delay to advise him of the recommendation made by the independent review team and to seek his commitment to a change to the nationality legislation being introduced by the UK Government as a matter of priority.

Mr Close: Does the Minister agree that the Executive appear to be indulging in foot-dragging over the report's implementation? The report was commissioned in 2000; the review team submitted its report in March 2002; and it seems to have lain around for a couple of months, as the Executive only considered it in May. It is the middle of June, and the report has only now come to the House.

Paragraph 1.12 of the report states that

"Consultation also played an important role. The team consulted with a range of stakeholders, including Ministers, Trade Unions, The Equality Commission, umbrella groups representing the Section 75 categories, the DFP Committee, Permanent Secretaries".

I could go on. Many people have been consulted, and we are now told that there is to be further consultation and that implementation will not take place until goodness knows when. Will it even happen this year? I detect

foot-dragging. Would it not be better for the Minister to implement the report straight away?

Dr Farren: I get tired listening to the same hollow complaint from Mr Close. How much consideration has the Committee given to the review team's work? I understand that the Committee — of which Mr Close is a member — met Lord Ouseley once, but he was unable to have a second meeting with it. What does that say about that Committee's consideration of the issues? Mr Close had the opportunity to pursue the matter vigorously. I do not take kindly to being chided by Mr Close, given the — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: I do not take kindly to that, given the record of the Committee, of which Mr Close is a member, on addressing the issue. It may not have been his fault, but we must consider the way in which the Committee has deliberated on the issue before criticising the review team. The review team was asked to carry out some work. There were some difficulties about the timetabling of meetings. The team thought that the matter required greater deliberation than was at first deemed necessary; hence, the length of time that it took to complete the review. When the review team reported, the Executive deliberated on the matter as expeditiously as possible.

An implementation plan is being prepared on many of the recommendations. Three recommendations in particular are being highlighted for further consultation. The recommendations on retirement age, the nationality issue and the composition of the Civil Service Commissioners for Northern Ireland are being treated separately for reasons that I have already outlined. Progress will not be delayed.

Mr Close raised the issue of wide consultation. Yesterday, he attacked the suggestion that there should be general consultation on issues that concern the working of the Executive and the Administration. His approach to consultation is exclusive and elitist. He believes that only certain sections of society should receive consultation documents and be invited to submit their views.

Yesterday, I rejected the suggestion that we should be anything but fully transparent in the consultation process. I shall remain committed to such an approach as long as I have any responsibility for consultation, especially consultation on such fundamental issues as equality of opportunity. I make no apology for holding a full public consultation, and I reject the suggestion that we should be elitist, selective or include only certain groups, as Mr Close advises us to do.

Mr A Doherty: The Minister made it clear that it is appropriate that the Senior Civil Service be open to all nationalities. Therefore, will he join me in wishing the members of the Republic of Ireland senior soccer service, many of whom perform at the highest level in the English League, all the best in their match today?

Dr Farren: Our Senior Civil Service performs to the highest standards, and I am sure that the Irish team will play to the highest standard today. I trust that the House will join me in extending good wishes to the Irish team, which I understand will take to the pitch in Japan in just over one hour. I trust that there will be some rejoicing over lunch.

BUDGET (NO. 2) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 16/01] to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31 March 2003; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2003; and to repeal certain spent enactments.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

11.15 am

I have received notice from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the requirement of Standing Order 40 has been fully met in terms of appropriate consultation. It is therefore in order for the Budget (No 2) Bill to proceed with accelerated passage.

STRATEGIC PLANNING BILL

First Stage

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 17/01] to make further provision in relation to the regional development strategy for Northern Ireland.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

RAILWAY SAFETY BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: To enable Members to speak to the Bill, I shall take the vote on clause 1 separately, by leave of the Assembly. I also intend to group the remaining clauses for the questions on stand part, followed by the two schedules and the long title.

Clause 1 (Safety of railways)

Mr M Robinson: The Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development has asked me to extend his apologies for not being able to attend today's debate. He has asked me to speak on behalf of the Regional Development Committee. I begin by expressing the Committee's thanks to those who gave evidence to the Committee. I also express the Committee's gratitude to the departmental officials who made themselves readily available, often at short notice, throughout the Committee's deliberations.

As Members will be aware, the Railway Safety Bill is primarily technical in nature. It is, none the less, an important piece of legislation that has major safety implications for our railway network. The importance of the legislation cannot be underestimated, particularly when we look at the recent rail accident at Downhill and, indeed, other accidents such as the unfortunate death of a contract worker on the railway track at Sydenham in February of this year. Such accidents serve only to reinforce the need for exacting standards of rail safety.

Mr Deputy Speaker, during the Committee's deliberations on the Railway Safety Bill, it noted that the Bill will enable several important pieces of secondary legislation to be brought forward. In particular, clause 1 of the Bill provides for existing legislation to be used to introduce railway safety regulations. Under article 17 of the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, the Department will have the power to require rail operators to prepare safety cases. That is to be welcomed. A safety case approach will require Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) to conduct a rigorous audit of all its plant infrastructure and machinery, including its trains. The Minister is to be praised for ensuring that the safety cases will be closely scrutinised. His Department has reached an agreement with the Health and Safety Executive whereby the railway inspectorate will act as agents to scrutinise and approve each risk assessment and safety case. That will undoubtedly contribute to ensuring that safety cases are carefully prepared and closely monitored.

As the basis of the legislation is the requirement for railway operators to provide safety cases, it is important that the safety case regulations are swiftly implemented, particularly in the light of recent accidents. I note that during the Second Stage debate the Minister stated that

the safety case regulations will require NIR, in particular, to undertake quite a bit of work before it has prepared a detailed safety case.

Therefore, I ask the Minister to monitor the situation closely to ensure that NIR completes the work as soon as possible. The Committee for Regional Development had no amendments to the Railway Safety Bill and agreed unanimously with all its clauses and schedules.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not oppose the Bill, but I wish to make some comments on it. I welcome the principle of introducing railway safety legislation, given that the existing legislation is Victorian-based and does not attend to today's health and safety standards.

Concerns were raised about the Bill, notably by Translink and by Transport 2000. One of the initial concerns was that an opportunity had been missed to introduce substantial legislation. The Bill is enabling legislation; it does not contain detail. Detail will be provided by secondary legislation in the form of Statutory Rules.

I shall make a general comment on the use of Statutory Rules as a means to introduce legislation. Statutory Rules will be used to introduce the detail required to ensure that rail safety is addressed properly by legislation. However, Statutory Rules are not subject to the same level of scrutiny by Committees or the Assembly as Bills that are introduced through the Assembly's legislative process. I question whether that is the correct way for the Assembly to deal with legislation — to pass enabling legislation and then have the detail to be provided by Statutory Rules. I shall comment briefly on the Bill itself.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McNamee, I remind you that we are considering clause 1 rather than the entire Bill.

Mr McNamee: Clause 1 sets out the substance — or lack of substance — of the Bill. It sets out the Bill's overall position. That is what I am speaking to, as opposed to the detail.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please continue.

Mr McNamee: I am not speaking to any of the other clauses or their content. I am speaking on the general nature of the Bill, which is covered by clause 1.

The Bill generally reflects the system in GB. Some concerns were raised about the application of the safety case system were there to be fragmentation of the rail network. I refer to paragraph 5 of the explanatory and financial memorandum, which states:

"Furthermore effective rail safety legislation would have to be in place before a Public Private Partnership, which would involve the private sector operating trains in Northern Ireland could be introduced. We could not risk the profit motive tempting the private sector to cut corners on safety measures."

The explanatory notes refer to an issue regarding public-private partnerships. Concern was raised that if there is a fragmentation of the operation of the railway,

and there are contractors who have sub-contractors, and sub-contractors who have subsequent sub-contractors, a difficulty would arise in identifying who was responsible for safety issues.

It is also clear that the Bill does not identify how safety auditing would be carried out on the safety cases and who would be responsible for ensuring that operators actually carry out the risk assessments, as provided for in their safety case. The Bill also fails to identify who would monitor whether operators are taking remedial action to deal with any problems identified by the risk assessment.

Those are my main concerns. When the detail of the Bill is introduced in the form of Statutory Rules, the Assembly will have an opportunity to study it.

Mr B Hutchinson: I support the Bill. Has good practice in the safety of railways throughout the world been looked at? Japan springs to mind, and the speed of the trains there. Football teams are using the bullet train to get from their bases to the grounds. Will the Minister join with me in supporting England in the match tomorrow against Nigeria? I hope that the team wins and reaches the last 16.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that that is stretching it a bit.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You allowed an SDLP Member to speak in the debate on the Budget (No2) Bill without saying anything about a budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not take points of order at this stage, Mr Hutchinson, as you well know.

Mr B Hutchinson: I represent the Business Committee —

The Deputy Speaker: I shall not take points of order now, Mr Hutchinson. I call the Minister to respond.

Mr B Hutchinson: You never mentioned anything —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hutchinson, Order.

Mr B Hutchinson: I raise —

Mr Deputy Speaker: You may raise a point if you wish, Mr Hutchinson, but you will not disturb the business of the House once more. I call Mr Peter Robinson.

Mr B Hutchinson: You should behave even-handedly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you repeat that, Mr Hutchinson?

Mr B Hutchinson: You should behave even-handedly.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I thank Mr Mark Robinson for his kind comments and the Committee for its support for the Bill. It was analysed seven times and given clause-by-clause consideration, so it has been looked at thoroughly.

In my statement to the House yesterday on the accident at Downhill on 4 June, I showed how important the Bill is to enhancing railway safety here. Last month's crash at Potter's Bar, which followed another major accident on the mainland, and the recent fatality on the Bangor line show the need for a focused legislative and operational approach to modern, safe travel by railway.

We were fortunate that the outcome of the Downhill derailment was not more serious. The Assembly will agree that we shall not have a culture of complacency on safety matters on our railways. I thank Northern Ireland Railways for its positive contribution to the development of the Bill and the secondary legislation that will follow. I urge it to complete its safety case. Although there have been criticisms about the control of railway safety in Great Britain, none has been directed at the safety case concept. Rather, criticisms have been directed at the fragmented nature of the railway industry there.

Mr Mark Robinson asked about the secondary legislation that will flow from the Bill, and that was also raised by another Member. I assure Members that I have no plans to change the integrated way in which the rail industry is operated here. I am convinced that the best way to ensure safety on our railways is by introducing a safety case regime along the GB model.

The safety case Regulations will follow as soon as possible after the Bill becomes law, allowing NIR the necessary time to finalise its safety case and have it thoroughly examined. I also thank Mr Mark Robinson for his comments on the measures that my Department has taken to ensure that all safety cases developed here are rigorously examined.

11.30 am

I shall deal with the issue of the Bill's being enabling legislation. That is one of its inherent strengths. Those who have had ministerial responsibility may have been — at least, they will be by now — frustrated by the length of the legislative process and how long it takes for a Bill to come before the House. I shall outline the number of Statutory Regulations that flow from the Bill, and I assure Members that the Committee for Regional Development will thoroughly examine all the secondary legislation.

In addition to the Railways (Safety Case) Regulations, my Department will introduce other Regulations that will flow immediately from the Bill and will constitute further steps to assist NIR to provide a safe railway.

The Railways (Safety Critical Work) Regulations will seek to ensure that staff engaged in safety critical work, such as drivers and signalmen, are competent and fit and do not work for periods that are likely to result in fatigue. The Railway Safety Regulations will provide for train protection and warning systems to be fitted to

all trains, and at key junctions and other danger points on the network.

As a result of the Railways (Approval of Works, Plant and Equipment) Regulations, new and altered works, plant and equipment, including locomotives and rolling stock, will be subject to approval by the Department.

The Railways Safety (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations will replace many old provisions that date back to 1842, covering the prevention of unauthorised access, for example, by fencing, the means of passenger communication on trains, the prevention of collisions and derailments through adequate signalling and braking systems and the prevention of accidents to staff, such as injury to trackside workers caused by moving trains.

The Private Crossings (Signs and Barriers) Regulations deal with the erection of signs and barriers at private crossings and are aimed at further improving the safety of the public at railway crossings.

Amendments will be made to RIDDOR — the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations — to make them applicable to railways. Guidance on that matter will be prepared and published.

Detailed Regulations are being introduced. If we were to take them through by primary legislation, which would require two or three years in each case, many accidents could occur during the period of delay. This is a much speedier way to proceed.

As I said at the Bill's Second Stage, I intend to consult the Committee for Regional Development on each set of Regulations. I shall also consult with other interested parties. The consultation process will commence in early summer.

I thank the Committee and the House for their consideration of this important Bill. I am sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will join me in wishing the England football team every success. We hope that they travel safely to the game. I look forward to the Bill completing its Assembly Stages by the summer recess and to the introduction of the secondary legislation by the early autumn.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does Mr Mark Robinson wish to respond?

Mr M Robinson: No. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Railway Safety Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

AMENDMENTS TO STANDING ORDERS

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the next two motions, to amend Standing Orders 10 and 18, relate to the same issue, I propose to conduct one debate. I shall call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall call the Chairperson to wind up and then put the Question on the first motion. I shall then ask the Chairperson formally to move the second motion and will put the Question on that motion without further debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move:

Delete Standing Order 10 and insert new Standing Order:

“10. SITTINGS AND ADJOURNMENTS OF THE ASSEMBLY

- (1) The categories of business to be conducted in the Assembly shall consist of the following:
 - (a) Assembly Business
 - (b) Executive Committee Business
 - (c) Committee Business
 - (d) Questions
 - (e) Private Members' Business
 - (f) Private Business
 - (g) Adjournment Debates
 - (h) Party Business.
- (2) Subject to the authority of the Business Committee to determine the time for commencement of business in plenary session the sittings of the Assembly shall be arranged as follows:

Monday 12.00 midday – 6.00 pm

Tuesday 10.30 am – 6.00 pm

The allocation of time for business within these sittings shall be determined by the Business Committee, except that

- (a) on each Monday on which there is a sitting there shall be a period for Questions commencing at 2.30 pm and finishing at 4.00 pm;
 - (b) at the end of each sitting up to one hour may be set aside for an Adjournment Debate;
 - (c) any private notice questions shall normally be asked immediately before the Adjournment Debate.
- (3) Where business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm on Monday, the Speaker may allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the outstanding business is completed, whichever is earlier. Consideration of business on the Order Paper not concluded by 7.00 pm shall be postponed until such a time as the Business Committee determines.
 - (4) If at 7.00 pm a division is in progress, or a question is being put and a division or a vote in the chamber results,

adjournment of the Assembly shall be deferred until after the declaration of the result of the division or vote in the chamber.

- (5) If Tuesday's business cannot be completed in the allocated time, the sitting may be extended into the evening, into Wednesday, or both.
- (6) Additional sittings may be arranged by the Business Committee according to the exigencies of the Assembly.
- (7) Where statements made under Standing Order 18 impinge upon the time bands specified in this Standing Order the Speaker shall take action under Standing Order 18(5).
- (8) An adjournment of the Assembly shall mean an adjournment until the next sitting day unless the Assembly, on a motion made by a Member of the Executive Committee after notice, has ordered an adjournment to some other definite date.
- (9) A Session of the Assembly shall be that period from the commencement of business following the Summer Recess until the end of the subsequent Summer Recess. The Business Committee shall determine the dates for recess."

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 18(5) line 7 delete "Standing Order 10(3)" and insert "Standing Order 10(5)". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

The two motions form part of the Committee's ongoing work on ensuring that the Assembly's Standing Orders and procedures best meet its needs.

This is not an attempt by the Committee on Procedures to extend by the back door the sitting time on a Monday. Instead, it is intended to clarify existing Standing Orders and to introduce an addition to Standing Orders that will improve the way the Assembly conducts its business. There are two main changes to Standing Order 10. The first and substantive change relates to paragraphs 6 and 7 of Standing Order 10, which require business to be interrupted at 6.00 pm so that the Speaker can put the Question of whether business should continue. Members will know that it has become the convention that that requirement has not been enforced.

That requirement has been in Standing Orders since devolution, and it was taken from the Standing Orders at Westminster. Members will recognise that, at the time of devolution, we had little experience of how business could best be managed, and it was recognised at that time that it would be a case of amending Standing Orders as time progressed and experience highlighted their deficiencies or otherwise. Paragraphs 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are examples of Standing Orders that were considered to be necessary at that time, but in practice they have become redundant.

In consultation with the Business Committee and the Speaker about amending Standing Orders, it became clear that the opportunity should be taken to include a facility to allow scheduled business, if it has been delayed, to proceed beyond 6.00 pm. The proposal is to allow business to continue beyond 6.00 pm only on a

Monday, and it applies only to scheduled business. That means that the Business Committee must plan business for a Monday on the basis of a 6.00 pm finish.

If the Business Committee decides that pressure of business is such that it will go on beyond 6.00 pm, a suspension of Standing Orders will continue to be required. This amendment to Standing Orders is designed to cater for those circumstances in which, for different reasons, business on the Order Paper has not been completed — for example, when business is unexpectedly delayed.

That may arise when there are a number of divisions, which on average take more than 15 minutes each, or when a Minister decides to make a statement. That is fine on a Tuesday because there is no pressure on time, as business can run on into Tuesday evening. However, on a Monday that is more difficult because business cannot proceed beyond 6.00 pm. Therefore, if a Minister wants to make a statement on a Monday when business is already anticipated to run until 6.00 pm then, because up to an hour can be allocated for questions in addition to the time that it takes to make the statement, some business may fall. Invariably, the business that is likely to fall is the final item on the Order Paper, which is normally the Adjournment debate.

The Committee on Procedures considers that that would be unfair to the Member who brought the Adjournment debate or to any other motion that fell in that way. Therefore, the Committee, with the support of the Business Committee and the Speaker, considers it reasonable that in such circumstances, where there is insufficient time before 6.00 pm to complete the remaining business, the Speaker should have the discretion to allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the outstanding business is completed — whichever is the earlier.

The Committee on Procedures also considers that the facility to allow business to go on until 7.00 pm is necessary because, in the near future, it proposes to amend Standing Orders to allow a Member to table, with the agreement of the Business Committee, an urgent motion for debate. The scenario envisaged is that, on a Monday morning, a Member might propose to table a motion for plenary debate on a matter of urgent public importance. The proposed amendment to Standing Orders would help to facilitate that by allowing business to proceed until 7.00 pm. If that facility had been available, it would have been used only once since the start of this session. Therefore, it is to be used only occasionally, when unforeseen business delays the scheduled business.

The second change proposed to Standing Orders is to clarify Standing Order 10(2). The proposed rewording is necessary to clarify the authority of the Business Committee to arrange an earlier start to Monday sittings. At present, Standing Order 10(2) sets out the days and times for which sittings of the Assembly should ordinarily be arranged and provides for the allocation of time for

business within those sittings to be determined by the Business Committee. Clarity is required in order to define “ordinarily”. The Business Committee has interpreted the word “ordinarily” to allow the plenary to start earlier than 12 noon on a Monday when the pressure of business forces it, although that has occurred only once during this session. That was endorsed by the Speaker in a ruling he made on 5 November 2001.

Members were confused about why it was necessary to suspend Standing Orders to proceed beyond 6.00 pm, yet it was unnecessary to suspend them to start before 12 noon. I shall not go into the detail of the reasons behind that, but there is currently no flexibility in Standing Order 10 to go beyond 6.00 pm on a Monday, unlike on a Tuesday when Standing Order 10(3) allows business to proceed beyond 6.00 pm and, if necessary, into Wednesday. Hence the suspension of Standing Order 10(2) is required.

It is important that Standing Orders are clear and that Members are in no doubt as to their meaning, and as such the Committee proposes the rewording of Standing Order 10(2), which clarifies the authority of the Business Committee to arrange an earlier start to a plenary sitting on a Monday.

The Committee has taken the opportunity of the consideration of Standing Order 10 to make several drafting changes to it. The first of those is in Standing Order 10(1), where a new category of business — Assembly Business — has been inserted. Items of business in that category would include petitions, Speaker’s rulings, et cetera.

Changes to Standing Order 10(2)(b) are proposed in order to reflect current practice. We have made it clear that at the end of each sitting up to one hour “may” be set aside for an Adjournment debate as opposed to “shall”, in order to reflect the way in which business is managed.

In conclusion, I re-emphasise that changes to Standing Order 10 should not be viewed as an attempt to change the set finishing time of 6.00 pm on a Monday — 6.00 pm will continue to be the standard finishing time for the Business Committee when it plans business for a Monday. If the pressure of planned business is such that the sitting is required to go beyond 6.00 pm, a suspension of Standing Orders will continue to be required.

The second motion on the Order Paper is a consequential change to Standing Order 18. The change is proposed to reflect the new numbering in Standing Order 10.

I commend the motions to the Assembly.

Ms Morrice: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have several remarks to make on the motions. However, at this point I am able to speak only to the first motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You can speak to the first two motions.

Ms Morrice: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures for outsmarting me by going out of his way to allay the fears that he probably expected me to raise, especially the potential to extend the hard-fought-for family-friendly hours, of which the Assembly, as a modern legislature, can rightly be proud. The Assembly agreed that there should be family-friendly hours, at least on a Monday.

I am pleased that the Chairperson has assured us that an extension beyond 6.00 pm will be used only occasionally, when there is a delay or some unscheduled business. The Women’s Coalition has always accepted that, under exceptional circumstances, time could, and should, be allowed after 6.00 pm. However, the most important issue is the hard-fought-for principle that the Assembly’s family-friendly hours should not be broken or disturbed in any way. Having listened to the Chairperson’s opening remarks, I believe that that is still the case.

At present, we start at 12 noon on a Monday, so rather than an extension beyond 6.00 pm, why can we not start business earlier? When we first sat, and when I was involved in the setting of the Standing Orders in the original Committee, the agreement was a 10.30 am start on Mondays. Travelling distances, party meetings, et cetera on a Monday morning suggested that that time should slip. Again, we are prepared to accept that. However, why slip to 12 noon? Why not have 11.00 am as the starting time, so that that extra hour between 6.00 pm and 7.00 pm could be made up in the morning? The family-friendly hours of the Assembly would, therefore, be preserved. The principle here is that Members have families that they should, could and would like to — whether they are men or women — go home to in the evenings in order to see their children before they go to bed. I am glad that the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures has said that there is the potential for starting business earlier on a Monday morning and that only on rare occasions will the principle of the 6.00 pm finishing time be breached.

11.45 am

Mr C Murphy: The Committee has made the position clear, and I give the credit for outsmarting Ms Morrice to the Committee Clerks rather than to me, as they prepare the wording on these occasions.

Family-friendly hours are important. They are not only an issue for the Women’s Coalition. They are an issue for all Members. I have a young family. I am sure that many other Members in the Chamber also have young families and are, therefore, keen to continue with family-friendly hours. However, 6.00 pm might mean family-friendly hours for someone living in north Down or in south Belfast. For Mr Gerry McHugh, Mr Tommy Gallagher, Mr Derek Hussey or Mr Pat Doherty, for example, a 6.00 pm finish does not necessarily mean particularly family-friendly hours. By the time those

people get home it is closer to 9.00 pm. Family-friendly hours benefit those who live fairly near to the Assembly, but they are not so much of a benefit to those who live far away.

The Committee has always been supportive of the principle of family-friendly hours. It is clear in the proposal that the ability to extend the time beyond 6.00 pm should be used in exceptional circumstances only, when the scheduled business has been delayed or interrupted and it is necessary to continue until it is finished or until 7.00 pm, whichever is the earlier. Certainly, that is the intention of the proposal.

Previously, the plenary did start at 10.30 am on Monday mornings. However, parties were under pressure because they had no time during the week to carry out internal party business, given that Committee meetings are held on Wednesdays and Thursdays and, indeed, on Fridays, when the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development meets. It is difficult for larger parties to meet at a time when there is no other pressing Assembly business. A trial period was introduced in which the plenary began on Mondays at 12 noon. At the end of the trial period, the Committee on Procedures proposed to make the 12 noon start permanent, with the exception that the Business Committee can decide — as it did on only one occasion — that the plenary should start earlier. At that time, no party objected to business starting at 12 noon. It appears, therefore, that those arrangements are satisfactory, and the Committee on Procedures is still satisfied with them.

Of course, Standing Orders are open to change, and any Member can propose an amendment if he wishes. Standing Orders are constantly under review. Based on experience, the Committee is satisfied that the changes that it has proposed today will allow for the conduct of business on Mondays. The Committee is also content that the changes will facilitate the extension of business and that there is no need to start the plenary before 12 noon, other than in exceptional circumstances when the Business Committee so decides.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the House that because the motion relates to amendments to Standing Orders, the vote requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Delete Standing Order 10 and insert new Standing Order:

“10. SITTINGS AND ADJOURNMENTS OF THE ASSEMBLY

- (1) The categories of business to be conducted in the Assembly shall consist of the following:
 - (a) Assembly Business
 - (b) Executive Committee Business
 - (c) Committee Business

(d) Questions

(e) Private Members' Business

(f) Private Business

(g) Adjournment Debates

(h) Party Business.

- (2) Subject to the authority of the Business Committee to determine the time for commencement of business in plenary session the sittings of the Assembly shall be arranged as follows:

Monday 12.00 midday – 6.00 pm

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The allocation of time for business within these sittings shall be determined by the Business Committee, except that

- (a) on each Monday on which there is a sitting there shall be a period for Questions commencing at 2.30 pm and finishing at 4.00 pm;
 - (b) at the end of each sitting up to one hour may be set aside for an Adjournment Debate;
 - (c) any private notice questions shall normally be asked immediately before the Adjournment Debate.
- (3) Where business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm on Monday, the Speaker may allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the outstanding business is completed, whichever is earlier. Consideration of business on the Order Paper not concluded by 7.00 pm shall be postponed until such a time as the Business Committee determines.
 - (4) If at 7.00 pm a division is in progress, or a question is being put and a division or a vote in the chamber results, adjournment of the Assembly shall be deferred until after the declaration of the result of the division or vote in the chamber.
 - (5) If Tuesday's business cannot be completed in the allocated time, the sitting may be extended into the evening, into Wednesday, or both.
 - (6) Additional sittings may be arranged by the Business Committee according to the exigencies of the Assembly.
 - (7) Where statements made under Standing Order 18 impinge upon the time bands specified in this Standing Order the Speaker shall take action under Standing Order 18(5).
 - (8) An adjournment of the Assembly shall mean an adjournment until the next sitting day unless the Assembly, on a motion made by a Member of the Executive Committee after notice, has ordered an adjournment to some other definite date.
 - (9) A Session of the Assembly shall be that period from the commencement of business following the Summer Recess until the end of the subsequent Summer Recess. The Business Committee shall determine the dates for recess."

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 18(5) line 7 delete "Standing Order 10(3)" and insert "Standing Order 10(5)".

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move:

In Standing Order 54(1) after paragraph (l) insert:

- “(m) Those functions relating to the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission transferred to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister by The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001.”

I say at the outset that the motion to amend Standing Orders has been moved at the request of the Committee of the Centre, which has asked for an extension to be made to its remit to allow it to examine certain functions relating to the Planning Appeals Commission and to the Water Appeals Commission.

That is because under the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001, administrative responsibilities for the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission transferred from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The responsibilities transferred were administrative in nature, centring on the appointment of commissioners, the determination of their remuneration and allowances, the appointment of persons to assist the commissions in the performance of their functions and to determine their remuneration and allowances and the remuneration and allowances for any assessor appointed by the chief commissioner to assist at hearings, the making of rules for regulating proceedings before the commission and the prescription of fees in respect of appeal applications.

I shall not explain the rationale for the transfer, as it is not within the remit of the Committee on Procedures. It has already been the subject of consideration by the relevant Statutory Committees. However, the Committee understands that the thrust behind the Order was to reinforce the independence of the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has recently initiated a quinquennial review of the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission.

The Committee of the Centre wishes to be involved in that review. To do so, an amendment to Standing Orders is required, because Standing Order 54, which sets out the remit of the Committee of the Centre, is very specific. Unlike Statutory Committees, whose remit is to advise and assist their respective Ministers in the formulation of policy, the remit of the Committee of the Centre is limited, as it can scrutinise only those functions specified in Standing Orders or any other matter determined by the Assembly.

The net effect is that each time the Committee of the Centre wishes to scrutinise a new role of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, an addition to the list of functions in Standing Order 54 is

required; hence this motion to amend Standing Order 54. The proposed wording of the amendment reflects the legal advice that the Committee received to describe the transferred functions.

Ms Morrice: The Chairperson has again responded to my query to a certain extent. However, I would appreciate further information, as the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission are to be the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's responsibility.

The Chairperson said that he should not necessarily comment on that. He said that it was to do with reinforcing the independence of those bodies, which we certainly welcome. Will the Chairperson elaborate on the exact reason for the transfer? If not, will he tell us where we can find it?

Mr C Murphy: The reason for the transfer was not a matter that the Committee on Procedures considered; it was a matter for the Statutory Committees that were involved in the transfer and for the relevant Ministers and Departments. The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001 came into force last year. I am sure that the reasoning behind that legislation is laid out in the explanatory notes. The Statutory Committees and the Committee of the Centre have considered the matter. The Committee on Procedures's function was simply to table a motion to amend Standing Orders to allow the Committee of the Centre, whose remit is firmly fixed in Standing Orders, to consider matters relating either to the Water Appeals Commission or to the Planning Appeals Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 54(1) after paragraph (l) insert:

- “(m) Those functions relating to the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission transferred to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister by The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001.”

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I beg to move:

Insert new Standing Order:

“75. OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

- (1) A substantially verbatim report of the proceedings at all sittings of the Assembly and Committee meetings that form part of the legislative process or at which evidence that will contribute to a report by a Committee is being taken shall be prepared and published. The report shall be known as the Official Report (Hansard) and shall be a record of the proceedings in the language spoken.
- (2) A revised edition of the Official Report (Hansard) for all Assembly sittings and Committee meetings which form

part of the legislative process shall be prepared in bound volume form at such times as the Speaker shall determine. Such bound volumes shall also contain written questions and answers for the period covered.

- (3) Editorial control of the Official Report (Hansard) shall rest ultimately with the Speaker but shall be exercised on his behalf by the Editor of Debates."

The Official Report, or Hansard as it is usually called, is the report of proceedings in plenary. It is a substantially verbatim report, and it performs a vital function in showing the Assembly's commitment to openness, accountability and accessibility. In addition, Hansard offers a unique record for posterity that will help future generations paint a picture of how we lived today and how and why we made decisions.

Standing Orders do not contain official provision for the production and publication of the Official Report. That is at odds with the practice in the Scottish Parliament, the Dáil and the Welsh Assembly. It could leave the Assembly open to the accusation that it is not being seen to give Hansard the standing that it merits. More importantly, it could also be argued that the omission is contrary to the intention of schedule 6 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which states that

"The standing orders shall include provision for reporting the proceedings of the Assembly and for publishing the reports."

Standing Order 70 makes provision for the printing of the minutes of proceedings, which are the official record of proceedings. Those form the record of decisions made and should not be confused with Hansard, which has a separate, independent role. Moreover, Standing Order 70 is concerned with the Office of the Clerk and with the records of the Assembly. Hansard is a separate entity, with editorial control resting with the Editor, who exercises that responsibility on behalf of the Speaker. It is important that that independence is reflected in a separate Standing Order, rather than by being incorporated it into an existing Standing Order, such as Standing Order 70.

Although the issue has caused no problems to date, the new Standing Order makes formal provision for Hansard and removes any uncertainty as to its role. It gives Hansard the important place that it merits in the operation of the Assembly. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Fee: I want to talk specifically about the role of the Editor of Debates and the role of the Speaker and about paragraph (3) of the proposed new Standing Order 75, which states that

"Editorial control of the Official Report (Hansard) shall rest ultimately with the Speaker but shall be exercised on his behalf by the Editor of Debates."

I understand from what the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures has said that we are following the precedent set by Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, the Dáil and the like. On enquiry this morning, however, I have not

been able to find any Standing Order of this nature that pertains or applies in Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, the Dáil or in any other Western democracy. There are certainly conventions, custom and practice, and proper procedures that have been built up over centuries, but they do not vest editorial control of the Official Report in the Speaker of any of those Parliaments.

To be fair to the Editor of Debates in this House and to the Speaker, both of whom have provided exemplary performances in recent times, we should not confuse the authority vested in those two positions. From the outset, all of us agree that Hansard has to be a true and accurate account of what happens here. It is a crucially important historical record. Following recent judgements in the High Court in England, it is also a very important legal record from which courts may draw inference. However, to rest the editorial control with the Speaker, who may have to adjudicate on a challenge to the official record, is to confuse his role with that of the Editor of Debates.

It is the role of the Editor of Debates to try to ensure that a true and accurate account of the sittings of this Assembly is recorded and published at an appropriate time. All of us in this place know that the Hansard staff have been wonderful in meeting the deadlines that we have set for them, both before and after devolution. The former Editor of Debates did a wonderful job when he was here, and his successor has followed in his footsteps.

However, to divest the Editor of Debates of the responsibility for editorial control will cause the House substantial problems.

12.00

An old journalistic maxim is that the editor of a newspaper will publish such prejudices of the owner as the prejudices of the advertisers will allow. If we allow this new Standing Order, it will open the House to that accusation. If we consider again the procedures and precedences in other places, we will find that the independence of the Speaker guarantees a full and accurate Official Report and that the independence of the Editor maintains the Speaker's role and the accuracy and veracity of the Official Report.

I ask the Committee on Procedures to reconsider the new Standing Order and to implement procedures whereby the Assembly Commission, the Clerk and the Speaker's Office are compelled to ensure that the Official Report (Hansard) is properly published. I beg the Committee not to remove the editorial independence of the Editor of Debates.

Mr B Hutchinson: The Member for Newry and Armagh, Mr Fee, voiced my concerns eloquently.

Mr C Murphy: This Member for Newry and Armagh will try to answer Mr Hutchinson's concerns eloquently also.

All new Standing Orders or changes to Standing Orders brought to the Assembly by the Committee on Procedures are checked by the Assembly's legal adviser, and the Speaker is consulted. The Speaker's view has been sought on this Standing Order. I assure Mr Fee and Mr Hutchinson that the Committee would be happy to consider all queries about Standing Orders. If a Member is not content with the Committee's view, he or she is free to table an amendment.

This Standing Order confirms current practice. In Westminster, editorial control rests with the Speaker, and that arrangement has not caused the problems that John Fee anticipates occurring here. In Westminster, the Speaker is responsible for the Official Report (Hansard) and delegates editorial responsibility to the Editor of Debates. The Speaker, as required by Erskine May and, perhaps, Westminster Standing Orders, appoints the Westminster Editor of Debates.

The Committee on Procedures checks amendments to Standing Orders and proposed Standing Orders with the Assembly's legal adviser. If Members think that that arrangement raises a problem, the Committee would be happy to re-examine it. The proposed Standing Order is, however, legally competent and reflects current practice here and in other legislatures.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 45; Noes 14.

AYES

Nationalist

Bairbre de Brún, Pat Doherty, John Kelly, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey.

Unionist

Ian Adamson, Roy Beggs, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Danny Kennedy, Robert McCartney, Michael McGimpsey, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson.

Other

David Ford, Kieran McCarthy, Sean Neeson.

NOES

Nationalist

P J Bradley, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Joe Hendron, Patricia Lewsley, Alasdair McDonnell, Monica McWilliams, Eamonn O'Neill, John Tierney.

Unionist

Billy Hutchinson, Jane Morrice.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>45 (76.3%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>13 (52.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>29 (93.5%)</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Insert new Standing Order:

"75. OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

- (1) A substantially verbatim report of the proceedings at all sittings of the Assembly and Committee meetings that form part of the legislative process or at which evidence that will contribute to a report by a Committee is being taken shall be prepared and published. The report shall be known as the Official Report (Hansard) and shall be a record of the proceedings in the language spoken.
- (2) A revised edition of the Official Report (Hansard) for all Assembly sittings and Committee meetings which form part of the legislative process shall be prepared in bound volume form at such times as the Speaker shall determine. Such bound volumes shall also contain written questions and answers for the period covered.
- (3) Editorial control of the Official Report (Hansard) shall rest ultimately with the Speaker but shall be exercised on his behalf by the Editor of Debates."

12.15 pm

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE: CULTURAL TOURISM AND THE ARTS

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will leave the Chamber quietly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on its Inquiry into Cultural Tourism and the Arts and calls on the Executive to ensure that the Committee's recommendations are evaluated and implemented at the earliest opportunity.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure launched this important and substantive inquiry on 25 January 2001. Its terms of reference were: to determine the status of the existing relationship between the cultural and tourist sectors; to identify areas of the arts with the potential to be incorporated into a cultural tourist product that could be actively promoted by the tourist industry; to identify the support required by cultural activities, including languages, to enable that heritage to be maintained and enhanced; and to report to the Assembly, making recommendations to the Department and/or others on action to strengthen the link between culture and tourism. The Committee also agreed that the inquiry should take particular account of the diversity and unique nature of the cultural tourism product that Northern Ireland can offer its visitors.

I am not exaggerating when I say that the Committee was astounded to receive 82 written submissions from a wide variety of groups and individuals with an interest in every conceivable aspect of culture, heritage and the arts.

These ranged from the North of Ireland Bands' Association to the Ulster Historical Foundation; from the Hilden Brewery Company to the Lyric Theatre; from the University of Ulster to the Somme Association; and from the National Trust to Gael-Linn. We held 39 oral evidence sessions with key organisations representing the main sectoral interests. In addition, the Committee had the opportunity to draw on the experience gained during fact-finding visits to Boston, Paris and Barcelona, which were taken in association with the inquiry. We were fortunate to be able to engage with key public and private sector organisations in those cities.

At the outset, the Committee accepted that Northern Ireland's negative image, combined with the failure to promote and market the region enthusiastically, resulted in lost years of tourist growth compared to other parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. We certainly cannot promise good weather and warm seas in Northern Ireland,

but today's traveller is increasingly seeking more than sun-and-sand destinations. People are living longer, remain more affluent in their retirement, and have a growing interest in visiting places where they can learn about different cultures.

Most people come to Northern Ireland to visit friends and relatives, and although this important market has sustained the industry in hard times, we now have a tremendous opportunity to develop new markets. The growth of a top-quality cultural tourism sector, which will have the potential to attract the general tourist and the high added-value niche market, forms the core of that opportunity. Noting that tourism's contribution to Northern Ireland's gross domestic product (GDP) is less than a third of that in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales is a stark illustration of how far we have to go to catch up. In fact, it is 1.8 % compared to 6% in the other regions. Also, we cannot rely, at least in the short term, on the North American market as a visitor source. If Northern Ireland's culture and heritage are to remain key attractions, it is essential that targeting customers outside the long-haul market is given priority. The Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and continental Europe must be regarded as critically important.

Nevertheless, the Committee believes the scope for cultural tourism to be immense. Key niche products such as roots tourism and local studies, education and linguistics, literary and other arts-based summer schools, festivals, theatre, music and dance, as well as the many facets of our built and natural heritage, all hold considerable potential for growing a vibrant cultural tourism product. Northern Ireland has a wealth of cultural and heritage attractions that are key elements of the experience that we can offer to the visitor. Over 440 official heritage sites have been identified in recent research by the Academy for Irish Cultural Heritage at the University of Ulster. There are also many unofficial sites.

Culture and arts enrich our lives, build confidence and inspire hope in communities. They must not be seen as elitist pastimes. The Committee also believes that Northern Ireland's approach to the arts and culture as products must embrace the principles of sustainability; long-term viability; limited negative impact; local involvement; and positive social and economic benefits for all communities, groups and individuals involved.

Our inquiry also brought home to us the importance of industrial heritage tourism and its potential, largely untapped in Northern Ireland. That can help to create employment and investment in industrial areas where manufacturing industry has declined. It can also restore pride in communities and improve people's perceptions of their localities. Many local authorities, particularly in industrial towns in the English Midlands, are incorporating industrial heritage tourism into their tourist development programmes.

By comparison, in Northern Ireland, we have largely neglected our industrial heritage and allowed many of its best examples to be destroyed. We now need to commit ourselves to recognising the importance of preserving and reusing it for sound economic reasons, as well as for the education and appreciation of our community and visitors.

Linked to industrial tourism is the story of the Titanic. Several written submissions expressed interest in the development of a maritime museum in the Belfast shipyard. The story of the Titanic has been told across the world, but Northern Ireland has failed to capitalise on the fact that the ship was designed, built and launched in Belfast.

The plans for the Titanic are currently held in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra. The original drafting rooms, Thompson Dock and the keel blocks on which the Titanic rested during its fitting-out still exist. Furthermore, the SS *Nomadic*, the last remaining White Star Line tender, which was used to ferry passengers to and from the Titanic, is currently located on the River Seine in Paris. The acquisition of that vessel could be a focal point for a Titanic attraction.

It is also evident that we have not developed the arts festival and summer school sector to the same extent as the Republic. While we have a few major festivals that have proven sustainable over the years, there is enormous scope for further developments. We must also consider how to fill the gaps that exist during the summer months with arts- and culture-based activities and attractions for the community and tourists.

We must do more to persuade the promoters of world-class and major international events that Northern Ireland is a good location. However, we must be in a position to back that up with hard cash.

Northern Ireland lags significantly behind England and Scotland as a location for world-class and major international events. It is even further behind the Republic of Ireland. The region's negative image is clearly a major factor for performers, promoters and sponsors.

The Northern Ireland Events Company's budget for this year is just over £1 million. Two years ago, the Government of the Republic allocated an extra £2.5 million a year for three years to bring in extra events. That was in addition to the financial support already provided for four major golf tournaments and a range of other cultural, arts and sports events. For example, approximately £7 million has been allocated to the 2005 Ryder Cup from the public purse, and the return to the Irish Exchequer on this investment alone is expected to be between £50 million and £100 million.

That illustrates clearly the need for that kind of investment. We must persuade promoters that Northern Ireland has good facilities and is a safe, sensible location. We

also need to persuade ourselves that we can host major events.

12.30 pm

The devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales have allocated significant budgets to attract big events. With competition becoming more intense, the key to success is to enable the Northern Ireland Events Company to give a financial commitment sufficiently far ahead in the bidding process.

In the year that we have submitted our bid for European Capital of Culture 2008, it is astonishing that Belfast is the only major city in the United Kingdom without a dedicated public art gallery. The Ulster Museum has a unique collection of Irish art and a collection of British contemporary art that was described by 'The Times' as the finest outside London. Irish art is hugely popular, particularly in America, but the museum cannot display its full collection because it does not have enough space. The development of a museum of creative arts could be, and should be, the key priority for the Department, and the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI). That would provide a showcase for the prestigious collection held by the Ulster Museum and enable exhibitions of world-class collections to be staged.

It is worth noting that the Monet, Renoir and the Impressionist Landscape exhibit, which was on show in the new Millennium Wing of the National Gallery of Ireland between January and April this year, attracted an average of 2,000 paying visitors each day, a large proportion of whom would have had a considerable economic impact on the city with overnight or weekend stays.

With 60 million people claiming to have Irish ancestry, there is a worldwide market for roots tourism. However, investment in, and the marketing of, genealogy have been largely neglected. We heard compelling evidence about the impact that a move away from the use of townland names would have on communities and potential roots tourism.

Other issues considered included: the promotion of our linguistic diversity as a unique asset to the tourism industry; promoting and showcasing our tradition of quality band music through hosting international competitions; the cultivation of traditional song and music; providing support for local professional opera; developing dance; reviewing the opportunities which exist to support the independent professional theatre sector; the potential to develop and co-ordinate cultural trails and tours; and the importance of film and television in forging positive images.

The Committee's report sets out 56 recommendations, and their implementation will be essential to improving the quality, cohesiveness and competitiveness of our cultural tourism.

Only two weeks ago Committee Colleagues and I attended a conference on cultural tourism in County Cork.

The theme of the conference was 'A National Asset Awaiting Sensitive Development'. Delegates heard that tourism is undoubtedly Ireland's greatest area of growth, with ever-increasing numbers of tourists interested in culture and tradition. Those tourists are prepared to go out of their way to remote places to find authentic, living culture, much of which is hidden among the hills and valleys and has lived on for generations without disturbance. That is every bit as true in areas such as the Glens of Antrim, the Sperrins or Rathlin Island as it is in Cork, Kerry or Clare.

Our hidden locations need to be developed alongside the better known cultural centres to ensure a wider spread of attractions and, consequently, more tourist spending throughout rural and urban areas. The challenge will be to ensure that authentic culture survives commercialism.

One of the speakers at the conference expressed the view that the extent to which a country's culture is known elsewhere is a defining characteristic of any people. That is a thought-providing statement. He encapsulated the importance of culture for us all by saying that

"If you were to meet a man coming along the road who couldn't tell you where he was coming from, it would be a fair bet that he wouldn't be able to say where he was going either".

We all have a stake in the enhancement and development of Northern Ireland's cultural tourism product, and we must take an interest in it.

I wish to express a number of acknowledgements on behalf of the Committee. We were encouraged by the level of involvement in the inquiry. We thank all those who sent in written submissions and those whose appearance before the Committee to give oral evidence provided us with much vital food for thought.

I wish to record the Committee's appreciation of the assistance given by Boston College and the British Council in facilitating our invaluable study visits to Boston, Paris and Barcelona. As Chairperson of the Committee, I pay tribute to my Committee Colleagues, who overcame many traumas to get to where we are and worked exceedingly hard to bring the report to publication. I pay an equally glowing tribute to the Committee staff, the Committee Clerk and its specialist adviser.

Cultural tourism is a broad area, and like the Committee's report on inland fisheries, our recommendations involve several Ministers and their Departments. It is a prime example of an area in which joined-up government is essential and can deliver real benefits for the entire community. My Committee Colleagues will further develop the issues emerging from the report, and I look forward to an interesting debate. I commend the report to the Assembly.

The sitting was suspended at 12.37pm.

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

2.00 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mrs Nelis): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank all those who contributed to the report through oral and written submissions. I commend the Committee Chairperson and the members who diligently, and at times passionately, went through the various drafts. They all fought for the cultural and artistic attractions of their constituencies. I am especially grateful to the Committee Clerks, for without their skill we may not have had a report at all. However, the person engaged as special adviser to draft the report failed to address adequately the four stated objectives in a precise or objective manner.

Cultural tourism and the arts, as the Committee learnt, can be anything from the search for local place names such as Lisnamucky, to listening to the tales — tall or otherwise — of the yarn spinners, or engaging with the flautist skills of the local flute band.

Some years ago, a group of Pennsylvanian millionaires came here in search of the Elliot and the Curran clans. They knew the place names from whence their ancestors had come and they managed to find the "auld sod", as some people describe it. We did not capitalise on the interests of those wealthy cultural tourists, and the report suggests many recommendations on how we may attract and service such visitors in the future.

The submissions to the inquiry were exciting, varied and informative. They came from groups as diverse as the National Trust, the Glass Ceiling Theatreworks, the Gortin and District Historical Society and the Hilden Brewing Company, which unfortunately did not provide a sample of its wares with its submission. Despite the wealth of evidence from such diverse cultural, artistic and tourism organisations, the special adviser to the Committee used his own material throughout the report as a source of information and to verify that information. It was disappointing to note that that happened despite excellent submissions.

Most of the special adviser's evidence was generated via the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. It was apparent from the first draft that the special adviser and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board did not understand the intricacies of the definitions and working of "culture" and "the arts". That is best exemplified by the table used by the special adviser, which was sourced from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. It failed to distinguish between visitors and tourists, and that type of statistic was used intermittently throughout the report without due care and concern for relevance.

The now infamous table excluded the sixteenth century Derry city walls and wiped the city's historic landmark off the cultural and tourism top 20 map at a time when

Derry City Council had bid to have the walls declared a world heritage site. The other famous Derry tourist attraction, Free Derry wall, did not get a mention from the special adviser either — such was the limitation and myopia of the expert appointed to draft the report for the Committee.

Most of the places listed in the table, for instance the Pickie Family Fun Park — the second favourite tourist attraction — are unknown to people outside the Belfast and Bangor areas. I cannot imagine cultural tourists from Europe or the United States of America coming to visit a pool surrounded by rocks with the added attraction of a train and a donkey. I can imagine that the Pickie Family Fun Park would provide a great day's outing for families from that area of the east coast. That shows the need to distinguish between the cultural tourists and visitors who come to see friends and relatives and who make up 40% of all the people who come to visit the North.

How do we turn the visitors of family and friends into cultural tourists? That is the major question.

The recommendations, if adopted, show how heritage days, theme tours and trails can become special interest markets that offer specific experiences. More detailed research and analysis of the material submitted was needed in early drafts to help the Committee understand and interpret the widely diverse definitions of cultural tourism and the arts. The Committee is indebted to its Clerk, who produced a better, workable and relevant definition of our stated objectives.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines culture as:

“distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group.”

Art is the outworking of those features, and culture is the glue that bonds us together. It impacts on every aspect of our lives. It allows us to celebrate ourselves and show the rest of the world who we are and how we live.

The tourist is the person who comes to experience our uniqueness through the lens we offer. Why tourists come, and how to analyse that, is a major part of our recommendations and requires partnership between the major players. The jury is still out on why so many tourists come to this small island, but we can be sure that it is not for sun, sea and sand. Submissions from various groups and organisations helped us to examine that issue.

Tourists may come in search of their roots and their identity; to seek out the place that produces Irish music, art, or literature; to see monuments of ancient civilisations; to see the artistic splendour of the Book of Kells, the Cathach, and the Broughton Gold; and to see the historic sites of the Boyne, Derry city walls, Newgrange and where the Titanic was built.

It is accepted that many tourists come to look at our wall murals, and most tour operators now include those as part of their itinerary. Those attractions should be considered as specific elements of a cultural strategy proposed in section 5 of the report, but such a strategy should be based on an all-Ireland partnership between the arts, tourists and cultural organisations. Planned, resourced and managed tourist projects, whether they be festivals, events, band concerts or genealogical summer schools, must be co-ordinated in order to reflect the relationship among the visitor, the tourist and the local community.

The appearance of a close-knit community shaped around its culture and art creates a positive image. However, the essence of any cultural tourism and arts strategy must be rooted firmly in the cultural pluralism of the local communities. That would acknowledge that, although we share this island, we have distinctive codes of behaviour and historical identities.

The report establishes that difference can be a key feature. Many of the success stories recorded in the submissions received little or no recognition or financial support from the agencies that have been set up to promote general tourism.

We recommend that all cultural tourism strategies should start with an inventory of resources. The process should include an assessment of how local people feel, as well as the views of the vested interest groups, such as local authorities, statutory agencies and others. Too often, tourism planning strategies are based on a hope and false expectations as opposed to a reliable and technically sound evaluation of potential impacts.

New and innovative partnerships and techniques must be considered — involving trusts, co-operatives and community councils — when implementing a cultural tourism and arts strategy. Our report will be the catalyst for such initiatives. I urge the Minister and the Department to support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Dr Adamson: I extend my thanks to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, chaired by Mr O'Neill. I also thank the Committee Clerk and her staff for the hard work that they have put into this important report, which, I believe, shows the Belfast Agreement at its best.

The greatest of all historians, Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, wrote of the exhortation of the British nobleman, Calgacus, who fought the Roman Empire, when he said of the Romans:

“There are no more nations beyond us; nothing is there but waves and rocks — the Romans more deadly still than these, for in them is an arrogance which no submission or good behaviour can escape...They create desolation and they call it peace.”

As recent events in Belfast have shown, many ordinary people in Northern Ireland have rarely felt so despondent and uncertain of their future. Whether real or imaginary, the perception in the Unionist community in

particular, is that the so-called “other side” has gained most from the political process. That has been feeding an increasingly sceptical and negative appraisal of the Belfast Agreement, and what we call “peace”.

The overriding concern most frequently voiced by community activists is that there is an increasing internal disarray and even disintegration in Loyalist areas. The unemployment situation has rarely been so dire. The level of education attainment remains abysmal. The former community infrastructure, even if largely of an informal nature, has taken a severe battering from mismanaged redevelopment, the break-up of old communities and the absence of any long-term strategy for revitalisation and renewal. That is why such reports are so vital to social, economic and cultural regeneration in large areas of Northern Ireland.

The Department should assess the further potential for the development of dynamic cultural quarters in Northern Ireland's cities to promote and showcase local culture and locations in which art and culture can be offered to all. District councils should place greater focus on the historic cores of our cities and towns, through the development of history trails, imaginative interpretation and storytelling in which we excel.

The Department and the Arts Council should assess the position elsewhere, regarding the requirements placed on developers to include public art into major schemes, particularly in urban areas. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board should determine, in each product group network, the extent to which themed tours and trails can be used for the special interest market as well as for the future tourists that we so desire.

In east Belfast, for example, there is ample potential to develop and co-ordinate trails and tours that focus on diverse aspects of culture and tradition. C S Lewis — perhaps the greatest Christian writer of the twentieth century — was born in Belfast in 1898. The C S Lewis tourist trail links the main places in Belfast and north Down that are most closely associated with Lewis, such as St Mark's Church, Dundela; Little Lea, Circular Road; Bernagh, now known as Red Hall on the Circular Road; the Old Inn at Crawfordsburn; the Holywood hills, which were the template and origin for the Narnia tales — the greatest children's stories ever written; Campbell College; Dundela flats and the centenary sculpture at Holywood Arches.

Little Lea and Bernagh, which is owned by the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, are still under threat of development. That must be reversed. At Bernagh, Lewis wrote his first book as a Christian — the great ‘Pilgrim's Regress’ — an imitation of ‘The Pilgrim's Progress’. That building must be protected from developers at all costs. The Chairperson also spoke in detail about the Titanic Trail, which, of course, has great potential throughout the world.

2.15 pm

The historic cores of our key cities offer a great opportunity for tourism, as has been shown by the promotion of Derry's walls and the O'Doherty Fort in Londonderry. Also, the development of heirskip, or heritage, villages, perhaps centred on the reconstruction of Belfast at the time of the American Revolution, could be created in inner east Belfast to facilitate the promotion of the Ulster-Scots language and culture. That should be done on an equal basis with Ulster and Irish Gaelic language and culture, to revitalise the entire area.

We must require developers to incorporate public art into their major schemes, especially in urban areas, so that they can put something back into the community that they have pillaged for far too long. There is not, to the Committee's knowledge, an officer at either central Government or local government level anywhere in Northern Ireland whose specific responsibility is to encourage the sponsorship and incorporation of artwork in public areas for all the public to see. We who pay the pipers should also call the tune.

Mr Hilditch: As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I am pleased that the ‘Inquiry into Cultural Tourism and the Arts’ report has now been concluded and brought before the House. The inquiry was launched last January, and I, for one, never imagined that the Committee would be subjected to such an enthusiastic response. We received more than 80 submissions. To add further support, the Committee also heard oral evidence from 100 people representing 39 organisations.

The workload was immense, so I join with other Committee members in thanking the Committee Clerk and the support staff for all their work on the inquiry in the past 18 months. I also thank those who took the time and trouble to make submissions, both written and oral, giving the Committee much food for thought on wide and varied issues within the terms of reference.

It was clear from the outset that Northern Ireland was starting on the back row of the grid. Our geographical location on the periphery of Europe and the unreliable climate do us no favours. Those factors, combined with decades of terrorism and civil unrest, ensured that Northern Ireland could not reach its full potential. Regrettably, some figures indicate that, up to 2000, 62% of people who came to Northern Ireland were either visiting friends or relatives or were here on business. That left only 18% who could be considered tourists.

During the inquiry, the bottom fell out of the North American market in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September, leaving another void in an area that had witnessed a fair degree of growth. That, on top of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, has taken a severe toll.

The only other negative issue on which I wish to comment was the repeated criticism of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which featured time and time again in oral evidence. It has been a bad time recently for the Tourist Board, so I shall not dwell on the subject. However, there was consensus that there had been a failure to promote and market the region and to encourage tourist development of culture and the arts. However, some comfort can be taken from the work of the Cultural Tourism Partnership in placing culture at the heart of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's corporate plan.

The report contains 56 recommendations that reflect issues from the arts of music, film, drama and dance to visitor attractions, cultural strategies, infrastructure, funding and much more. The recommendations show the depth of the key issues.

I draw the House's attention to the recommendations that highlight the potential for festivals, summer schools and other events, especially recommendation 8 on the development of the festival sector. It has been established that festivals can play an important role at local level, specific to the culture of that area, and also on a wider regional basis. More importantly, they are major economic generators. For example, the highly successful Edinburgh Festival 2001, to which the report refers, redeemed an otherwise devastated Scottish tourism industry in the wake of the last year's foot-and-mouth disease outbreak.

The recommendation states:

"District councils should consider how they could encourage the development of sustainable local community festivals, which would also provide a focus for visitors."

That would complement existing major festivals. However, to develop their potential

"they must be able to offer long-term viability and serve both the host community and the visitor."

One local example is the Carrickfergus Waterfront Festival, held during the past two weeks, which included a re-enactment of the landing of King William in 1690. Every year, local people take pride in proclaiming their history and heritage, and visitors display their hunger to learn of the culture of others and eagerly return to witness the event.

District councils have begun to realise the potential of such festivals, but promotion and co-ordination are essential. It was disappointing that several of the 26 district councils did not reply to the Committee's request for information on local festivals. Those included four of the eight councils whose areas encompass the Causeway Coast and the Glens of Antrim, two of the country's leading tourist attractions.

During our research, it was interesting to learn that a similar policy has been developed in France, where, until recently, 500 festivals were not considered to be tourist products. Those are now specifically marketed,

and 15% to 20% of visitors to major festivals are now foreign tourists.

In recommendation 9, the Committee strongly encourages Belfast Festival at Queen's to examine the potential of summer events and to use the broadcasting media to develop an international audience. Representatives of Belfast Festival at Queen's stated in their evidence that they were conscious of the gap that exists during the summer. The festival is in its fortieth year, has proved its sustainability and has capitalised on the focus of Halloween. The Committee would support any proposal to organise events to fill the summer gap and to promote the festival more widely.

Although Belfast Festival at Queen's cannot rival the Edinburgh Festival, there is scope to tap into international coverage through the commissioning of a purpose-made showcase to highlight events during the festival to satellite television audiences worldwide.

I endorse recommendation 13, which calls on the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to liaise with district councils, the professional theatre and others to develop a summer arts programme for local audiences and visitors. Such a programme could serve a dual purpose as a training ground for young actors and as a frequently changing entertainment option.

The Northern Ireland Events Company only scratches the surface in its provision. I commend its efforts, but given our limited resources, we can only glance sideways in jealousy at our neighbouring devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales, where significant budgets attract major events. We must persuade potential promoters, as well as ourselves, that business can be done in Northern Ireland. However, given the Northern Ireland Events Company's limited budget of £1 million, the key to success will be the positioning of a financial commitment sufficiently far ahead in the bidding process.

Unfortunately, confidence in the Northern Ireland Events Company was recently undermined by a Sinn Féin/IRA Member. That organisation destroyed stability with its campaign of murder and destruction but now has the audacity to portray itself as the minder of the public purse.

Perhaps the Minister could consider another major event. In recent days, it has emerged that the local government auditor has written to Carrickfergus Borough Council, which in 1997 won the right to host the Optimist World Championship in sailing. Despite the fact that that successful event was a good economic generator for the area, the local government auditor has questioned the council's entitlement even to bid to stage it. That bureaucracy is a worry, given our attempts to expand and bring world-class events to Northern Ireland.

I support the motion. I commend the report and hope that its recommendations will be implemented soon.

Mr McCarthy: I support fully the contents of the report on the inquiry into cultural tourism and the arts. As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I am delighted that the report has come to the House.

The Committee worked extremely hard. It listened to many groups and considered many written submissions. I hope that its Assembly Colleagues will support the report's recommendations and that the Executive will act on it, because that can only benefit everyone in Northern Ireland.

We must make up for the lost and wasted years. Northern Ireland has much to offer. I have repeatedly told the Committee's hosts in Boston, Paris, Barcelona, Scotland and Galway that they should visit the Strangford constituency. It has it all — it is the best in the land. Of course, my Assembly Colleagues supported me fully at all times.

Northern Ireland has two important features with which to attract visitors: genealogy, which could be classed as a "roots strategy"; and townland names. Recommendations 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23 cover fully what must be done. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other bodies could play a significant part in a roots strategy. The report states that there are

"60 million people worldwide claiming to have Irish ancestry".

Those people must be persuaded to visit us. Although they may discover that their relatives live in Cork, Kerry or Waterford, we should, through investment, development and marketing, entice them to Northern Ireland. We can assure them of a welcome and offer them attractions equal to those in other places. Ireland is a small island, and we can benefit if the determination is there.

I recently received information about the Irish Genealogical Congress, which holds a week-long international conference every three to four years that attracts people from all over the world. Plans are afoot to hold the next conference in 2004. Belfast was considered as a venue in the past but, because of its problems, other cities were selected instead. Therefore, at this early stage, I appeal to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider seriously the provision of a real incentive that would bring the Irish Genealogical Congress to Belfast. It is an excellent opportunity that should not be missed.

I pay tribute to the work of our local historical societies, especially the Federation for Ulster Local Studies, which made a presentation to the Committee. The Assembly must support all that work.

The Committee Chairperson mentioned my pet subject, which I have spoken about many times in the Assembly, and I shall continue to stress the importance of maintaining the precious heritage of Northern Ireland's townland names. The previous time that I tabled a motion on townland names I mentioned Ballycranmore, Ballycranbeg, Ballyesborough and Ballyboghilbo. Townland names

continue to be an attraction for visitors to Northern Ireland; therefore, they must not be forgotten.

In mirroring recommendation 21, I appeal to all Departments, district councils and other public bodies to include townland names on all correspondence. It is not good enough for Ministers to rely on the community to include townland names on correspondence. Since the early 1970s, townland names have largely been omitted, so an entire generation may be ignorant of them.

2.30 pm

I should like to applaud the staff of the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, based at Colby House, Stranmillis Road, on their progress with the common address file. I understand that it is now called the compass address file. I hope that that will give us a complete list of all the townland names in Northern Ireland, that it will be completed in the autumn and that Departments will have no excuse not to include townland names on all their correspondence.

I should also like to pay tribute to the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for concluding this important inquiry into cultural tourism. I should also like to express my admiration and thanks to all the Committee staff for their help, courtesy and invaluable advice during the course of our work.

I appreciate the presence of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr McGimpsey, in the Chamber. I know he supports our work, and I hope that he can lead his Department and the other Departments to see that our recommendations are fully adopted.

Mr Agnew: I should like to congratulate the Committee staff on the way in which they brought the report together. The Committee Clerk — affectionately known as "Mrs Woman" incidentally — and her staff have been tremendous in ensuring that the report is before us. We should also congratulate the Chairperson on his leadership throughout the inquiry.

It was an interesting exercise, and we had submissions from more than 80 groups and individuals concerned about tourism. We asked all those people questions, and one thing that struck me about their views on the Tourist Board was that no one had a good word to say about it. Some did not comment at all. Although that is not my view, others suspect that rather than promoting a good image of Northern Ireland, the Tourist Board has promoted a bad image of itself — a significant comment. Again, and I may be speaking for myself here, we should analyse the usefulness of the Tourist Board and ask whether it is necessary. Around the Province local authorities provide most of the 450 plus tourist facilities.

I am interested in the industrial heritage aspect, an area that is largely untapped here, unlike other parts of the free world. I was in Phoenix, Arizona, a few weeks

ago, and there was a Titanic exhibition in downtown Phoenix. That evening I spoke to a group of approximately 35 business people and asked how many realised that the Titanic was built in Belfast. Only two people raised their hands. The rest did not know that the Titanic was built in Belfast, yet there they were having a Titanic exhibition in the middle of Phoenix. On display were all the artefacts that were found at the bottom of the ocean and brought ashore and that now make up a travelling exhibition.

Belfast should be proud of that. Some people seem to think that Belfast should be ashamed because the ship sank. We know why it sank, and it had nothing to do with the skills of the workers in Harland & Wolff; it sank because the silly captain decided to try to break a transatlantic record and sailed straight into an ice field.

Northern Ireland should capitalise on its great industrial base of linen, agriculture, pottery, crystal, even whiskey — it is all there — to highlight what the Province has to offer. I am not so sure about poteen, but those are all part of our culture.

Newtownabbey Borough Council was faced with the possibility of seeing the demolition of a great mill at Mossley that had played a central part in the industrial revolution in Ireland. The council stepped in immediately and within a week had purchased the mill and decided to turn it into its new headquarters.

Other areas in the UK are preserving their industrial heritage, and it is paying its way. A Lisburn man called Gregg developed the great mills at Hyde on the fringe of Manchester Airport. The National Trust is taking those over and fabricating and manufacturing items for the tourist industry. It is paying its way. The big spinning wheels and the steam turbines are all there and are being restored.

A similar project is going on at the mill village in Lanark, just outside Glasgow. People are still living in tenements in that area, but part of the mill has been converted into a hotel, and other parts have been restored to working order.

A private entrepreneur took over massive mills in Halifax in North England and developed them. They are so vast that one could not walk from one end to the other, but would require transport. An arts centre and all sorts of businesses and attractions, hotels and restaurants have been established there.

In Bradford a large collection of old machinery has been restored — in fact, there is so much that it is being sold off to other museums throughout the UK. All those operations are in place to preserve our industrial heritage.

We are proud of what we have done in Newtownabbey, because the industrial revolution in Ireland took off in the present boundaries of Newtownabbey Borough Council. I had to include that historic fact. We are attempting to preserve part of our heritage. That can be

accomplished in many ways. Part of Mossley Mill could be restored and used as a museum. The mills in Benburb have been partially preserved but still need to be developed. These projects could be considered tourist attractions. We have an audience and a product that can be used to attract that audience.

When the Committee was preparing the report, it was discovered that most visitors to Northern Ireland come to see friends and relatives. People must be attracted for other reasons, such as over 450 varied attractions and many worthwhile sites. Leisure centres bring in many visitors, but there are also places of sound historic interest that can be used for tourism.

The Titanic Quarter and the events down at the shipyard can be compared with extensive developments in Liverpool. Those might suggest that the Titanic was built there. The Titanic never visited Liverpool, but the White Star Line was associated with the city. The tender that brought people out from Cherbourg where the Titanic was anchored before it headed off across the Atlantic is now a disused floating restaurant on the River Seine in Paris. That could be brought back here to provide a focal point for tourism. There are many attractions that we could utilise.

I am a believer in community-based tourism. No matter what community we consider, it has something of interest for tourism. It could be an inaccessible hidden path. What is the sense in having such an attraction with no way to get to it? That is a problem throughout Northern Ireland. In my history research I have found that many attractions are not signposted and lie up a country lane or across a field. We must make those more accessible. We need to audit tourist products, both current and potential.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board will continue to exist in one form or another despite what I have said. It is of the utmost importance that it promote Northern Ireland's attractions comprehensively and accurately. At present, it is not doing so. Last night, I looked at a Tourist Board brochure. As I glanced through it, I was surprised to find that the information on certain historic attractions was not accurate. That is not good. The Tourist Board must ensure that it is accurate in its assessment of the attractions that it includes in its brochures.

The approach to promoting attractions should be more comprehensive. There should be an audited list of all the attractions that bring people to the Province. This is a good little Province. Despite all our problems, this place is worth living in. When King William came to Ireland he said that it was a place worth fighting for — we have been doing that ever since. However, we can put that in context and recognise that we are all citizens of this land. There is so much on offer. We ourselves are a product, and there are many things to attract people

who have a genuine interest in some of the areas mentioned today.

I have looked at only one aspect of tourism — industrial heritage. There is a market for that. I and other Committee members saw the evidence of that in a place called Lowell, about an hour's drive from Boston, where they have developed the great mills and put the boat on the old canal. Almost by accident, they decided to install some tiered seating and hold a country and western event. It is now a massive occasion that attracts almost 250,000 people on a weekend.

The significant point about that project is that it is located in a downtown area that was falling apart and inhabited by drug addicts. It was not a place where respectable people would be seen, so something had to be done. The area was developed with the mills as the focal point. The place is tremendous — a basketball arena and an ice arena, which can also host concerts, were built. Facilities were provided to attract people.

Whatever a community has to offer, it will have something that will attract people. It could be a place like Newtownabbey, which was the cradle of the industrial revolution. People are interested in the fact that we have preserved part of that heritage. Unfortunately, some of it has gone. What was perhaps the oldest factory chimney in Ireland was demolished to make way for a Toys 'R' Us store, which was a shame. There was no need to take away that chimney. People are attracted to such things. Do we do enough about that?

The report makes 56 recommendations, including some on visitor centres and museums, in which I have an interest. We should consider those recommendations, which I commend to the Assembly. We recommend taking stock of our visitor attractions, heritage centres and other facilities. I urge the Assembly to accept the report's recommendations, and not only because of the Committee's hard work. However, it is because of that hard work that we have got the report right. The issues that it raises must be taken on board, not ignored or thrown out.

Mr J Wilson: The Chairperson and my Colleagues on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have already mentioned many aspects of the background to the inquiry, the need for the inquiry and the report. I wish to say a few words about one section of the report.

2.45 pm

Before I do, I want to join with others in placing on record a word of thanks to the Chairperson. He did a sterling job, keeping us focused on the objective against many competing pressures. It was not easy, and it was a job well done. Also, I want to thank the Committee staff for their hard work and dedication. This was a substantial inquiry — one that was necessary and useful — and all the staff played a big part from start to finish.

I want to say a few words about Northern Ireland's image, which has been mentioned briefly by others, and how that image relates to the task of promoting our culture and, I hope, attracting tourists. As was the case in the angling inquiry, some issues were mentioned again and again by almost everyone who made a submission. Our image was certainly one of those. In short, what came over time and time again was the comment: "How can we compete, faced with the bad news stories about Northern Ireland?" Blame was apportioned over a wide spectrum: the terrorists; the rioters on our streets; the criminality in our communities; and the murders. Even the news industry did not escape criticism.

Many submissions noted that a major barrier to developing culture tourism is the persistence of a negative image of Northern Ireland. On the other hand, feedback from visitors suggests that they are impressed by how different the reality of Northern Ireland is from the image they see, hear and read on television, radio and newspapers.

I draw Members' attention to recommendations 30 and 31. It is not just the media that have the job of telling the Northern Ireland story — it is a Government responsibility, and the responsibility of the Executive and the Assembly. As has been said, it is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and the film industry, the Arts Council and district councils also have a role in telling the Northern Ireland story.

Those who made submissions to the inquiry recognised that providing, promoting and marketing culture tourism against a backdrop of terrorism was and, to some extent, still is an uphill battle. However, on the positive side, they also said that when broadcasters and the film industry deal with Northern Ireland culture, they could focus more on its richness, variety, and beauty — tipping the scales so that the positive outweighs the negative. Collectively, all the providers of cultural activity need to work harder, in a cohesive and strategic fashion. Those who promote and manage Northern Ireland need to do more to emphasise the positive if we are to attract more tourists to enjoy our rich and varied culture.

One Member in particular has referred to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and there is no doubt that it did come in for some criticism. However, would the tourist boards of Wales, Scotland, England, or just across the border in the Republic of Ireland have done a better job through the 30 plus years of terrorism? I doubt it very much.

I commend this report to the Assembly. I know that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will give it serious consideration.

Mr Shannon: We hae a report theday that can chairt the oncum o cultural tourism for a fair fek yeirs ti cum, help forder thrift an mak tourism in our Province yung again. A mukkil betterment can be brocht aboot, but anelie gif a co-ordinate plan is putten thegither an actit on.

The heid raison fowk cums ti Norlin Airland is veisitin feres an freinds, an A believe that's whaur we maun stairt biggin up tourism potential. Awmaist 45% o aw fowk veisitin the Province faws intil that categorie. Monie o us believes that tourism is wantin virr an smeddum at the meinit. Takkin tent til that thocht, that's whitfor it's that importin ti pouss forrit wi forderin furth-o-state cultural tourism insteid o daein it in the fushionless wey the NITB's duin it up til nou. Alang wi tyauvin at forderin tourism, the local mercat maun pley its part wi a qualitie airts sector no blate ti grup the potential for furth-o-state veisitors. Lat's be perfit apen here — veisitors ti Norlin Airland disnae cum luikin a "sand and sun" holiday, for we cannae gie onie uphauuld for the lyke. Whit we can gie thaim in Norlin Airland is cultur, heirskip an the airts, an as a niche mercat it haulds on growein. The NITB haes seen a meiserable failyie in its ettills at forderin an mercatin the Province an maun awn its responsibeilitie for tint yeirs in tourism growthe an oncum. Lat's tak a keek at the feigurs — juist 1·8% o Norlin Airland domestic product cums fae tourism, but the Erse Republic, Scotland an Wales aw cums oot aroun 6%. It's patent that the'r a bittie makkin up ti dae, an, again, the evident is that the'r no mukkil been duin for yeirs. September 11 haes been a catalyst for the USA an, atweill, the haild world, an it's thocht that a focus on the mercats o Europe, Gret Britain an the Erse Republic wad gie us mair o a heft. Still an on, the USA can — an soud — be a pynt for cultural tourism. USA ceitizens haes a hert-hunger for finndin thair ruits an historie, an that mercat cannae be slung a deifie aither.

Today's report can chart the future for cultural tourism for a great many years to come. It can help to bring an economic boost and rejuvenate tourism in the Province. A vast improvement can be made, but only if a co-ordinated plan is put together and acted upon.

The principal reason that people come to Northern Ireland is to visit friends and relatives. That is where we must start to increase tourism potential. Almost 45% of all people visiting the Province fall into that category. Many of us feel that tourism currently has no push or energy behind it. Therefore, it is vital that out-of-state cultural tourism is promoted aggressively and not in the namby-pamby way practised by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board up until now.

In tandem with aggressive tourism promotion, the local market must play its part with a quality arts sector, anxious to seize the potential for out-of-state visitors. Let us be perfectly honest: visitors do not come to Northern Ireland because they are seeking a "sand and sun" holiday; we cannot guarantee that. In Northern Ireland, we offer the growing niche market of cultural heritage and the arts.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has failed miserably to promote and market the Province and has been singularly responsible for the lost years of tourism growth

and development. Let us look at the figures. Only 1·8% of Northern Ireland's gross domestic product comes from tourism, while the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales all average approximately 6%. It is apparent that there is some catching up to do, and there is evidence that not much has been done for years.

The events of 11 September were a catalyst for the USA and the whole world. It is felt that a focus on the markets of Europe, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland would be more advantageous. However, the USA can, and should, be a point for cultural tourism. American citizens are hungry to find their roots and hungry for history; that potential market cannot be ignored either.

We need world-class events. The rest of Great Britain has several world-class and major international events. We must see a push to bring at least one or two events to the Province each year. While the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the roles of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland Ltd must be clarified, and the benefits for our Province must then be taken advantage of, it is not enough to talk about what must be done. Let us see a clear strategy within specific goals to develop each sector.

It is especially worrying that so many of the organisations giving evidence were critical of their dealings with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Most Members have referred to that. There has been a breakdown in the Tourist Board's customer services, and failure to return phone calls or to respond to requests paints a very damning picture of it. District councils have an important part to play in promoting cultural tourism. In fairness to it, the Tourist Board has acknowledged that it could improve on what it is doing. We urge it to galvanise itself, grasp the nettle and actively promote cultural tourism.

We have looked at the diversity of themes and sectors and at the responsibilities we have for our cultural heritage. How can we encourage a good quality of life for the whole community? Promotion and development could be undertaken by the cultural strategy for Northern Ireland.

Cultural tourism can unlock many doors to benefit the entire Province, but that can only happen if the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Tourist Board, as part of that Department, grasp the initiative collectively. Up until now, they have failed to do so. They should accept constructive criticism, accept that things have gone wrong in the past and move forward with zeal and enthusiasm so that all tangible benefits are grasped and made the most of. It is in front of us, like an apple ready to be picked, but we must get it right. That is more vital today than it has ever been. I commend the report's recommendations to the House.

Mr Davis: Reference was made during a debate yesterday to empty Benches, and we have empty Benches again today. All Members in the Chamber, with the exception of Mr Gibson, are members of the Committee

for Culture, Arts and Leisure. This is one of the most important reports to be brought before the Assembly. When we read the papers we cannot fail to see the words “culture”, “arts” and “leisure”, yet we see from the gathering today just how interested Members who are not on that Committee are. Indeed, there are more people in the Public Gallery than in the Chamber. However, I welcome the opportunity to comment on the report of the Committee’s inquiry into cultural tourism and the arts, and I will focus on the strategic planning and development section. That section says that the Tourist Board does not have an overall objective that shows what it is trying to achieve and what its limitations are. Every successful organisation needs to have a purpose, and the work of the organisation should be focused around it.

The Committee took evidence from several organisations that referred to the poor performance of the Tourist Board. I note that its co-operative plan for 2002-05 has a vision of increasing the number of visitors by 7% each year over that period. The Committee hopes that the board will recognise the important part that culture can play in attracting more visitors to Northern Ireland. As a result, recommendation 40 says that

“Culture and heritage should be promoted by the NITB as key brands, particularly for the special interest market.”

I want to promote recommendation 41. It refers to

“the potential for establishing a Heritage Day”

and what that would offer to tourism. The objective behind such a day would be to emphasise the importance of celebrating the wonderful culture that exists in Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

It is vital that the Department take the lead in pursuing that matter, working closely with other Departments and bodies. Various groups support the idea of a heritage day, and it has been suggested that the theme of the day could be changed annually to ensure that all cultural groups are supported and represented.

The Tourist Board must undertake research to analyse and understand exactly what attracts visitors to our Province. By so doing, it will be able to determine what will encourage potential visitors in future, and thus it will be able to increase visitor numbers. That task must not be undertaken in isolation but in close conjunction with other relevant tourist bodies in mainland UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Departments, district councils, non-departmental public bodies, attraction operators, accommodation providers, transport undertakings, tour companies and other bodies, such as the National Trust and the Northern Ireland Events Company, must work together more effectively. In that respect, the creation of Tourism Ireland Ltd should promote greater co-operation and allow the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to invest greater energy and resources in

promoting Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

The formation of formal local networks of cultural partners and tourist attraction operators is important. Those networks would develop theme-based package tours and trails, and they should be assisted by local tourism action plans, with attraction clusters within a specific locale that would allow visitors to have a range of cultural and heritage experiences.

The report states that the Committee was encouraged by the work of the individual product groups and their working parties in the cultural tourism partnership. Specific action must be taken on the conclusion and strategies outlined in the 2002 progress report, including the development of networks and branding exercises. Recommendation 47 suggests that policies and measures should be monitored, evaluated and reviewed to allow for continual improvement in the industry, and appropriate structures should be established to allow for such improvement.

I thank the members of the Committee, the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson for the work that they have put in, and I record my thanks to the Committee staff for their commitment and attention to detail. I hope that the Minister will give the report the serious consideration that it rightly deserves.

Mr Gibson: I am not a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, but I support the report. I have a long-time vested interest in cultural tourism. Many years ago, perhaps to my own discredit, I promoted, in the Omagh District Council area, the idea of basing a 51-mile trail on the inspirational points and places of W F Marshall, who was one of the first people to broadcast on the BBC in Northern Ireland. He was an academic of great power. He made a special contribution to the literary world by recognising that the area in which he lived in mid-Tyrone had a unique and distinctive dialect. So distinct was it, as indicated by his research, that W F Marshall was commissioned by the BBC to assist in the production of Shakespeare’s great play ‘As You Like It’ in the original language of Shakespeare, which is recognised as being the mid-Tyrone dialect. Given that vested interest and the strong call that was made for the retention of townlands, I commend the Committee on the excellent report.

However, no methodology for retaining townlands was suggested. I have struggled with the issue for many years in my council area, where townlands have been eliminated and replaced by manufactured road names. I live seven miles from Omagh, in the village of Beragh. That seven-mile area is known by one name — Donaghane — but it is made up of 11 townlands. I have encouraged Omagh District Council to insert the names of townlands in red print on road signs. It is a greater

expense, but the council receives sponsorship for the project. A practical effort must be made.

I have encouraged other community groups to use local stones to mark out townland boundaries, but permission for that is required from the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service. I know that the Minister would be interested in supporting that idea.

Much criticism has been levelled at the Tourist Board, but everyone can contribute in his own area. Local pride and heritage can be brought to the fore and utilised as an important tourist product. In the town that I represent, the names of such musical geniuses as Dominic Kirwan, Brian Coll and numerous showbands are written large in history. The same applies to local poets such as John Montague, Benedict Kiely, Matt Mulcahy, R L Marshall and W F Marshall. Every area has similarly well-known people. Mid-Tyrone did not have tourism potential until it used the inspirational points of the 51-mile Marshall trail through unspoilt, undiluted, unpolluted countryside. That rural quietude brings tranquillity to visitors from the concrete conurbations.

I support the report, and I advocate that the Minister encourage the practical, rather than aspirational, retention of townland names. It can be done, and I encourage him to treat the matter seriously. Northern Ireland obtained the concept of townlands from Sudan. The idea was imported during the third and fourth centuries, when Coptic traders arrived at the Shannon and other estuary rivers. Townlands are particular to Ireland and north Sudan. Let us retain a custom that is almost unique to Northern Ireland, so that we can give it a special focus as part of our cultural heritage.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the Committee's report, and I acknowledge its breadth. Its 56 recommendations offer a means to maximise the potential of cultural tourism and the arts in Northern Ireland. It will come as no surprise to the House that, given the substantial number of recommendations and considering the short time that I have had the report, I shall want to give it more detailed consideration before I make my formal reply to the Committee. Moreover, some of the recommendations fall to other Ministers, and I shall wish to consult them before responding. However, by way of early comment, I welcome the Committee's recognition of the importance of the arts in adding value to cultural tourism and of the extent to which the arts can enrich our lives and make positive economic and social contributions to the development of Northern Ireland.

Recognition of culture as an economic generator is not a new concept. It is being employed in parts of Europe — Bilbao and Rotterdam spring to mind. It is a tool — an economic generator — that has been highly successful in those areas, and I am certain that we can

use it to good effect in Northern Ireland. Many Members have mentioned the areas that we can utilise to create economic well-being as well as to enhance our image and self-esteem.

I also welcome the Committee's pragmatism in its approach to issues such as sustainability and long-term viability. We have already witnessed the difficulties that have occurred in projects such as the St Patrick Centre in Downpatrick and the Navan Centre in Armagh. The need for financial rigour, as well as intellectual rigour, for projects such as those is essential, and their absence will almost certainly lead to sustainability problems. The importance of properly addressing that issue is essential if some of the opportunities identified in the report are to be brought to fruition. Too often with such projects the capital investment can be found, but not enough consideration is given to the revenue consequences and the fact that many of the projects will create an annual revenue deficit for several years. If the number of visitors is not estimated realistically, we are liable to run into problems, as we have done at the Navan Centre and the St Patrick Centre.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is addressing issues that are particularly relevant to it. Those include the welcome focus on the development of the Titanic Quarter and the telling of the Titanic story. With that in mind, I urge Committee members to visit the Thompson dry dock to see its potential and that of the surrounding area in order to promote Belfast's industrial, maritime and aviation centre. For those who are not familiar with the story, the Thompson dry dock was built in 1910 and is an awesome piece of space. It was extended by 30ft to allow the Titanic to squeeze in, and it sits down there just as it was built. We should look at how we can develop that to retain the dry dock features and the pump house that sits alongside it and at how we can use it to tell the Titanic story. Belfast is the only city in the world that can tell that story.

HMS Caroline is currently in the Alexandra dock. It is a 1914, first world war, light cruiser built for the Royal Navy. It is the last survivor of the Battle of Jutland and is a priceless and irreplaceable artefact. The ship is of the Titanic era and built in Titanic fashion; much of it was rivet built. We have huge potential there, and I urge the Committee to look at that.

Next door to that, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners plan to develop a portion of the wharf to enable large cruise liners to dock in Belfast. We have all that potential sitting cheek by jowl with the science park. The Nomadic has been mentioned. Two tenders were especially built to carry passengers from Cherbourg out to the Titanic, and one of those was the Nomadic. It looks like a mini Titanic, and it would be a wonderful asset if it were situated in Belfast. However, the Department has looked at moving it from Paris, and there are major cost implications. Extra bridges have been built over the Seine,

where it sits, and it would mean sinking the ship to take it below the bridges. There would be major engineering difficulties in retrieving the ship from Paris and major resource implications too. When it was being considered I envisaged difficulty in finding resources. However, the Department will keep it in mind.

3.15 pm

Promoting the cultural quarter concept, art and public spaces, accessibility to arts facilities and the development of cultural product in theatre, dance and music are also to be welcomed as is the identification of roots tourism in the international genealogy market. The Public Records Office will play a central role in that. I recently hosted an event in the Long Gallery for overseas visitors for just that type of tourism. Digitising records will play a key role as they become an easily accessible resource through new technology to visitors to the Internet.

Those are ideas that the Public Records Office and other areas of the Department are very much aware of and aligned to. We feel strongly about getting new technology into various areas. The Assembly saw the first part of that initiative with the electronic libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) project early in 2002. That was a £36 million contract to develop computer technology in all our libraries. That is a step forward because those computers will play a major part in future for genealogy and other interests that visitors might have.

Furthermore, the Department is making progress on the development of language and the use of the arts to explore our common heritage, and I welcome, in principle, the identification of the need for a dedicated art gallery. However, that has a major cost implication, to which I shall return. I am pleased that the report acknowledged the importance of specific managed events alongside, for example, locally organised festivals to encourage tourism.

Several Members referred to the importance of district councils. Much work is being done there. The Department is working through the cultural forum to ensure that each of the 26 district councils will have local cultural strategies that complement one another and have the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's overall aims in its publications. That is happening and is an area of activity that will ensure that councils complement the Department's aims as set out in 'Face to Face', the sector's vision for arts, for culture and for unlocking creativity. The cultural forum has a key role to play in providing a broader approach to help deliver much of what is contained in the report.

Mr McCarthy and others, such as Mr Gibson, talked about townland names. Recently, during Question Time, I referred to the common address file project, which will enable townland names to be added to addresses. The Department now has funding to get the common address file into operation, and that will ensure that Government Departments and councils use it initially and that there

will be a ready bridge across from the townland names archive straight into the common address file. The Department has the means to do that — and it has the will to do it.

The report's recommendations on creative industry align with the Department's work and with that of the interdepartmental creativity action group. In particular, support to enable the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission to develop the sector is being pursued by my Colleagues and me through Executive programme funds. The Arts Council also fulfils a co-ordinating role in the craft sector, which, although it is not featured in the report, is another important element of cultural tourism. It appears that some issues are not covered in the report.

We are all aware that money makes everything possible. The report rightly identified funding as being critical to future development. However, the report stopped short of quantifying any of the costs associated with the areas identified for the development and of offering any practical view on from where future funding might be obtained.

For example, the museum of sea and sky and the museum of creative arts could cost in the region of £100 million, as could the Ulster canal and the Lagan navigation projects combined. If the money were there, we could deliver everything that is contained in the report. However, we must live within our means, and expectations must be realistic.

There are ways to find that money. We must be imaginative and inventive, but we must also understand that the Executive and Government cannot simply write cheques for those amounts. On top of the capital amount is the resource implication after construction. Those areas need careful examination and investigation. It taxes me greatly, but we are actively considering funding options. Unless the resources are found, we cannot deliver what we are talking about and looking for. We cannot satisfy expectations, but we are aware of the value of cultural tourism as an economic driver.

The bid for 2008 Capital of Culture and the potential of sport as a key component of our culture did not feature in the report, nor is there any acknowledgement of the Cathedral Quarter in Belfast and the "hub" concept — something else on which we are actively working. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is also conducting major tourism reviews. Several Members mentioned the Tourist Board. The Department takes the views expressed seriously. A major tourism review is under way, and Belfast City Council is also undertaking a review, but neither is mentioned in the report. I am sure that the Committee will be anxious to look at those reports when they are published.

The report is an important step forward. I commend the Committee for the effort that has gone into it. I shall give the Committee a detailed response to the report in due course, and I look forward to working closely with

Committee members to see what might realistically be delivered.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome all the contributions made on the report and thank all Members for their time and consideration.

One issue that sprang to mind from several contributions, especially that of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, was the definition of culture. She used the UNESCO definition, which reminded me of the visit that some Committee members made to Kanturk to attend a culture conference in County Cork. At the conference, an academic from Wales described culture as “the central thing”. She also said that in Welsh, the closest interpretation of the word for “culture” describes the move from being wild to being civilised. That is an interesting concept about culture and its meaning.

The enthusiasm with which Committee members have responded to the report in this debate indicates the level of work that the Committee had undertaken. I thank them once again for all that work.

The Deputy Chairperson mentioned a good example of where we, as a community, can fail in dealing with the concept of cultural tourism when she mentioned the Pennsylvanian millionaires.

It is a great pity that such opportunities — and we know of many — go a-begging because we have no facility to take advantage of them.

Mrs Nelis rightly highlighted the Northern Ireland Tourist Board’s annual summary of attractions. Although the Committee was concerned about the clear shortcomings of that important data, it was more concerned about the board’s method of gathering it. The report emphasises that that methodology must be examined and improved. The Tourist Board wrote to various organisations to request information, but it published only the details that it was given. That procedure is hardly suitable to provide an educated and scientific understanding of what is happening.

Ian Adamson’s insight and knowledge made a tremendous contribution to our debate and the preparation of the report. He spoke accurately about the alienation and break-up of communities and the lack of proper regeneration strategies. The definition of alienation as “the absence of culture” was also heard in Kanturk. That is an interesting thought. Dr Adamson highlighted the importance of making an inventory of our heritage, built and otherwise. Without that proper identification, we cannot preserve and care for the most important elements of our heritage. Local trails and tours were among the recommendations that the Committee sought.

David Hilditch referred to the criticism that was made of the Tourist Board. A pattern of criticism ran throughout the report, and it is right that Members should highlight it. The Tourist Board had major problems in addition to the current criticisms of it. The criticism was made by

those who gave evidence, rather than by Committee members. Mr Hilditch was correct: almost everyone had a criticism to make. I recall only one positive comment, and that may have come from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The report might have included a few criticisms of that body. The Committee reflects the weight of evidence, and it is part of its job to listen to practitioners and other witnesses, put together their views coherently and constructively and present them to the Minister and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Kieran McCarthy, whom we all recognise as the champion of townland names, again made a good case. Unfortunately, Oliver Gibson is not present, but I thank him for his interesting and valuable contribution. It would be good if townlands could be incorporated into rural road signs to inform a traveller that he is leaving one townland and entering another. Mr Gibson said that our suggestion was aspirational; on the contrary, it was a clear and definite recommendation of usage by all Departments and official organs. That is not aspirational; it is practical. Its achievement would be a major step towards our goal. The Minister correctly referred to the common address file project, and the Committee recommended that that be supported. Once that is in place, there will be no excuse for not using townland names.

3.30 pm

Frazer Agnew spoke with considerable passion about the poor record that we have for preserving and restoring our old linen mills and machinery. A great deal of work is happening elsewhere to preserve such heritage, but we seem to be relentless in our neglect of the infrastructure, and Mr Agnew’s comments reflect the Committee’s concerns.

Mr Agnew also made a telling point about the accessibility of heritage sites. We are not very good at signposting, but if we put our minds to it, we should be able to address those problems.

Jim Wilson concentrated on our image problem. Internationally, what image do people have of us? What films do they see that are made in Northern Ireland about Northern Ireland? What documentaries do they see? Unfortunately, the negative image invariably comes across, and Mr Wilson is right to draw our attention to that. Reported news must be the truth, but the Committee’s report attempts to get people to focus on the positive qualities of life here.

Jim Shannon made an interesting contribution and, once again, demonstrated the wealth of cultural diversity here by using Ulster Scots in his introduction. I thank him for that. He referred to the need for a cultural strategy to set goals and objectives and to galvanise all those involved.

Ivan Davis referred to the low attendance during most of the debate. I was delighted to hear that the Republic of Ireland won 3 – 0, and I congratulate the team. It is

hard to blame Members who wanted to watch the match, but we cannot use that excuse every day on which attendance is low. More Members are here now — perhaps something of interest is to begin shortly.

Ivan Davis also highlighted the idea of a heritage day. I hope that people consider that closely as a neat recommendation that could do much to create the image that we want to project, as opposed to the negative image that we have.

I thank the Minister for his full attention. I recognise his interest in the Committee's work and thank him for his support for the majority of our recommendations. He commented on the financial implications of some of them, and it seemed as though he had not considered fully the financial recommendations that we made. However, when the Committee considers them more closely with the Department, the Minister may realise that they contain a lot of financial detail. We hope to widen the possibilities because the funding recommendations contain opportunities for us to consider imaginative approaches. We recognise that the proposals could be expensive, but many of the recommendations could be fulfilled at little cost. We need to focus our resources and commitment better on what we want to achieve. It is possible. I commend the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on its Inquiry into Cultural Tourism and the Arts and calls on the Executive to ensure that the Committee's recommendations are evaluated and implemented at the earliest opportunity.

INCIDENT AT BELFAST INSTITUTE OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, TOWER STREET CAMPUS

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that she wishes to make a statement on an incident at the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education's Tower Street campus on 7 June 2002.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I wish to make a brief statement about the events at a campus of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education last week.

At around 11.00 am on Friday 7 June, an incident occurred at the Tower Street campus of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education during which staff and students were subjected to disgraceful and degrading behaviour. I understand that the details of the incident are under investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and for that reason I do not wish to engage in any discussion of them. I am sure that the Assembly will join me in unequivocally condemning the incident and in demanding respect for the essential neutrality of all educational establishments.

Our society has suffered extensively from civil disorder for over three decades. We should be thankful that during that time, with a few notable exceptions, universities, colleges and schools have been allowed to carry out their task of educating children, young people and more mature students without fear or favour. That has particularly been the case in respect of further education, which by its nature provides educational opportunities to all sections of the community in its numerous campuses and outreach centres.

That neutrality was breached on Friday morning, when staff and students were interrupted by an incursion by people from outside whose interest was palpably not in further education and training. Such behaviour has no place in any decent society and no place in the neutral surroundings of any educational establishment.

At a time when the stresses and strains of examinations should be the only consideration for students and staff, it is unacceptable that any institution should have to close its buildings, reschedule its examinations and help staff and students cope with the experience of sectarian threats. The Assembly should be united in its unequivocal condemnation of the events of last Friday.

I trust that the experiences of staff and students will not deflect any of them from achieving the grades and results that they need for their careers or their educational progress. My thoughts, support and sympathy go out to the management, staff and students of the Tower Street campus.

I appeal to the communities in east Belfast, and, indeed, in all areas, to preserve the essential neutrality of educational establishments, which are designed to meet their needs irrespective of religion or political opinion. I am heartened by the fact that several local community leaders have already visited the Tower Street campus to express their regret that such an incident took place and to demonstrate their support for the staff and students. I will visit the campus when the management and staff consider it appropriate.

I conclude by reiterating my unequivocal condemnation of that action and by underlining the principle of respect for the neutrality of educational establishments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: (Dr Birnie) I am very pleased that the Minister has made her statement, and I concur with what she said. I also agree with the statement of one of the relevant teachers' unions, the NASUWT, on 10 June, that the action was reprehensible because of the successful way in which further education colleges have integrated Protestant and Catholic students over many years.

Will it be necessary for the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and other further education colleges around the Province to take extra security measures? If that is the case, what are the budgetary implications, and how would the Department respond to the extra financial strain?

Ms Hanna: I hope that this is an isolated incident. No one wants to make fortresses out of colleges or any educational establishments. All colleges consider their security requirements and take whatever steps are necessary to protect staff and students in their local communities. The college at Tower Street has already engaged one further security person. I am not aware of the financial implications.

Mr Gallagher: The behaviour referred to is completely unacceptable. I draw attention to an incident in the Holy Land area of Belfast where an attack on a young student from County Fermanagh, Marius Rooney, took place. He is still seriously ill, and I am sure all Members hope that he will make a good recovery. Does the Minister agree that that behaviour is reprehensible and that we need to redouble our efforts to bring those who carry out such attacks to justice?

Ms Hanna: Sadly, attacks on individuals are increasing. I know of the attack on that young man about 10 days ago. He is still seriously ill. I do not know the circumstances, but I am aware that some of the attacks have sectarian undertones. Some of them are just a sad reflection of the increase in crime on our streets. I agree with the Member that we totally and utterly condemn all these attacks, regardless of motive.

Mr Poots: We all concur that such behaviour is unacceptable. I would highlight the difference in attitudes between

the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education when schoolchildren wearing their school uniforms were attacked in Strabane by so-called supporters of the Irish football team.

When schoolchildren could not enter Londonderry city centre because they were wearing certain school uniforms the Minister of Education did not appear before the House. I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for bringing this matter to the House and making it clear that sectarianism is unacceptable in the school place and that sectarian attacks on schoolchildren are also unacceptable. I wish the Minister of Education would take a leaf out of the book of the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Ms Hanna: Sectarian attacks are wrong and unacceptable, regardless of the location or the person involved.

3.45 pm

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister been advised that this is not the first instance of students and staff being threatened at the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education's Tower Street campus? The fine arts examination was cancelled. Will the Minister give special consideration to their students who will have to resit their examinations? What measures did the board of governors have in place to protect the students and staff, who had to lock themselves in classrooms for protection?

Ms Hanna: Most examinations were relocated to other campuses. I assume that special arrangements will be made for any students who were unable to sit their examinations.

I am not aware of any other attacks on Tower Street, but I am conscious that, sadly, over the past 30 years there have been at least five brutal attacks on people in education establishments. A headmaster was killed in his classroom, a school bus driver was killed and a classroom was booby-trapped, resulting in the death of a policeman. Lecturer Edgar Graham was killed outside Queen's University, and a lecturer at the Magherafelt campus of the North East Institute of Further and Higher Education was murdered in his classroom. Perhaps even more such sad events have occurred.

Ms McWilliams: I thank the Minister for the statement, but I am concerned that, given the serious nature of the incident, the statement was not made in the House yesterday. The fact that young students were lined up against a wall and asked their religion, no matter what that religion might be, shows the depths to which this society has sunk. Will the Minister co-operate with the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Education because this matter concerns agencies other than her own Department?

Signs are being put up on the walls on the routes to the college and to schools that say "No Taigs from Short

Strand beyond this point". If such signs were put up referring to Protestants, every Member would condemn them.

School principals have told me that they are concerned that this September students will not attend the Tower Street campus and that they may have to find courses elsewhere. Principals are concerned that these young students have only one option and that they now have nowhere to go. What arrangements has the Minister put in place to address this problem?

Ms Hanna: Alternative arrangements have been made for staff and students. I expect that special arrangements will be made for all those students. I will personally look into the matter if there is a problem. I apologise that the statement was not made yesterday.

The atmosphere is very tense in some parts of Northern Ireland, especially in Belfast. I will co-operate with all Departments and do anything I can to alleviate that tension.

Dr Adamson: I join with the Minister in condemning the appalling incident at the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education in Tower Street. In the light of our common concern for neutrality in our education establishments, what steps are being taken to ensure that Queen's University and its Students' Union become less of a cold house for Protestants and Unionists?

Ms Hanna: It is up to everyone, especially those of us in leadership roles, to work together to ensure that all students feel comfortable in all our establishments.

Mr A Maginness: The incident in Tower Street highlights the whole issue of sectarianism in this city and throughout our society, and this House must take the matter seriously. We must address it vigorously, as if it were a disease that affects us all. It is insufficient to respond to one incident. We must develop a strategy for dealing with sectarianism no matter where it manifests itself — in the classroom, in colleges, or in the street. We must deal with it.

The Minister has emphasised the sacrosanct nature of neutrality in an educational establishment. Is there any danger, as a result of this sectarian incident, that the future of the Tower Street campus might be under threat? Also, will those students whose examinations have had to be relocated get a sympathetic marking to compensate for the trauma that they clearly and manifestly went through as a result of this incident?

Ms Hanna: There is no question of relocating the Tower Street campus, and I would expect any students experiencing difficulties with their examinations because of this incident to get a sympathetic hearing.

Sectarianism is a contagious disease in this society. Unfortunately, we have a certain tolerance of a level of sectarianism in our everyday life, and we must proactively work together if we are to eradicate this disease.

Mr Foster: I apologise sincerely to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the House for my mobile phone ringing unceremoniously this afternoon.

I am heartened, as the Minister is, by the fact that some local community leaders have already visited Tower Street campus to express their regret that such an incident should take place, and have offered their support to all the staff and students. One has to condemn any sort of irresponsibility from whatever gang, or from wherever, and any form of intimidation. If such behaviour escalates, then there is trouble ahead.

This may be beyond the Minister's remit; it is more to do with education. For many years, students from controlled schools in County Fermanagh have suffered intimidation when going home on school buses to border areas. Undoubtedly, this has eased a little, but it has been a difficult situation for many of them.

Is the Minister aware of the intimidation that grammar school pupils suffered recently in Strabane when the Republic won its football match? I congratulate the Republic on the win, but some people are using and abusing the situation.

Ms Hanna: Many of us are aware of issues of sectarianism in our communities. It is not any respecter of place, person, or religion — it happens in all areas and to all people. However, until we work together, seriously and proactively, we will not eradicate this scourge.

Mr Ervine: I concur with the Minister's sentiments. Will she offer to us her knowledge of the police assessment that she must have received on any paramilitary involvement in the attack on the Tower Street campus? Since she is unable to give us details of previous attacks, will she also confirm why we should have had such an occurrence after thirty years of nothing?

Will the Minister look at the constituency in which Tower Street falls? Will she consider that conditions may have existed that certainly do not encourage me to condone what happened, but which may be a symptom rather than a cause? There is a greater cause; is the Minister aware of it?

Ms Hanna: I said that an investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland is taking place, so it would not be appropriate to comment on that.

Why is this happening? It is happening because we have a problem with sectarianism in this society. I hope that everyone would join me in condemning unequivocally this outrageous incident, regardless of any background, "what abouts" or "wherefores".

Mr P Robinson: I welcome the Minister's initiative in making a statement on this issue, and I support the content of her statement. Elected representatives have a duty to speak out on issues, whether it is convenient for them to do so or not. The intimidation of people who are attempting to get an education is reprehensible. I am

sure that the whole House accepts that that procedure is totally unacceptable in any civilised society. Therefore, I have no reservation in my condemnation.

The Minister has expressed the hope that it would be an isolated incident; that is also my hope. My hope is somewhat raised by the fact that all of my findings suggest that there was nothing organised about this event. There appears to have been no involvement of any paramilitary organisation. It is more likely to be the result of the reaction of people in the area, which is currently tense as a result of the IRA-orchestrated violence in that part of east Belfast. Like the Minister, I trust that there will be no reoccurrence of the incident and that there will be no detriment to the education of the people involved.

Ms Hanna: I welcome the Member's statement and his unequivocal condemnation of this act.

ERECTION OF UNAUTHORISED TERRORIST MEMORIALS

Mr Foster: I beg to move

That this Assembly rejects the offensive trend of erecting memorials throughout Northern Ireland by Republican elements in memory of terrorists who tortured citizens of this state for decades by their campaign of murder, maiming and destruction and calls upon the Executive to take immediate action to remove those memorials which have been erected without permission.

The motion is important to the many relatives of those who were foully murdered by the terrorists who held this land to ransom for many years.

The erection of forms of memorial to those who for decades wrought havoc and destruction on the people of this state is, at least, highly offensive, in-your-face and profoundly insulting. It is uncaring, uncompassionate and grossly irresponsible. It is an offensive taunt to a community which has suffered broken hearts, broken limbs and broken homes and been left with heartbroken widows, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters and many orphans.

Sinn Féin still lauds, and associates with, the gunman and the murderer, despite the fact that its members now act in Government here in Stormont, as Ministers acting on behalf of Her Majesty The Queen in this part of her realm.

4.00 pm

The preponderance of different types of memorials in Fermanagh intends to rile and hurt. The memorials are not intended for the purposes of respect — only for abuse. The most terrible lie is not that which is uttered but that which is lived.

There will be a plea on behalf of heroes today, but can anyone in the Chamber who professes adherence to a faith and belief in the Living Lord call terrorists “heroes” or “sons of the brave”? Could those who blew two of my colleagues to pieces outside Enniskillen one night many years ago be called heroes? I remember Alfie Johnston and Jimmy Eames well.

What about the terrorists who murdered Mrs Bullock at her doorway, and then went into her home and murdered her husband Tommy? What about those who went into the Earl of Erne County Primary School at Teemore and murdered the school principal, George Saunderson, as he had a cup of tea? What about those who murdered Alexander Abercrombie as he sat on his tractor, or those who murdered Willie Burleigh when he attended an auction? What about those who bravely murdered Tommy John Fletcher at Garrison, or those who murdered John McVitty at Magheraveely as he did his farming chores? What about those who brutally murdered my cousin, Charlie Johnston, in cold blood near St Anne's Cathedral as he, a director of a travel

agency in Waring Street, walked to his work? What about those who set off the Enniskillen bomb on Remembrance Day in 1987? I was present at the cenotaph on that day of carnage. Two people died in my hands. I tried to console them as they bled to death. Twelve people died in that atrocity.

What about the terrorists who caused the La Mon House Hotel hell-on-earth inferno? What about the Shankill Road bomb, Teebane Cross, the Ballygawley bus bomb, the murder of the soldiers at Narrow Water Castle, or the Kingsmills murders? What about all the individual murders that have taken place over the years? What about the Omagh bomb activists, who may eventually seek to be called heroes at some time in the future?

We had ethnic cleansing in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I have only referred to some of the many dastardly acts of murder and aggression perpetrated on citizens of that community by terrorists over the years — terrorists who are now being hailed as heroes by Sinn Féin.

Terrorists — either so-called Loyalists or Republicans — can never be accorded hero status by any decent individual. It is grossly offensive and insulting to many people in Northern Ireland.

The Hassard and Love families in the Belleek area of Fermanagh are grievously mortified by the erection of the memorial to terrorists beside where their loved ones were assassinated coming home from doing an honest day's work. Is that action not in-your-face offensive? I must emphasise that point — it certainly is in-your-face offensive.

Since then, another memorial has been erected in Enniskillen to the memory of Bobby Sands. It is on the site where a memorial to those who died during the famine had been solemnly dedicated a couple of years ago. The words "respect", "honesty" and "decency" are not in the thinking of Republicanism — they never were, and they never will be. This is just about Sinn Féin becoming the largest anti-British party in Northern Ireland at the expense of anyone who gets in its way. It has no scruples; it rides roughshod over the feelings of everyone, regardless of the hurt caused.

I appreciate that the blood relatives of those who have lost their lives mourn the deaths of their loved ones. However, it seems that that mourning should only happen when Sinn Féin dictates and in a way that it determines. That is shameful. Does anyone believe that the erection of a memorial to a terrorist on unhallowed ground will ease the pain for the relatives? Is that sacrilege?

Republicanism does that to seek political gain at the expense of the relatives who mourn the death of their flesh and blood. What sacrilege is being played out by those who profess innocence while making lying accusations of harassment in Northern Ireland?

I have been prepared to give those who have sinned in the eyes of the Almighty the opportunity to show repentance and remorse for their association with evil deeds over the past decades — for the well-being of this state and within the family of Britons. They have failed miserably to do so. They have been given a chance to redeem themselves and to show good, honest citizenship. But no — they want their pound of flesh, and they disregard the feelings of those around them.

They have been given the opportunity to serve in Executive positions in the Assembly, despite the fact that over the years they have associated with those who endeavoured to destroy this country, burned its towns and villages, and murdered and maimed our people. I say to them: look at the hands of those you call heroes. They are stained with the blood of our loved ones and their loved ones. Can they have a conscience at all? Can they barefacedly go on with their deceit and unadulterated, undiluted hypocrisy?

Those people have ignored at least three Departments — and, indeed, law and order — in their erection of offensive memorials. However, they expound here regularly, superficially filled with pretence about other issues. The Department of the Environment — my former Department — the Department for Regional Development, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must ensure that their responsibilities are not eroded and overrun by Republican stridency. The Department for Social Development is also involved. Departments cannot be seen to fail their remit or their responsibilities.

Monuments, by their very nature, are political statements. Those wildcat memorials are inimical to the healing process that Sinn Féin purports to espouse. They stir up hatreds, bitter memories, and fears and feelings that we all hoped that we could leave behind.

Evidence of Sinn Féin's being involved in stirring up community strife in places such as north Belfast, its involvement with the terrorists and drug dealers of FARC in Colombia, and its active links with other international terrorist groups, all of which is attested to by independent outside bodies and not only Unionist political comment, points to a real Sinn Féin agenda at total variance with its professed aim of healing our society. It is, unfortunately, an agenda of perpetuating strife. It is war by other means, at the expense of the heartbreak of citizens mourning their loved ones. How shameful can they get? How base can they become? There is an old Spanish proverb that says:

"Tell me who you associate with and I will tell you what you are."

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion, which is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr O'Neill: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 1, delete all after "Assembly" and insert:

“recognises the sensitivities involved on all sides in respect of the commemoration of those who have lost their lives in the conflict here, and calls upon the Executive in consultation with the relevant bodies, including the Victims Unit, the Community Relations Council, the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission to provide guidelines so that memorials of whatever kind conform to agreed criteria, and do not give offence.”

I wish to explain to the House what my party finds inadequate in the motion. To begin with, the motion mentions

“the offensive trend of erecting memorials... by Republican elements”,

when, clearly, it is not only Republicans who erect offensive monuments.

The motion goes on, in emotional terms, to describe in a one-sided way what we all know to be the suffering of all our people. My party finds that unacceptable. The motion calls on the Executive to take “immediate action”. Our amendment acknowledges that there is more to the matter than asking the Executive to storm in and remove those monuments. That approach is not satisfactory, and, therefore, we cannot support the motion.

Our amendment advocates a more proactive, equal, fair and genuine way of attempting to deal with the problem. If we wish to solve the problem, we must come up with a sensible way to deal with it. That is why we have included the bodies and responsible people listed in the amendment. Our conflict has been unique. It is vital that we consider the sensitivities of all those who wish to remember their dead.

The SDLP has no general ingrained objection to memorials. The problem arises when those monuments cause offence to other people within or without a community. We have a sad tradition in our society of being offended by the actions of others. That is not the way in which the SDLP wants to see our community continue. A serious human rights issue is at stake.

To erect monuments in a manner that is not conducive to the pledges made in the Good Friday Agreement is to fail the commitment to peace; to insist on erecting monuments where they do not have the full support of local people is to be destructive of the Good Friday Agreement’s values; to erect those monuments illegally on public grounds and to ignore the implications is a clear disregard of the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

Some time ago, a Republican monument was erected in Downpatrick without any reference to the council on whose land it was built. In an attempt to deal with the issue, the council asked someone to take responsibility for it. No one would. It is unfair to put a public body in such a position, and whoever was responsible had no regard for how it would affect others. The council, mindful of the sensitive nature of the situation, decided to deal with it step by step. It consulted the Equality

Commission for Northern Ireland. The commission’s interesting response stated:

“Under Article 28 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 it would be unlawful for the council to discriminate in a manner in which it provides services. This would include access to council-owned parks. It is the Commission’s view that the presence in a public park of an emblem or display such as this monument, which is directly linked to the community conflict over the past 30 years, could be regarded as offensive by some members of the community. As such, the council could be challenged under the above Order.”

The commission’s response also stated:

“Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act also requires the council, in carrying out its functions, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain individuals and groups. Without prejudice to this obligation, councils are also required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious beliefs, political opinion or racial group. The council would need to consider whether the presence of such a monument could be perceived as marking out territory and thus inhibit the use of this park by all of the community. In our view there would be particular problems from a good relations perspective if the council were to allow such displays in its facilities.”

That is a clear statement of the problems that unauthorised, illegal structures create.

A similar monument to the one in Downpatrick was then erected in the town where I live, Castlewellan. Planning permission was applied for. I asked whether it had been proofed against the human rights and equality legislation vis-a-vis the Equality Commission’s opinion that I have just quoted. It had not. The irony was that Sinn Féin members of the council — in a clear contradiction of their responsibility as publicly elected officials — supported that. It was a clear indication that, for them, party politics came before the welfare of the community. They have treated human rights and equality with total contempt despite their supposed allegiance to equality — they are interested in “themselves alone”.

I said that I would support remembrances as part of the healing process, and that is the SDLP’s policy. I also said that I would have no objection to a monument that had the full support of the community, the Human Rights Commission and the equality agenda.

4.15 pm

On a radio programme, I publicly asked the Sinn Féin representative for South Down, Mick Murphy, if he would join me in supporting a monument in Castlewellan to all those who had suffered and died in our area, instead of the one he proposed, and he publicly refused. What else can one say? He was only interested in a monument for “themselves alone”.

If we want to deal with equality as an issue and an agenda to be followed, we must practise what we preach, and we must be seen to do it. There is no point in talking in lofty terms about equality while doing the exact opposite on the ground and, as I have said, treating equality with

the contempt of which I have local experience. Therefore, in an attempt to deal with this growing problem it is necessary to bring all those agencies on board in order to get a coherent, sensible, fair and equal way of dealing with that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Now that I have a fuller picture of the number of Members who wish to speak — and it may yet change again — I advise Members to limit their contributions to eight minutes.

Mr Berry: I support the motion. Individuals, communities and societies like to mark and remember milestones in their history, and that is accepted across the world. However, the misuse of that which is being undertaken by those who any civilised society would look upon as fascist thugs is unacceptable. It is akin to erecting a memorial to Adolf Hitler, whom Sinn Féin/IRA backed, or putting up a memorial to Myra Hindley after her death.

A civil war is not being commemorated — it is not a war in any legitimate sense of the word. Memorials are being erected to common criminals who have killed innocent people across the Province. They are being erected to people who are nothing more than vagabonds who have raped and pillaged their way across the entire community and country and murdered workers, school-teachers, children, women, fathers and husbands in a dirty, grubby, filthy and rotten campaign.

Memorials have been erected for people who have killed the likes of 17-month-old Colin Nicholl and two-year-old Tracey Munn in 1971 — that was a brave act. It is repugnant to decent people that a group of brutal terrorists are commemorated, the sort of thugs who murdered George Saunderson, the school principal, in Erne County Primary School in 1974. My constituency of Newry and Armagh has suffered much of the brunt of Republican Sinn Féin/IRA terrorism — Kingsmills, Glenanne and other incidents have been mentioned today.

Anthony Nolan, an IRA activist who was nothing more than a common thief, accidentally shot himself while planning a bank robbery; he is some hero. Is he the type of person who deserves to be remembered? Bateson, Sheridan and Lee killed themselves while transporting a bomb to kill innocent people. On that occasion, the evil that they planned for others was turned on them.

Memorials erected to cowards who shot people in the dark and crawled up laneways to murder in the dark is not only repugnant and obscene, but a daily affront to everyone who went about their ordinary business decade after decade while those gangsters and hoods did everything possible to murder them in their beds or at work. That is what is being glorified across this country. If we were to erect a memorial to every citizen, soldier and policeman murdered by those thugs, there would not be enough land for them all.

What makes those shrines offensive is the glorification of violence and bloodshed. They are tasteless, tactless and obscene. However, what do we expect from IRA/Sinn Féin? In contrast, the memorial to the nine civilians who were murdered on the Shankill Road consists of a street lamp.

My constituency of Newry and Armagh has borne much of the brunt of IRA terrorism. Outside Belfast, Armagh has had the highest number of deaths. Republicans were responsible for 2,140 of the 3,636 deaths in Northern Ireland up to 1999 — around 60% of those murders. They are responsible for all the deaths, because there would have been no deaths but for them. The Assembly must not forget that for every two Protestants that the IRA killed they also murdered one Roman Catholic.

Whom did those heroes murder? People like Frank Murphy, who was murdered while driving a school bus for Drumsallen Primary School outside Armagh; William Elliott, a post office inspector; Henry Dickson, a train driver; and Tracy Doak. I am sure that none of us can forget the 1995 documentary about Tracy entitled 'No Time to Say Goodbye'. There is not enough paper to record the pain and anguish caused by Republican terrorists. It is, therefore, morally repugnant to remember any of those murderers. The Executive and the Minister of the Environment must take action.

The Assembly must do something to represent the innocent victims: people from both sides of the community who have suffered so much at the hands of terrorists; people who across the Province went about their daily duties and worked to the best of their abilities to look after their families and friends. They were stopped with such cowardice by terrorists across Northern Ireland. I speak to many victims who find it soul-destroying to see those memorials and to see terrorists being glorified for the bloodshed and violence that they caused across the community. Action must be taken to deal with those memorials; the relevant Department must remove them immediately.

I listened to Mr O'Neill with interest. He stated that he would not support the motion. That is a matter of grave concern. It was of greater concern that he suggested that all victims' names could be on the same monument when he spoke about Downpatrick. I assure the House that the victims that I have spoken of do not, in any way, want their loved ones' names beside those of the murderers who carried out such cowardly attacks. I state that clearly.

Action must be taken on behalf of all innocent people who suffered at the hands of terrorists. The motion is about Republican terrorists who have caused so much distress and anguish and who committed many murders across the Province. The last thing that the DUP wants to see is them being glorified for the terrorist, cowardly,

bloodthirsty acts that they have carried out throughout the Province during the past 30 years.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion is lopsided: it covers only one side of the story, which is no more than one would expect. Mr Foster is one of the movers of the motion. It seems that he has gone back into councillor mode. He was in that mode the last time that I remember being in such a debate with him. He is obviously spoiling for such a debate.

The amendment says that memorials should “conform” to agreed criteria. What are those criteria? However, there is not as much to argue against in the amendment as there is in the motion. No one to whom equality is important could support the motion. It does not reflect how the Assembly should approach the issue of memorials. The arguments presented so far are not the way to deal with the memorials issue. They can only make matters much worse.

The number of attacks on Republican memorials in Fermanagh and other areas is proof that all we can do is make the situation much worse. Paint has been poured on monuments and cars have been set on fire. One Unionist councillor asked that all monuments be blown to bits — so much for his signature to using non-violent methods. His words were followed by an attack on a monument the following night. There has been one attack only on British war memorials in Moy. If I am wrong, perhaps someone can put me right on that.

It has not been a two-way process. The motion is about one side; it is only about seeing victims as being on one side. That has been the argument on everything relating to victims. We often hear about the conflict of the past 30 years. Anybody who knows his history knows that the reasons behind the conflict go back to the inception of this particular statelet and the way that it was run from the start. Nationalists were entirely left out of the picture and had no part in ruling this part of Ireland. That is the backdrop for all this. It has nothing to do with the past 30 years in particular.

One need only go to any town or village, however small, in the North to see British war memorials in every one. Most of them cost a sizeable amount of money. Recently, £19,000 was spent in Enniskillen to just update the names on a memorial. We in Fermanagh District Council did not oppose that. Who was consulted about the original cenotaphs? Whose permission was asked? Did the original Stormont Government give permission for the erection of those cenotaphs?

Republicans have a right to pay tribute to, and commemorate, their dead like anyone else. There has been conflict over the past 30 years, but, as I said, the conflict has gone on much longer than that. That conflict, as with all wars, was bitter. There is no such thing as clean fighting in a war, despite what the Member opposite

almost implied. We need only remember the rape and plunder committed by Cromwell in his early years in Ireland. *[Interruption]*.

It is a reality. The Members opposite seem to have a difficulty in hearing the truth. However, it is the truth, and that is why it hurts. War is war. War was the same wherever it occurred.

Mr Foster: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does Mr McHugh equate murder with war? Is he condoning the murders that have been committed over the years?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I consider that to be an intervention, not a point of order. The Member may wish to respond.

Mr McHugh: The British security forces, in collusion with Loyalists, murdered Nationalists on many occasions. Louis Leonard was murdered in his butcher’s shop in Derrylin in 1972. That involved collusion with the security forces. Michael Naan and Andrew Murray were killed in south Fermanagh as part of the pitchfork murders. They were killed by security forces — by soldiers in British regiments, who later admitted it.

There were many other murders in that area. Patsy Kelly from Trillick is one example. There have been many accusations as to which element of the British security forces was responsible for that murder. No one has ever admitted to it. Those are only a few of the murders. Nationalists were murdered, but there seems to be no agreement —

Mr Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr McHugh: I need to use whatever time I have left, given that we have only eight minutes to speak.

4.30 pm

We have always been prepared to acknowledge that there has been hurt on both sides and that there is no monopoly on suffering and pain. Gerry Adams has consistently told Unionists that Sinn Féin, through the peace process, wants to move to a different position. This type of debate does not encourage that.

Observers can only be encouraged by Unionists’ asking in the Assembly for something completely different for Nationalists and Republicans who want to honour their dead. This is not for their glorification; this is done simply because they believe they have that right. I agree. Most Nationalists and Republicans quietly put up memorials as a mark of respect, a tribute to their dead, to volunteers who gave their lives for a struggle they believed to be right. They were right. They gave their lives for the right reasons, as did anyone who fought in the British wars. Those people believed that they fought for an honourable cause, and that should be recognised by all sides. Unionists especially should not beat the drum that they are the only ones who are right.

Mayhem and slaughter are seen as the backdrop to history in any country in the world where Britain ruled. I am sure that most Unionists here know their history very well, but perhaps they pick and choose the parts to remember. Most Nationalists, however, know their history exactly. We have had 800 years of history here, and we do not need to be told it. The future position of Nationalists must be based on equality. Éamonn Ó'Neill referred to picking and choosing someone to make a particular statement on a monument in his town. We cannot do that. For the conflict to cease, we must go forward on the basis that everyone has a right to honour his dead.

Mr Boyd: I want to place on record my opposition to the erection of illegal memorials by Republicans. Those so-called memorials are deliberately provocative. They are designed to mark out territory and further insult the innocent victims of IRA terrorism. In respect of the SDLP amendment, the distinction between innocent victims, both Protestant and Catholic, and those who set out to destroy lives and property must be clear. It is insulting and disgraceful that some in the Assembly and in the community refer to terrorists and their families as victims when they set out deliberately to plan and execute heinous acts of terrorism that resulted in innocent victims. It is disgraceful that Republicans in the Chamber treat with contempt those gallant Protestants and Catholics who fought side by side and died in wars, including the world wars.

It is a scandal that terrorist families have received Government support and funding, while many innocent victims, including those who laid down their lives in defence of freedom and democracy, have received no compensation and are not even permitted to honour their loved ones. Mrs Thelma Johnston's son David was in the RUC. He was brutally murdered by the Provisional IRA on 16 June 1997 in Lurgan, shot in the back by cowardly scum while serving the whole community. A committee of Belfast City Council recently refused Mrs Johnston permission to lay a wreath on behalf of those brave members of the security forces who had laid down their lives. I hope that those gullible and disgraceful Presbyterians who yesterday embraced Alex Maskey of Sinn Féin/IRA meet the innocent victims of Republican terrorism.

Throughout Northern Ireland, however, many illegal memorials are erected by Republican terrorists. It is a disgrace that many councils turn a blind eye to that and refuse to demolish or remove them. Many of those memorials are strategically placed to cause maximum hurt and pain. They are placed on main roads, close to where many members of the security forces and others were murdered and maimed. It is disgusting that some councils, such as Newry and Mourne District Council, maintain memorials to Republican terrorists.

It is disgraceful that Londonderry city council claimed ignorance of the statue of an INLA terrorist armed with a rifle that was erected in a Londonderry cemetery. The

INLA is responsible for some of the worst terrorist atrocities, including the Darkley massacre in south Armagh; the murder of 17 people in the Ballykelly bomb in County Londonderry; the murder of the Conservative Party's Northern Ireland spokesman, Airey Neave MP; and the murders of many other innocent people. Many other Republican memorials have been erected illegally in Northern Ireland, causing heartache for many innocent victims.

My problem with the motion is that it calls for the Executive to take action. The Executive includes Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness, a self-confessed leader of the Provisional IRA. At a Republican memorial rally in Bodinstown on 23 June 1986, 'The Irish News' quotes the same Martin McGuinness — the so-called Minister of Education — as saying

"Freedom can only be gained at the point of an IRA rifle. I apologise to no one for saying that we support and admire the freedom fighters of the IRA."

It would, therefore, add to the hurt of the innocent victims to call on Martin McGuinness when he clearly endorses the Provisional IRA's erection of illegal memorials to Republican terrorists.

The illegal memorials must be removed immediately, and ultimate responsibility for their removal should be placed firmly with the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the Northern Ireland Office. The Prime Minister is too quick to remove essential security installations, yet he refuses to remove the illegal memorials to Republican terrorists who were guilty of the most heinous crimes.

One of the worst reminders for the innocent victims of terrorism is IRA/Sinn Féin in the heart of the Government of Northern Ireland. I have spoken to many innocent victims, including some from the constituencies of the Members who proposed the motion. I call on the hon Members Foster and Kennedy to ease the pain of the innocents by removing the Ulster Unionist Party from the power-sharing Assembly with IRA/Sinn Féin. The placing of IRA/Sinn Féin in the heart of Government over the people whom they continue to terrorise compounds the hurt of the innocent victims of terrorism. The innocent victims continue to suffer.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion for two reasons: the memorials are offensive to the majority of decent people; and they are illegal because they were erected without planning permission. An illegal memorial has been erected in the village of Dungiven, three miles from where I live. It is supposedly in memory of the hunger strikers who took their own lives in the early 1980s, but it has caused much hurt to the family of an RUC officer who was shot dead within 50 yards of it and much distress to the parishioners of the local parish church, which is just yards from it. The church's property has been damaged many times, and its hall has been burnt to the ground.

To add insult to injury, the eyesore has been erected on the only open space in Dungiven's Main Street. It is across the road from Dungiven Castle, which was regenerated as a tourism centre using thousands of pounds of public money. There are those in the Unionist community who do not feel that they can visit that historic site because of the intimidating structure opposite.

People who have been deeply involved in terrorist activity in recent years but who now claim to be democrats have been elected to local councils throughout Northern Ireland. It should naturally follow that democrats should not only support and uphold the law of the land but should be seen to do so. However, it is clear that many who claim to be democrats are not. When I raised the issue of the illegal memorial at the council's monthly planning meeting, the majority of the SDLP councillors did not support its removal and none of the Sinn Féin councillors was supportive, which was no great surprise.

The fact that the Planning Service has not taken any steps to remove the memorial is disturbing. Hundreds of people who pay due regard to the process and follow the correct procedures are refused planning permission. Understandably, they find it difficult to understand why others can build whatever they like, wherever they feel. I urge the Planning Service to review its policy on illegal developments and remove these offensive so-called memorials forthwith.

We can all recognise the sensitivities of people who have lost family members. However, with proper planning approval, there is enough space in cemeteries to erect appropriate memorials. It is incumbent on all elected representatives to ensure that these illegal structures are removed. I support the motion.

Ms McWilliams: I shall address some technical points before I consider the more emotive issue of how to deal with this difficult subject.

It would be a good idea if the Executive were to consider the issue, because it will not go away. The Executive should consult the agencies that are cited in the amendment, and also local councils.

Depending on where memorials are erected, they are likely to cause offence. The Women's Coalition is a cross-community party that is made up of Nationalists, Unionists and others. Since Jane Morrice and I were elected to the Assembly, we have tried to understand the perspectives of the opposing sides. We always question ourselves on whether our actions give due consideration to human rights. Are we being inclusive in what we say or do? We may get it wrong at times; if people are brought up in one community, they do not always understand what it is like for the other community. Do we provide equality of opportunity, or are we acting in a discriminatory way?

The test has been difficult, but the same test could be applied to how we remember the dead. The agreement states that there is a right to free political thought and a right to freedom and expression of religion. In this country political identity and religion are often mixed up. The agreement also refers to the right to freedom from sectarian harassment. Although we are debating memorials to the dead, and given the Minister for Employment and Learning's earlier statement, I am concerned about the creation of murals that are dedicated to the living before they are dead.

I shall give you an example of how difficult it is for Departments to reconcile their responsibilities. If a memorial is built on public land, the Department that owns that land is responsible. Councils have had to deal with that problem. If a mural is painted on a wall, the owner of the property is responsible. Lamp-posts and street lights are the responsibility of the engineering and lighting division of the Department of the Environment, and pavements are the responsibility of the Roads Service of the Department of the Environment. I made many phone calls this afternoon, and it takes several hours —

Mr Beggs: The Member referred to the Department of the Environment. Will she acknowledge that those responsibilities were transferred from the former Department of the Environment to the Department for Regional Development?

Ms McWilliams: I acknowledge that it is completely confusing, and I am glad of the intervention.

One area is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, and another area is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development. It is good that the Executive may have an opportunity to address the matter. The situation is absolutely ridiculous, the height of nonsense. The Planning Service says that if a memorial is erected without planning permission and is considered unacceptable, it must determine whether formal enforcement action is appropriate.

I may not vote for the amendment. I would like to know who would be responsible for the enforcement of any guidelines that may be adopted. The Planning Service does not apply much enforcement with regard to what is being erected, or where it is being erected. The same Planning Service then says that there are no permitted development rights for memorials or monuments in Northern Ireland, irrespective of size or classification — there is no legislation in place. That may be something for the Executive to address.

4.45 pm

Planning permission is required for the erection of any monument or memorial outside a cemetery. Inside cemetery walls is where they ought to be; if they are being erected anywhere else, they are offensive. It may

be that local residents, depending on which community has the majority at a particular time, do not see them as offensive, but if we take the principle that we are dealing with a double minority, then the memorials will offend someone. The Executive should address the fact that legislation is not in place for memorials or monuments outside cemeteries.

I have listened to the debate, and I am disheartened by what I have heard. Ours is a damaged society — the conflict has been a terrible one — but until people get out of denial that there has been terrible hurt and desperate murder committed and take responsibility for that and commit themselves to doing something different in the future, we will go round and round in a vicious circle.

I have much sympathy for the Ulster Unionist motion — the issue needs to be addressed. Memorials are being erected all over the place, and those from the other side need to seriously consider what those memorials mean to people as they are passing by, particularly the relatives of those who have been murdered.

People who are writing sectarian scribbles on the walls of east Belfast should seriously consider how offensive and dangerous they are to people walking past them.

It is time to remember and to change. We are not ready to put up memorials around the country willy-nilly. The Executive should take the issue seriously — although no Minister is present to respond to the debate. When the Business Committee met last week it asked the Executive to decide which Minister would take responsibility. I see that they could not come to any agreement on that matter. Where does the issue go after we have debated it today?

Mrs Carson: I support the motion. As I listened to Members' comments I thought about canvassing in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, where we do not need memorials along the road. We can see the crossroads where someone was shot in the back; the tarmac patch where the bomb exploded and where several people were murdered. We cannot forget that.

I agree with Ms McWilliams that we have to look forward. Here we have an instance of coat-trailing by one side of the community trying to perpetuate the problem.

We have so many insensitive IRA monuments erected in public places, causing great distress to the families of people murdered by those named on the monuments. It is claimed that those named on the monuments were on active service. The term "active service" implies a recognised army or battle situation — not the actions of a sordid terrorist organisation that ambushed and murdered unarmed civilians going about their day-to-day business. The weasel words of "active service" are used to try to cover the fact that IRA members were actively seeking innocent members of the public to murder. Thankfully,

many people were saved from further outrages by the security forces.

Remembrance is an important part of our healing process. It ensures that those who went before us, and their contributions to society, are not forgotten. We have monuments to the dead of both world wars, and I emphasise that they commemorate people from both communities. I am a proud Enniskillen person, born and raised in the town. I recognise people from all parts of the community. During the world wars, it did not matter whether someone was a Roman Catholic or a Protestant. People were proud to serve in the two regiments, and their names are on war memorials. Please let it be recorded in Hansard that it was not a sordid campaign.

There are memorials to the dead from both communities in both world wars. There are also monuments to tragedies, but our most common memorial is the headstone of the family grave. Those memorials are dignified and respectful, but to equate a traditional monument with that of an illegal terrorist organisation is repugnant and insulting to all ordinary people. The victims' families have to pass such monuments on the roadside, and it brings back terrible memories each time. The pain endured by the families does not lessen with the passage of time. In Fermanagh and South Tyrone there are too many roadside IRA monuments.

I am concerned by Sinn Féin's inflammatory actions and words. Its members involve themselves in public displays of contempt and hatred, which only further divide society. This is the same party that talks so much about equality and peace. A Sinn Féin Member from Fermanagh and South Tyrone stated in a BBC report that the positioning of a monument at a Belleek crossroads was justified. The same person admitted that those mentioned were on active duty. She also stated that the RUC and Royal Irish Regiment monuments were in public places.

Monuments to the Army, the RUC and the Royal Irish Regiment are kept in churches, graveyards, security buildings or on Government property. The only truly public memorials are war memorials to commemorate — and I say it again — both Protestants and Roman Catholics who died in two world wars. They are poignant reminders to the public of the terrible price paid for fighting fascism for the common good. The IRA is simply an extension of the evil that plagued the world more than 60 years ago. Churches and graveyards are a testament to the price that we paid to ensure that madness did not destroy our freedom.

If terrorist groups wish to have memorials, they should consider asking whether they could place them in the graveyards and churches of their own denomination or allegiance, where they will not cause offence. They should consider that; there are already some in graveyards and burial grounds.

All plaques, memorials and monuments on public sites require planning permission. I call on all the Departments to co-ordinate their efforts to ensure that these illegal memorials, with their pseudo, copycat trappings of conventional war memorials, are removed from our roadsides, forestry plantations and historical graveyards.

Mr Gibson: I support the motion. At times we have been guilty of missing the main point of this debate. I do not call these objects “memorials”. They are wayside platforms for the promotion of the political activists who have supported terror in this country. This is another part of the IRA/Sinn Féin terror campaign. It is a form of political and institutional terror and a way of dominating the landscape.

Every one of these memorials, as they call them — I call them the political platforms for the activists turned political terrorists — are for the draft dodgers, the quartermasters, the suppliers, the finger pointers and all those who have been part of a unique campaign of genocide, particularly in the west of the Province. Let us not forget that the IRA strategists who control Sinn Féin have not changed their great ambition. They view this as part of their campaign to deliver a Republican, united Ireland. This is simply a stepping stone. We have seen how they have changed their tactics over the years.

I was delighted that Gerry McHugh admitted in his speech that it was murder; that is the first time I have heard a member of his party admitting that what was carried out was murder. However, he went back to the old Republican phrasebook when stuck for a little ammunition and talked about 800 years of British misrule. I will pose him some questions. Who murdered at the rate of 27 to one in the Irish civil war of 1921-22 — was it not the so-called Irish who killed the Irish? Will he tell the Assembly whether the 10 who were exhumed by the Southern Government and re-interred recently in Glasnevin Cemetery were pro-treaty or anti-treaty? Had they survived their jail term, would they have been murdered by their own?

It is interesting that Mr McHugh made one slip in all this, supporting the erection of terrorist platforms by the waysides so that almost weekly they could have another campaign to make sure that the Young Turks and the older troops would be ready, accessible and amenable. That is what they are about. Therefore I would never dignify the activities of the IRA and its campaigns of murder with memorials. My constituency has too many bitter remembrances of those occasions. I could mention Teebane and Ballygawley Road, one, two, and three — they are all multiple murders. Most people have forgotten Teebane. I could mention the Royal Arms Hotel murders, the Knocknamoe murders and, of course, the Omagh bomb murders.

This was not just a terror campaign of genocide — it has moved on to domination. Believe it or not, I was surprised

at the SDLP, which has again shown tremendous weakness. That party is always urging us to take leadership and move forward. However, Éamonn ONeill said that Sinn Féin treated equality with contempt; that theirs was a “themselves alone” programme. Having admitted that Sinn Féin is all about “themselves alone” and that Sinn Féin treated equality with contempt, that Mr ONeill lacks the courage or wisdom to support the motion displays a terrible weakness in SDLP thinking

5.00 pm

We must be wise to the real issue. Terror comes in many forms, such as the physical form of murder; there have been 97 murders in my constituency. It can also come in institutional forms. It can come in the form of the stoning of school buses or of quiet, insolent contempt for everything that is Unionist.

What threat is a small Orange lodge of 22 members to a massive Republican community? The church is in Carrickmore. Twenty-two local farmers and labourers going to a Sunday service — what threat could that pose to the massive Republican stronghold of Carrickmore? It cannot be tolerated; that is what Sinn Féin means by equality. Similarly, Mountfield is a Republican stronghold; out of seven councillors, it produces four Sinn Féin members. What threat would a wee Orange lodge of 27 members be to that community? It cannot be tolerated.

My time has run out. I support the motion.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to make a few comments. I agree with Mr Gibson that the places he mentioned present no threat to anyone. It is an absolute disgrace that anyone would consider them as such. The difference is that I can say that an attack on an isolated Orange hall is absolutely and fundamentally wrong and goes against any Republican principle. I disagree with that entirely.

However, the same people will never speak out about Catholic churches in east Belfast or other isolated Catholic communities that have been under attack. They will somehow always fall back on the notion that such attacks are reactive, that they are a reaction from the community to some greater misdeed that was done to their community. That is the difference. Isolated communities on whatever side should be allowed to live in peace. Mr Gibson, who has since left, should consider some of the actions carried out by people from his community and treat them with the same seriousness.

The motion’s tone has set the standard for the debate, which has been largely predictable. It shows how far we must go if we are to engage in any reconciliation process. Sam Foster spoke about people not having any honesty, integrity or dignity. He reverted to that type of language when talking about us. That struck me because the same people who share Committees with us here and who support the d’Hondt principle — that we will

take the rightful places that we are entitled to by the number of votes that we receive — will walk out of a council meeting because a Sinn Féin member is elected chairperson.

There is a lack of integrity in Unionist representatives when they can do business with Sinn Féin and support the elections of its members in Chambers such as this, yet huff and puff in other chambers and walk out when Sinn Féin is elected. When we talk about honesty and integrity, we must look at ourselves first and foremost.

I agree with the sentiments of the amendment. Monica McWilliams —

Mr Foster: When the Member speaks about integrity and otherwise at councils, is he referring to me?

Mr C Murphy: I heard Mr Foster's opening remarks on the monitor. If I heard correctly, he questioned the honesty and integrity of Republicans and Republican elected representatives. In this institution, his party and Unionists support the right of Republicans to the positions to which they are entitled, and they have voted in support of that and d'Hondt. However, recently in Belfast City Council, members of his party, including Ministers who benefit from the d'Hondt mechanism, walked out of a council meeting when Sinn Féin got its just entitlements as the largest party on that council. When talking about honesty and integrity, one should look to oneself first and foremost.

I agree with the sentiments of the amendment. It talks about "agreed criteria", and that term is not defined. Monica McWilliams raised questions about the amendment. An agreed set of procedures for erecting monuments is something that we could go along with.

There was some irony when Éamonn ÓNeill said that the behaviour of Sinn Féin in Downpatrick was hypocritical because it flew in the face of supporting the equality provisions. The irony is that the monument was erected to an unarmed person who had been shot dead by the RUC. He was left to bleed to death in the street, and that was a breach of his human rights. However, the MP for the area at the time said that he felt that the RUC had acted appropriately in the action it took, in allowing an unarmed man to bleed to death in the street. That is a challenge to its support of human rights, which it has lauded over the years.

The Unionists who proposed the motion object to the erection of illegal monuments, and that is what the motion is focused on. On the one hand, I can see that that might be the case. A monument was erected in my village in 1991. Planning permission was sought, a lay-by was built and agreed by the Department of the Environment, and there were no objections from local Unionists.

However, when Republicans in Newry sought the agreement of the council some months ago to find a site for the erection of a monument to commemorate the

hunger strikers, Danny Kennedy lodged very vocal objections, even though the people involved had worked with the council to try to identify a site and had located the monument on a site that the council had suggested, not one that they themselves had chosen. That begs the question: are people really worried about whether monuments are legal or illegal or about the fact that there are monuments at all?

Members have said that the location of monuments is insensitive. Gerry McHugh made the point that there are monuments to those who fought in the British Army in every town centre. From the roof of Woolworths in Newry, less than 50 yards from the cenotaph, the British Army shot dead three young men in the early 1970s. No one, as far as I am aware, has objected to the location of the cenotaph in the middle of Newry or has tried to have it removed. It stays there and people are entitled to have their remembrance. However, it is a monument to those who served in an army that murdered people on the streets of that town. Newry is a largely Nationalist town, and no one has objected to the cenotaph.

There is a tradition that people are sensitive to how remembrance is conducted. The media are all obliged to wear poppies in November in remembrance of the British Army, regardless of their political, religious or personal affiliations. I ask the movers of the motion how they think Jean McBride, the mother of Peter McBride, feels when the people providing a service to her are obliged to wear poppies to commemorate the British Army that murdered her son and re-employed those who were found guilty of that murder.

There are sensitivities on the other side to people they consider to be legitimate war heroes, as there are to people engaged in legitimate war on our side of the fence. All the sentiments expressed by Paul Berry could be expressed by someone from a Republican community about the RUC, the UDR or the British Army. They could all reflect the same sentiments of people murdering those who were trying to go about their business, who were innocent or who were not even involved in conflict. Murders have been covered up.

There is talk of sensitivity and monuments being located in sensitive areas. There is hardly a town centre in the North that does not have a monument to those who have fought and served in the British Army.

Mrs Carson: Will the Member give way?

Mr C Murphy: I have very little time, and I cannot give way. However, I will address a point made by Joan Carson. There are monuments at roadsides as well as cenotaphs in towns. There is one on the way to Kingsmills, not far from where Danny Kennedy comes from, and there is one in Castlewellan to UDR members who were killed there.

That does not stop the Unionists who talk about sensitivity from travelling round the South. There is hardly a road or town in the South where there is not a monument to someone from the IRA who was killed during the war of independence. Nationalists and Republicans erect monuments in a different way to Unionists, who erect cenotaphs in town centres.

I have run out of time. We need to address a process of national reconciliation. Unionists seem to be fixated with the idea that they are right and that there is a necessity to prove that they are right. That means running down anything that Republicans try to do. That will not lead us to national reconciliation. I accept that we should be sensitive as to how we commemorate our dead. Unionists must learn that the commemoration of British Army war dead is a very sensitive topic for people on my side of the fence.

Mr McGimpsey: I support the motion. I also want to look at the amendment proposed by Mr Tommy Gallagher. In it he talks about the need for criteria and referring the matter back to various bodies, including the Executive. It is important for Members to reflect that a criterion already exists; it is called the planning law. Any memorial requires planning permission, and the erection of a memorial without planning permission is illegal. Every one of the memorials that have gone up without planning permission is illegal. That is the law.

I have served on the planning committee at Belfast city hall for many years. Many Members are similarly aware of planning law, because they deal with it on a daily basis in local councils. Development, as defined in article 11 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, is:

“the carrying out of building, engineering, mining or other operations in, on, over or under land, or the making of any material change in the use of any buildings or other land.”

“Other operations” is a catch-all term for any physical operation.

The memorials that we are debating are illegal because they do not have planning permission. The question then is what to do about them legally. Action can be taken by way of an enforcement notice against the person or organisation that erected the memorial and the landowner. That action is available to the Department of the Environment. Planning applications were not submitted for many of those memorials, and no one claimed ownership of them, which makes the enforcement process difficult. However, other action can be taken; the landowner has the right to clear his land of anything that people put on it.

The land on which many of those memorials have been erected belongs to Departments. The point has been well made in the debate that Departments have a duty to ensure that the law of the land and planning regulations are enforced. The issue is an emotive and a difficult one, but that does not excuse the breaking of

the law by Mr Conor Murphy’s organisation in each and every one of those cases.

I have spelt out the criteria. There is no need for the amendment. The matter may be difficult, emotive and sensitive, but those are the criteria, and the process of obtaining planning permission and permission from the landowner must be adhered to. That is the way forward.

I support the substance of the motion for reasons that have already been mentioned in the debate. Sam Foster and Mrs Carson referred to the memorial erected in Belleek to IRA volunteers who carried out acts of murder. It is not located where the IRA volunteers died, but it has been erected at the spot where they carried out that act of murder. Two men travelling in their car were singled out and murdered by the IRA. The IRA/Republicans put up a memorial on that spot.

Not only were the IRA saying that those men had no right to exist, which is bad enough; they are now attempting to say that they never existed, which is monstrous. That is the reason I support the motion. That act is not simply insensitive, intolerant or inequitable; it is absolutely monstrous. They are looking to eradicate the existence of those men by erecting an IRA memorial on the spot where they died. That is disgraceful and outrageous.

The place for memorials is often in graveyards. That is recognised by the authorities, because planning permission to erect a memorial in a graveyard is not required. Permission is required from the owner, which, in many cases, is the local council. The Republican plot in Belfast is a case in point. Republicans have the opportunity to erect memorials to their dead in that plot, and it is an appropriate way for them to grieve for and to remember those friends and family members that they have lost.

Mr Conor Murphy referred to war memorials in many towns in Northern Ireland. Those are memorials to the dead of two world wars — the two greatest wars in history, in which millions of people died, including many from both sides of the community in Northern Ireland and people from right across these islands.

Those memorials are different from monuments to people who set out to achieve a political aim that they could not fulfil by democratic means. An overwhelming majority of the population rejected those political aims, so the terrorists resorted to terror in an effort to achieve them. They failed, and that is why Members are here today. The Assembly is trying to rebuild society and to deal with its pain and scars. That will not be done by erecting memorials on roadsides and at inappropriate spots that cause great hurt to the community. A graveyard is the proper place for a memorial.

If planning permission and the landlord’s permission to erect the memorial were obtained, nobody would object; however, that did not happen in the cases outlined. The erection of a memorial in Belleek was monstrous.

The only course of action is to ensure that the landowner and the authorities take the necessary steps. The attitude of Republicans, including those in the Chamber, is a formula for conflict.

Republicans are denying Unionists the right to exist. That is evident in the blocking of roads; for example, Ormeau Road was blocked during an Orange march that consisted of only two or three dozen Orangemen. Those Orangemen's culture, identity and right to exist are being denied. They are being told that they have no right to be there. Republicans have still not learnt that Unionists have a right not only to exist, but to be part of a democratic and free society.

There is no case for the amendment, which should be voted against. There is an overwhelming case for the motion.

5.15 pm

Mr Hay: There have been extremely lively debates on the issue in council chambers across the Province. In the city of Londonderry in the early 1970s, the IRA decided to kill company directors, including the head of DuPont, who was shot dead as he returned from work by gangsters who waited for him outside his house. I know of other company directors in Londonderry who were shot dead by the IRA. The IRA, during those years, felt that it was necessary to "take out" the directors of major companies throughout the Province. The IRA has also murdered young children, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters.

For decades, the Republican movement has carried out a terrorist campaign without shame. In the Foyle constituency the IRA shot dead a young policeman and returned a year later and shot dead his only daughter. This afternoon, Members have heard about people's rights. The Republican movement in the House has tried to equate terrorists' monuments to cenotaphs throughout Northern Ireland.

In my city of Londonderry wreaths that were laid on Remembrance Sunday by many organisations have been torn apart and taken off the cenotaph two hours later on many occasions. We in Londonderry know all about Sinn Féin/IRA's rights, as they call them.

We need to be clear about what the debate is about, and I know some Members equate those monuments to memorials in graveyards. A Republican movement took over a graveyard in Londonderry to erect a terrorist monument, and that movement stayed in the city cemetery for several days. Even today, many Protestants whose relations are buried there cannot go near it. The monument was so high that it was a total insult not only to the many Protestant people there but to many in the Nationalist community. I invite anyone in the House to look at that monument and ask himself whether this is about rights when he sees that monument towering

above the other gravestones. A Republican organisation practically takes over a graveyard, threatens the people there and erects a monument, and Sinn Féin/IRA talks to us about rights.

In another instance in Londonderry it has taken over Roads Service land to erect other monuments, and, once again, it has used force. We can have all the planning laws we want, and the Executive can do whatever they want, but those people just take over areas in my city by force and erect monuments. Anyone who enquires about what is happening is threatened.

The problem in Northern Ireland — and it has been so for many years — is that terrorists are happy to threaten and murder people and break the law to erect monuments because they know that they have a weak British Government that will do nothing. There is a feeling among Republicans that they can do anything here, and if they want a monument on any piece of land, they will use whatever brutal force is necessary to ensure that it is erected.

I support the motion. However, I do not know what will happen now, given that there is still an armed wing that is prepared to take over land to erect monuments. There is a serious issue of law and order in Northern Ireland.

Mr Hamilton: I say at the outset that, having listened to Mr Conor Murphy, I know of no spectacle more offensive and ridiculous as the Republican movement in one of its periodic fits of pretentious morality. I support the motion so ably proposed by my Colleague Mr Foster. There is a difference between graveyard monuments and memorials in places where the individuals who are commemorated are buried and monuments in open, shared places of public concourse.

Dublin, for example, has many sites associated with the 1916 Easter Rising. However, the Republican memorial is at the Republican plot in Glasnevin Cemetery. The city is not littered from one end to the other with memorials. Memorials in public places should command broad public support. War memorials to the fallen of forces that represented the legally elected Government of the day are one thing. Custom and practice have meant that war memorials have always been sited in prominent public places — usually town centres.

Monuments for the fallen of an insurgent terrorist force that is responsible for killing many ordinary, innocent citizens in a cold-blooded and premeditated way are offensive to most of the population. If such monuments must exist, they should be confined to the cemeteries and graveyards where those whom they commemorate are buried; they should have the appropriate consent of church authorities. Memorials should not be politically provocative and should not be sited in politically provocative places. It seems that Sinn Féin is hell-bent on deliberately seeking out sites that will be provocative

and are designed to hurt. Such sites represent in-your-face Republicanism.

Ordinary planning rules are inadequate to deal with what is essentially a political issue. A judgement on whether a monument is aesthetically acceptable or in some way damaging to local amenities is not enough. Those monuments, by their very nature, are political statements. One is almost tempted to suggest that a solution might be to have such memorials subject to a body like the Parades Commission, because they have the same politically charged nature as many of the parades that are deemed contentious by some people.

Those wildcat memorials run deep against the healing process that Sinn Féin purports to espouse. They stir up hatreds, bitter memories, fears and feelings that we all hoped could be left behind. When considered alongside other evidence, such as Sinn Féin's involvement in stirring up community strife in north and east Belfast, its involvement with the terrorists and drug dealers of FARC in Colombia, its active links with other international terrorist groupings — all of which is attested to by independent external bodies, not only Unionist political comment — all point to a real Sinn Féin agenda that is at complete variance with its professed aim of healing Northern Ireland's society.

It is an agenda for perpetuating strife. It is war by other means, and I support the motion.

Mr Morrow: As my Colleagues have intimated, we will be supporting the motion.

I find the amendment quite offensive. It is despicable that the SDLP should use this opportunity to try to cover again for Sinn Féin/IRA. It is also most regrettable that the Minister of the Environment is not here. Whether he has full or partial responsibility, he should be speaking in this debate, but this is not the first time that that Minister has held the House in contempt, and we know that.

I am quite offended at the SDLP's attempt to amend the motion. Its amendment states that everything after "Assembly" should be left out and the following inserted:

"recognises the sensitivities involved on all sides in respect of the commemoration of those who have lost their lives in the conflict here,".

If ever there were a misnomer, a misuse and abuse of a word, it is the use of the word "conflict". That is highly offensive and insulting. In Northern Ireland, a bunch of hoods, thugs and corner boys became murderers, and that is now described as a "conflict" — it is anything but. It is highly offensive and insulting of the SDLP to say that this was a conflict. It was unmitigated terror, perpetrated by those who made every attempt to overthrow the legitimacy of the state. They have shown in the crudest, rudest and most fascistic manner their disrespect for everyone who does not agree with them.

Is it not time for the SDLP to come clean on these issues? Is it not time that the SDLP stopped giving cover to Sinn Féin/IRA? The time has come for that party to stand up and be counted and demonstrate in clear, unambiguous terms that there is clear water between it and Sinn Féin/IRA.

Mr Dallat: What about the LVF?

Mr Morrow: I have no connection with the LVF. If you want to take me up on that point, I am happy to do so. It gives me no trouble whatsoever to condemn that group. I want no monuments to the LVF, and I hope that you understand that. That is not what your party's amendment says.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The debate will take place through the Chair, not across the Chamber.

Mr Morrow: The amendment says that that party feels that there is a place for these monuments. There is no place to elegise terrorists. I do not care from what side they came. Anyone who knows me in public life — you have not known me long, but you can visit my council and see if I have been ambiguous in my condemnation of terrorism, from whatever quarter. I do not put any ifs, ands or buts into that, as some Members try to. I want no monuments to any terrorists at all. I hope that you, Mr Dallat, fully understand that. If you need it written out in big print, I will do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I repeat that I will tolerate a certain amount of cross-chat, but the debate will take place through the Chair and not across the Chamber.

Mr Morrow: The brutal campaign of terrorism that has been waged over the past 30 years in Northern Ireland must not be glorified in the monuments that are being erected willy-nilly across the country.

They are intended to offend and insult, and that is what they do. They are intended to carry on the war by another means. As has been said, our graveyards are a poignant testimony to what has gone on here for the past 30 years. We do not have to walk far from the Chamber to find the first monument to terrorism. Step out through the Door of the Chamber and on the right-hand side are two memorial inscriptions dedicated to three innocent people who were done to death by Sinn Féin/IRA. Cross the Great Hall to the Senate, where there was a service recently, and there are memorial inscriptions to Senator Paddy Wilson of the SDLP and Senator Jack Barnhill from Strabane, both brutally done to death. It is right and fitting that their memories should be lasting. I appreciate and applaud the fact that there are memorials by which to remember those two gentlemen. I understand that there will soon be another inscription to remind us of what happened. I am not selective in my condemnation, nor as to who should be commemorated.

Do we need to be reminded of the Shankill Road fish shop, Teebane, Kingsmills, La Mon, Enniskillen, Omagh,

Glenanne, the Ballygawley-Omagh road, Ballykelly, Narrow Water or Darkley Pentecostal Church? Those are but a few of the atrocities that we have had to live with and to endure, not to mention the gunning down of many individuals who were going to or coming from work, were at their place of work or were working on their farms.

Sinn Féin/IRA claims to represent working-class people. I am working class. I am neither proud nor ashamed of that. The vast majority of people who were gunned down were working class, trying to earn a living from a hard day's work. Yet those people were seen as legitimate targets and were done to death. Some of them could not afford to buy a car and, as they cycled to work to earn a living in order to bring up their families, the people on the opposite Benches, who are associated with Sinn Féin/IRA, gunned them to death. Yet these are the very people we are told must be remembered.

Another justice was meted out in my town at the weekend. I could go on and on, but my time is up. I support the motion.

Mr Gallagher: I want to deal with a comment from the member for West Tyrone, Oliver Gibson, who referred to a weakness in the SDLP in tabling an amendment. An amendment that recognises that there are sensitivities on both sides of the community is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it is a sign both of leadership and a readiness to take up the challenge of dealing with difficult issues. In relation —

Mr Gibson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way. If Maurice Morrow takes offence from an amendment that recognises that there is hurt and grief on all sides, such comments from an elected representative are an indication that some people in this society have a very long way to travel.

The amendment deals with the problem of memorials and monuments in a logical and sensible way. The motion will not.

The proposer of the motion and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure referred to the required planning permission for the monuments. Monuments have been erected regardless of planning permission, and, if this motion were passed and the monuments taken down, experience tells us that they would be erected again. Therefore, the amendment, not the motion, will address the problem. If the amendment is passed, it will ensure that the Executive, following consultation, will implement fair and workable guidelines.

It is four years since the Good Friday Agreement, and in that period many people throughout the island, especially in the North of Ireland, have experienced real improvements in their lives. That, however, has not been the case for everyone. There are many bereaved families on both sides, and they must endure daily the pain and loss of a loved one. For them, the relative peace brought by

the Good Friday Agreement does not assuage the pain of their loss. Instead, it has brought a heightened awareness and a deep sense of the futility of a conflict that robbed so many of life. For some bereaved families, it is essential to remember the past and to have commemoration rituals.

The amendment recognises each side's need to remember its dead and to commemorate the past. As Members know, a problem arises if monuments are erected in a manner or at a location that offends or hurts others. That is why the erection of the monument to dead IRA men in Belleek, where I live, has become so controversial. The IRA men whom it commemorates were killed many miles from Belleek, but the monument is on the very spot where that organisation murdered two Protestant workmen. The memorial has caused hurt to the families of those workmen and has met with strong disapproval in the local community. For the benefit of those Members who might support the motion, representatives of one of those Protestant families, the Hassard family, have said publicly that they have no problem with Republicans' commemorating their dead. However, they are hurt by the insensitive way in which the Republicans erected the monument.

Northern Ireland has many memorials and monuments, some of which were mentioned, and some of which are controversial. Controversy is inevitable when a divided and hurt community bitterly remembers its dead. It will take time for those memories to fade. It has taken time in every other country that has experienced a conflict such as ours. In the Republic of Ireland, it took 70 years before the civil war could be remembered with a national day of commemoration. No healing can take place while memorials are hijacked for political purposes and there is a complete lack of understanding of the pain and hurt experienced in the other community. With the amendment, we can find a way to undo the damage that has been caused by the erection of some memorials and the way in which the issue has been handled.

My Colleague from Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Conor Murphy asked about the criteria. The criteria have not been drawn up.

However, we know from the consultation outlined in the amendment that criteria will be included that are based on fairness and equality. Ms McWilliams raised the genuine point about who will enforce the criteria, and we need answers to that. I have no doubt that when the Executive are given time to complete their consultations, they will give us answers. However, they must first be allowed to begin those consultations, and the only way in which that they can do that is if we pass the amendment. I ask Members to support the amendment.

5.45 pm

Mr Gibson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is there anywhere in Northern Ireland that supplies yellow marble?

Mr Kennedy: Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you for my non-attendance at the beginning of this important debate. I also apologise to Members and to those who participated earlier. I would also like to record an apology to my co-sponsor, Mr Foster, and thank him for his contribution. Unfortunately other business prevented me from attending, but I am grateful that there have been several contributions. I particularly want to thank those who agreed with the motion.

In recent months and years we have witnessed a determined campaign by Republicans to create memorials in the Northern Ireland landscape that offend decent, law-abiding and God-fearing people. The memorials are placed deliberately and provocatively close to commercial centres and places where people are known to gather. They honour individuals who may at best be described as highly dubious, but more accurately as bloodthirsty murderers.

The groups that erect the memorials do not care about the real emotions of the relatives and friends of those who lost their lives to the so-called Irish patriots whom the statues honour. It often seems that determined efforts are made to maximise the victims' hurt by placing the memorials close to the scenes of the atrocities that those so-called heroes carried out, and we heard evidence of that earlier in the debate.

Those who erect such memorials should be condemned, deplored and exposed as sectarian coat-trailers of the worst kind. I draw a distinction, and right-minded people draw the same distinction, between those whose names are honoured on war memorials and other such tablets in recognition of their service to their country. They carried out their duty as members of the security forces or the emergency services against those who chose to wage war in darkness and to kill without mercy or pity for victims who were given little or no chance.

Memorials are being erected to Republicans in places that bear no relevance to the events that occurred. Recently in Newry, a new memorial dedicated to the IRA hunger strikers was unveiled in a public park. The park is owned and maintained by the local authority. Members of a well-respected local Protestant business family provided the park in good faith to acknowledge their contribution to their community. The imposing nature of the monument is one thing, but it is worth remembering that none of the 10 hunger strikers came from Newry.

Why should the memorial be erected there, close as it is to a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet and adjacent to the major shopping centre in Newry? There can be only one reason — to offend and intimidate.

The other possible reason is that the erection of the memorial is proof that the unjustifiable Republican war is now over and that, to convince the grass roots that the partitionist settlement agreed to in the Belfast Agreement by Sinn Féin is worth having, with Stormont and Sinn

Féin Ministers of the Crown administering British rule in this part of the UK, a few token monuments should be erected to keep the hardliners happy. How cynical can you get?

Whatever the truth of the matter, these monuments have no place in any decent society that wishes to move on from the conflict and war that nearly destroyed it over 30 years. Whether the monuments are erected in Newry, Castlewellan, County Down, County Fermanagh or anywhere else, they are unacceptable.

The issue is cross-cutting in terms of ministerial responsibility. In addition to the planning and environmental issues put to the Minister of the Environment, I am aware of memorials on land and property owned by the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Examples are the memorial on land adjacent to the Newry bypass, which is presumably owned by the DRD, and the new and impressive defence wall built by the Rivers Agency of DARD at Kilmorey Street, Newry, which contains a memorial tablet to IRA volunteers. I hope that the Ministers responsible will, on receipt of the Hansard report of this debate, take action to remove offensive objects from their Departments' property.

I was gratified by Monica McWilliams's acknowledgement that Unionists had every right to be offended by these memorials. I am grateful for the support of my Colleagues Joan Carson and Tom Hamilton and other Members of the House such as Paul Berry, William Hay and Oliver Gibson.

Conor Murphy seemed to think that Unionists were being inconsistent by objecting to the election of Alec Maskey as Lord Mayor of Belfast. The context in which Belfast City Council operates has to be remembered. The place was almost flattened by the activities of Sinn Féin/IRA during the troubles. Witnessing the activities of Sinn Féin/IRA representatives fostering, and continuing to agitate, civil disturbance in parts of Belfast, it is no wonder that Unionist members of Belfast City Council considered a representative of Sinn Féin to be unfit for the high public office of Lord Mayor.

I remind Sinn Féin that there is no correlation between world war conflicts, commemorated by memorial tablets and monuments which properly indicate service and sacrifice in a worldwide conflict, and the actions of terrorist guerrilla warfare, which can never be considered as war in the true sense.

Several Members mentioned the roadside memorials at Kingsmills and Teebane. Those are memorials to innocent workers and victims who were mercilessly murdered and who therefore have the right to be remembered.

I reject the SDLP's amendment. Once again, the SDLP is trying to cover for Sinn Féin on this issue, which is regrettable. Mr Gallagher asked that guidelines be provided.

The best guidelines would be provided by the Planning Service and the Departments, whose Ministers should not allow the erection of such monuments on Government property.

6.00 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 20; Noes 32.

AYES

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alasdair McDonnell, Gerry McHugh, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Ken Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly rejects the offensive trend of erecting memorials throughout Northern Ireland by Republican elements in memory of terrorists who tortured citizens of this state for decades by their campaign of murder, maiming and destruction and calls upon the Executive to take immediate action to remove those memorials which have been erected without permission.

Adjourned at 6.07 pm.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 1 May 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL
SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mrs Courtney
Mr Hamilton
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Mrs I Robinson

Witness:

Dr J Thompson) Researcher,
Northern Ireland Assembly

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee Clerk has prepared a paper on issues relating to the Health and Personal Social Services Bill. He will summarise those issues for us now.

The Committee Clerk: I prepared the paper for Members' information and to allow them to consider further the evidence taken from Prof Stout, Age Concern and the Belfast Carers' Association.

The witnesses raised several concerns about the part of the Bill that deals with free nursing care. The two key concerns were the separation of nursing from personal care and how nursing care is defined in the Bill. I have outlined various associated concerns that have been expressed, including the effectiveness of any split between nursing and personal care, and the experience of operating the system in England, where nursing homes used the money that was provided for nursing care to cover increased residential fees.

Other concerns include the monitoring arrangements; ensuring that residents in different homes receive equality of treatment; publicity and the entitlement process; the appeal and complaints mechanisms to be put into place, including the possible utilisation of the existing arrangements; and the impact on benefits to residents and their

families. There is a detailed note about separation, its definition and the implementation arrangements.

There are several options in the paper that Members will wish to consider. The interdepartmental working group on personal care is not due to report until the end of June. That prevents the Committee from considering the Bill in the context of what, if any, recommendations on personal care would come from the working group.

Personal care has been outlined in the research paper, and Janice Thompson, who is here to answer questions on that, said that the cost of personal care would be substantial — £30 million to £40 million. If it happens, that would have to be met from the Department's budget.

I will briefly go through the options. The Committee could accept the Bill as it stands. There are major benefits for the residents of nursing homes, including increased financial assistance and correcting the anomaly of residents' having to pay for aspects of nursing care that are received free of charge by patients in hospital.

If Members' concerns were significant, the Committee could look at the feasibility of amending aspects of the Bill to widen the definition. Concerns were raised over Alzheimer's disease. The Committee could also look at the monitoring and appeal mechanisms. The most extreme action would be to recommend the rejection of that clause, but that would have to be set in the context of there being a commitment to introduce personal care — something that the Committee is not in a position to know of at present.

If the Bill were to progress on the provision of free nursing care, the Committee would want a firm commitment from the Minister as to how the Bill would be implemented and what Regulations would result. The Bill is quite short, and it essentially just allows free nursing care to be introduced. The guidance that the Department issues to trusts will set out the parameters under which nursing care will be provided. The Committee will want a firm commitment from the Minister about how the assessment process, which is being developed at present, would operate.

The fee mechanism must also be looked at. Will there be a flat rate or a tiered system? My information is that it is likely to be a flat rate similar to that in Wales, rather than the tiered system in England. A flat rate would be simpler to administer.

A question was raised about changing the short title of the Bill. There are difficulties about changing the title. It is difficult to describe the contents accurately and to meet the legislative requirements of a short title.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee Clerk has raised the main issues for us — ranging from accepting the Bill, through to the other extreme of rejecting the Bill,

and a few things in between that will probably require more detailed examination. It is now over to members.

Mrs Courtney: I should like clarification. You said that we should have formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill next week. Is that your recommendation?

The Committee Clerk: At present that very much depends on members' views regarding the Bill itself. One option is that, if members were broadly content with the Bill's direction as it stands, I could invite the officials to attend the Committee next week. That would allow us to take forward the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny and ask the officials what each clause means and how the provisions would be implemented, thus reassuring members of the Bill's intent and allowing them to raise further questions if they wish. The opportunity today is to clarify how we go forward in the case of any major concerns which must be investigated and developed.

Mr Berry: The briefing note is most informative about what is happening, and I commend you for keeping us all appraised. In relation to the second option and Alzheimer's disease, under 'Separation and definition' the paper states:

"The Department has explained that the assessment tool will take into account the physical, mental and social needs of people in care".

The Committee Clerk: That is my current understanding, based on the evidence given by the Chief Nursing Officer to the Committee.

Mr Berry: Obviously we could ask them more if we went through the Bill in detail.

Dr Thompson: The Department has said that its assessment tool will cover Alzheimer's disease, but in England concerns were raised that whatever assessment process they had in place was not doing so; Age Concern raised that point. Until anyone has seen the assessment, it is very hard for him to make a hard and fast judgement. I sound the note of caution that it would need to be extremely comprehensive to cover every aspect.

Mr Berry: Neither do we want to be seen as putting everything back by taking the fourth option, which would be quite a big step.

The Committee Clerk: It would have to be very extreme.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is there agreement on that view?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Berry: Perhaps we might work on the top three options to try to agree a way forward.

The Deputy Chairperson: Have we to agree on one of the options before you invite departmental officials along for the detailed clause-by-clause consideration?

The Committee Clerk: It is not so much a matter of agreement on one option. It was the opportunity for

members to discuss the issue, and, in the case of a major objection or problem in an area, such as the separation of nursing care from personal care, that would make implementing the present draft of the Bill very difficult. I should need to investigate certain aspects before we reached that stage to ensure that members had sufficient information to question officials and suggest amendments. The clause-by-clause scrutiny will take the first clause and move through the Bill, thus allowing members to determine what each aspect of a clause does so that they are reassured that the provisions laid down meet the Bill's intent.

The key aspect is the separation of free nursing care from personal care, which is what England and Wales have undertaken; Scotland has done things differently. I wanted the Committee to have the opportunity to consider comments such as those of Prof Stout from Age Concern before we took the next step.

The Deputy Chairperson: What has been implemented in Scotland?

The Committee Clerk: Initially, the Scottish Executive were proposing free nursing care along the lines of England and Wales. The Scottish Parliament examined it and decided that it wanted free personal care inclusive of nursing care. That was debated in the Scottish Parliament, and it was put back to the Executive. On the face of opposition to free nursing care, and excluding free personal care, they decided to take the issue forward. England and Scotland have kept the two issues separate, and they have introduced free nursing care. England has a tiered system of payment, and Scotland and Wales have a flat rate payment. Scotland must accept the financial consequences of accepting the need for free personal care.

The Deputy Chairperson: What stage is that at?

Dr Thompson: It will be implemented in July in Scotland. It should have been implemented sooner, but it was delayed for administrative and financial reasons.

The Deputy Chairperson: Has the Scottish Parliament agreed to provide the funding to cover nursing and personal care?

Rev Robert Coulter: It is still costing that.

Mrs Courtney: Can the Committee see the costings before it makes that decision? It is important to get that right.

The Committee Clerk: The research paper that Dr Thompson provided to the Committee indicated the overall cost implications. In England, the Health Department decided that the money that it would cost for free personal care would be better spent on the other pressures that it faced.

Dr Thompson: In England, it was going to cost around £1 billion, but the Department thought that it would be

better spent elsewhere. In Northern Ireland, it will cost a minimum of £30 million for free personal care and £9 million for free nursing care a year.

The Committee Clerk: The Royal Commission on Long Term Care looked at it and put forward a proposal. It indicated £1.1 billion, in 1995 prices, rising to some £2.6 billion by 2021 and £4.6 billion by the middle of the next century. On a pro rata basis, if you read that across to Northern Ireland, they are still substantial figures.

Rev Robert Coulter: There is a statement in the paper that, for Northern Ireland, it would cost £25 million to £30 million a year.

The Assistant Committee Clerk: Dr Thompson's research paper notes that the anticipated costs of introducing free personal care in England amounted to £1 billion. It was decided against introducing it there because of the costings and the fact that a similar amount of money could be used to provide 5,000 more NHS beds, to enable an additional 50,000 elderly people to live independently at home and to extend break services that would enable at least 75,000 carers to take a break from their caring role.

The Deputy Chairperson: In their view, those services could be implemented rather than putting the money into personal care.

Rev Robert Coulter: If we accept the Bill as it stands, can we then table amendments to it?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee can recommend amendments to the clauses if necessary during the clause-by-clause consideration.

Rev Robert Coulter: Would the Committee be accepting the Bill in principle?

The Committee Clerk: Provided that its amendments were agreed to, the Committee would accept the Bill in principle. In cases where it becomes clear that the content of the Bill does not meet what the Committee believes to be its requirements, the clause-by-clause process allows the Committee to recommend amendments. We have a number of weeks yet before we have to report to the Assembly. The Committee must report to the Assembly on 7 June; therefore, it has two or three weeks to complete its consideration, and it can recommend amendments as necessary.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are there any questions?

The Committee Clerk: If members are content, I shall invite officials to meet with the Committee to begin the examination of the clauses.

The Deputy Chairperson: Will that begin next week?

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 8 May 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL
SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter (Acting Chairperson)
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr P Deazley)
Mr M Hendra) Department of Health,
Ms J Hill) Social Services and Public Safety
Ms J Thompson)

The Acting Chairperson: We are glad that officials from the Department have come to meet the Committee. I would like to welcome Mr Peter Deazley, Mr Mike Hendra, Ms Judith Hill and Ms Jennifer Thompson. We look forward to hearing your comments on the Bill, and then we will have questions for you.

Clause 1 (Charges for nursing care)

Mr Deazley: Clause 1 amends the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, removing any charge for nursing care from residents of either statutory or independent residential nursing homes. Paragraph 4A gives the following definition of nursing care:

“(a) the provision of care, or

(b) the planning, supervision or delegation of the provision of care,

other than any services which, having regard to their nature and the circumstances in which they are provided, do not need to be provided by a nurse so registered.”

The Bill removes the recoverable aspect of any nursing home charges that include an element of nursing care cost. It is a simple Bill.

The Acting Chairperson: Do members wish to make any comments?

Ms Ramsey: I would like it to be on the record that the Committee has raised concerns about separating nursing and personal care. I do not want to sound negative, because this is a positive step, but people have concerns. You have heard from individuals, Age Concern and the Belfast Carers' Centre. We must raise concerns with you from the outset, but we must also note the Department's constraints, particularly financial ones. We have heard that the interdepartmental working group is looking at personal care. When does it hope to report?

Mr Hendra: The interdepartmental working group will report to the Executive by the end of June.

Ms Ramsey: Is that definite?

Mr Hendra: Yes.

Ms Ramsey: Will the Committee see the report?

Mr Hendra: That will be for the interdepartmental group and the Executive to decide.

Ms Ramsey: Chairperson, should the Committee not receive that report? I do not know what the procedure is, but the Committee is examining the Bill, and the report is going to the Executive. Should the Committee not have some input into the report or see what it says?

The Acting Chairperson: Are there any further comments or questions?

Ms McWilliams: The Committee must receive the report. If it is to scrutinise the legislation, it must have all the evidence, including that report. Will that report contain the assessment tool?

Mr Hendra: No. The group has been asked to examine the cost and implications of personal care.

Ms McWilliams: OK. As I understand it, the other report relates to the ongoing pilot scheme.

Mr Deazley: That document is almost complete. It will be going to consultation, and we hope to send it to the Minister in a few days. As promised before, we will send a copy to the Committee also. That report will contain the assessment tool, the guidance for its use and all the necessary information.

Ms McWilliams: That makes scrutinising the legislation difficult for the Committee. There are two key issues: the scheme was introduced in England with tiered payment levels, but nursing care was paid for at a flat rate in Wales; and the Committee is unsure about the Department's intentions. Should nursing care be described as free, when only some people will have all their costs covered?

Does the Department intend to make it clear in the explanatory memorandum and any publicity material that not all nursing care is free? “Free nursing care” is a misnomer, because not everyone will get free care, and a memorandum that describes it as such is confusing.

Mr Deazley: Nursing care will be free according to the definition in the Bill. We intend to send proposals to

the Minister within the next 10 days. They will say whether payment will be tiered or in a single band along the same lines as the Welsh system. We will publicise the method that is adopted.

Ms McWilliams: You must accept that it is difficult for the Committee, if the decision has not been made. If the payment is tiered, some people will have to top up the amount from their incomes.

Mr Deazley: The English system attempts to grade the level of nursing care required into low, medium or high categories. A pro rata contribution is made towards the costs according to that.

The Acting Chairperson: Therefore, the nursing care is not free.

Ms McWilliams: No. It is not free according to that system.

Mr Deazley: It is free according to the definition in the legislation, which provides for the element of care required in the nursing home that is provided directly by a nurse or for

“the planning, supervision or delegation of the provision of care”

by a registered nurse. That does not include all the care provided by a nursing home — only the nursing care element.

Mr Berry: The Committee has taken evidence from many witnesses, and we feel that there is no definition of what constitutes care. Professionals in the field have not had an answer, and the boundaries are unclear. The Chief Nursing Officer has explained the assessment process that has been developed and the training that will be required. However, witnesses have told us that similar tools in England have not worked and that the system there as a shambles. Can you explain that?

Ms Hill: Nurses who have used the tool on the pilot schemes found it useful. It has enabled them to identify the needs of patients and users of the service. Although it has been used to establish nursing care needs in nursing homes, they see the tool that we have been developing and testing as something that could be used to meet nursing needs more widely. They see it as defining the input that is required from nurses to care for the groups of people that they have been assessing.

I accept that the situation in England is giving cause for concern. The approach there will influence how we think and enable us to make recommendations. We want to avoid those difficulties. The scale that we operate on here enables us to be closer to the staff involved and ensure that they have the appropriate training and support to carry out the assessments. Evidence from the pilot schemes shows that nurses are confident about using the tool. It is to be hoped that a training programme can be developed that will allow us to use it more widely.

Mrs Courtney: I have similar concerns. There is no definition of the meaning of the assessment tool. Even the Chief Nursing Officer has spoken about the need to develop the assessment process and the training that will be required. That seems to imply that the tool has not been properly tested. Will we be able to see how that assessment tool is being used before it is put into practice?

Ms Hill: That is the consultation process that Mr Deazley referred to. The pilot schemes have been completed and will go out for consultation.

Mrs Courtney: Where will the pilot schemes take place?

Mr Deazley: The pilot schemes have already been completed. They were carried out in every board area.

Ms Hill: The pilot schemes were carried out in the independent sector as well as in the statutory sector.

Mrs Courtney: Having met the independent sector, I doubt that it is content with the assessment tool as it stands.

Ms Hill: The independent sector is represented on our working group, and it has not said that to us. It will be able to raise concerns in the wider consultation, and we will listen to them.

Mrs Courtney: I am still not convinced.

Ms Ramsey: I have a concern about payments. Prof Stout said that the Royal Commission was not advocating payments for bed and breakfast. There is confusion around the definition of personal nursing care.

Mr Deazley: This is only one response to the Royal Commission, not an acceptance of its recommendation, which was for much more than free nursing care. The response is similar to the response in England.

Mrs I Robinson: Do you accept that the “Defining Personal Care” section of the Royal Commission’s report is an all-embracing, itemised account of the meaning of personal care? Should we be working from its definition of what nursing care is and what personal care is?

Mr Deazley: I will ask Mr Hendra to answer that question, as he is involved with the personal care group.

Mr Hendra: I am involved in supporting the inter-departmental group, though I am not on it. It is looking closely at definitions. The Royal Commission is perhaps a starting point. The group has looked at a raft of other definitions running on from the Scottish care development group work — definitions in legislation that provide the legislative background to this. That is then to be translated into an operational definition for personal care. That work is ongoing.

The Acting Chairperson: I want to ask about the £85 that you have drawn up in the formula. Given that

Wales has set a flat rate of £100 a week and the highest English band is £110 a week, why is our one so low?

Mr Hendra: The £85 a week was an indicative cost that was established around 18 months to two years ago when the Government first gave their response to the Royal Commission. That was used for resource bids. It does not necessarily reflect the level of banding that will be used, but it provides the overall level of resources that the bandings will reflect.

The Acting Chairperson: Is there any indication of the banding, which is now being looked at after two years?

Mr Hendra: Peter Deazley spoke about the submission that is going to the Minister for a decision on whether we run with several bands or a single price for nursing care.

Mr Deazley: That will address both issues — the banding issue and the payment at individual level.

The Acting Chairperson: When will we get information on that?

Mr Deazley: We aim to have a submission with the Minister within the next two weeks at the latest.

The Acting Chairperson: That will be useful. Can you explain the assessment method that you will be using?

Mr Deazley: Which assessment?

The Acting Chairperson: How people are going to be evaluated to discover what they should, and should not, pay.

Mr Deazley: The nursing needs assessment will be carried out first. If it is decided that a level of nursing care is required, as defined in the legislation, that element will be removed from the means assessment. There will be no further assessment of the contribution towards nursing care. The personal care and accommodation aspects will remain when a person has the means to address those. However, the nursing care element will simply be removed from the assessment.

The Acting Chairperson: Will we be consulted on your assessment methods?

Mr Deazley: I imagine that the current financial assessment process will continue to be applied when people are assessed for care management. There will be no need to change that system.

Mr Hendra: The Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 apply. The exclusion in clause 1 of the Bill prevents that from being applied to nursing care.

The Acting Chairperson: That will be standard right across the country?

Mr Hendra: Yes.

Ms McWilliams: Given our concerns about the assessment tool, what about the right of appeal? Currently people can make a complaint under the normal complaints

procedure about all other areas of health and social services. Is that a fair way of allowing people redress if they have not been assessed accurately, or would a separate appeals system built into the legislation be more appropriate?

Mr Hendra: We have not considered a separate appeals procedure. We have looked at what is done in England, and it relies on the existing local authority and NHS complaints procedures. If someone is dissatisfied with the assessment and that is not resolved by negotiation, he has recourse to local level and then to a higher level of complaint. We propose to do the same at this time.

Ms McWilliams: It may not be appropriate to look at England, as, with our devolved Administration, the structure of health and social services is entirely different there.

Mr Hendra: The health and social services complaints procedure is integrated with social services and health services and is generally the same. The detail of an assessment would be looked at by the appropriate professionals clinicians.

Ms McWilliams: Members of this Committee are fairly familiar with the complaints procedure. It is long, drawn-out, time-consuming and difficult. It is also tiered: as a complaint gets bigger, it goes up a level. It is hard for some people to understand, and it is mainly elderly people who are involved. Some people are disorientated and unfamiliar with the process. A built-in appeals procedure might help those who felt that they had been wrongly assessed in the first place. It might also help us.

Mr Hendra: You are focusing on a fast track, local level complaints procedure that could resolve an issue quickly and would be more formalised than the existing one.

Ms McWilliams: Yes. Some people could be dead by the time we had a complaint resolved. I have been involved in the procedure, and I know how long it can take. The one I am involved in now has taken nearly two years. Elderly people getting nursing care need an urgent assessment, and if they felt that it was not done accurately, they would want to be able to appeal it.

I discovered recently that the nursing assessments some people had were assessments of the care they needed when they went into hospital not of what they needed when they came out. If someone was treated like that, he would want to appeal. Complaining in the standard way can take a long time — between six to 18 months, and not many take less than six months.

Mr Hendra: We will see if we can formalise a fast track in the system. Ultimately a patient would have recourse to the normal complaints procedure, the health ombudsman, et cetera.

Ms McWilliams: How would that be done?

Mr Hendra: It would be part of the guidance document on the implementation paper for free nursing care.

Ms McWilliams: Would it go into the Statutory Regulations?

Mr Hendra: It may be regulated on.

Mr Deazley: It would be more likely to go into directions from the Department to the trusts.

Ms McWilliams: If we vote this legislation through on the Floor of the Assembly, would we know from you that that guarantee was in place or would we be taking your word on a wing and a prayer?

Mr Deazley: There would have to be a process, and the boards would have to monitor it. There would be a registration process of the complaints and tight monitoring to make sure that they were fast-tracked. We would have to ensure that the directions we gave to the trusts were implemented.

Ms McWilliams: You will have a look at that and then come back to us.

Mrs I Robinson: I support what has been said. Many people may feel aggrieved when the Bill is enforced, and they could flood the process by wanting to be reassessed. The ordinary system may not be able to cope. It is logical that each board should be responsible for dealing with its area.

Mr Deazley: Part of the experience in England has been heavily related to its tiering system.

The Acting Chairperson: Concerns have been raised that conditions such as Alzheimer's disease may be excluded from the definition of nursing care. We accept that the Chief Nursing Officer has said that the assessment tool will cover assessment of the physical, mental and social needs of people in care. Can you confirm that nursing care for sufferers of Alzheimer's and those with other mental health needs will be covered? How will providers ensure that such people are identified and assessed?

Ms Hill: We took that into account when piloting the assessment tool. A range of service users has been assessed, and those with mental ill health and dementia will be included in assessment for nursing care. This was raised by the Alzheimer's Society and discussed with it by colleagues. The society awaits wider consultation but appears satisfied that its needs and concerns have been considered.

Ms Ramsey: Much faith has been put in the pilot projects. Can we see the results?

Ms Hill: We must report on them as part of the working group activity. We will check on the feedback and consider what can be made available.

Mr Deazley: The second part of the question Ms Hill was asked dealt with identifying and assessing people with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. The boards will

soon be asked to identify all self-funders in independent nursing homes, regardless of their reasons for being there. All those people will be told of their right to free nursing care and offered an assessment of their nursing care needs.

The Acting Chairperson: How will the assessment work with someone in a nursing home who is reasonably healthy but becomes ill, needs nursing care and then returns to reasonable health?

Mr Deazley: Did the person remain in the nursing home throughout?

The Acting Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Deazley: That will depend on the decision regarding single-band or tiered payments. Tiered payments provide an opportunity for review to increase the level of nursing care.

The Acting Chairperson: Who will institute the review?

Mr Deazley: In those circumstances it is highly likely that the nursing home proprietor and manager would do it. The resident — or, if he were unable, his family — could ask for it. The request could come from several areas.

Ms Hill: I understand that there is in any case an annual review which could identify situations.

The Committee Clerk: The Department wishes to respond to members' concerns. Perhaps we might return to clause 1 after it has done so next week.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 1 referred for further consideration.

Clause 2 (The Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery)

Ms Hill: Clause 2 refers to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC) and sets out its duties. These include promoting high standards of practice for nurses and midwives and standards for education, training and professional development. Clause 2 also indicates how NIPEC should take these forward through a range of activities providing guidance and information, exercising its functions in close association with the Department.

The Acting Chairperson: Are there any questions?

Mrs Courtney: If health visitors are no longer included in the title, how are they included in the clause?

Ms Hill: A health visitor must first be a registered nurse, so they are included in the title.

Mrs Courtney: They are simply not named explicitly.

Ms Hill: That is right; it follows decisions made at Westminster about the new Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), which is operating across all four countries of the United Kingdom.

Mrs Courtney: Is that simply a matter of standardisation?

Ms Hill: Yes.

Ms McWilliams: You may not be able to answer this question. Recently some non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) have been stood down and brought back under the auspices of the Department, yet we are establishing a new one. Are the provisions for establishing this NDPB the same as for the others?

Ms Hill: They are similar. Ms Thompson has been working on the shaping of the Bill, which reflects the establishment of certain other organisations.

Ms McWilliams: Are there any differences?

Ms Thompson: We have received advice on how the legislation is formulated with regard to the establishment of the body, so I am not aware of any differences. It will be a standard NDPB like the others. It will have the same powers, establishment, functions and accountability to Departments as other NDPBs. It will also be accountable to the Minister for its budget, annual reports and so on.

Ms McWilliams: It is difficult to understand how these bodies operate. On one hand they are independent, and on the other they are public.

Ms Thompson: It can be more rightly described as an "arm's length" body, as it is not fully independent. An NDPB is funded by the Government and accountable to the Department. The NMC is more independent, since it is funded by registrants, meaning it is slightly more removed from the Government.

Ms McWilliams: Will this NDPB replace the NMC?

Ms Thompson: NIPEC is not replacing the NMC. The NMC is replacing the four national boards and the UK Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting. It was clear that we could not set the body up to be funded by registrants, as they would then have to pay two registrant's fees — one to the NMC and one to the new body. That would not have been acceptable, so it had to be funded by the Government.

Ms McWilliams: Do the registration fees go to a separate body?

Ms Thompson: They go to the NMC as the registration body.

Ms McWilliams: So there will be two bodies involved in management, but only one in registration.

Ms Hill: Strictly speaking, it is not management but providing guidance, advice and an opportunity to develop services in a managed approach. It is not management in the way a regulatory body would function; it is very

much in partnership with nurses and midwives in the service. The idea is that the development of the profession will come from the service into the body. It will then be tested and shaped, giving us the opportunity to spread good practice which might have been developed in one area across the rest of the service. We shall be able to build on that good practice to the benefit of all service-users.

Ms McWilliams: So it is more policy-oriented.

Ms Hill: Yes. It would be standard-setting and development by agreement with the profession, as opposed to their being imposed by an outside arrangement.

Ms McWilliams: As I am not familiar with how nursing is organised, I am trying to find out what differences there are between the registration body and this body, so that I might be able to explain it to someone. It appears that this body is setting standards, but you would be struck off by the other body if you did not meet them. I am trying to establish the relationship. If this body changes its standards, the other body would need to have a close relationship to know. Am I thinking along the right lines?

Ms Hill: Yes. In essence, the NMC is operating at a four-country level, setting high standards for the operation of the profession. People initially qualifying as nurses must meet those standards. They must also meet ongoing registration standards. We recognise that people could be competent when they qualify initially, but as things change they must continue to demonstrate competence. The function of that central body is to help people gain an initial licence to practise and then maintain it. If they fail in some way, it must remove them from practice.

This body will work much more closely with local health and social services, looking at the roles we desire for nurses within the broad standard framework which the central body is developing. If we seek specialist skills, we can agree locally how we want that to occur, and we can make it happen within the framework of general and local legislation. That is the relationship.

Ms McWilliams: You have a great deal of international experience. Is this how it works everywhere, or do some countries combine the functions of the two bodies into one?

Ms Hill: Yes, some do. Interestingly, the Republic of Ireland has gone for two bodies. It has gone for An Bord Altranais, which is its registering body, and a National Council for Professional Development. They recognise that, in developing roles beyond initial registration, there must be a different, more developmental and participative approach as opposed to the bureaucratic tendencies one finds in the regulatory functions.

Others have tended to look to professional organisations to lead on some of these issues. The Royal College of Nursing or the Royal College of Midwives might have

that sort of function in some other countries. Professional organisations would set standards for specialised roles as part of activity in employment and industrial relations. We have tended to keep that separate here.

Mr Berry: Paragraph 17 of the schedule states that the council will be subject to investigation by the Commissioner for Complaints. How will the arrangement work, and what opportunity will nurses, midwives and health visitors have to redress complaints or appeal against decisions?

Ms Thompson: The clause is a standard inclusion in the establishment of an NDPB. It does not refer to complaints against an individual nurse, since the body will not be concerned with the registration or conduct of individual nurses. The clause is included in the legislation so that the body must adhere to a complaints procedure if, for example, a member of staff made a complaint against it. A change to the legislation was required.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Schedule

Ms Thompson: The schedule sets out some of the general arrangements for the functioning of the organisation. More detail will be included in the regulations, which will be submitted to the Committee at a later stage. The schedule sets out the status of the body, its general powers and duties, membership, appointments and procedure.

Ms McWilliams: How many people will sit on the body?

Ms Thompson: The explanatory memorandum states that there will be between 10 and 16 members — we have left it open. Thirteen members have been appointed to the shadow advisory committee. We did not want to appoint 16, since we wanted the committee to be small but flexible so that, if the committee wants 16 members when the legislation has been passed, it will be able to arrange that.

Mrs I Robinson: I note that 60% of the body will be made up of professionals. How do you intend to identify the 40% that will be made up of lay members?

Ms Thompson: Lay members have been appointed to the shadow advisory committee.

Mrs I Robinson: What are their backgrounds?

Ms Hill: The members are: a mother who has done a great deal of work in the voluntary sector; a consultant obstetrician; a retired senior officer from an education and library board; a retired member of Queen's University who has worked in adult education; and a minister from a cross-community church. The obstetrician and the retired member of Queen's University are women, so there are three women and two men in the group.

Ms Thompson: Paragraph 5 of the schedule sets out the general rules for appointing the chairperson of the body. The Department may make regulations on the

appointment of the chairperson and other members, the tenure and the constitution, functions and procedures of the committee. Some of this detail will be included in the regulations, which we will have to submit to you as part of the subordinate legislation following the Bill.

Ms Ramsey: The royal colleges are concerned that they and similar groups are unable to nominate people for appointment. They are also concerned about the criteria which the Department will use for selecting those who have been nominated. Does the Department have such criteria?

Ms Hill: The criteria were developed for lay people and professionals. The advert was open so that anybody could respond to it. People were shortlisted according to whether they met the criteria. They were then tested against them at interview. The chairperson and I were part of the interview panel, and there was also an outside assessor. People knew the criteria against which they were being assessed.

Ms Thompson: Appointments to an NDPB are made through the public appointment process.

Ms Ramsey: I am concerned that as a group they were not able to nominate someone to represent them.

Ms Hill: It is not a representative body in that sense. Essentially, everyone becomes a member of a corporate body not representing a constituency.

The Acting Chairperson: Are there any questions on paragraph 6 covering remuneration and allowances?

Mrs Courtney: Have separate proposals been made for the chairperson and members?

Ms Thompson: Yes. The remuneration proposed for the chairperson is £9,252. That is in line with, for example, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), which has similar time commitments. The proposal for members is that it should include expenses and payments for substitute carer allowances but no separate remuneration.

Ms McWilliams: What do you mean by "payments for substitute carer allowances"?

Ms Thompson: I have probably not used the right form of words. It means that, if you have to pay for childminding to attend a committee meeting, the costs are covered for you. Likewise, if you need to pay a carer for an elderly relative, those fees are also payable on top of expenses.

Ms McWilliams: That may have been the case for some time. However, it is an interesting innovation considering what used to be considered expenses.

Ms Thompson: The NISCC has also made that provision.

Ms McWilliams: Is it made by other NDPBs?

Ms Thompson: I do not know. When we were considering arrangements for it, we examined the

NISCC's provision. We thought it important and wished to include it.

Ms McWilliams: It is positive in that it may be attractive to younger parents rather than only to retired members of the community — depending on time commitments — and particularly so for lay members.

The Acting Chairperson: Are there any questions on paragraph 7?

Mrs Courtney: Will the chief executive have overall responsibility for the body?

Ms Hill: Yes.

The Acting Chairperson: Are there any questions on paragraphs 8 to 17?

Ms McWilliams: Will the Commissioner for Complaints assume the role of ombudsman? Will the body come under his remit?

Ms Thompson: Yes, and the legislation will require amendment to include NIPEC.

Ms McWilliams: That was not the case under the body which it replaces.

Ms Hill: The national board would have been subject to that legislation.

The Acting Chairperson: We shall now move to paragraphs 18 and 19.

Mrs Courtney: Does NIPEC refer to the extended role of the nurse?

Ms Thompson: It is a standard change to existing legislation, but NIPEC must be included.

The Acting Chairperson: We shall now move to paragraph 20.

Mrs Courtney: I am looking at 20(2) which states:

“This paragraph applies to property, rights and liabilities”.

Ms Thompson: That section of the legislation was required because some of the existing staff and assets of

the national board are coming over to the new body. However, as the NIPEC is currently only an advisory shadow body, it does not have the right to employ staff or hold assets. We therefore had to produce a mechanism for those staff to be transferred. They currently come under the remit of the Central Services Agency. Paragraphs 20 and 21 allow the transfer of staff so that their superannuation continues and they have their existing employment. When the legislation is passed, they will be employed by the NIPEC. It allows the transfer from the CSA to the NIPEC.

Mrs I Robinson: In our file there is a letter dated 25 March 2002 from the National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Northern Ireland. It questions sub-paragraph 21(1)(a). However, the reference to the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2002 is incorrect. It should read “the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 Statutory Instrument 2002 No. 253,” which is the legislation establishing the NMC from 12 February 2002.

The Acting Chairperson: I beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that paragraph 21(1)(a) be amended as follows: delete

“Nursing and Midwifery Order 2002”

And insert

“The Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 Statutory Instrument 2002 No. 253.”

Question put and agreed to.

Ms Thompson: I have not seen a copy of that letter. We shall check the reference. Thank you.

Schedule agreed to subject to the Committee's proposed amendment.

The Acting Chairperson: We shall leave the remainder of the Bill until the next session. Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Tuesday 14 May 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL
SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Courtney
Mr Hamilton
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr P Deazley) Department of Health, Social
Mr J McKeown) Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: The Committee welcomes Mr Peter Deazley and Mr John McKeown, who have returned to discuss the Health and Personal Social Services Bill. Matters were raised last week, especially regarding the possible appeals system. If you will update the Committee on what has happened since then, my colleagues will then ask questions.

Mr Deazley: There is a model review process on which the Department has previously consulted. It can easily be developed to take account of the nursing care assessment process. The process is brief and would obviously have to be redrafted to suit nursing care and be put out to professional colleagues and any interested professional bodies, including the Committee.

Essentially, the process requires the assessment to be reviewed within one week to the satisfaction of the service user, the carer, the family or other interested parties. Where it is not satisfactorily sorted out, a panel must be constituted and a further review completed within two weeks. Therefore, the complete process takes three weeks.

The Chairperson: The other point concerned whether the check on feedback can be made available to the Committee.

Ms McWilliams: It would be better to discuss each point one at a time; otherwise, it will be more difficult.

The Department already had that model review for other purposes?

Mr Deazley: Yes. It was used for guidance on continuing healthcare.

Ms McWilliams: Why would you use that model? Because it has been tried and tested, and it works? I am concerned that we are dealing with nursing care, which, in its own right, is a very specific area and for which a particular assessment tool is being produced.

Mr Deazley: I did not say that that particular process would be used. I said that the model could be adapted and developed for nursing care purposes. The consultation for it was done in 1998, so it is out of date.

Ms McWilliams: That was what I wanted to clarify.

Secondly, we expressed concern last week that the primary legislation as it stands does not have a method of appeal in it. Is the Department going to consider the inclusion of an appeal mechanism?

Mr Deazley: We propose to issue a statutory direction to the boards and trusts that will incorporate the guidance and the review process. That statutory direction comes from article 17(1) of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972.

Ms McWilliams: Here is where our learning curve must match yours. That is a statutory regulation that will come after the legislation has received Royal Assent. It is part of the legislative process. Why can it not be included in the primary legislation in the first place?

Mr Deazley: We do not see the need to have it in the primary legislation or to have a separate regulation. Article 17(1) of the 1972 Order gives us the right to issue a direction. There is no legal process to go through. We simply issue the direction to the boards and trusts. That carries the force of regulation under the 1972 Order.

Ms McWilliams: So this legislation amends the 1972 Order?

Mr Deazley: Yes.

Ms McWilliams: Are you saying that an appeal process already exists?

Mr Deazley: A legal process exists by which we can issue direction to the boards and trusts. It comes from article 17(1).

Ms McWilliams: My only concern is that on reading the legislation, as we have, it is not immediately clear that there is a right of appeal.

Mr Deazley: That is true.

Ms McWilliams: I am concerned that those in receipt of nursing care should know about this. I might have a concern either as a relative, or as someone wishing to

ensure that a person was correctly assessed. If I accessed this legislation, I would not know about the appeal mechanism. However, if I worked for the board, I would know about it. The people with that knowledge might not always want to grant that right.

Mr Deazley: The directions and the guidance that go along with them will be publicly available. We will not prepare the directions and the guidance and simply issue them to the boards and trusts. They will be available through the same media as the legislation itself. It will be publicly available on the Internet.

Ms McWilliams: If you are going to explain the legislation, will the directions and guidance be included? Are you going to disseminate widely the fact that that right is available?

Mr Deazley: We would not make the right available and not publish the fact that it existed.

Ms McWilliams: Are there other pieces of primary legislation in existence that are similar to this one? Is the right of appeal normally dealt with in the way that you have described? Are there precedents where, by whatever means, you have sought to include it in the legislation?

Mr Deazley: Our research shows us that reviews are normally carried out as a result of departmental direction. On some occasions, where there is professional input through the General Medical Council or nurses' bodies, it is also done by regulation and direction.

Mr Gallagher: If an individual is unhappy with his or her assessment and wishes to appeal, how does that happen?

Mr Deazley: The service user, his or her family, or the carer will simply ask for a review of the decision. It will not be a financial decision. The decision is based around the level of nursing care that the patient needs.

Mr Gallagher: Who carries out the review? Is it done within the trust in question, or is it independent?

Mr Deazley: A nurse will do the initial assessment. A different assessor will undertake the first review — it will be a professional nurse, but not the nurse who carried out the first assessment.

Mr J Kelly: That assessment is done on the individual?

Mr Deazley: Yes, on the individual.

Mr J Kelly: Is it on the individual — whether that is a daughter, son or whatever — and not any circumstances around the individual?

Mr Deazley: All aspects of the individual's physical and mental health are taken into account. I have a copy of the assessment tool with me. It is going to the Minister, and as soon as the Minister has cleared it, we will pass it, the guidance and the consultation letter to the Committee.

Mrs Courtney: I want to pick up on what Ms McWilliams said. We were told that the review would

take place within three weeks, and, it is hoped, to the satisfaction of the resident or carer, or whoever made the original application for a review. I take it that that includes when the first complaint was made? When a person is on a ward and meets the ward sister, she does the first assessment. The ward sister then has to take that assessment to someone else. Will the whole process take three weeks?

Mr Deazley: Absolutely. It will take three weeks from first complaint to the completion of the second stage.

Rev Robert Coulter: This review on assessment is only for patients. What happens when a nursing home is not happy with the result of an assessment?

Mr Deazley: Nursing homes will have the same right to ask for a review of the assessment.

Rev Robert Coulter: They will have that right as well? It is not just the patient?

Mr Deazley: It is not necessarily aimed at patients. The first people to be assessed under this legislation will be residents in nursing homes who are funding their own care.

Rev Robert Coulter: Will the nursing home have the right of appeal?

Mr Deazley: The nurse manager will have that right.

The Chairperson: You were to check on the feedback that can be made available to the Committee on the work of the pilot projects on the assessment tool.

Mr Deazley: I have copies of the assessment tool, the consultation letter going out with that, and the guidance. I do not have the report on the findings of the pilot study, which has been completed by the University of Ulster. It will accompany all of those documents going to the Minister. It will also be included in the documents coming to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Is everyone happy with that?

Ms McWilliams: Will that be next week?

Mr Deazley: It will be as soon as it is ready. I cannot say that it will be ready next week. I tried to get the missing document this morning, but could not contact the person who has the material.

Ms McWilliams: We are holding up the process to do that. We would like to have it urgently so that we can clear the legislation. We are almost at the final stage, but we would not want to clear it without having access to the document and its evaluation.

Mr Deazley: I expected to be able to tell the Committee today that it was on the way. I hope that that will be the situation between now and next week.

Mrs Courtney: Will we have all the documentation by next week, including the paper you have today?

Mr Deazley: I will attempt to get everything to you by next week.

The Chairperson: It is important to have everything. If the Committee is not satisfied, it will have difficulty in accepting clause 1. We were talking about appeals and the consideration of a fast-track appeals complaints procedure on nursing needs through the statutory regulations. The Department will consider how such a complaints process could be monitored to ensure that trusts implement its directions.

Those are the main points. Do my colleagues want to raise anything? Would Mr Deazley or Mr McKeown like to raise anything?

Ms McWilliams: We have discussed the right of appeal, and you will provide the Committee with

information on the tool and its evaluation. Last week, the Committee asked about the payment mechanism. England and Wales have chosen the flat-tier option. The Committee does not know which option the Department prefers, and it would like guidance on that.

Mr Deazley: The Minister will receive the Department's submission on its recommendations tomorrow.

Ms McWilliams: Therefore, the Committee will leave that until next week.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. We hoped to conclude clause 1 today, but in view of what has been said, we cannot do so. Therefore, we will wait until next week. Clauses 3, 4 and 5 follow clause 1. Therefore, we will leave them as well.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 16 May 2002

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL
(NIA 7/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Lewsley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Armstrong
Mr McClarty
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr D Barr) Department of the Environment
Mr J McConnell)
Ms H Cousins) Northern Ireland Office
Mr M McGuckin)

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Mark McGuckin and Ms Heather Cousins from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and Mr David Barr and Mr John McConnell from the Department of the Environment to this meeting.

Mr McGuckin: I am Mark McGuckin, head of the Criminal Justice Services Division of the NIO. My colleague, Heather Cousins, is head of the policy branch of the Community Safety Unit. I thank you for inviting us to discuss the draft community safety strategy, which was published on 10 April and has a consultation period running until 3 July. We propose to give a short presentation on the strategy, which should help to set the context, after which we shall attempt to address any specific questions. I understand that you are considering clauses in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, and you will appreciate that, while we can address questions about the community safety strategy, we are not in a position to answer any questions on the Bill.

Ms Cousins: Thank you for the invitation to discuss the strategy with you today. We are trying to consult as widely as possible and are grateful for this opportunity. I have tried to shorten the presentation which we gave when we launched the strategy to fit your timescale, and I have brought copies of slides which are slightly different to those you had.

I shall start with the definition of community safety that we are using in the strategy document and point out certain key aspects. Community safety is a much wider subject than crime reduction, and we are examining the prevention, reduction and containment of social, environmental, and intimidatory factors that affect the right to live without fear of crime, and which have an impact on quality of life. We see this as a much wider subject than crime reduction — it is a quality-of-life subject and must be linked with other such strategies.

We have put together a simple picture of an unsafe community to illustrate the fact that the issue is much wider than merely crime reduction. When you ask members of communities about safety concerns, crime is one of the last things they mention. Fortunately, most people live without experiencing it directly; the things that concern them are lower down the iceberg. The symptoms are truancy, vandalism, difficulties with noisy neighbours, drug and alcohol abuse, graffiti, and so on. This has been borne out by some of the work we have done with the Creating Common Ground Consortium, which has surveyed over 40 communities, particularly in Housing Executive estates. They came up with the same issues, and would like to have them tackled under the heading of community safety.

We have consulted extensively, examining crime statistics and conducting research. From that we have come up with nine key issues in the strategy. We have tried to have every issue come in under one of the headings. Some are quite broad, such as “fear of crime among older people, victims and children”. Our intention is that it will consider wider safety aspects in relation to older people, victims, and children, as well as crime-related issues. We are also examining youth offending and reducing criminality through diversion and education programmes. The last one is “street violence, low-level neighbourhood disorder, and antisocial behaviour”, which is intended to deal with those other issues not specifically crime-focused. Those are our nine issues, which arise from the extensive research we have conducted.

We see community safety as being about local problems. It is about people getting together with service-delivery agencies locally to tackle those problems and develop solutions appropriate to their situations. It must be bottom-up and joined-up — not top-down — and the partnerships need to find ways of involving the community directly. As it is about local problems, the strategy is not prescriptive about how this should work. We anticipate different areas structuring partnerships in different ways and are content with that. It should reflect local circumstances.

With regard to the types of agencies that would be involved in tackling such issues, it is not the job of the police alone to deal with antisocial behaviour. Other agencies will be involved and must think about what services they can offer to support each other in their

attempt to tackle the problem of antisocial behaviour. We are considering such groups as the mediation services. Facilities are required for young people so that they are not seen to be hanging around causing a nuisance. Education authorities and local councils can be involved in such provision.

We hope to reduce substantially the fear of crime by working in partnership and giving the problem a higher profile. Improved street lighting has been shown to reduce such fear. A project in an estate in Ballymena has been shown to reduce older people's anxieties. We are also considering the installation of home security systems, particularly for elderly and vulnerable people. A partnership approach can achieve more than individual organisations working in isolation.

In considering structures for partnerships, we established criteria for successful community safety partnerships. We required that the membership and structure of the partnerships allow them to commit resources to partnership working, but that they should also be able to deliver actions. We are not interested in a partnership that will sit around the table and talk. We want one that can do things — with an action plan and people signed up to deliver that programme. It should also be accountable to local people for creating safer communities.

It is vital that community safety be a mainstream activity rather than an aim pursued on the side if there are spare resources. In that way, organisations will come to consider the community safety aspects of any policy that they deliver. It is also important to link that with other strategies related to quality of life. In particular, we are thinking about the strategies on neighbourhood renewal, investing for health and the link to the local policing plan.

We also want a structure that can provide matching funding. We have secured resources for community safety, but we expect other organisations to contribute. Several organisations should be able to move towards achieving their objectives through participation in the programme, so they should also be prepared to provide funding.

Those are the factors we were looking for when we considered models for structures. We decided that we could not be prescriptive, as the partnerships must fit local circumstances. All we have said in the strategy, therefore, is that the partnerships should be based on district council areas. In that way, they will be conterminous with police boundaries.

Our two key concerns are that the partnerships be able to commit resources and deliver services. Community safety should be mainstreamed and become part of the strategic plan for the district. We have not stated that there should be a lead partner. A partnership will decide how it will work when it is formed; it may differ depending on the area.

This slide shows voluntary partnerships already up and running. In Antrim, the community safety partnership is chaired by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Before that, it was chaired by the district council — the partners take turns. Lisburn has taken a different approach by setting up a charitable company. One reason for doing this is to be able to get access to funding through charitable trusts. All the partner organisations will be directors of the charitable company. That model is working successfully.

The community safety unit has experience of setting up such partnerships and co-operating with organisations, and we are available to do that anywhere in Northern Ireland.

All partners should be equal. There should be collective ownership of the problems and solutions. One partner should not tell everyone else what to do. You will not achieve success without collective ownership. The service-level agreements should formalise the arrangements, so that the partners can agree on their contributions.

The NIO has not asked the district councils to lead the community safety partnerships. It is inviting them to co-ordinate them. It will provide dedicated resources to the partnership for co-ordination. The councils' participation is voluntary, but the NIO is confident that they will see the benefits of working in partnership. Lack of safety in a community will have an impact on all initiatives in the area, such as economic development and health improvement. Engagement in a community safety partnership is therefore to everyone's benefit.

The NIO expects the partnerships to perform several key functions. The vital element in the partnership is its operation. An audit will be conducted to determine the problems through analysis of the information available to all the partner organisations. That will result in the development of an action plan that will set out what they intend to do to tackle the problems. The plan will be monitored, and its results will be reported back to the appropriate strategic group. Individual task groups will implement the planned action either in a specific part of a district, or, when dealing with an issue such as domestic violence, across the whole district. The task groups will report their progress to the operational group.

This is a real opportunity to make a difference. The success of the strategy will be judged by the difference that people say it makes to their lives when they are asked about community safety.

The NIO is interested in maximising the benefit from collective contributions. By pooling resources and working together, we shall achieve more than can be done by individual organisations working in silos. However, that depends on co-operation at many levels. A lack of co-operation will have an impact on the scheme. Joined-up thinking and action are needed, as is investment, and the NIO has secured £2.5 million per annum to start the ball rolling.

It is not a short-term initiative, and that is one of the reasons why the strategy will cover a five-year period. The NIO anticipates that, while there will be achievements in the short term to encourage people, the scheme will take time. It will try to tackle the causes of crime, and that cannot be done quickly.

The Chairperson: You placed emphasis on co-operation and the involvement of each partner. The Community Safety Unit will facilitate the formation of partnerships. However, while we are getting some definitions, clause 7, subsection (2) of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill states:

“The Department of the Environment may by order confer or impose on district councils other functions”.

The imposition of functions does not imply a partnership. Why was that phrase included? It does not sit easily with the aspects of the scheme that you emphasised, which implied that it cannot be forced on the community and that all parties must work together.

Mr McGuckin: I am not sure that we can answer a question about the drafting of the Bill. It is important that as many organisations as possible participate in partnerships. At this stage, the intention is to include them on a voluntary basis; that is correct. However, effective partnerships involving as many organisations as possible are crucial to the success of a strategy to address community safety issues.

The Chairperson: The question may be difficult, but you have not answered it, and someone must do so. The emphasis of Ms Cousins’s presentation was the voluntary partnership and the various groupings working together. However, the legislation says:

“The Department may by order confer or impose on district councils other functions relating to the enhancement of community safety in their district.”

That does not tally with what has been said. Why are district councils faced with an imposition when no one else has been?

Mr McConnell: Community safety is important. There is no intention to coerce district councils to become involved; it is voluntary. If, however, following a review of public administration, the Assembly decides that community safety is such an important issue that councils should, and must, be involved, the power is there to allow the Assembly to make that decision. The Department could not, or would not, impose that without the approval of this Committee and the Assembly.

The primary intention is to ensure that the Assembly can make the condition that councils must become involved in community safety issues if it finds that necessary at some future date.

The Chairperson: Would that not be the appropriate time to insert it? It goes against everything said this morning.

Mr McConnell: The Department has no ulterior motive in its inclusion. It is there to anticipate any future decision of the Assembly.

The Chairperson: If reorganisation of local government took place, and that involved the shifting of power, surely that would involve new legislation. Would that not be the appropriate time to change the legislation?

Mr McConnell: It is there because we wish to allow the Assembly as much latitude as possible, should it later decide that councils should have that responsibility. Councils already have other responsibilities imposed on them, and the Assembly may decide that it is also something that the Department should require.

Mr Barr: It is essentially an enabling power built into primary legislation. It would enable the Assembly to pass subordinate legislation requiring councils and other bodies to engage in compulsory, rather than voluntary, community safety if the voluntary scheme were not working successfully. That would happen only after full consultation with district councils, other relevant bodies, Departments, this Committee and other Assembly institutions.

The Chairperson: Who would make the judgement that it was not working?

Mr McConnell: The phrase “not working” was perhaps unfortunate. If it were considered important and turned out to be as successful and worthwhile as the NIO says — and I have no reason to doubt that — the Assembly might decide that such an important issue is not a matter of choice. People automatically turn to the council when an emergency happens in the district. I cannot conceive of any circumstances where councillors are not first in line for criticism. It is a method of ensuring that, if it were such an important matter, the Assembly could impose the duty.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome that move. It is bottom-up and joined-up for a change.

I have reservations about the funding to be given and the longer-term accountability, monitoring and evaluation. Could you explain how that would happen?

As a Lisburn Borough councillor, I wish to ask about the project in Lisburn; is that the one in the Glasvey area?

Ms Cousins: There is a community safety partnership, which is not currently working on specific projects. That is perhaps the Creating Common Ground Consortium. The project in Glasvey has a community safety aspect, which is concerned with lighting and so on. We have a member of staff working on that project.

Ms Lewsley: Is that the one which you mentioned when you spoke about Lisburn — where the charitable status was set up?

Ms Cousins: Lisburn community safety partnership has received charitable status. It is currently developing

its action plans, having completed community consultations. It has not yet started any projects.

Ms Lewsley: Who is part of that community safety partnership?

Ms Cousins: The council, police, health trust and most of the statutory agencies.

The Chairperson: Who chooses the great and the good?

Ms Cousins: They choose themselves. Initially we write to the interested organisations and invite them to a local meeting to discuss forming a partnership. At the meeting they decide themselves who should be in the partnership.

Ms Lewsley: There is another group connected with Lisburn Borough Council called the “adults at risk” group. It has a multi-agency approach and is seeking funding for a co-ordinator. Will that funding be jeopardised because there is already another project, the two being unaware of each other?

Ms Cousins: I cannot comment on the other project, but the mayor currently chairs the community safety partnership in Lisburn. I should therefore hope that those involved would be aware of what was happening.

Ms Lewsley: I am a councillor, and I was not aware of that. I am on the other group, where there is a multi-agency approach. Any agency going into the homes of elderly people or vulnerable adults must go through a checklist to ensure their safety. The group is looking for a co-ordinator so that we can identify and prove the need. We have worked with the local schools; we have such things as safety chains. I do not know whether it is aware of the other group. There must be better communication and co-ordination throughout.

I also wish to enquire about the monitoring and evaluation of moneys that will go into projects.

Ms Cousins: The funding will go to the partnership. It will be given based on the partnership’s action plans. We should like to see evidence in those action plans that the projects are based on an analysis of problems and so on. We want to see that the audit has been completed.

Mr McGuckin: The resources that have been made available to support the development and implementation of the strategy will not be sufficient to meet all the needs. That is not the intention; the intention is to support high-quality projects — to provide seed funding and get projects started. If the partnership is set up effectively, we should also anticipate that — and this relates back to the Chairperson’s question about who selects those people — the partnership will be made up largely of service-delivery organisations. They will have responsibilities for delivering certain aspects.

In the most effective partnerships, those individual organisations’ objectives will be mirrored in the community safety strategy and the community safety action plan.

By contributing to the action plan, they achieve their own objectives. They can therefore target the resources they already have at specific issues identified as being of concern to the local community.

Mr McClarty: I too am concerned about the imposition of responsibilities on councils. Responsibilities are imposed by central Government, and, more particularly, many are imposed by Europe. Councils have to find the money to carry out those responsibilities. I agree with the concept of community safety, and my council has taken advantage of that. It has installed security cameras in town centres, and there has been a significant reduction in crime centrally.

We were recently given a demonstration on the effectiveness of the cameras, and we saw some footage of undesirables creating mayhem in the town centre. Cameras are tremendous for ensuring a community’s safety, and they are relatively inexpensive to install. Monitoring is the real expense and a recurring cost. Can you foresee grants towards those costs continuing for the foreseeable future?

Mr McConnell: I cannot comment about the grants or the imposition of responsibility. I do not want to repeat what I have said to the Chairperson, but if a council is being made to spend money, it is easier to justify the expenditure than if it were voluntary. That is not the purpose here. If it is so important and proves to be successful, the Assembly may, at some point, decide that councils should be responsible for it as they are for other matters such as bin collection. That is the only purpose, and there is no ulterior motive. If the Committee wishes, we can go back to the Minister and say that the Committee does not want it. There is no ulterior motive — it is simply a way of allowing the Assembly a measure of control, should that be necessary.

Mr McGuckin: The CCTV schemes were established as a result of a competition run by the former Police Authority. The grants were purely to cover the set-up costs. It was expected that a partnership would develop in each area, and that that would ensure that they were maintained.

Mr McConnell: Some councils are concerned that money they have spent on CCTVs does not have the necessary legislative cover. Councils can spend up to 5p in the pound on anything they like under section 115 of the Local Government Act 1972. All councils have that money well accounted for. Councils are seeking legislative cover for things such as CCTVs.

Mr Barr: Councils have, through the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), requested statutory cover to enable them to spend money from the rates on community safety if they so wish. The amount of money that they spend will be a local decision taken in council chambers and will depend on the other priorities and expenditure demands that they have. Each council

will still have the power to spend what it wants on community safety.

Mr Poots: I am glad that the NIO is here today, because I am very sceptical about the whole idea. While it is fine for a community to get involved and give support to initiatives, the fact is that NIO is responsible for justice and policing. More visible policing is not possible when more police officers are leaving the service than joining it. That is an ongoing problem. Over the past two years there have been significant problems because there are not enough police officers.

The judiciary is worse: people commit crimes, and the police apprehend them, but they are let off with community service and a slap on the wrist. If the police and the judiciary cannot deliver, it is a joke to expect the community to assist. Nothing good will come of this. Communities will just get more work and more hassle but will see no significant benefits unless the judiciary gets its act together and NIO ensures that there are sufficient police.

Mr McClarty left the meeting.

The Chairperson: I cannot continue without a quorum, so I will have to suspend the meeting.

Session suspended.

Mr McClarty returned to the meeting.

On resuming:

Mr McGuckin: There are three aspects to this: the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the criminal justice system and community involvement. The deployment of the PSNI is a matter for the Chief Constable, so I cannot comment on it. We always consider the effectiveness of sanctions that the courts impose, and evidence of more effective sanctions will be considered.

The criminal justice review, which was the most comprehensive review of the criminal justice system here, identified several new initiatives that are the subject of legislation in Westminster. The youth conferencing process is aimed at providing young people who are engaged in crime with more effective responses, and the Community Responsibility Order and Reparation Order will, I hope, improve overall effectiveness. Those initiatives are designed to get the most effective response from individuals and to have them address the nature of their offences. They are also designed for earlier intervention with more effective disposal.

Although the community safety strategy contributes to that, as Ms Cousins said, it goes further by tackling the causes of the offences. This is about intervening before people commit crime. The community can become involved in mediation services, facilities for young people, improved lighting and other environmental factors. It can say where the needs are and, therefore, influence how statutory agencies respond.

Ms Cousins: We do not expect the community to deliver this alone. It can be involved in identifying the problems and solutions and can work with the statutory agencies that deliver those solutions.

Mr Poots: Our council has already written to the judiciary, with very little response. The judiciary has refused to meet the local authority and wants to keep a hands-off approach as far as talking to public representatives about dealing with criminals is concerned.

You mentioned the causes of crime. Someone who has committed 30 or 40 offences gets a slap on the wrist and is told not to do it again. Some young people have appeared before Lisburn Courthouse on car crime offences and have walked out of the court and stolen a car in which to get home. The community wants a safe environment, and I have no doubt that it will assist in providing it. However, with the best will in the world, there is no point in NIO using the strategy to create a safe environment without putting other, more important, systems in place to achieve it. That point is slightly political and perhaps difficult for you to answer.

The strategy will be meaningless without proper policing. You said that policing is a matter for the Chief Constable — it is not. It is for NIO to give sufficient funds to the Chief Constable. There is a projected £43 million of underfunding in the policing budget for this year, so it is for NIO to get more from the Treasury. This is also a matter for the judiciary, under the direction of NIO.

Mr McGuckin: The community safety strategy cannot stand alone. Mr Poots is entirely right: it is one part of a wider process that, as I mentioned earlier, involves improvements that we are attempting to make in disposals for the young, and that may start to address the car crime scenario.

Mr Armstrong: We may be starting at the wrong place. It is all well and good to have ideas about how to get rid of crime or alleviate it, but the main problem is that funding is not there. We should start with the youth when they are young children and not wait until they are young adults to push money into a scheme when the problem could have been solved at primary school. Education is the way. Young people should be educated about this when they are 10 or 11. That is what you should be looking at. Money will be put into this, and you will expect people, including the police and councillors, to implement it when they have no real authority to do so.

You mentioned improved lighting. Although much crime happens at night, much also happens in broad daylight, when lighting is not needed. Cameras are an obvious deterrent, but we need to educate people from the start. That should have been your starting point.

Mr McGuckin: Education authorities must work effectively with other agencies to identify and address

the problems with young people's behaviour, as they do with other areas of the curriculum.

Mr Armstrong: They must do that before young people become absorbed in an unnatural way of life, not afterwards.

Mr McConnell: A councillor who was keen to get involved in community safety projects told me that they were not just an opportunity to deal with the superficial problems that have been mentioned, but a means of encouraging and engaging other partners — all of whom can have a role. I am not an expert on that, like the NIO, but that point was made to me.

Mr Armstrong: I appreciate what you have done, but you must reconsider the matter and take it in hand.

The Chairperson: Rebellion in the heart of man is not unnatural. It is the most natural way of life and must be curbed by a greater power — I am speaking with my other hat on. Rebellion must be broken.

Mr McClarty: That is the shortest sermon that the Chairman has preached in a long time.

The Chairperson: I trust that my point has been made.

I want to make two other important points. Your answer to Mr Poots on the Chief Constable's operational responsibilities was inadequate. Bricks cannot be made out of straw. The Chief Constable does not have enough officers to fulfil his operational responsibilities, and that is NIO's responsibility, so it cannot wash its hands of it. Lack of funding is one thing, but what has happened to the police, and the numbers that are leaving, has left us devoid of persons for the Chief Constable to operate with.

The second matter is of equal importance and concern. Funding was £2.5 million in 2002-03, £2.5 million in 2003-04 and will be subject to a successful bid for £2.5 million in 2004-05. There is 100% funding for the next few years to get the councils sucked in. It will then be dropped to 75%, and the councils will be expected to fund the remainder.

"The NIO will fund councils directly, with the first three years financed at 100%. Thereafter, in the form of grant aid at the rate of up to 75% on approved costs. Councils would be expected to fund the remainder."

Mr McClarty referred to that earlier, and that has serious implications, because once again councils are being given responsibility but not funding to do the job, so who is paying for crime? The answer is ratepayers. That is a concern. Why should the Department put that imposition on a council? Rates are a council's only way of finding money that it does not have. This is important, and everyone has given his blessing in principle. At first we did not know all the details; however, we can now point out practical problems. As mentioned earlier, funding is a major problem.

Mr McConnell: To connect imposition to the funding is wrong, and that is not our intention, although I see how the Committee can draw that conclusion. I assure you that the problem is purely and simply for the reason given earlier. However, the 25% applies to councils and others —

The Chairperson: No. I am sorry. Let me read the words to you — and I did not write them:

"Councils would be expected to fund the remainder."

The words are "would be expected" not "could be expected"; and "others" were not mentioned.

Mr McConnell: I understand.

The Chairperson: I put on my glasses and took them off to ensure that I was reading correctly.

Mr Barr: May I ask the date of that communication?

The Chairperson: It was dated 8 March and came from the Minister's office — it is not possible to go higher.

Mr Barr: We were not fully aware then of the funding arrangements for community safety. We were trying to take that clause through the Justice Bill. Time was limited, and a quick submission had to be made. We were not able to discuss the details with NIO, and the communiqué is perhaps not fully accurate, given that we now have further information from NIO. Councils must address the funding of community safety partnerships with the other partners and NIO.

Currently, councils can decide whether they wish to participate in community safety partnerships. After consultation with NIO, SOLACE said that they wished to be part of it and that they wanted powers to contribute financially. The amount of the contribution would be for them to decide, bearing in mind their priorities and the other claims on their resources.

The Chairperson: I have heard no objection to the principle from around the table, but we want to ensure that councils faced with problem after problem are not left with a financial burden. Mr Brown made the wonderful announcement that we may have three times the rates to pay for everything, a lovely message from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Now we are being told that there will be a further burden on the rates. That is no reassurance. You say that you have changed paragraph 6; however, I wish to see it in writing — moreover, in bold writing.

Mr McGuckin: The draft community safety strategy was published for consultation on 10 April, and I draw your attention to chapter 5, page 39, which deals with funding. At that stage the proposal was to provide financial support for the employment of a co-ordinator over three years in the manner suggested — 100%, 100% and 75%. Paragraph 5.7 makes it clear that a full evaluation of the co-ordinator role will be conducted in

year 3 to inform further funding arrangements. That is the position in the draft strategy, which is at consultation. My point is that funding for the third year might increase to 100% to allow that evaluation to take place.

Secondly, the co-ordinator is a resource for all the organisations in the partnership. To be effective, such a partnership needs a co-ordinator. I assume, if the costs were not met centrally, that they would be met by the partnership rather than by any of its component parts.

Mr McClarty: Community safety is an emotive issue. Councils will be compelled to do this, so it will not be voluntary. Most agencies in the partnership have finite budgets, and if they have to contribute to this, the money will have to come from something else, so funding is a big problem.

The Chairperson: This is a vital matter. Mr McClarty made the point earlier about CCTV. I know from personal experience that two towns committed money to that and then found that the operation was left to the area — that is fact. They got into partnership with the business community, and the business community participated in the debate. However, to the best of my knowledge, it bore only a small part of the financing, and the group left holding the baby was the council.

The paragraph mentioned can mean many things, but it is really saying that 25% is not promised from NIO, so there will be a burden on the councils, and the question is: where will they get the money? They are willing to take the challenge if no one else is, but they have to have money to do the job and they need a lead. In my

years in public service, a number of other important responsibilities were given to councils, often with introductory grants of 75% for two years and then nothing — since nobody else wanted the responsibilities, the councils had to finance them. However, councils can only finance anything from the rates, so we must have this clarified — if only because we are dealing with a letter which is now out of date.

Mr McConnell: The update on the letter will simply be to include “and others”. We just want to give an enabling power to councils, but we have no control over funding at all.

Mr McGuckin: The strategy is currently in draft format and has been published for consultation. These are the proposals that we are making, and I will take on board the Committee’s comments. As an initial step, I will certainly be suggesting that NIO funds the third year to 100%.

On Ms Lewsley’s earlier point on this element of funding, this will be significant and will take up 30% of the budgets being set aside for it. It will be incumbent on us to evaluate how effective the use of the money is and see whether we should continue to take that approach.

The Chairperson: This is as far as we can go this morning, but you do sense our concerns. The principle is good, and SOLACE is not turning away from it. We have a public duty to point out any problems, and we ask you to consider them and give us direct answers. Thank you very much.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 22 May 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr J Clarke) Department of Health,
Mr D McGowan) Social Services and
Ms M Reynolds) Public Safety

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr John Clarke, Ms Marion Reynolds and Mr David McGowan from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Please give the Committee a general overview of the Bill and its explanatory notes and financial memorandum.

Mr Clarke: This is a short Bill with nine clauses. It will provide significant resources for young people leaving the care system. The essential backcloth is the Social Services Inspectorate's report, 'Promoting Independence: A Review of Leaving And After Care Services', that was published in October 2000.

Young people leaving care suffer several disadvantages in practically every area compared with their peers, and they have particular problems with education and accommodation. Essentially, the intention behind the Bill is to firm up the existing provision for leaving and aftercare services in article 35 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The Bill will introduce provision for the assessment of young people's needs. A personal adviser will be appointed for them who will act, as it were, as a good parent would for an older child. A pathway plan will be put into effect. That will be, in a sense, an extension of a care plan. It will focus on helping young people make the transition to independent adult living. That is the

background to the Bill. Does the Committee wish to go into clause-by-clause consideration?

The Chairperson: I will leave that up to you, Mr Clarke.

Mr Clarke: I have heard that there has been some confusion about the categories of entitlement mentioned in the equivalent legislation in England and Wales. The Bill mentions eligible children, relevant children and former relevant children. I have a prepared an aide memoire, which I will share with the Committee. Sometimes the wording of legislation can be an obstacle.

The Chairperson: Thank you; that would be helpful.

Mr Clarke: The aide memoire basically states what the Bill is about.

Clause 1 introduces the concept of an eligible child, which is a 16- or 17-year-old who is, and has been, in care for a prescribed period. Prescribed periods will be set out in regulations made under the Bill. If we follow the same path as England, then the prescribed period will be 13 weeks. The prescribed age will probably be 14. However, although it is subject to discussion at regulation-making stage, it is something that should be considered now.

Trusts will be required to assess the needs of each eligible child with a view to determining what advice, assistance and support they should provide to young people while in care and when they have left care. It is important to realise that this transition activity will begin with an assessment of their needs, and preparations will be made before they leave care. All eligible children will have the right to a pathway plan based on the assessment. The plan will be reviewed regularly and it will cover education, training, career plans and the trust's support in helping young people achieve their full potential.

Do any members have comments on clause 1, or will I move on?

The Chairperson: Please proceed, Mr Clarke.

Mr Clarke: Clause 2 will insert new articles into the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which will impose new duties on trusts for children and young people that they formerly looked after. Article 34B will introduce the concept of the relevant child as being a 16- or 17-year-old who has left care and was an eligible child whilst in care. Other children who are care leavers would still be entitled to the existing range of aftercare provision.

Clause 2 will also introduce the concept of the responsible authority, which will be the final trust that looked after young people whilst in care: that trust will continue to be responsible for them. That will ensure continuity in the child's life and that they will not be passed from trust to trust and from authority to authority.

The responsible authority will be required to keep in touch with the relevant child and, where contact is lost,

it must continue to make reasonable steps to re-establish contact. That will ensure that trusts will no longer be able to forget about children who have left their care; they will have a continuing responsibility.

The responsible authority will be required to appoint a personal adviser for each relevant child if this has not been done already when the child was in care and was, therefore, an eligible child.

Responsible authorities will be required to ensure that the relevant children have regularly reviewed pathway plans based on an assessment of their needs. The Department will be given powers through regulations to prescribe who is to be consulted about an assessment; how it is to be carried out; the recording of results and any other considerations to which trusts must have regard in carrying out the assessment.

Trusts will be required to safeguard and promote the welfare of relevant children by maintaining and accommodating young people, and providing such other support as may be prescribed by regulations.

The Department will also need to prescribe the meaning of “suitable accommodation”. There is a concern about the word “regulation” — and I use that word lightly in this context — as regards the types of accommodation young care leavers can end up in. The Department will have to look closely at this when it is implementing the legislation. It will have to be realistic about what can be provided. However, the Department will have to pay due regard to the standards that must be applied to this type of accommodation because it would not fall within the category of children’s homes or other dwellings that are currently regulated.

Article 34D will introduce the concept of former relevant children; those who qualified for support as relevant or eligible children and who are now aged 18 or over. I hope that my aide memoire explains it fully because the term has been criticised by legal authorities. In fairness, there was probably no other way of wording the term, but perhaps there could be other titles.

The responsible authority’s continuing duties towards care leavers includes keeping in touch, re-establishing contact, continuing the appointment of a personal adviser for each former relevant child and continuing to keep the pathway plan under regular review. Legally, it is a continuation of the role of good parenting.

Assistance in kind, or exceptionally in cash, will be provided for expenses associated with employment, education and training. That will be particularly important to the long-term future of those young people. In assisting young people with education and training, trusts will be required to disregard any interruption in their attendance on a course if resumed as soon as is reasonably possible. In addition, trusts will be required to provide vacation accommodation, or the funds to secure it, where

necessary. Vacation accommodation is a very important area, and young care leavers are potentially disadvantaged when compared with their peers. Accommodation during term time in higher education is relatively straightforward, but there is potential for particular difficulties with accommodation in vacation periods.

The duties of relevant authorities will continue until the young person is 21, except when assistance with education and training is being provided. In that case, assistance will continue until the end of an agreed programme, even if it runs beyond the young person’s twenty-first birthday. That is sensible. Throughout that time, trusts will be responsible for keeping in touch with the young people, and providing them with a pathway plan and a personal adviser.

Ms Ramsey: You mentioned the young person’s adviser several times. The written submission from Barnardo’s highlighted the issue of how that role would be resourced and how the adviser would be kept up to date with changes in housing and benefits legislation. How many young people will be affected? How many will slip through the net before the legislation is in place?

Will there be additional finance for this provision? The Committee’s inquiry into children and young people touched on matters such as residential care, and the Committee is aware of the issue about finance to children’s services in general.

I know that the explanatory and financial memorandum is not the be-all and end-all. However, paragraph 16 states:

“While many respondents were attracted by the idea of a single system of financial support for 16-17 year old care leavers, others did not support such an approach.”

Who is not happy with the approach, and why?

Mr Clarke: I cannot say who, but I can say why.

Ms Ramsey: Uniformity of approach across trusts in respect of finance was discussed briefly following Mr McConaghy’s presentation. I agree with that, but has the Department taken on board the issue of the cost of living in different areas here? Many people will have questions about that, and we will return to it next week.

Barnardo’s have pointed out — and I am hearing it from the public — that the benefits system in England for care leavers has not worked well. Barnardo’s will be raising that as an issue. There is definitely a case for a single benefits system. Please explain the impact that the difficulties with the benefits system will have on young people leaving care.

Mr Clarke: Personal advisers will need to be thoroughly trained and be very familiar with the benefits and housing systems. It is a specialist role. Views differ as to who personal advisers should be; the legislation leaves it open. Some people may see it as being essentially part of a social worker’s role, but I do not

necessarily agree. The role could be filled by a person with the relevant training — someone with the ability to communicate and empathise with young people and who can provide them with the necessary support. That might take it outside the social work field.

Ms Ramsey mentioned wider considerations in children's services, and there may be an issue as regards the overall supply of trained social work staff. We will need to consider whether it is practical for social workers to take on every conceivable role as regards children.

Ms Ramsey: Young people asked First Key if they would get to choose their adviser: they do not get to choose their social worker.

Mr Clarke: The legislation will not provide for choice. Some young people have told me that they would prefer not to have their social worker. That is their view. Where it is possible to provide choice, it would be reasonable to do so, because we are asking someone to empathise with the young person and whom the young person can be comfortable with. There needs to be an element of choice, therefore, as to whether they want that role to be fulfilled by their social worker or not. It will depend on circumstances. Some young people will want that continuity but others will not. I have spoken to Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) in the past, and some young people were adamant that they did not want their social worker as an adviser. The number of young people involved was mentioned. It is about 200 a year.

Ms Reynolds: The figure would be different if all eligible young people being prepared for independence were included. Some eligible children currently in foster care would not be included in the 'Promoting Independence' report figures. We would need to check that. The number would be greater.

Mr Clarke: There will be a build-up of young people under this legislation. It will immediately affect the 200 young people leaving care at that time. However, there will be an approximate doubling of the numbers in the second and third years as more young people leave care.

You mentioned the comment in paragraph 16 of the explanatory and financial memorandum, which is really about removing benefits. We have not reached that clause yet, but it is about young care leavers — 16-and 17-year olds — and their entitlement to benefit. We are conscious of the divergence of views, and I know that many people commented on the issue.

The Department's intention is to improve the life chances of those young people and that financial support be co-ordinated through a single channel — that is the principle on which the Bill is based. The concern is that it will be perceived that the Department's intention — through the introduction of the young person's advisor and the new legislation — will be to view young care leavers as

people who go on to the benefit system. Resources from the benefit system, which would be drawn into the Department under transfer arrangements, must be co-ordinated in a way that will assist young people in education and training designed to get them a job. I am not being critical of the benefit system. Those young people have particular needs, and resources need to be pooled to bring their future more into line with that of other young people.

Ms McWilliams: The Guardian Ad Litem Agency's submission provides an overview of how the Department might involve itself in a comprehensive children's strategy, and it comes to an interesting conclusion. It states that to implement the legislation will require detailed regulations, a significant increase in funding, an infrastructure that can deliver and a considerable commitment from well-trained and well-resourced staff. The submissions from the trusts state that leaving and aftercare service is very underfunded. How will the legislation work given that we do not have a comprehensive children's strategy in mind?

We have been told that £400,000 in the current budget has been committed for the implementation process yet this seems to be a completely different way forward for this age group and will command an enormous amount of resources. If we are to get this right we need to have a completely different type of worker. In the absence of a comprehensive strategy and an infrastructure that can deliver well-trained and well-resourced staff, how can this be implemented successfully? Mr Clarke was present when Down Lisburn Trust gave evidence to the Committee about things that went seriously wrong with a much younger group. Things have gone seriously wrong in the whole area of children leaving care, and the Committee is concerned about huge promises being made but not delivered.

Mr Clarke: I agree. Undoubtedly the legislation must be placed within a wider strategy. In England and Wales the leaving care arrangements are part of the 'Quality Protects' initiative. That links with residential care and fostering because we are saying that children should be prepared for leaving care and should not be just "thrown out". There are links between all of the services.

The resources allocated for the legislative requirements of child and family care this year amounted to £1.5 million. However, those resources are currently allocated to boards for the enhancement of family and childcare services. The Department has assumed that £500,000 of that money would go to this piece of legislation. The £500,000 would not be for residential care; it would be specifically for these legislative requirements.

The resources have been allocated in advance of the legislation and it will be recurring money. It will go towards laying the foundation for the resources that will be required. With a view to implementing the legislation, we have identified an inter-agency group involving the voluntary sector. It is in a preliminary stage at the

moment, since the legislation has not been passed. We will have to map out existing provision and future costs. The current information suggests that £500,000 will be required in the first year with higher amounts thereafter, when more people will become eligible.

Ms McWilliams: Have costs for the next three years been calculated?

Mr Clarke: Yes, but only on the basis of assumptions. A great deal of work has to be done to assess the additional requirement. The assessment comprises the baseline provision together with that of statutory and voluntary groups — no separation has been made. We must be careful that the additionality provided by the Department in this area will not be offset by a reduction in funding in another area. The baseline is important.

Ms McWilliams: I am glad we have reached that issue. We must be certain that we shall not lose funding in other areas, which has been a criticism in the past.

Mr Clarke: That is what I fear also.

Ms McWilliams: The Committee, in scrutinising future budgets, would like to be able to see that the money set down for this legislation has been secured. If that is not done then it will leave the Committee in the position of trying to calculate baselines for one year and projections for the next.

Would Mr Clarke provide the Committee with some indication of costs over the next few years? We are about to carry out the comprehensive spending review, which is based on a three-year prediction. The Committee would like to be able to secure funding for this legislation and ensure that money is not sliced from another area.

One evaluation concerning community care makes some interesting suggestions about personal advisers. First, we are assuming that the personal adviser will have to be a trust employee because the trusts, in their submissions, stated that if trust resources are to be committed, the person would have to be a trust employee. Is that correct?

Mr Clarke: I am not sure whether the personal adviser would be a trust employee or if the job could be created through a fee attracting arrangement. There are a variety of options. Trusts might employ people on a contract basis. I am not saying that would be the case, but it is possible.

Several trusts have said that they envisage the arrangement as being solely part of the existing social work set up. The Department would not want it to be as narrow as that because of some of the issues we have been talking about. We may wish to create a more flexible situation. Trusts would be responsible for ensuring provision but it would also be for them to decide the most suitable method.

Ms McWilliams: Could they sub-contract the work?

Mr Clarke: My view, in advance of detail, is that flexible approaches could be used, bearing in mind that the responsibility would be on trusts to ensure that the provision is made.

Ms McWilliams: Social workers will say that this is another duty being added to an already overloaded agenda.

Mr Clarke: I agree. Some trusts have said that the personal adviser must be a social worker. However, knowing the pressures on social workers, I would have thought that the pragmatic point of view suggests that a range of options be considered. It should not necessarily be assumed that every function involving work with children is necessarily for social workers.

Ms McWilliams: Some submissions have outlined the type of skills that would be required and they suggest that skilled negotiators would be required — people ready to work with challenging behaviour. Some people will be working with young people from offending backgrounds.

This will be a very demanding job if it is to be carried out properly. Community care suggests that it may involve two workers. Thirty young people leaving care were interviewed and they suggested that the best proposal might be to have a combination of social services and a second support worker. Have you heard similar imaginative proposals? If this is to be successful there must be continuity. Young people are being passed from pillar to post. They come from many different backgrounds perhaps never having built up solid relationships. Social workers are telling us that they do not have the time to provide such a relationship and that we may need to look at a different arrangement.

Mr Clarke: That is an issue. I spoke earlier about continuity and the importance of continuity of social workers for some young people.

The Chairperson: Clearly we are going to need more appropriately trained social workers.

Mr Clarke: I would not necessarily presume that. The danger in such a presumption is that the job is seen purely as one for social workers.

The Chairperson: I am concerned about the possibility of contracting out the work.

Ms McWilliams: The current wording in the Bill suggests that a young person's adviser would be one person. The Committee may wish to consider an amendment to facilitate the possibility of more than one personal adviser for a child.

The Chairperson: I would like to bring in other Committee members. I am sorry Ms McWilliams, I know what you are saying is very important.

Ms McWilliams: Could I have a response to my question?

Ms Reynolds: One issue that arose during our inspections with young people is how many people are involved with them. Young people seem to resent that. They are asking for one person to look after their needs for an extended period of time.

The turnover of family and childcare social workers has created considerable problems because children not only have to deal with the changeover of placements but also the turnover of staff. There should be a specialist personal adviser who can be a focal point for the child and take care of all of the child's needs rather than introducing the child to an increasing range of people. We should limit the number of people who come into the child's life at this transitional stage.

Ms McWilliams: It has been suggested that there should be a combination of a social service employee working with a second support worker chosen by the young person. Currently there is a conflict because the word "appointed" is in the legislation, but we will return to that later.

Mr J Kelly: How many children would each personal adviser be responsible for? Will the new arrangements apply to young people previously looked after under an accommodation care order but who are in a juvenile justice setting under a juvenile justice order? In such circumstances clear mechanisms need to be established to ensure that trust assessors meet need and create pathway plans in appointing an adviser. How will that be arranged?

Will young disabled people, looked after within trust disability programmes, be eligible under the legislation? In some circumstances "leaving care" should focus less on making a move forward to independence and more on helping the young person make a smooth and successful transition to adult life.

Will disabled children, in receipt of respite care arrangements over an extended period, qualify under the new arrangements? Under the existing legislation, such children are regarded as being protected by social services.

Mr Clarke: The number of children each young person's adviser would look after would have to be calculated; it will depend on the level of involvement.

Mr J Kelly: You mentioned 200.

Mr Clarke: That is across the whole Province, and there are already leaving and aftercare teams involved. Realistically, I cannot quote you a figure on how many children will be looked after by each young person's adviser, especially as there is a range of options in the number of people that would be involved. We would have to ensure, through implementation, that there are enough advisers to provide the necessary support, and that will vary greatly from child to child.

Mr McGowan: It will also depend on the children because they would be involved in the choice. The trust

will be able to draw from a pool of advisers. Each adviser will have a caseload, but we have not identified what that will be.

Mr Clarke: The qualification periods for the new arrangements will continue to operate for children being looked after by trusts under a care order. The timescale criteria will apply as long as the care order is in effect.

Mr J Kelly: Do children in juvenile justice care qualify?

Mr Clarke: The child must be looked after by a trust. Where a trust has a care order, that order will still run if a young person is in the juvenile justice system. The qualification relates to the care order.

The Chairperson: This is a general overview of the Bill. We will be going through the Bill in more detail.

Ms Ramsey: Mr Clarke said that the duty is on the trust to provide a personal adviser. The Bill states that no matter where the child goes the trust is required to provide the adviser. If the trust is in Derry and the child moves to Belfast, would the young person's adviser follow the child?

Mr Clarke: The child remains under the care of the trust responsible. That is part of the continuity.

Ms Ramsey: I understand that; but the Department must be careful about how many children are assigned to each adviser because they could be spread over many areas.

Mrs I Robinson: I am concerned about confusion, overlapping and duplication between the young person's adviser and the social worker. I do not understand how the duties will be separated to avoid confusion. It will take a lot of money to introduce this system and I am worried about how the Department will distinguish between the roles. Where will young people's advisers come from? Surely, they would have to be employed by trusts?

Mr Clarke: The trust will be responsible for providing young person's advisers. The important thing is to ensure that there is continuity for a young person before and after leaving care. That is a fundamental principle that everyone is agreed on.

Mrs I Robinson: Is the young person's adviser not really a social worker with added responsibilities?

Mr Clarke: For some young people the continuity could be established through their social worker. However, that may not work for other young people, as some want to break away from social workers. It will be the trust's responsibility to ensure continuity. The young person will have the choice to part from the social worker. However, the obvious person to act as a young person's adviser is the one who has been working with the child while he was in care. However, for a variety of reasons, that may not be practical.

Continuity is important and this will be emphasised by the fact that work on leaving care must start before the child leaves care. The legislation will provide for a pathway plan, among other things, to be started while the child is in care. The young person's adviser will be introduced before the young person leaves care.

Mr Berry: I would like more clarification about the young person's adviser. I understand that trusts will be responsible for appointing the young person's adviser. There seems to be some confusion. In its submission, Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust stated:

"Clarity would be needed as to whether the young person's adviser would be a trust employee".

A trust is asking that question — not the Committee. It continues:

"It would not be possible for a non employee to commit trust resources."

That is a concern, because trusts will not appoint non-trust employees. If the young person's adviser is not a trust employee, a trust worker would also have to be involved, otherwise it would lead to possible duplication and confusion. I am worried that trusts are not fully aware of who will act as young person's advisers. Would you comment on that?

Mr Clarke: Trusts will be responsible for providing young person's advisers and will be responsible for providing the services. There is no question of the young person's adviser spending the trust's resources. It will be the responsibility of the trust to provide the young person's adviser and all the necessary resources. All of those decisions lie with the trusts.

Mr Berry: Why are the trusts asking who the advisors will be?

Mr Clarke: One thing we must be clear about is that this is the legislative framework; the implementation will be carried out by the trusts and the voluntary sector. We have been discussing who the young person's personal adviser would be. The legislation simply provides that trusts will be responsible for ensuring that there will be a young person's adviser.

The detailed arrangements that the trusts are getting into will have to be taken forward when the procedures are being implemented. The appropriate regulations and guidance have to be drawn up, and the implementation group will include representatives of the trust and the voluntary sector. The issues will become clearer as we progress towards implementation.

This Bill is a framework; the regulations and guidance will underpin it. Arguably, that is where the meat will

be, and that will be the subject of consultation. The Committee will be interested to see the outcome.

Rev Robert Coulter: I am worried when I hear the word "assumption" at this stage. How many extra staff do you assume will be required, and will they be administrative staff?

Mr Clarke: We do not have an answer on the numbers of administrative staff that will be required. Leaving and aftercare services are already subject to statutory provision, and teams are already in each area due to existing legislative requirements. We are talking about enhancing and realigning that.

Rev Robert Coulter: How many extra staff do you assume will be required to implement the legislation?

Mr Clarke: I do not know whether we can make a precise assumption at this stage. Different areas will have to be looked at during the implementation stage, including whether the young person's adviser would be one person or whether support staff would be needed.

Rev Robert Coulter: We are dealing with a Health Service that is already underfunded, overburdened with administrators and strapped for cash in carrying out its remit. Nevertheless, we are looking at more legislation that will add more staff, and we are not being given a definitive statement about the extra burden that will put on the Health Service.

Mr Clarke: We are working on an assumption, and £1.5 million of extra resources will be provided this year towards legislative requirements arising out of the child and family care services. We are already putting in resources.

Rev Robert Coulter: And those resources will be ring-fenced.

Mr Clarke: That is a wider issue, and the Department's position on ring fencing is known. I cannot add anything to that.

Rev Robert Coulter: Clause 5 says:

"35D. — (1) Every authority shall establish a procedure for considering representations (including complaints) made to it".

Will that be standardised across the trusts?

Mr Clarke: We would wish to see that standardised across the trusts. This is largely a restatement of existing representations and complaints procedures. We did not touch on this one because there is already a general representation and complaints procedure for the services provided.

The Chairperson: Thank you. We will be looking at this important subject again.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 22 May 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)

Mr Berry

Rev Robert Coulter

Mr J Kelly

Ms McWilliams

Ms Ramsey

Mrs I Robinson

Witness:

Mr R McConaghy) Assembly Research Services

The Chairperson: I should like to welcome Mr Rab McConaghy, an Assembly researcher.

Mr McConaghy: This will be a short briefing; I do not intend to look at the Bill clause-by-clause, especially as the Committee is meeting officials later. Everyone should have received the research paper that the Assembly's research section has produced, as well as the explanatory and financial memoranda.

The Children (Leaving Care) Bill was introduced on 4 March 2002, and the Second Stage was agreed on 19 March. On 7 May the Committee sought, and gained, approval for an extension. The period for Committee scrutiny will end on 26 June.

The Bill is aimed at ensuring that children who are 16 or 17 years old and who have been in care are given adequate support that will allow them to adjust to life outside a care environment. The duty extends to the age of 21, but can go beyond that if the young person receives assistance for training and education.

The Bill will amend the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, specifically article 35 of that Order. The 1995 Order allows and requires authorities to offer advice and assistance to young people once they have left care. However, the proposed legislation is a positive step aimed at enhancing that support framework. It will effectively tighten up and formalise the current legislation on the obligations that an authority has to young people leaving its care. Certain things are specified in the

legislation, such as a formalised needs assessment; the development of pathway plans to help young people in their last period in care and in leaving care; and the appointment of a personal adviser. There are also specific requirements for the authority, in this case the trust, to look at accommodation needs and the suitability of accommodation in relation to the young person.

A major element of the new legislation, and perhaps one of the more controversial elements, relates to clause 6, which provides for the removal of care leavers' entitlement to standard benefits such as jobseeker's allowance, income support and so forth. Those would be replaced by a package arranged by the trust, using funds that have been transferred from the Department for Social Development. The rationale is that that package would be better tailored to meet a young person's needs. Some people would be excluded from that and would stay on the main benefits system — primarily young care leavers who are lone parents or who are disabled.

The Bill effectively mirrors the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 in England and Wales, which amended the Children Act 1989. The background in GB has been quite complex and goes back to the early and mid-1990s, when there were different reports about childcare, such as that on the scandals in north Wales, and so forth. A lot of work that was done at that time was broadened out to focus on what happens to children not only in homes, but also once they leave.

The Social Services Inspectorate produced a report in 1997 that looked at young care leavers' specific problems, and it mentioned a few pointers, such as lack of academic qualifications and consequent higher unemployment rates, greater propensity to go into more serious adult crime, higher levels of homelessness and frequent changes of addresses.

The Utting Report, which reviewed the safeguards for children living away from home, was a key document at that time. It was produced by a committee chaired by Sir William Utting. It confirmed a lot of the findings of the Social Services Inspectorate. The new Labour Government of 1997 looked at other aspects of childcare and social work and introduced the "Quality Protects" programme and the White Paper, 'Modernising Social Services'. A range of things was introduced at that time, and there was a desire for streamlining. A consultation on the needs of carers went out in 1999, and that led to the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 in England and Wales.

Although the Utting Report, which was the basis of the legislation, applied only to England and Wales, John McFall, who was the Minister responsible for health in Northern Ireland, welcomed it. The point was made that because Northern Ireland had more recent legislation in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, there was a lack of urgency, and less perceived need to develop new

legislation. However, it was recognised that the position should be monitored.

The Northern Ireland Social Services Inspectorate conducted similar work to its British counterpart and produced the report 'Promoting Independence', which mirrored the GB findings and was essentially a matter of catch-up work. The report recommended the application of the English and Welsh legislation.

Ms McWilliams: Are we able to follow what you are saying in your written paper?

Mr McConaghy: Yes, most things are covered in the paper.

Ms McWilliams: You are speaking from a set of notes prepared on your research paper.

Mr McConaghy: It is just the summary around that.

Ms McWilliams: I am trying to key in and flag up some of the points as you are going through the paper.

Mr McConaghy: I have tried to keep them in sequence. However, some of the issues that I thought might be better for discussion are re-sequenced slightly in the briefing.

Ms McWilliams: OK.

Mr McConaghy: The Social Services Inspectorate report in Northern Ireland directly recommended the application of the GB legislation. A major research project at that time was the Northern Ireland leaving care project, which was initiated in 1996 and which confirmed many of the research findings in Britain. The statistics showed that one in two young care leavers in Northern Ireland left school without any qualifications, compared to only one in 14 in Britain. Six months after leaving care, a young person was four times more likely to be unemployed than the general population average. That represents the background to the Bill. It is paralleling what is happening in England and Wales.

The legislation is only part of the story. Detailed regulations and guidance will be needed if the Bill becomes law, and there will be a further consultation period for that. The regulations must address the basics in the Bill, such as the prescribed age, and how long a child has to be looked after in order to become eligible. The Committee may find that it has a heavier workload when the regulations and guidance go out for consultation. The needs assessments and pathway plans, along with the personal advisers, will also have to be addressed in the guidance and detailed regulations.

The explanatory memorandum with the Bill shows that there was a positive feedback from the consultation phase held by the Department. There has been some criticism about how these provisions operate in England and Wales, although there has not been time for a full evaluation. The primary criticism was that the language used in the legislation, such as "keep in touch" — a trust

would have an obligation to "keep in touch" with someone once he or she has left care — is quite woolly. How would that operate in practice? There is a very open tone, and that is probably necessary in social welfare legislation. However, there is a concern that the language lacks rigour. How would individual trusts and authorities follow it up?

Clause 6 is one of the main clauses concerned with the withdrawal of benefits. There has been criticism about how that would be implemented consistently across different trust areas and how other benefit channels would be placed in relation to young people. For example, in cases where a young person is currently eligible for free prescriptions, would that be taken from them? If they lose other income benefits, they will no longer be making national insurance credits. Such issues have been raised in relation to the English and Welsh legislation.

During the consultation phase, some people asked that more time be given to allow evaluative work to emerge from England and Wales. The Committee must strike a balance between waiting for that work and pushing forward with what is generally seen as a strong piece of legislation.

Legislation on this aspect of childcare in the Republic of Ireland is found in the Child Care Act 1991. That Act loosely states that authorities and boards "may" follow up with young care leavers. However, with the resource constraints in the South, there is a feeling that that is not being carried through to the extent desired by the voluntary sector. There has also been a tendency in the South to focus on homelessness; there is a strong homelessness lobby there. Some good legislation and policy guidance is emerging on homelessness prevention strategies and so on.

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 also allows for trusts and boards to follow up, but it does not put a requirement on them to do so. Research is ongoing to gauge the success of boards and trusts in carrying that through. Section 6 of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, relating to benefits, extends to Scotland. The benefit shift will be away from social security to a package delivered by the appropriate trust.

The feedback seems to be that this is seen as a positive development and that it strengthens existing legislation. The wording is still open, and detailed guidance and regulations must be developed afterwards. During that period, there will probably be a chance to see some evaluative work from England and Wales. Again, there will have to be a balance between the speed of implementation and allowing that work to feed through.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Ms McWilliams: One of the issues that seems to be coming up — and I do not know how familiar you are with it — is eligibility for benefits. What does that

package look like? Has any work been done in Scotland, England or Wales on the support package?

Mr McConaghy: I am not sure that the package is fleshed out in the guidance. It would be up to individual trusts to work on their own to develop specific packages. Thus, one of the criticisms relates to how consistent those packages would be across different authorities. You may wish to check with the Department, but I do not think that that has been addressed in the guidance. There would be quite a bit of freedom for the trusts to develop those packages. In our search for work from England and Wales, we were unable to get details on this.

Ms McWilliams: There are variations between trusts in Northern Ireland depending on what support and resources they have available. That has been demonstrated in community care. Would this lead to huge differentials depending on what trust you were in, or is there some kind of bottom line?

Mr McConaghy: The Department has drawn down £400,000 a year over the next two or three years from the Executive programme funds. That will be used to look at innovative leaving care packages. The Department sees the rest of the funding as coming from within the existing baseline. However, there is £400,000 a year to develop different packages from within the trusts. There is no detail on the allocation of that money between trusts.

Mrs I Robinson: Does that mean that there would be differentials? Would different amounts be paid? We are again talking about postcodes; different trusts could have different levels of payment. Surely, that would be wrong, morally and in every other way?

Mr McConaghy: Certainly, there is the potential for a postcode lottery, and it has been criticised.

The Chairperson: A postcode lottery would be terrible. You can elaborate on that point afterwards.

Ms Ramsey: The explanatory memorandum says that during the consultation period, the issue of uniformity

across trusts was raised. The cost of living in some areas must be taken into account. I am not suggesting that because someone lives in a certain area they should get more or less than someone else. We must ensure that there is consistency. For example, it might cost more to live in Belfast than in another area.

The Chairperson: Clarification on that must be sought from departmental officials.

Mr McConaghy: There may be an issue regarding the cost of living. It is clear from the legislation that practical cash assistance would be available for training, education, travel to and from places of training and education, and so on. The cost of living does not emerge specifically. That might be worth pursuing — what the margins are, and what the possible additional allowances for cost of living might be.

Ms McWilliams: I have read some of the submissions — only a few have been sent in — and there appears to be concern about the provision of personal advisers, such as when they would be appointed, and by whom.

Mr McConaghy: Clause 5 of the Bill allows for representations and a complaints procedure. There was criticism in England and Wales that the balance of power always lay with trusts. That was not clarified in relation to representation — how much input a young person would have in the appointment of an adviser, or in a situation in which they were being pushed down a particular road or pathway plan that they did not think was appropriate, but the trust perhaps wanted to pursue because it was cheaper. Although there is an allowance for a complaints procedure, there may be a feeling that it is not strong enough. The balance of the young person might be in the other way.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 22 May 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL
SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey
Mrs I Robinson

Witness:

Mr P Deazley) Department of Health, Social
Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: Clause 1 will be considered first, as agreed last week, followed by the remaining clauses. I propose to complete the consideration of the remaining clauses today, if possible.

The Committee welcomes Mr Peter Deazley from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Committee's concerns are centred on the consultation on the professional assessment tool, the fast-track review and the appeal mechanism and the payment system. Last week, you said that you would give the Committee further information today.

Mr Deazley: I had expected to be able to bring the documentation today, but the Minister is still approving the consultation document. Approval is taking this length of time because the document is large. I had expected it to be approved in time for today's meeting. For it to be of any use, the Committee would need to go through the document.

The Chairperson: Have you anything to add that was not covered last week?

Mr Deazley: No.

Ms McWilliams: We have known about the report for some time. When was it finalised?

Mr Deazley: The final piece of the report had to be written by Prof Brendan McCormack, who designed and piloted the tool. It was completed two weeks ago.

Ms McWilliams: Knowing that the legislation was going through the Assembly and that the tool went hand in hand with the legislation, I am concerned that the Committee has been delayed in completing consideration of the legislation. With the legislation being considered by the Committee, one would have thought that the Department would have issued a timescale in parallel with the legislation so that everything could have been completed by now.

The Chairperson: That is very disappointing. However, we must proceed, as time is passing.

Clause 1 (Charges for nursing care)

The Chairperson: There is an amendment concerning consultation on the professional assessment tool. Mr Deazley has said that he has nothing to add. The Committee was asked to agree to a provision for financial assistance for nursing care costs and to agree the definition of what constitutes nursing care in advance of detailed written information based on the assurances of officials. Members will want to confirm those points with officials, as we discussed last week.

Members may wish to consider whether the Committee should recommend an amendment to the Bill that would require the Department to issue its guidance by means of Statutory Rules. That would ensure that the Assembly and the Committee would have the opportunity to consider and formally agree any guidance or appeal mechanism prior to its being implemented. This would allow the Committee to agree to clause 1 with a greater degree of confidence in advance of the details being made available.

Members should note that the draft amendment is a working proposal that has been drafted without legislative drafting advice, and it may not be technically competent. Advice is also needed on how and where it should be placed in the Bill in the context of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. Members could discuss and agree the amendment even though it may not be technically correct. That has happened before. That could be done at a later stage via Mr Deazley and the relevant people, but is open to discussion.

Ms Ramsey: This issue has probably arisen in relation to every Bill we have discussed. We are all representatives and know the way boards and trusts work; we all know that those entitled to something are not always aware of the fact. We introduced a clause into the Carers and Direct Payments Bill to the effect that responsibility to inform people of their entitlements should lie with the trust. The proposed amendment does not strike me as being in any way different from what we did with other Bills. I know that the question of placing the onus on the Department, the board or the

trust to inform people of their entitlements was raised with the Committee Clerk at the start of deliberations on this Bill. Unless I am reading the issue wrongly, I have no problem with placing responsibility on the trust or relevant authority to ensure that it informs people of their exact entitlements, rather than assuming that it will do so.

The Committee Clerk: The proposed amendment, which takes accounts of members' points, is essentially intended to require the Department to provide for guidance, directions and so on by means of a statutory instrument which would have to come through the Assembly and the Committee. The Committee would, therefore, have the opportunity formally to agree whatever guidance or payment arrangements were put into place. It does not specifically identify a requirement on the part of trusts or boards to publicise the information. Based on the evidence given by officials, they are arranging for boards to identify all those residents currently entitled. It is therefore not quite the same as the previous amendment that we made, since it is proactive.

Ms Ramsey: If we ask the Department to bring the guidance to us, we shall at least have another shot at ensuring that the requirement is part of it.

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

The Chairperson: Yes, that is possible. Do we have enough time left?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee must complete the Committee Stage of the Bill by 7 June. We are running late. We need to put the draft report before the Committee for agreement. It must be lodged with the Business Office by 7 June. If we went ahead with an amendment on this basis, it would allow the Committee to consider all the other issues when they come forward from the Department. The Bill is essentially a provision to ensure equity of treatment for nursing home residents. That is in clause 1, and the details will have to follow; the Committee will wish to see them.

The Chairperson: Are members agreed that we should try to amend the Bill? The technicalities of the amendment will, of course, have to be considered further.

Ms McWilliams: Given that the deadline is 7 June, I feel that we have been put in an absolutely ridiculous position. We have neither the tool of assessment nor the payment systems before us for discussion. We are sitting here scrutinising legislation with two massive pieces of information missing, yet the deadline is 7 June. It is absolutely outrageous, and if we continue to act in this manner with other pieces of legislation, we may as well pack up and go home. The amendment is based on the content of two documents that are supposed to come forward to us. We are having an irrelevant discussion about an amendment based on whether what the Department produces is adequate.

The Chairperson: The assessment tool was a key point.

Mr J Kelly: Perhaps I might ask Mr Deazley when he thinks the statutory instrument will be introduced.

Mr Deazley: I would rather not make any more promises. In defence of the Department, I should point out that the assessment tool was entirely in the hands of professionals. It was being run entirely by Prof Brendan McCormack. We in the Department could not move on the issue until we had received the documentation. As far as I can remember, we got the report on the pilot about a fortnight ago.

Mr J Kelly: So you are not going to hazard a guess.

Mr Deazley: As I have said, I expected to be able to lay out the consultation document and the submission on the payment system today. It is a big document for the Minister to go through by herself.

The Chairperson: Our choice is to postpone it again — and it seems terrible to do that — or agree that we are content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment.

Ms McWilliams: I propose that we postpone it. If we need to have extra meetings before the deadline, we will do so. We are not in a position to take this forward without two major decisions being made by the Department.

Clause 1 referred for further consideration.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 23 May 2002

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL
(NIA 7/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr McClarty
Mr M Murphy
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr J McConnell)
Mr D Barr) Department of the Environment
Miss M Finnegan)
Dr T Power)

The Chairperson: The Committee welcomes Mr John McConnell, Mr David Barr, Miss Marie Finnegan and Dr Tracy Power from the Department of the Environment.

At first, we thought that the Bill was straightforward, but it is more complex than we anticipated. Several points, which were raised in recent debates, have caused concern. We must go through the Bill clause by clause. The Committee received a detailed response from the Department and would appreciate departmental officials taking us through it. Have any Committee members an interest to declare as councillors?

The Chairperson, Mr M Murphy and Mr McClarty declared an interest.

Mr McConnell: The two experts from the division will take the Committee through the responses.

Miss Finnegan: We shall go through pages 1 to 14 of the submission. Page 1 deals with clause 2(2)(c), which makes provision for requesting information and gathering data in a particular manner for the formula. The Regulation allows the Department to seek information, by way of expenditure figures, at a particular time and in a particular format from council chief executives. The details of the format will be spelt out in the subordinate legislation.

The information must be complete, which is why we felt it necessary to have a clause to deal with it. A

problem arises if a district council fails to provide the data in the manner requested by the Department. If the Department received information from only 25 councils, and not 26, the formula would be incomplete. Clause 4 provides a means for dealing with such a problem should it arise.

Subsection (2)(c) also covers data from sources other than councils, such as the Rate Collection Agency, the Valuation and Lands Agency, census data, et cetera. The source of the data, its nature and its timing will be spelt out in the subordinate legislation.

The Chairperson: Should there be an enabling provision in this clause to stipulate the consequences of not providing the required information at the time and in the manner required?

Miss Finnegan: That is not necessary in primary legislation, as a clause in the Bill stipulates that councils can be penalised if they are inefficient or if they do not comply with the Department's requests.

Not all information comes from councils: some of it has already been published. We do not anticipate a problem. Difficulty would arise only if councils, for whatever reason, were lagging behind and had not produced their expenditure figures — for example, certified figures — by a certain time. If councils had not produced their accounts, they could not be certified in time for us to pick them up. That is the only problem that I anticipate.

The Chairperson: The Department told us that it never stipulated which councils had problems producing data.

Miss Finnegan: Things have improved. Much of what we asked for was new to councils and they presented it to us in the wrong way. There was much toing and froing, which made things difficult. We have been working closely with finance officers at workshops, and councils now know what is required.

Before determining the figures for the last consultation exercise last year, we had great difficulty in getting the adjusted expenditure figures from councils. Some councils were producing one thing while others were producing something else. This year, we have asked for the same information in a pro forma that they understand. I do not think that there will be a problem now.

The Chairperson: The Department came from the opposite side when the Committee was dealing with the best value legislation. It had to include certain things because councils were not providing information. It seems that the Department has come round to the Committee's way of thinking.

Mr McConnell: Trust between councils and the Department is vital. We are certain that work done on the finance side will produce an outcome. Everyone involved in this exercise in the councils has an interest

in getting it completed correctly. I am not sure that the same could have been said about best value.

Miss Finnegan: Clause 2(4) relates to the Regulations and it is a definition of the formula:

“the methods, principles and rules of any description.”

It will determine the detail of the formula; it alerts the Assembly that the formula is very detailed and comprises different measures and weightings.

The Chairperson: Page 5, paragraph 5, line 1 of the explanatory and financial memorandum states that clause 2(4)

“allows the Department to amend the subordinate legislation”.

Is that right or wrong? Our legal advice is that it does not reflect the wording of clause 2(4). Subsection (4) is a definition only.

Miss Finnegan: The Bill states that it is a definition of “formula” and that stands on its own. In the explanatory and financial memorandum we tried to bring the two clauses together for greater clarity. One could argue that clause 2(4) does not match exactly the explanatory and financial memorandum. Our answer is based on legal advice. However, in the explanatory and financial memorandum we linked subsections (4) and (2). It may be clearer if we spelt out the link between the two subsections in the Bill itself. We would have to return to our legal advisers on that.

Mr McConnell: We have our legal advice and you have yours. Such discussion, however, is nugatory. Perhaps we could have further consideration on the legal advice.

The Chairperson: If the explanatory and financial memorandum reflects the intention to allow the Department to amend the subordinate legislation, should clause 2(4) not be amended to reflect that important point?

Miss Finnegan: According to our legal advisers, subsection (4) is a definition only and the two should be read in conjunction.

The Chairperson: We are guided by our legal advice. It was suggested that if the need to amend clause 2(4) is accepted — and that must be checked with your legal advisers and ours — should the words “of any description” not be removed and replaced with wording similar to “to be agreed within the Regulations made under clause 2(1)”? The words “and rules of any description” is certainly a wide statement.

Miss Finnegan: The words “of any description” were put in to assure Members that all details would be covered in the Regulations, because there is a great deal of data. Any of that data could be replaced over time with better measures. For example, we used the Robson index on deprivation when starting to work on the formula. Midstream, we moved to employment factors, and we ended up with the Noble indices, which seem to be the best measure of deprivation. We use bednights to

measure the influx of tourists; councils wanted us to use day trippers, but those statistics are not available. We hope to include them when they become available.

The definition is wide of necessity. At present, we do not know what we may want to change. The Department would not make changes without first consulting councils, particularly those involved in finance and personnel, as they would want to consider the effects. Any change would be made through the subordinate legislation. There would have to be consultation, but the subordinate legislation would come before the Committee for the Environment and the Assembly, because it would be subject to affirmative resolution.

Mr McConnell: It is a response to councils’ concerns. Councils wanted issues taken into account on which we did not have the necessary information and to allow us, if that were the consensus, to use the information in future.

The Chairperson: Would the wording to be agreed in the Regulations made under clause 2(1) not be a more appropriate way of dealing with the matter?

Mr McConnell: We have taken legal advice. However, we do not wish the matter to degenerate into a clash of legal opinions. We should like to marry the two to produce something legally valid that the Committee will accept.

Miss Finnegan: We could have introduced a clause to the effect that the Department desired the power to make Regulations to distribute the resources element of the general grant and left it at that. However, in clause 2 we have provided an outline of the elements that we wished to include in subordinate legislation. The Committee will see an analysis of each section.

The Chairperson: The wording must reflect the reasons for each clause, and that is where our legal advisers have challenged it.

Mr McConnell: Our difference seems to be not in the desired outcome but in the legal ramifications of the Bill’s wording. Perhaps a meeting of both sets of legal advisers could help to resolve the matter.

Miss Finnegan: Would it satisfy the Committee if we outlined a definite link between the two subsections?

The Chairperson: We wish to ensure that the wording is appropriate. It does not help to say that there is a link between the two when the words used mean different things.

Mr McConnell: It would be wrong of us to insist on that when you have received legal advice to the contrary. We shall, of course, check the matter, if the Committee is content.

The Chairperson: We should be more than happy to pass on our legal advice to the Department if that were helpful.

Mr McConnell: That would be very helpful.

Mr A Doherty: What is the legal status of the explanatory and financial memorandum's contents if there is a difference in the interpretation of its wording and that of the Bill?

Miss Finnegan: My understanding is that the explanatory and financial memorandum is not a legal document.

Mr A Doherty: Does it accurately reflect the Bill?

Miss Finnegan: It should match the Bill's clauses, but there is an opportunity in the explanatory and financial memorandum to expand a little.

Mr A Doherty: The important thing is to ensure that the Bill's wording is correct.

Mr McConnell: This is an example of good co-operation with councils. The intention is to ensure that their wants are included.

The Chairperson: The explanatory and financial memorandum gives extensive detail on the formula and the data to be used. Take for example page 1, paragraph 5 and page 5, paragraph 2. If clause 2(4) is to agree with the Regulations — we are suggesting the wording — would that not show that the relevant clauses in the Bill are merely enabling clauses that allow for the introduction of Regulations that will stipulate the full details of the formula?

Miss Finnegan: The Bill's clauses are enabling because they enable the Department to make Regulations. The Regulations will detail the formula; the Bill does not state it.

The Chairperson: Does the Department agree that it is not for the Committee to scrutinise the formula at this time? Should not it do that when it receives the draft Regulations?

Miss Finnegan: Yes.

The Chairperson: When will the draft be available? May the Committee see the working draft as soon as possible?

Miss Finnegan: Yes. The Department has done some work on the draft Regulations and is working closely with departmental solicitors. It plans to make a submission to the Minister for permission to move on the draft Regulations by the end of May 2002. It will then start work on subordinate legislation, which should be before the Committee by the end of June. The Department will then work on a policy memorandum, which should reach the Executive by mid-October. That will be followed by the legislative process of laying the statutory Regulations with the Business Office in mid-November, followed by a debate in mid-December. The timescale is tight. However, the Department hopes to meet all those deadlines.

The Chairperson: As I say, the Committee would like to see the working draft as soon as possible.

Mr McConnell: It is in the Department's interest to ensure that it is made available to the Committee as soon as possible; it is aware that the Committee will not simply nod through legislation. I asked for the Committee's indulgence and as much speed as possible. Issues must be raised and cleared as quickly as possible.

Miss Finnegan: Clause 2(5) refers to Regulations and provides for refinement of the formula. I referred earlier to the kinds of refinement that could be available. The Department accepts that amendment of that subsection may be necessary. The Department must consult, and that could lead to the amendment of subordinate legislation.

The Chairperson: In accepting consultation with others apart from local councils on clause 4(4), will the Department include the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)?

Miss Finnegan: The Department does not normally consult those organisations on subordinate legislation. However, it consulted widely on primary legislation because of the equality impact assessment. The Department consults councils on subordinate legislation because they are involved. It also consults other bodies that are interested in councils, such as the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, Northern Ireland's National Association of Councillors (NAC) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).

The Chairperson: Surely it would be appropriate to consult NIPSA and NILGA as well.

Miss Finnegan: The Department could consider that. I am not sure whether it does not already consult those organisations.

Mr McConnell: That should not be a problem, because unless consultation is nugatory the Department should consult all organisations. It must consult on all those issues with all those who are involved in local government. If the Committee considers that to be necessary, the Department will do so until it proves otherwise.

The Chairperson: When will the Committee know whether the clause is to be amended and when will it be informed of the terms of a proposed amendment?

Miss Finnegan: The Department has not yet suggested amended wording for any of the clauses, although a few may need to be amended. The Department has not considered rewording at this stage, as it is waiting for a response from councils. It will then deal with that as one exercise.

The Chairperson: What are the provisions of clause 4?

Miss Finnegan: Clause 4 provides for a reduction of the general grant due to misappropriation of funds or excessive expenditure.

The Department was asked whether it could put a figure on this, but we would have to deal with each case

as it arose. The Department would consider the local government auditor's report and submit a report to the Assembly in due course; that is part of the requirement. The wording in the Bill is a pick-up from the existing legislation; we did not change the wording.

The Chairperson: The Department says that it cannot give a precise figure, as that would depend on the circumstances of the council in question. However, clause 4(1)(b) states

"having regard to its financial resources and other relevant circumstances".

That is a much broader statement and could bring any circumstance into consideration.

Mr McConnell: Councils will welcome that, because they wish other circumstances to be taken into account before action is taken. Councils may wish to make representations on matters that they believe should be taken into account, and that would not make it excessive. We will depend largely on the local government auditor and the councils for the information they have for defrayal. Someone may say that it is wrong to the nth degree, but the council may have other things to ameliorate that.

Miss Finnegan: Factors other than finances may be involved — we need the data. A council may have failed to submit its annual reports. That is important. Under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, the Department directs councils to submit their reports by a certain date — for example, this year they must submit their reports by 31 July. We are moving towards submission of reports by 30 June. The general grant reduction may be used to achieve that, if necessary. It has not been used to date, but the Department would have to consider it as a means of ensuring that councils comply with the direction.

Mr McConnell: In this exercise we have been dealing with finance officers, and that has been worthwhile in establishing a working relationship. We do not order councils to do this or to do that; we consult them on everything. They will then agree whether this approach is reasonable.

Miss Finnegan: If a report is not submitted by 31 July, there will not automatically be a drastic reduction in the grant. We would liaise with the council about the delay, and we would perhaps set a target after negotiations. However, if nothing happened and there was inefficiency in the council, the Department would have to act.

Mr Ford: You said that the report of the local government auditor would have to be considered. Should subsections (1) and (2) not spell out that it is on the foot of a report from the auditor that the Department takes action? It is implied, but it is not explicit.

I am afraid that I am unclear about the procedure. The Department would "recommend" the amount to be deducted from the general grant. There is no mention of

"recommendation" in the Bill; it speaks of Regulations being made subject to negative resolution. If it is a recommendation, presumably the Department can only recommend it to the Assembly. I praised you earlier this week for getting away from negative resolution in most cases. Should this not require an affirmative resolution of the Assembly, as that is the only interpretation I can place on the Department's "recommending" as opposed to the Department's sliding something through while everybody is asleep?

Mr McConnell: The Department has no intention of sliding anything past anybody. I assure the Committee that the past year has demonstrated that, if the Department even attempted to do that, there are too many people around this table to call the Department to task.

Mr Ford: Why not make that clause affirmative, like the others?

Miss Finnegan: We should not have used the word "recommend" in our answer; we should have said that the Department would "determine" the amount to be deducted from the general grant. The clause is one of several that use the wording of the 1972 Act. I do not know whether it is necessary to refer to the local government auditor in the Bill — that is a procedural matter.

The Department would not know about those matters unless the auditor reported them to us. If a ratepayer reported it to the Department, the Department would go directly to the auditor to check the accusation that had been made against the council and to obtain evidence. It could come to light in the annual report. If it does not, the Department can ask the auditor to carry out a special audit. It is understood that the auditor is the Department's source of information.

Mr Ford: I can accept that point somewhat easier that the second point, which you have not answered. Why is the clause a negative resolution when everything else in the Bill is affirmative?

Miss Finnegan: I did not think that that was an issue. We are not making an Order. The Department makes a written report to the Assembly, by way of information, that contains all the details of the case.

Mr Ford: If the Department reports to the Assembly, what is the procedure for somebody taking action on the foot of that report?

Miss Finnegan: By the time the Assembly received the report, the Department would have taken action and determined the amount to be deducted from the council's grant.

Mr Ford: Therefore, the point that matters is that, as the Bill stands, the Regulations made by the Department are subject only to negative resolution. A report issued months after the event is irrelevant if the Department has made Regulations that enforce its decision.

Miss Finnegan: I do not see this as the Department making an Order or Regulations.

Mr Ford: That is what the Bill says. Clause 4(5) mentions Regulations. The Department is making Regulations.

Miss Finnegan: I understand where confusion arises. Regulations made under clause 4 are subject to negative resolution. That relates to subsections (3) and (4) only. It has nothing whatsoever to do with subsections (1) and (2). I missed your point.

Mr Ford: Subsection (5) says: “Regulations under this section”. It does not say: “Regulations under subsections (3) and (4)”. If there is any confusion, it is not on the part of the Committee.

Miss Finnegan: I accept responsibility for the confusion; that will have to be clarified. Subsection (5) does not relate to subsections (1) and (2); it relates to subsections (3) and (4) only.

Mr Ford: Therefore, under subsection (2), a reduction in grant is simply a matter of the Department reporting to the Assembly that it is taking action without having to seek approval from the Assembly to do so.

Miss Finnegan: That is correct. The Department would report to the Assembly stating the case, giving the details of the auditor’s report and stating the amount that the Department had decided is appropriate to deduct from the grant.

Mr Ford: If the Assembly deemed that the Department’s actions were not appropriate, what would be the procedure to reverse that decision?

Miss Finnegan: I do not know that that particular decision could be reversed.

Mr Ford: Will you explain how that would fit in under the European Convention on Human Rights? The concept that the legislature deemed that the actions of civil servants were inappropriate and could not be reversed seems to be a fundamental breach of human rights.

Miss Finnegan: The Department would have to fully justify its decision in its report to the Assembly.

The Chairperson: The Department does not have to justify anything. It has the power to take that action, and whether it justifies it or not, the Assembly can do nothing about it. If it were the Assembly’s opinion that the action taken by the Department was not justifiable, there should be a right of redress.

Miss Finnegan: That is taken from the current legislation, although that does not mean that it should not be changed. There has never been a report, although the legislation was to be laid before Parliament.

The Chairperson: The words “laying before Parliament” mean nothing.

Miss Finnegan: I know that it is a formality.

Mr McConnell: There is nothing in the legislation that allows for that procedure. We need to look at that and ensure that a procedure is in place. Apart from the human rights aspect, we must consider the primacy of the Assembly.

Miss Finnegan: What you want would require the clause to be changed substantially, which is possible. It could be changed so that the Department would make a recommendation to the Assembly, and no deduction would be made until the Assembly approved that recommendation.

Mr Ford: That is what I thought subsection (5) meant, until you told me that subsection (5) did not mean what it says.

Miss Finnegan: As I have said, subsection (5) does not relate to subsections (1) and (2).

Mr McConnell: The point is well made, and it is something that we shall address. All that I have said relates to the primacy of the Assembly, and we want to take that, and the human rights aspect, into account.

The Chairperson: I return to clause 4(1)(a). What measure will the Department use to determine that

“a reasonable standard of economy”

has been achieved? How is excessive expenditure defined?

Mr McConnell: Councils are required to seek best value under Local Government (Best Value) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002. Were the local government auditor to suggest that things could be done better by looking at different aspects, that may be one area in which we could look at economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In clause 4(1)(b), the word “excessive” is taken into account when the local government auditor reports back on what the expenditure has been.

The Chairperson: Do you say that the local government auditor has sole responsibility for determining a reasonable standard of economy and excessive expenditure?

Mr McConnell: Yes.

The Chairperson: It is not the Department’s responsibility?

Mr McConnell: The Department would determine that based on a report from the auditor. If someone writes to us and says — however unlikely this may be — that a district council is behaving badly, the matter is referred to the local government auditor. It would be the auditor’s decision as to whether there was any evidence to support the accusation. The Department would exercise its judgement at that point.

The Chairperson: Is it the Department or the local government auditor that determines the amount of deduction?

Miss Finnegan: The Department would determine the amount of deduction, not the local government auditor. The Department would have to take into account how much grant the council gets. Some councils do not get very much, although others get substantial grant. Could the entire grant, be withheld or, as a warning, could it be reduced by a small amount?

Mr McConnell: That is where the Assembly comes into play. What role does it have to play in the determination of that exercise?

The Chairperson: You have placed so much emphasis on the local government auditor, yet the auditor is not mentioned anywhere in the legislation.

Mr McConnell: The local government auditor is —

The Chairperson: He is a shadowy figure in the background.

Miss Finnegan: The local government auditor's responsibilities are set out clearly in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and in subsequent Orders.

The Chairperson: However, if it is not clearly laid out as his assessment, the Department could carry out the assessment. You are saying that the local government auditor assesses the key areas of the reasonable standard of the economy and excessive expenditure.

Mr McConnell: He will report to us.

The Chairperson: When it is not clearly laid out that you refer to the local government auditor, the Department could make the determination. Is that not correct?

Miss Finnegan: The Department would not have the evidence without obtaining the information from the local government auditor. The Department receives figures, but we do not analyse councils' accounts.

The Chairperson: Why is that not included for clarity?

Mr McConnell: The second part of that would be the follow-on.

The Chairperson: That follow-on concerns the Assembly's responsibility and authority.

Mr McConnell: We shall certainly look at that. I need to check the provisions of the 1972 Act, how they cover this legislation and whether it is simply a reference to that Act.

Miss Finnegan: The words that we have used in the clause are exactly the same as those used in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982.

The Chairperson: However, as you know, authority and responsibility have changed dramatically. Therefore, just because the words were included in that Act does not mean that they should remain in this legislation. If something was neglected, that does not mean that we should neglect it in our legislation.

Mr McConnell: Or whether it simply means, from a legal point of view, a reference to earlier legislation.

Miss Finnegan: The questions on the reduction of the general grant deal with much of what we have been discussing. The next area covers economic development and the provisions for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to issue directions. We discussed those areas with that Department. It does not intend to issue further legislation. It thought that it would issue similar guidance to that which the former Department of the Environment issued in 1992. It also said that it would be non-statutory.

Mr Ford: In that case, I am at a loss as to what the word "directions" means in clause 6(4).

Mr McConnell: The last sentence in the answer —

Mr Ford: The Bill uses the term "directions". You talk about guidance and specifically used the term "non-statutory". What does the word "directions" mean?

Mr McConnell: Mr Ford previously raised that point. The last paragraph of the Department's answer to the Committee says:

"The Department would accept that clarification in the wording of this clause and in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum will be necessary."

You are correct that directions are not guidance.

Mr Ford: It is more than the wording. Many Departments issue guidance, but if it is non-statutory, surely it should not be mentioned at all.

Miss Finnegan: Councils cannot do what they like in relation to economic development; they must work within parameters. That would be in the form of guidelines issued by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. When the Department of the Environment was responsible for it, we always had to be careful when approving projects that our guidelines were being followed. We did not want councils to duplicate what LEDU or the IDB was doing. Guidelines are needed so that there are parameters within which councils can operate.

As Mr McConnell said, we must amend the wording to make clear that they are guidelines rather than a formal direction.

Mr McConnell: In many ways, we are speaking about another Department. I understand that the intention is to ensure that there is no duplication of effort. It is as simple as that. For that purpose, councils should adhere to the Department of Trade, Enterprise and Investment's guidelines.

Mr Ford: Do you suggest that there will be guidelines and that the Department of Trade, Enterprise and Investment will have a role in saying what councils may or may not do? It seems to me that you are still skating somewhere between a formal piece of legislation and informal guidance without being entirely sure which

it is. There is also nothing in subsection (4) that relates to consultation with district councils to draw up any guidelines, directions or Regulations.

The Chairperson: Although guidelines sound perfectly simple and helpful, we must know what they are. Clause 6(4) says: “a district council shall exercise”, not “a district council might exercise”.

Mr McConnell: That is why we must examine the wording. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment’s primary intention is simply to ensure that 26 district councils are not doing their own thing in economic development willy-nilly.

The Chairperson: Time and time again it has been voiced as a concern in the information that we have hitherto received from district councils. There must therefore be proper and meaningful consultation on what the word “guidelines” means.

Mr McConnell: How that consultation is reflected in the legislation is a matter for us to discuss with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I presume that it would be along the lines of guidelines drawn up following consultation with councils. There must be some way for councils to do what they feel they must do while ensuring that that does not in any way compromise other activities in the area.

The Chairperson: Must the guidelines be backed up by secondary legislation?

Miss Finnegan: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has conveyed to us that that is not its intention.

The Chairperson: I should like to know exactly what its intention is before I approve something of which I have no clear understanding.

Mr McConnell: We must return with the rewording in any case, and the point that you make about consultation is extremely salient. We shall need to consult with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about what it intends to do to satisfy the Committee regarding consultation.

Mr Ford: I have another question on clause 6, although not on subsection (4). I raised the issue of vesting land with the Minister in the Chamber. His response was that it was covered not by this Bill but elsewhere. He did not make clear whether the powers laid down elsewhere would extend to economic development. Clarification would be helpful, although it need not come today.

Miss Finnegan: We need legal advice on that, but our understanding is that the provision in the Bill gives councils the power to acquire, hold and develop land. The Minister referred to the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, which gives general powers to councils to acquire and vest land. There is substantial legislation. Our understanding is that something more

may be needed — perhaps a separate clause to allow councils to vest land specifically for economic development.

Mr Ford: That is the apparent lacuna. It is unclear when the economic development powers were granted, and now is surely the time to address that.

Miss Finnegan: Yes. If our solicitors say that what we have is sufficient, councils will have the power to acquire land for economic development. That is now a function of the council. That is acceptable as far as vesting is concerned because it is covered by the 1972 Act. If the solicitors say that, there is nothing more to be done. However, if they say that a separate clause is needed for councils to vest land for economic development purposes, it will have to be included.

Mr McConnell: Mr Ford is correct — it is complex. The Department for Social Development has powers of vesting for the acquisition of land. There is still much to cover on that.

The Chairperson: You will have to return to answer questions that we did not have time to ask today and to clarify several other points. Have councils specifically consulted on the precise terms of clause 6?

Miss Finnegan: The answer that I had submitted to the Committee on whether councils had been consulted on the precise terms of the clause was wrong. The problem is that we are caught between the former Department of the Environment and the former Department of Economic Development. We are trying to piece everything together to see exactly what happened. I understood that the consultation on 27 November 1997 was on the precise terms of the clause. The consultation was, in fact, on the proposals as announced by Lord Dubs at that time. There was, however, a good response to those proposals — 23 out of 26 councils responded — but it was not on the detail of the clause itself. The old Department of the Environment had preferred the clause contained in this Bill.

The Chairperson: That was on 11 September 1997. Several councils have written to the Committee about their concerns. They agree on the need to move in that direction, but they must have the situation clarified to know exactly to what they are agreeing. The letter of 11 September 1997 does not appear to contain anything of note.

Miss Finnegan: A discussion paper, of which you have a copy, went out to councils following that announcement.

Mr McConnell: It is unfortunate, but what Miss Finnegan has said is absolutely true. This piece of legislation fell to another Department. There was then pressure from the councils, mainly because of European Community money and how to obtain and use it. We responded late in the day. There were shortcomings.

The Chairperson: The Committee can help by allowing you to have the responses it has received from councils on the economic development subsection, if that would help.

Mr McConnell: It would.

The Chairperson: It is a guide to the councils' thinking. We can help to get a clear understanding of what local government is saying. The Committee has received 15 responses to its request and more will arrive. Mr Barr, I am sorry that you did not get to speak today.

Mr McConnell: He has been busy with community safety.

The Chairperson: I hope that you listened to the debate on 20 May about community safety, and have taken on board some of the comments made. Many people thought that this was a simple situation that would be accepted without question, but there is much concern. The Department must answer matters that were raised in the debate — for example, duplication and fragmentation of responsibility.

Mr Barr: To be fair, some of those questions might be better addressed to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) rather than to the Department of the Environment.

The Chairperson: If that is so, we shall get the NIO to come along at the same time to assist you. We are happy to do that.

Mr McConnell: We shall work with the Committee staff to see where the balance lies.

The Chairperson: That is perfectly acceptable.

Mr Barr: The NIO is consulting at present on the community safety strategy, which is open until 5 July. That gives ample opportunity for consultees to raise those particular issues that were raised in the House, and for the NIO to address those issues. If the Committee wishes to raise concerns about the strategy, I am sure that it would be free to do so.

The Chairperson: The Committee must find out the responses to those issues that have been raised in the Assembly. We need to ascertain whether the answers are satisfactory. Those points arose in the debate, and we cannot run away from that. It is better that we do it now, because they will come up again in the Assembly.

Mr McConnell: Some of the issues raised can be answered without further reference to the consultation paper. The NIO may wish to talk about some issues, but that is entirely a matter for that Office.

The Chairperson: Work with the Committee staff, because the Committee will be happy to facilitate you in any way it can.

Mr McConnell: Thank you for that offer. Frankly, it is my strong belief that, if the situation continues, nothing will happen, which is to the detriment of everyone.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your attendance.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Friday 24 May 2002

**FUR FARMING (PROHIBITION) BILL
(NIA 8/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr Ian Paisley (Chairperson)
Mr Savage (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Armstrong
Mr Bradley
Mr Dallat
Mr Douglas
Mr Ford
Mr Kane
Mr McHugh
Mr M Murphy
Mr Paisley Jnr

Witnesses:

Mr J Given) Department of Agriculture
Ms M Hood) and Rural Development

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee welcomes Mr Given and Ms Hood from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. As you know, the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill stands referred to the Committee following completion of its Second Stage in the Assembly this week.

The Committee Stage is a detailed scrutiny of the Bill's provisions and will consist of three phases. The first phase, starting today, consists of policy briefing and evidence taking so that we can decide on possible areas for amendment. The Committee has sent letters to an agreed list of bodies asking for their views. A press release has also been issued, offering other interested parties an opportunity to make a submission. Once the first phase has been completed, we will move to formal clause-by-clause scrutiny and then produce a report.

The Committee will now hear your statement and then ask questions.

Mr Given: I presented the Committee with a paper earlier this week. I do not have much to add.

The Labour Party pledged some years back to introduce a Bill to prohibit fur farming. A private Member's Bill to ban it fell by the wayside, so the Government picked

it up, and an Act was passed for England and Wales, where fur farms existed. Scotland followed, although it does not have any fur farms, and we are now doing the same.

The Deputy Chairperson: Paragraph 13 of your written submission says that the decision to prosecute for the secondary offence of knowingly causing or permitting the keeping of animals for a prohibited purpose will be discretionary. What will be the criteria and who will decide when to prosecute?

Ms Hood: Are you referring to the explanatory memorandum or to the paper that was sent earlier?

The Deputy Chairperson: I am referring to the explanatory memorandum.

Mr Given: The Department will investigate if it believes that someone is, by proxy, allowing such practices to take place.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is it possible that people here are running fur-farming businesses that you do not know about?

Mr Given: It is possible, but it is hard to believe that such practices would not have come to our attention in one way or another over the past 20 years. If such businesses existed we would have been told because there are enough people around the country from the Department and the rest of the public sector for such activity not to be noticed.

The Deputy Chairperson: In many parts of the country, there are small businesses that very few know about. What would be your approach if you found that such a business had been around for a long time?

Mr Given: It would depend whether it had to be licensed — for mink or Arctic foxes. It is possible that the business could deal in fur-bearing animals that had not already been legislated for. Until this Bill becomes law, nothing can be done about such cases.

The Deputy Chairperson: Can you close a business that has been in operation for 15 to 20 years?

Mr Given: At the moment, it could be stopped if it was dealing with mink or Arctic foxes, because it would be operating without a licence. Beyond that, nothing could be done.

The Deputy Chairperson: Paragraph 20 mentions a lobby group in London that has been in constant contact with the Department about progress on the proposed Bill. Can you give us contact details of that group so that we can ask it to make a written submission to the Committee?

Mr Given: I cannot tell you off the top of my head, but the information can be made available.

Ms Hood: I may have details of the lobby group. It has not been in contact since it found out that the Bill was going through the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is the Bill proposed for Northern Ireland an exact replica of the GB Act, and, if not, what are the differences?

Mr Given: I am not aware of any significant differences.

Ms Hood: The principles are exactly the same, but the GB Bill contains compensation clauses because fur-farming businesses existed there. Our Bill just has an enabling power to create a compensation scheme.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are the fur-farming businesses in GB licensed?

Ms Hood: GB had only mink farms. There were 13 licensed mink farms when the Bill came into effect in December 2000. I understand that there are no longer any such businesses in GB.

Mr Armstrong: Which animals can be used for fur production?

Mr Given: I had not thought of it in those terms, but it would be any animal that was produced, bred and slaughtered for its fur rather than for food. I may not have described that well.

Mr Armstrong: It is not just foxes and mink.

Ms Hood: There are others, including the muskrat, which is also known as the musquash, the chinchilla, and the fisher. The most common are the mink and the Arctic fox. There must have been Arctic foxes in Northern Ireland in 1988, as there was an Order on how to keep them.

Mr Armstrong: Are animals going to be named in the Bill, or will it be a broad spectrum?

Ms Hood: No.

Mr Given: It will be a broad spectrum.

Mr McHugh: It is difficult to ask the right questions to ensure that everything is covered. Members have questioned the need for a compensation clause in the Bill. How can we prevent people from temporarily moving from the South to the North and starting up farms? Will we be safe from that? How long would it take people to start up a new business and get compensation? We do not want to pay out any money. It only takes a legal technicality for that to happen.

Then there is the moral issue. Why are we allowing fur to be sold? Could there be any free-range mink running free and then being trapped?

Mr Given: I am not sure about free-range mink, and catching them would be difficult. Fur farmers would be carrying on a fur-farming business, and that would come within the ambit of the Bill.

The Bill cannot tackle the sale of fur. That is an issue for others. If we accept the public morality argument, we should promote the Bill and show that the practice of fur farming is not a proper thing to do in the United

Kingdom. There are a few fur farms in the Republic and further afield, and I do not know if their legislation will go further. We can only spread the gospel of prohibiting the production of fur, and then the sale of fur will be less of an issue.

Setting up fur farms in the interim is possible. The Department will be telling farmers that fur farming is to be prohibited shortly and that no fur farms will be allowed.

Mr McHugh: Would they need a licence?

Mr Given: They would need a licence for Arctic fox and mink. Problems might arise if they started something else. In the absence of legislation we can only say that we are legislating to ban the practice and make it clear that no compensation will be given to anyone who sets up a fur farm. That would be a technical and legal point, and I hope that it does not come to that.

The Deputy Chairperson: One issue arises from the report's information pack, which all Members received. London seems to be the centre of the fur trade. It is big business there, providing employment for many in clothing industries, et cetera. Will they not lobby strongly to try to retain fur farming? It is a major industry in the Netherlands, and we are part and parcel of Europe. Legislation affects all parts of Europe, as we know from beef and so on. It is free trade.

Mr Given: This is past the post in England and Wales; the legislation is in force. Whatever lobbying was done was overcome. The Act is in place.

The Chairperson: However, you would have to agree that the fur trade is a big business in the Netherlands. We are all part and parcel of Europe now. We can stop it here in some areas —

Mr Given: Sure, but if we stop it and present the right arguments, the European Commission may agree. It may take a while, but I hope that the practice will be banned across Europe.

The Deputy Chairperson: Conversely, we could introduce legislation that might not stand up in Europe.

Mr Given: That is correct and a chance that we must take. However, there is a public morality argument in the Treaty of Rome that we are setting our sights on as the basis on which we can bring this legislation into force.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I want to speak about organically raised mink. It must make a person feel better to know that her coat used to run around. If you shot one of those animals, there would not be much left of it. You would probably have to kill five times as many to make a coat. Getting to the serious point of the proposed legislation, is this a morality Bill or an animal welfare Bill? I am looking at paragraph 3 of your paper as I ask that question.

Mr Given: The Government across the water based their arguments on public morality, that it was not right

to rear animals and kill them solely for their fur. It is reasonable to take wool or other material off a food-bearing animal and use that for clothing and so on. To that extent, it is not a welfare Bill. I do not know the standards that are required for keeping mink in England, but obviously standards exist. I am not aware of any cases in which those standards have been breached, though it may well have happened. Some people say that you must keep the animals in relatively small cages, and that is not acceptable on welfare grounds. Compassion in World Farming is advancing that argument in the Republic.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is interesting to hear what the Labour Party did in England, but we are talking about what the Executive or the Minister here intend to do. Is this morality or animal welfare legislation?

Mr Given: It is an issue of public morality. There is no welfare issue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is definitely not a welfare issue?

Mr Given: We are banning something that we do not have, so we have never had a welfare problem. I am not sure why that thinking exists.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Your paper says that the ban is sought on grounds of public morality rather than animal welfare, although that too is a consideration. Then you give some instances of the reasons why animal welfare is a consideration. I want to be absolutely clear: is this a welfare or a morality issue? I will come to the point of my question in a moment.

Mr Given: It is a morality issue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is definite?

Mr Given: Welfare will only arise down the line.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It was spelt out clearly in the debate in the House on 21 May that this was nothing to do with animal welfare. The Minister's own words were:

"this is not a welfare issue".

Mr Given: Animals are slaughtered every day for food. There is a welfare argument there.

Mr Paisley Jnr: We are not slaughtering mink —

Mr Given: If you were keeping mink and slaughtering them for their fur, there would be a welfare consideration. Welfare standards would have to be set.

Mr Paisley Jnr: There is nothing in the Bill that addresses welfare issues. It is a morality Bill.

Mr Given: That is correct.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is important to know the nature of the Bill. A few matters arise from that, and because we are not concerned with animal welfare, I shall set some of them aside. You have answered my Colleague's question about specifying animals. You say that you are not interested in specifying animals, that you want the Bill

to be a broad brush, making it illegal to raise an animal for its coat. Would that apply to goats?

Ms Hood: No.

Mr Given: Not if they were being slaughtered for their meat.

Mr Paisley Jnr: If I became an entrepreneur and decided to create mink steak, could I raise them for that meat and sell the by-product of their fur?

Mr Given: I do not like the thought of that at all, although I imagine that you could.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I could.

Mr Given: I think you could. I would like to take advice on that question.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I would like to hear that advice, because it is an interesting matter. It might not taste nice, but the value of the fur might make up for the lack of sales of the meat.

In an answer to Mr Savage, you said that selling would become less of an issue. If we succeed in banning the raising of animals solely for fur, we might persuade the rest of Europe that what they are doing is morally wrong. I think that is a fair reflection of what you said. However, 164,000 people are employed in the fur industry in Europe. There are over 6,000 businesses and 129,000 retail outlets, so it is unlikely that a ban here will have a dramatic impact. It might make the product even more exclusive than it is now, more desirable and, therefore, more costly. That could be the result of our good and moral intention.

Mr Given: Is that a reason for not banning it on the grounds of morality? That is the intention of the Bill.

Mr Paisley Jnr: No. I am saying that the hope that it might make Europe take a moral stand is a vain hope.

Mr Given: There is only a little hope of that. I am not saying that the Bill will transform Europe, but we must do what we think is right. It may be that the Commission will take the matter up in due course. It may take many years, but that does not make it unreasonable for us to take that step.

(The Chairperson takes the Chair).

Mr M Murphy: I believe that the mink meat referred to by Mr Paisley Jnr is a delicacy in Japan. How can we overcome that? Has a licence to farm mink ever been granted here?

Mr Given: I think so. However, I have not been able to research that.

Mr M Murphy: Can we get that information?

Mr Given: I do not know. We can try.

Ms Hood: We would be going back a long time, to the late 70s.

Mr Given: We have been trying to find out, but we have not found the file.

Ms Hood: I believe that it was valuable. I presume that a licence must have been granted at some time.

Mr Given: Mr Paisley asked whether mink could be considered a delicacy. I do not know, but stranger things have happened. He suggested that the sale of the meat might become unnecessary because the fur is so valuable. If it came to the bit, we might have to learn to live with it.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Do you mean if it came to the bite?

Mr Given: We might have to legislate again. If the majority of the income generated by an animal came from the sale of its fur that might not constitute proper food farming.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Companies, such as the Lisburn Hide Company Ltd, cannot export beef, so its true market value is not known. If your information is true, the legislation could impact on companies that sell the by-products of animals, such as the hide, at a good price. If the hide became more valuable than the original product, that could put those companies out of business.

Mr Given: Can you explain that further?

Mr Paisley Jnr: You said that if a company were to raise mink on the pretence that it was for its meat, even though it was for its fur, it would meet the requirements of the Bill. You say that the law would need to be amended to ban the raising of mink for meat if the animals' meat was not the main source of income. A result of the devastating BSE ban is that beef is not sold for its true value. However, companies such as the Lisburn Hide Company trade hide for a good price, so those companies would be badly affected if that loophole were closed.

Mr Given: I do not know what I could do about that. Cattle and sheep are killed for food. If it is decided that mink can be killed for food, the fact that its by-product is valuable is irrelevant. I am not sure how the desired end result could be achieved.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Neither am I. There is a problem with morality legislation.

Mr Given: I hope that that problem does not arise.

Mr Douglas: You said that welfare was not an issue; however, it is so on the mainland, where mink farming is commonplace. In the 1960s, the farming community here considered seriously the possibility of mink farming. The industry did not take off because mink, if they escape from farms, can have a serious impact on the welfare of birds and other animals. That is a problem on the mainland. I am not opposed to people wearing fur or fur farming, but I am concerned about the harm that mink can cause.

Mr Given: The welfare of other animals is a wider issue. I was referring to the welfare of the mink, but I take your point, and I have read about that problem.

The Chairperson: Clause 1(2) creates the secondary offence of causing or permitting another person to keep animals for their fur — for example, a person who grants a tenancy of land. Would a person who buys the animals for slaughter, or who is involved in the slaughter, be subject to subsection 2? Does it apply to someone who buys the animals after they have been slaughtered?

Ms Hood: Buying is slightly different from being involved in the raising and keeping of animals. The Department is trying to address that in the Bill. The Department has no control over what is bought in a shop; it is trying to stop fur farming at the source.

The Chairperson: Could subsection 2 apply to someone who buys fur?

Mr Given: That would be going too far. The crux of the subsection is that it can be applied either to someone who allows fur farming to take place, or who is involved in it. The Department could not take it any further. It targets the person who is involved in fur farming, or who allows it to happen.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Is that consistent? Although it may not be an offence to kill an elephant, and to possess, or to sell, its ivory in the country in which it was reared and killed, it may be so in many other countries. The clause deals with the same principle. If, according to the legislation, it is illegal to raise and kill an animal for its fur, surely it should be an offence to sell it. It should also, therefore, be an offence for the daddy of them all — the buyer — to purchase the product that is creating the demand for animals to be killed in the first place.

Mr Given: Those are a range of downstream offences — being in possession and selling.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is why, perhaps, “morality legislation” does not work. Perhaps animal welfare issues should be addressed separately in a different Bill.

Mr Given: The Bill is intended to prohibit the keeping of animals, and does not address those downstream offences.

The Chairperson: The Committee must deal with the Bill. It cannot change it, because it is at Second Stage. That might not have been the case had the Committee been consulted earlier; however, it must deal with what is on the table now.

There is a conflict between morality and animal welfare. The Government seem to say that there is a moral question. The response to that moral question is similar to the Labour Party's receiving money from the publishers of atrocious photographs, but rejecting funds from Gallagher's on the grounds that it makes tobacco. To enter the realm of morality is to tread on dangerous ground; to try to legislate on grounds of morality leads one on to even more dangerous ground.

Mr Given: Despite the labels that are put on the exercise, its purpose is merely to stop people from keeping animals for the production of fur.

The Chairperson: Clause 2(5) permits a person who claims to have an interest in the animals to apply to the court in order to resist the issuing of a forfeiture order. That implies that those suspected of owning animals for fur farming would be notified, in advance, of the court's intention to issue that order. Is the Department not concerned that that will allow the owner/breeder time to remove animals from the premise before the order is enforced?

Mr Given: I do not think so. There is always a risk that people will remove the animals, but the person will still ultimately be guilty of the offence of keeping them, irrespective of whether they are still there.

The Chairperson: Should there not be a provision to prohibit the removal of the animals as soon as the court announces its intention to make such an order? If the court rules to make an order, should that not be the time from which the animals' removal might constitute a breach? That would avoid premises being found empty.

Mr Savage: That is important.

Mr Given: So you wish to make the removal of the animals an offence once a forfeiture order is in place?

Mr Savage: Someone might have been operating a business in Northern Ireland for some 10 or 15 years, without the Department's knowledge? How could it stop him? Will he be deemed to have been trading illegally for 15 years? That point is very important.

Mr Given: He may not be trading illegally.

Mr Savage: No, but that will be the case once the Bill is enacted.

Mr Given: If such traders exist, we will certainly have to examine compensation arrangements, because their businesses will be closed under the new law.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Might the Department consider an amendment to clause 2(5) to prohibit removal of the animals once the court has announced its intention to make a forfeiture order?

Mr Given: We would be happy to consider an amendment if the Committee so wishes. Obviously, one would need more time to reflect.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Perhaps you could return to report your considered view.

The Chairperson: Clause 4 allows entry into premises to investigate the offence of keeping animals. Is there no power of entry for the secondary offence of knowingly causing or permitting the commission of that crime?

Mr Given: Clause 4 relates to the premises on which the animals are kept. Are you interested in the right to enter any other premises?

The Chairperson: I am interested in why there is no power of entry for the secondary offence of knowingly causing or permitting animals to be kept.

Mr Given: A power of entry would not help, since, in the circumstances you mention, I assume you would be looking for records. You could not enter the person's private dwelling anyway.

The Chairperson: So there is no possibility of inspecting records or correspondence that might provide evidence of causing or permitting the keeping of animals?

Mr Given: Once you start on the premises where fur farming is being carried out, you can probably move on. It would be a question of the police securing a court order to seize records, whether kept on the premises or elsewhere.

The Chairperson: It seems a little loose, with ways of evading responsibility.

Mr Given: Are we back to the question of morality?

The Chairperson: Clause 4(7) defines premises as excluding a private dwelling. Is it the case that animals could therefore be kept for their fur in such a private dwelling?

Mr Given: Yes, in theory I assume that that would be the case.

The Chairperson: That is a very substantial loophole, and I should think it needs re-examining.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is like growing your own clothes.

Mr Given: You are still not allowed to keep the animals. The fact that the definition of premises does not include private dwellings does not mean that you can keep fur-bearing animals.

The Chairperson: Yes, but who could enter to check if someone is keeping them?

Mr Given: Someone would be bound to let us know if that were going on.

The Chairperson: Clause 5(1) allows for a compensation scheme that will pay for losses incurred as a result of the Bill's enactment. Will any of the 13 businesses in England and Wales be able to relocate to Northern Ireland between now and the Bill's enactment and be compensated for their losses?

Mr Given: I was asked that question earlier. In theory, that is probably true. Having accepted the morality argument, part of the purpose of the Bill is to avoid the relocation here by people from England or elsewhere. If the Bill becomes law, that point will be legally interesting. One could tell anybody trying to relocate here that the practice is banned, or will be banned shortly, that fur farms will not be licensed in Northern Ireland, and that we would not be interested in compensating anybody. Doubtless lawyers could argue

for a considerable time about how that would work in practice.

Mr McHugh: I am still interested in organic mink. Does the Department know how many mink or fox are in the wild? Before the introduction of the bounty scheme for foxes, there were fur-farming operations across the border that were almost as big as factories. Under the provisions of the Bill, could people continue to trap mink? The lifting of the bounty on foxes would have a detrimental effect on the welfare of other wildlife, including any mink that escape, because there are so many foxes.

Mr Given: Are there?

Mr McHugh: Yes.

Mr Given: I do not know how many are in the wild in Northern Ireland.

Mr McHugh: The number of foxes is phenomenal.

Mr Given: They are not causing the same problems as they did 20 or 30 years ago.

Mr McHugh: If they are not hunted and trapped, they must eat animals such as duck, pheasant and other wild birds. Given that impact on the countryside, could trapping as part of a fur business continue? Some are happy to do that.

Mr Given: That would be a small-scale business. You might call it a business, but it would be at the low end of a business operation.

Mr McHugh: Would those who keep a couple of those animals as pets be bound to release them?

Mr Given: The animals are slaughtered for their fur, and if people do that, they will be running an illegal business under the new legislation.

The Chairperson: Can the Bill be amended to the effect that once it is announced that the legislation will proceed, there will be a deadline beyond which nobody can start a business?

Mr Given: The legislation has already been introduced. I am unsure of how such an amendment could be tabled. I take the point, and I am happy to consider it.

Mr Ford: Given that you must make a compensation scheme in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), it is reasonable that you should state on the record that any such scheme would not include compensation for anybody who established businesses subsequent to the introduction of the Bill. Otherwise, every member of the Committee could rush out and establish a fur-farming business.

Mr Given: I would be happy to state that, and we established that point in April. The policy paper that went out to all and sundry states:

“No claims for compensation as a result of the ban will be considered for any business which has not submitted a licence application before the date of this letter.”

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does that mean that a fur farmer must have a licence from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development?

Ms Hood: That is the case for the fur farming involving certain animals, such as mink and Arctic fox.

Mr Paisley Jnr: So, fur farming could not be added on to an existing business without a licence being obtained?

Ms Hood: No.

The Chairperson: Mr Given, will you consider the many points that the Committee has made today and advise us later of whether you intend to make any of the recommended changes?

Mr Given: Yes.

The Chairperson: The Committee must consult with other interested parties, but it wanted to discuss the matter with departmental officials first. Mr Given, would you keep in touch with the Clerk of the Committee and arrange to return to explain which matters you shall take on board, and why. It has been stated that no compensation will be made to parties who begin fur farming in Northern Ireland before the enactment of the Bill; it is important that that statement stand up in law.

Mr Given: No doubt the Clerk of the Committee will remind me of any points that I may have missed.

The Chairperson: We will give you a complete transcript of today's proceedings, which may help.

Mr Savage: For the purposes of the Bill, do rabbits fall into the category of fur-bearing animals? I dined at a top restaurant in Europe recently — not at my own expense, I may add — *[Interruption]*.

The Chairperson: This is on the record.

Mr Savage: One of the top delicacies on the menu was squirrel. In Northern Ireland, the grey squirrel has become a pest, and if nothing is done about it there will be no red squirrels left. There must be a grey area here. We must get the matter right, and the Committee will one day have to make a decision on it.

The Chairperson: I would be very chary about eating squirrels because of the information that I have read about them. They are vermin carriers.

Mr Given: The judgement is that if an animal is being produced primarily for food, its fur can be used as a by-product; otherwise, it cannot be used. The issue is not black and white; it is grey.

Mr Savage: That concerns me.

Mr Given: I am not sure how that can be dealt with.

Mr Savage: I am not sure, either. Someone will have to make a decision, some day.

Mr Given: The Department dealing with the Act will have to judge whether the animals are produced primarily for food or fur. The case for closing the enterprise or not would be based on that judgement. We would have to leave the outcome to the good judgement of the courts.

Mr Armstrong: What is your definition of “farming”?

Mr Given: That question is too hard to answer.

Mr Armstrong: In the light of recent changes, agricultural farmers are wondering how they are defined.

Mr Given: Fur farming is a production business.

Mr Armstrong: Some European countries are discussing the production of food along the canals, at ports and around multi-storey buildings. Is this the direction that farming is taking? Will it soon be carried out without land and agricultural holdings?

Mr Given: That may well be, but if the farmer is in the business of producing fur, he will not be allowed to operate.

Mr Armstrong: Fur production has nothing to do with farming.

Mr Given: It is a production.

The Chairperson: It is a business.

Mr Douglas: The paper that we received states that fur is perceived as a luxury item, whereas meat is a key foodstuff. Beef cattle have been used for centuries but mink, for example, have been used only in the last hundred years. That is a good argument.

Mr Given: In the next 1000 years or so beef or sheep might no longer be eaten.

The Chairperson: There would be no more scrapie, other than scraping the bottom of the barrel. The Committee may have further questions when you return with your final recommendations on what can be done with the suggestions that it made. Thank you very much.

The meeting ended at 11.22 am.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Tuesday 28 May 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr Hamilton
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms N Ferris) Barnardo's
Mr B Nellis)

The Chairperson: The Committee welcomes Ms Nuala Ferris and Mr Brendan Nellis from Barnardo's. Thank you for providing documentation.

Mr Nellis: Ms Ferris and I have over 40 years' experience of working with young people in care and disadvantaged young people. It is important to emphasise that ours are practitioners' perspectives. We are standing in for our project officer and policy expert, who was on leave when the Committee invited Barnardo's to give evidence. Our presentation is based on our experience of young people in care.

I want to focus on the point that Sue Ramsey raised about the article, 34C(2), proposed in clause 2(3). The word "appoint" is not about choice; rather, it involves the allocation of work with a young person. Had the word "arrange" been used, as we wanted, it would have allowed the young person an element of choice as to the personal adviser they wanted. As Ms Coyle and Ms Keenan from First Key (NI) said, choice is important for young people, and our work with them is about working in partnership and allowing choice. Young people are experts on themselves. They should have a right to their say, especially on big decisions that affect their lives. They should have a right to choose with whom they need to work.

Today, we will look at those specific clauses in the documentation if the Committee wishes. We thought that the clauses were self-explanatory when we planned this. With Ms Ferris's support, I propose to go through

the 10 points of our submission. Those 10 points are in the legislation, and we will try to elaborate on them from our practical experience.

Point 1 in our submission states:

"Access to benefits is a fundamental right for 16 and 17 year olds."

That means that all young people have a fundamental right to equal treatment. Many of our points parallel what First Key (NI) said, so I will not spend time on that, unless you want me to expand slightly.

The Chairperson: I am sorry to interrupt you, but we had problems getting a quorum earlier because other things are going on, such as an Assembly sitting. Five Committee members are present, which is a quorum, and one or two are under great pressure to get to other meetings. I apologise for asking you, but could you make your points in about six minutes? The Committee will otherwise be inquorate and will not be able to sit.

Mr Nellis: Our first point is about stigmatisation: labelling young people to be different. That would happen in the proposed system. We call it the free school meal syndrome. Young people who got free school meals were sometimes seen as different to those who had to pay for school meals.

In point 2, we note:

"If we remove the right of 16 and 17 year olds to benefits then we move them from reliance on an unlimited social security budget where once their basic entitlement has been proven they will receive an entitled amount to a Social Services budget that is limited."

Our point here is that because there is a crisis in the Health Service, resources are finite. There could be tremendous pressure to move resources to areas where need is perceived to be greater — to the primary-care system, for example. We know that that has already happened in some areas of community care, and we worry that it might happen here.

I hope that point 3 is almost self-explanatory. A right of appeal is very different from a complaints procedure. Barnardo's has a complaints procedure of which we are quite proud. It was formulated after cases such as that in Kincora, where young people did not find it easy to say that things were happening. Our complaints procedure is extremely transparent and open. It is very different from a right of appeal.

Point 4 argues for the retention of a basic right to social security for young people in this category, so that social services do not have to worry about basic income, thus freeing them to work as a corporate good parent and help young people financially with their limited resources.

Ms Ferris: Our experience is that 16- to 17-year-olds who have been in care live in absolute and abject poverty. They live on a subsistence income support allowance of £42.70 a week, from which they must pay for food, clothing, transport and leisure. Social services can currently

give those young people any extra finance they need. For example, all young people living alone after leaving care at 16 or 17 must buy a TV licence, which costs over £109 a year. They are already living at subsistence level; they cannot even save for clothes. Please do not think that they can, for they cannot.

Social services act as any good parent would, by helping young people buy clothes and with expenses such as TV licences and insurance policies. If the young people have gathered up TVs or other equipment for their homes, and those things are stolen, they have no means of replacing them, since they are living at subsistence level.

In other words, social services can act as a good parent by giving the young people the extra money. If we move the entitlement to income support to social services, that will put pressure on them to provide the young people with a basic income for food, rent and so on, removing the extra allowances that they also need. Even if they want to socialise or travel, young people currently have very little money for it. The role of social services as a good parent giving money whenever needed is indispensable. That is one of the major points that we want to make concerning young people and poverty.

Mr Nellis: Point 5 concerns the question of passport benefits, which is a question that we shall leave with you. Who will pay, and where will the money come from? Perhaps there is an answer, but we do not have it. We are highlighting a matter of great concern to us. If the passport benefit is income support, who pays for the free dental treatment and prescriptions for glasses?

In our experience, you must be on some type of income support to gain access to the social fund. For example, a young person going for an interview can apply to the fund. We always encourage them to try for a grant rather than a loan. If they cannot get a grant, they will get a loan, meaning they can buy a suit for the interview. That facility is to be taken from them, with the result that they will be attending the interview in trainers. That is only one issue regarding passport benefits. We worry about exclusion of these young people.

Point 6 concerns the experience in England and Wales; currently, many social-work departments find their funding inadequate. Like the witnesses from First Key (NI), we worry about funding also.

Ms Ferris: Northern Ireland has received £0.5 million to implement the legislation, while the Scottish Executive were given £10 million for young people's education alone. In England, the quality protection programme brought in several hundreds of millions to back up the legislation. Despite that, colleagues in Barnardo's in England tell us that the funds are already insufficient.

Mr Nellis: On point 7, we argue that the legislation should be seen as an opportunity for young care leavers to get out of poverty. We worry about the discretion as

to income levels for care leavers. In times of financial stress, we worry that the minimum subsistence will become the norm, not the exception. For example, if it is promised that income support payments will not go below £42 a week, that amount will become the norm. Therefore, young people who need extra for whatever reason — every young person is unique and their situations will be slightly different — will find limited resources to help them. That is especially worrying in an atmosphere where there is much financial pressure and squeeze on social services and the Health Service.

That brings me to point 8. There, we are talking about ring-fencing the money. In England, they were able to ring-fence it for two years. We worry about what happens after two years, because other money that was not ring-fenced was moved to primary care. If the money is not ring-fenced, young people are definitely going to lose out in the long term.

Ms Ferris: Point 9 is about restriction. If we make social services responsible for paying out the income to young people, that will remove their current flexibility to assist young people as a good parent. We understand that the Bill makes some provision for helping young people in education, but in one of the clauses it uses the word "may": social services "may" help them. It should be made a "duty" that they help them. Otherwise, on a stretched budget, it will not be made a priority for these young people.

Mr Nellis: I understand that your submission does not include point 10; I apologise for that. Point 10 should read:

"Managers and practitioners in Leaving and Aftercare Teams share the concern expressed by young people that the relationships between young people and their workers will be grievously undermined."

Social work is by its very nature a therapeutic process. We are working with young adolescents who have been through care and are coming out the other end at the age of 16. Our experience tells us that many manifestations come to fruition at that point. Young people are hurting from previous experiences. They start to work through that during adolescence. It is crucial that they have a firm working relationship with their social worker and other services to help them through that.

Exclusion from benefits changes their relationship with the social worker, who becomes more like a civil servant — there to deliver benefits and give income. One young person called him the 'bureau man'. That changes the focus of social work.

Ms Ferris: We are practitioners working with real adolescents in real relationships. We are always acting as a parent. You do not always get cosy partnerships with adolescent teenagers. They are sometimes conflictual, confrontational and difficult.

It is important that the social security system can at least offer independent access to income that is not dependent on a compulsory relationship with their social workers.

Mr Nellis: I want you to know about the young person's perspective. Their voice must be heard. This is work that we carried out with our young users, and their chairperson came up with this.

He said that he was against financial support, as young people would become dependent on the social worker for everything. He mentioned the changing relationship that I referred to and the idea of a social worker becoming like a civil servant.

He said that a young person must be allowed to flap his or her wings, make mistakes, be brushed down and helped to move on. At one time in his young life when he moved out of care, he did not have money for electricity because he used it on other things. After that he always kept £5 for an electricity card, having learnt from his experience of living in a cold house with no lights. That is not to suggest that all young care leavers should ever have to do that. However, he is saying that if the legislation is based on requirements of the trusts and social services and personal advisers are appointed, it does not allow for that movement. That is a young person's perspective; it is not necessarily my own, although I endorse it.

We have talked about his next point, which is that aftercare should remain voluntary and not compulsory. He went away and came back after a couple of years for more support, then disappeared and came back again.

There was no compulsory nature to his aftercare, and he thought that that faith was very supportive. He also said that money should not be mixed up with social support. Young people are forced to stay in the care system for longer whether they want to or not, and that ties up limited resources.

Rev Robert Coulter: Thank you. Your presentation has answered my question.

Ms Ramsey: Point 7 states that the minimum income level set for care leavers is at the discretion of social services. Given that the level of funding for social services across all trusts is poor, does that mean that children served by the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust could receive a lower income than children served by the Foyle Community Trust?

Mr Nellis: That is possible.

Ms Ramsey: In the information you sent us you said that the equality impact assessment failed to identify people under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 such as those from ethnic minorities. In the memorandum that came with the Bill, the Department told us that it does not see any difficulties on the equality issue.

Mr Nellis: That depends on how you define equality. Our definition of equality is that all young people, regardless of whether they are homeless, from ethnic minorities or coming from care, should be treated equally. As Ms Keenan said, the detail of equality is about labelling and stigmatisation as well as resource implications.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your documentation and presentation.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Tuesday 28 May 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr Hamilton
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms P Keenan)
Ms D Coyle) First Key

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Deirdre Coyle and Ms Paula Keenan from the First Key organisation, and I thank them for their helpful documentation. The Committee had a problem getting a quorum, and I apologise for the delay.

Ms Keenan: First Key is grateful for the opportunity to talk to the Committee about the Children (Leaving Care) Bill, as we are concerned about various issues.

You would be forgiven for thinking that First Key is an estate agent — it is not. It is the leaving care advisory service — a voluntary organisation that has worked in Northern Ireland for the past five years. It is totally independent of providers and focuses exclusively on care leavers. You may ask “Why does First Key focus exclusively on care leavers?” I do not want to bombard you with statistics, but one statistic that stayed with me relates to Fred and Rosemary West. You will remember all the stories in England about their reign of horror and terror there. Seven out of their 10 victims were care leavers, and that illustrates how vulnerable such young people are.

First Key is an advisory service. We do not provide direct services to care leavers. Instead, we work closely with care leavers. We train a pool of care leavers in research and evaluation skills, and those people then work alongside us as associates. We mostly work with the boards and trusts, and we advise them on how to develop their services. We provide training, evaluate after-care services and help the boards and trusts to design

their services. That is all based on thorough consultation with care leavers. First Key provides a central reference point for all leaving and aftercare services in Northern Ireland, and it is connected to all of them. One of our important roles is to get people talking to each other.

Over the last five years First Key has learnt that that social services alone cannot hope to address or meet all the needs of care leavers, and they should not be expected to. There are needs in relation to housing, education, training, employment benefits, emotional support and community support. The responsible agencies must work together to be effective. That happens through children’s-services planning at board level, but there is a big gap at regional level when looking at the whole of Northern Ireland. That is why First Key is engaged in developing a multi-agency aftercare regional consortium. The Department is supporting us, and all the key agencies have signed up to participate in the consortium. That is an important development.

First Key warmly and enthusiastically welcomes the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. It is very good draft legislation. Strengthening the duties of trusts, focusing on assessment and planning, and appointing advisers are very effective measures. They need to be effective because the situation of care leavers is pretty dire. Statistics show that 50% of care leavers in Northern Ireland leave care with no educational or vocational qualifications, compared to about 6% of their peers who are not in care. Some 50% have moved house at least once six months after leaving care, and 20% of young women leaving care are pregnant or have had a child within six months.

We have consulted widely on the proposals and on the draft legislation. We believe that many of the minor concerns raised with us during our consultations will be addressed in the Regulations and guidance, and we are confident in the Department’s approach to compiling the Regulations and guidance.

We have two major concerns. Unsurprisingly, the first is that additional resources will be necessary if this legislation is to be effectively implemented — you cannot give boards and trusts more responsibilities without giving them more resources. The second involves the financial arrangements for 16- and 17-year-old care leavers, as outlined in clause 6 of the Bill. This idea, as I understand it, came from the English legislation and was designed to address an English problem. In England there are huge problems with 16- and 17-year-old care leavers disappearing out of the system and losing contact with social services. We do not have that problem in Northern Ireland to anywhere near the same extent; it simply does not happen here to that level. The problem here is that 16- and 17-year-olds leaving care have difficulty accessing benefits. That can be addressed by amending social security legislation — not, as is proposed in the Bill, by taking those young people out of the system. Social security legislation should be

amended to give young care leavers of 16 and 17 years of age entitlement to income support. I believe that that is feasible and can be done.

The main messages are coming from the young people themselves. They are saying that they do not want to be stigmatised by being taken out of the system that everybody else belongs to. Also, the boards and trusts are saying that the way that they work with young people will be totally skewed if the legislation makes the boards and trusts responsible for deciding how much basic income support young care leavers should get. The danger is that these services in Northern Ireland are voluntary, with young people signing up to engage and get this support. The legislation would introduce a compulsory element if it were to say that young people's involvement in aftercare services is tied in to their basic living money and rent. Boards and trusts are alarmed at the possibility of that happening.

I do not want to take up too much of your time. You have a copy of our paper, which gives more detail about what we are proposing, and I now welcome the opportunity to address your specific concerns and any questions. If we cannot answer them today, I will supply you with a written answer as soon as possible.

Mr Hamilton: In your presentation you mentioned resources — in fact, you seemed to place a very heavy emphasis on that particular point. Bearing that in mind, do you consider that the money available is enough to make the Bill work? If not, what areas would need additional resources?

Ms Keenan: The money currently available for leaving and aftercare services throughout Northern Ireland is not enough. My basis for saying that is that we have visited every trust and board, and we have evaluated services. Boards and trusts, with the best will in the world, are not resourced to meet all the needs that exist. Some young people in Northern Ireland do not get any aftercare service. Therefore, the present money is already inadequate.

This Bill increases the duties on trusts. It is saying that trusts have to take a range of measures in relation to supporting young people, contacting young people and giving financial support for young people in further education. That increases their responsibilities and costs, and, therefore, I believe that extra resources need to be made available.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act in England has been operation since October last year, and additional resources, made available through the 'Quality Protects' initiative, accompanied it. I recently visited some projects in England, and those involved said that if it were not for the extra money from the 'Quality Protects' initiative, which we do not have as yet, they would not be able to manage.

Ms Ramsey: Thank you for your presentation and the papers that you sent to the Committee. The Committee

received a copy of the responses that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety received during the consultation period. Various issues were raised about the Bill. I take on board the fact that First Key broadly welcomes most aspects of the Bill; in my view the Bill has been a long time coming. Although some respondents welcome the employment of young persons' advisers, others are concerned that it might be too intrusive. If the young person lives in Derry when his or her adviser is appointed, does the adviser follow that young person if he or she decides to move to Belfast? That could create problems. I raised that concern with the Department last week. The Department is going to get back to the Committee on that.

You mentioned funding and the benefits based on the English model. I have heard reports that the benefit arrangements are not working in England. I understand where you are coming from, but can you point out where you see problems arising? As I understand it, and I may be wrong, rather than 16-and 17-year-olds applying for benefits from the Social Security Agency, they would apply for them from trusts.

You said that that was a key issue and that young people could be stigmatised. Please outline the process and explain why you see that as a problem. If young people apply to the trusts for benefits, surely they are the only people who will know. In case we have to change any part of the Bill, I would like to understand clearly why you feel that there is a problem. I am not suggesting that a problem does not exist.

Ms Keenan: The Bill states that personal advisers will be appointed for young people. First Key anticipates that those advisers will mostly be social services staff and aftercare workers. Young people already engage with aftercare workers, and the majority of young people are appreciative of the support that they get from those workers. I know of aftercare workers who call on young people at midnight to ask how they are feeling or to help them to move furniture. They do an enormous range of work.

The proposed legislation allows for a young person to choose somebody else to be his or her aftercare adviser. It may be a youth worker that they are close to, a teacher or a member of their extended family — *[Interruption]*.

Ms Ramsey: Sorry to interrupt, but the presentation that the Committee received last week from the Department stated that the Bill would not provide for choice. That is recorded in the transcript of last week's meeting.

Ms Keenan: I am surprised about that.

Ms Coyle: Aftercare provision has to be based on partnership. As Ms Keenan pointed out, it is a voluntary service. These are young people that most need provision, and, if we make the arrangements compulsory and do

not provide choice, the service will neither embrace young people nor meet their needs.

My understanding, based on my experience and practice in aftercare, is that choice is a key element in ensuring that young people engage with the workers who are there to support them. Under existing practice, I know of service providers that try to give young people that choice. There are constraints and limits, but the service providers try to accommodate choice as a means of staying in touch with the young people. The Bill states that we should take steps to stay in touch with young people. Therefore, to make the service work, we should make it as user-friendly and flexible as possible.

Ms Keenan: Many concerns were raised during our consultation, and I doubt whether we have heard anything different from what the Committee has heard. The devil is in the detail, and many of those concerns can be addressed through the guidance and Regulations. Our agency will certainly be involved, as will Barnardo's and a range of other agencies. That is where the detailed work will be done. We will not necessarily adopt the English guidance and Regulations wholesale. We, and the Department, intend to ensure that they pertain to our situation in Northern Ireland.

At present, 16- and 17-year-olds are often unable to access benefits. They are very vulnerable. The majority of young people who enter care do so for their own protection because they have been abused or neglected. Often, when they reach the point of leaving care, a great many emotional issues start to surface. Those young people have not had the experience of being raised — as, I hope, our children have — in a loving family environment, and they have never had anyone there for them. They have experienced changes of staff, and different people have dipped in and out of their lives. Suddenly they find that they are 16. They want to leave care, and they never want to see a social worker again in their lives. They must, therefore, have some method of income support.

Care leavers have great difficulty in signing up for a training course and receiving the related benefits — something that you would expect ordinary 16- and 17-year-olds to do. They cannot necessarily cope with getting up at 9 am, and they may not have the discipline to turn up, do the work and deal with everything that it entails. At 16 they are coping with emotional turmoil and an enormous transition — with the consequence that they lose out on benefits. It is very difficult for them to work their way through the maze of benefits and ensure that they get the money that they need.

One solution is to say that they can get the money from social services, but I feel that that is using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The easiest way to ensure that those young people get a basic income and are able to access housing benefit is to recognise them as extremely vulnerable and change the social security

legislation accordingly. Their situation is dire, and we must grant them the same automatic entitlement to income support as applies for young single parents. That will work and be clear to everyone. We need not remove the young people from the system or burden the social services with an additional role that they were not set up to perform.

Mr Berry: Thank you for your presentation. In relation to your last point, should we not seek to improve young people's chances of employment instead of having them depend solely on benefits? Some form of employment might help them to get through their problems. Is that not the best way forward? Can you see a better way forward? It would mean that they would not simply be dependent on benefits. They have experienced difficult times, and they will continue to experience them, but the way forward might lie in training them to enter full-time employment so that they are not dependent on benefits for the rest of their lives. Given that they are 16, there are potentially a couple of years available for such training.

Ms Keenan: You are absolutely right; the best thing is for social services, working in partnership with the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA), to devise schemes to get those young people into the workforce. Social services are directing their efforts towards that. However, we must ensure that there is a safety net for those young people who need additional support. They might be 18 before they reach the point where they can cope, so we advocate a safety net. I do not want to see young people on benefits — nobody wants that — but let us have a benefits safety net available. Young people are currently falling through the net.

Our agency is committed to getting the Housing Executive, the T&EA, the education and library boards and the Social Security Agency round a table together, representing all of Northern Ireland and working to establish protocols and schemes to really support those young people.

Ms Coyle: I take your point about our expectation that young people leave care to be dependent on benefits. I strongly agree with you that other measures can be taken. There is earlier intervention in relation to the in-care experiences of those young people, and what can be done in respect of educational outcomes for young people at age 16. I know that educational audits of young people's experiences while in care are taking place. A forthcoming piece of research in England exclusively looks at that.

The years between 16 and 18 are almost like a transitional period. Young people in care seem to need an extended period of adolescence and young adulthood. Because their starting points are so disadvantaged, they need that extended time to work, ideally, towards employment. That will impact on the whole quality and standard of their lives and their expectations for themselves.

The Chairperson: Can you explain how the English system treats 16- to 17-year-olds differently?

Ms Keenan: It is not so much that the social services system is different but that society is different. There are differences between England and Northern Ireland. One aspect relating to vulnerable young people leaving care in England is the attraction of London. We do not have that to nearly the same extent. London is a Mecca for young people. They think that they all they have to do is leave their small towns and go to London, but when they get there they are swallowed up and lose contact with social services. Belfast does not have quite the

same attraction as London as a Mecca for young people. Communities are also tighter in Northern Ireland, and people notice more.

Social services teams and trusts are smaller. Northern Ireland is the same size as one local authority in England. Social workers have smaller areas to deal with, which, coupled with closer relationships and tighter communities, means that the same problem does not arise here.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for answering our questions. Thank you too for your presentation and helpful documentation.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 29 May 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mrs Courtney
Mr Hamilton
Mr J Kelly

Witnesses:

Ms T Caul) Children's Law Centre
Mr L Mackle)

The Chairperson: We will now consider the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. The Committee's briefing paper contains submissions from the Children's Law Centre and the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. I welcome Mr Liam Mackle and Ms Tara Caul from the Children's Law Centre. Thank you for your documentation. I appreciate that this is an extensive topic and that the issues are important, but we would appreciate it if you could give us main headings rather than details. That will give my Colleagues time to ask questions.

Ms Caul: I thank the Committee for asking us to speak this afternoon. My colleague and I are from the Children's Law Centre in Belfast. I propose to briefly address some of the points in our main submission, which we have updated and provided for you today. Mr Mackle will then deal specifically with the proposal to exclude young people from the benefits system.

As you will be aware, the Children's Law Centre is an independent charity established in 1997. We provide training, information, research, advice and representation on children's law. We often advise young people who are looked after, and we thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about these matters.

I want to address our main submission. The first point that we made relates to the consultation process. In our submission to the Department, we said that there should be consultation with children and young people on the

Bill. We remain of the view that young people should inform the decision-making process, perhaps particularly in relation to their proposed exclusion from the benefits system.

I will give people the opportunity to look at the document.

The Chairperson: Does anyone wish to comment at this point? It would be better if you finish your points, and then my Colleagues will comment.

Ms Caul: Everyone has the document?

The Chairperson: Yes, we have.

Ms Caul: We welcome the introduction of a duty to assess and meet needs, which obviously strengthens the position of care-leavers under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. We recommend that that new duty should apply to as many young people leaving care as possible, and that any discretionary element should be removed. There is no detail in the current Bill about eligibility criteria, and it is essential that consultees be given the opportunity to address the detail required for regulation at a later stage in this process. In particular, we recommend that the category of relevant children include children and young people who, when they reach the age of 16, are detained in hospital or in a juvenile justice or young offenders' centre.

We are concerned about the comment, on page 11 of the initial consultation document, that, under the new arrangements, existing spending on aftercare services and benefits would be drawn together and used by trusts to provide support and assistance. In our opinion, the issue of additional resources must be addressed as a matter of urgency before this Bill is enacted. In England, the introduction of similar legislation was supported by new funding from the children's social services special grant, which was set up by local authorities as part of the quality protects programme. In our view, for the proposals in this Bill to be effective, additional funds must be allocated to support its implementation.

My next point concerns emergency assistance. The trust must retain the power to help young people in an emergency or where there has been a breakdown in relations with a social worker. We recommend that it be a duty of trusts to prepare and review pathway plans for all young people leaving care, and that that duty last until the young person is 21, or 24 where the young person is continuing in education. We believe that the current Bill purports to do that.

The task of the young person's adviser appears exceptionally onerous. We therefore ask whether substantial and significant funding will be provided to introduce them. We also recommend that the adviser have an advocacy role on behalf of the young person and should contact an independent advocate or solicitor should matters in relation to pathway plans not be agreed.

The Bill should reflect the need for assessment and planning to be carried out in whatever manner is in the child's best interests, rather than being driven by financial considerations. We are keen to see regulations introduced to govern suitable accommodation for care-leavers. There must be detailed consultation about what constitutes suitable accommodation for a care-leaver. The Bill does not outline minimum standards for financial support, and the term "maintaining" must be defined more specifically.

We shall deal with the issue of exclusion from benefits after we have dealt with the point about education.

We believe that there should be a legal duty on trusts to assist with the costs associated with a young person's education until they are 24, and that the proposed new article 35B should be amended to use the word "shall" instead of "may".

My colleague Mr Mackle will address the issue of exclusion from benefits.

Mr Mackle: One of the Bill's professed aims is to streamline the whole system of financial payments to young people. Under the current system, young people leaving care may be able to claim income support in some circumstances and jobseeker's allowance in others — and, more often than not, allowances for training programmes that they undertake. We support the submission made by First Key that the current proposals are not the best way of streamlining the financial arrangements for children leaving care and that a far more satisfactory provision would be to amend schedule 1B to the Income Support (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987 and add "relevant 16- to 17-year-olds" as a group entitled to income support.

That would remove from the trusts the onerous responsibility of taking care of these people's financial considerations as well as of their welfare. The social security system already has the technical capabilities to deal with this, but a whole new tier of administration would be created by transferring those responsibilities to trusts. The number of people in this group in Northern Ireland is small compared to that in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, we may be dealing with fewer than 1,000 young people a year. It would not be cost-effective to transfer those responsibilities to the trust, so the Social Security Agency should undertake this work. Removing the financial considerations would leave the young persons' advisers free to concentrate on other aspects of the pathway plans, such as education, building independent living skills and building capacity for coping with adult life. We support First Key's proposals on the financial provisions made yesterday.

The Chairperson: Ms Caul, in your submission you recommend

"that the new duty to assess and meet needs should apply to all of the above young people and that any discretionary elements should be removed."

All of your points are important, but that one is particularly so. Following consultation on the Bill, did the Department take your views into account? If not, what are your concerns?

Ms Caul: It is important to say that, overall, we welcome the Bill. We have been involved in the consultation process with the Department, and our document reflects a position that has been updated since the drafting of the Bill, so certain points have been taken into consideration. This document details the matters that have not been changed. We have tried to indicate where the Department has taken on board issues that we raised.

Mr Berry: With regard to former relevant children and education, other submissions have argued that young people leaving care need at least as much ongoing care and support in, for example, education and training beyond the age of 18, as children in a stable family environment do. Given what your submission says about education, you may not think that the Bill delivers in this area. Will the Bill ensure that trusts provide the level of support needed for young people beyond the age of 18? Is that what you are referring to in the section on education?

Ms Caul: Yes. In the section on education, we refer to a change to a proposed new clause in article 35B of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. We recommend that the word "may", which implies discretion, should be deleted and replaced with the word "shall", which would strengthen the duty.

Mrs Courtney: Exclusion from benefits is one of the key issues. The Department intends the Bill to bring together all of the resources available for children leaving care. It will be the duty of trusts, acting in place of the parent, to safeguard and promote the welfare of a relevant child by providing financial assistance, as well as giving advice and support. This is linked to the expectation that children leaving care move straight on to the benefit system. The aim should be to improve their chances through education and training systems and bring them into full employment, rather than have them rely on benefits. You support the proposal by Barnardo's to delete clause 6 of the Bill and amend the Income Support (General) Regulations 1987 to entitle 16- and 17-year-old carers to claim income support. How would this improve the situation for young people? Surely it is better to keep them out of the benefit system?

Mr Mackle: This provision is supposed to ensure that 16- and 17-year-olds have some financial arrangement for their weekly maintenance. Neither the current system nor the proposals as they stand adequately achieve that. When training placements fail, entitlement to income support is essential. It is also important to cut away much of the current system, as, when such a situation arises, young people and their social workers have to fish through the social security system for something that will provide an income.

The current system places rigorous training demands on vulnerable young people such as care leavers while they are making that transition from care to independent living. When that falls apart the social security system is not there to pick up the pieces. The proposals for income support will provide a stable weekly income through the social security system, which will remove any questions about their entitlement to a weekly allowance rather than social security dependency. It is a weekly allowance at the age of 16 and 17 to get those young people through that transitional period. There seems to be no better proposal for dealing with that, and to place other considerations on top of those that already exist is not the best way to proceed.

Mrs Courtney: I agree with that.

Rev Robert Coulter: Many of your concerns are naturally to do with how the Bill will work in practice. Are you content with the Department's proposal for developing provisions in the Bill such as the use of regulations to define accommodation, the appointment of personal advisers and a complaints procedure? Can you give us some steer on what those definitions should be?

Ms Caul: We are happy with the regulations as long as there is consultation with the appropriate agencies to enable them to comment on, for example, the definition of suitable accommodation. In England, regulations are very detailed on eligibility criteria, accommodation, the role of personal advisers and the complaints procedure. We are particularly concerned about those areas, and we hope that there will be widespread consultation on them.

Mr Gallagher: You seem to be concerned about the role of trusts in emergency situations or protecting the duty of trusts to help out in an emergency. Do you remain concerned about how that has been handled in the Bill?

Ms Caul: Yes, particularly when a young person moves from one trust area to another and perhaps arrangements in that other area fall through very quickly. We would like an emergency provision in the Bill to deal with that and also to deal with financial support.

Mr Gallagher: Would you like a provision to deal with young people who are caught up in an emergency situation?

Ms Caul: Yes, perhaps when accommodation falls through and there is a need to move on, or when payments do not come through for housing benefit.

Mr Mackle: One worrying aspect of the Bill is the absence of a safety net for young people who fall out with their personal advisers or have bad experiences in care, and they become estranged from a trust or do not want to engage with it beyond the age of 16. They are excluded from the benefits system, and if they are not minded to approach the trust there is no support available for them. That is very worrying, and it defeats the whole purpose of the proposed aims of the Bill.

The Chairperson: Your documentation states that people going into care are entitled to a guardian ad litem and a solicitor, and it seems that young people moving out of care would also need that sort of legal advice.

Ms Caul: Part of the young person's adviser's role would be to tell young people that if there is a fundamental disagreement on the content of a pathway plan, they can approach a suitably qualified solicitor or someone to advocate on their behalf. I am thinking, for example, about additional moneys for an education placement that is not agreed by the trust or might cost more than a placement provided by the trust.

Rev Robert Coulter: What happens to a young person of 16 years of age who comes out of care and gets married? Are any provisions made for that instance?

Mr Mackle: There is nothing in the Bill to address that. There may be social security benefits available to a 16-year-old in that situation, but the rules are complex. There may be some way of accessing the social security system, but the rates of benefit for married couples under 18 years of age are very low. The situation is unclear: it is not dealt with in the Bill.

Rev Robert Coulter: There does not seem to be any consideration of any kind for a 16-year-old who leaves care to get married.

Mr Mackle: Involvement with a trust or any other form of support would end if that person were to marry someone over the age of 18. [*Inaudible due to mobile phone interference*].

The Chairperson: Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 29 May 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mrs Courtney
Mr Hamilton
Mr J Kelly

Witnesses:

Mr N Rooney)
Mr T Boyle) North and West Belfast Health
Mr J Growcott) and Social Services Trust

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Noel Rooney, Mr Tommy Boyle and Mr John Growcott from the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. Thank you for your documents, which have been very helpful. Please go over the main points so that my Colleagues will have time to ask questions.

Mr Rooney: I thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak about the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. Mr Boyle and Mr Growcott will say something about our response and will be able to answer questions in detail, and I will make several key points about the issues we have raised in relation to the legislation.

We welcome the principles and direction suggested in the proposed legislation and the opportunity that it offers as regards those principles. There are around 380 children in care in our trust area; one of the highest number in any trust area in the Province. It is projected that approximately 10% of those children will leave the care system every year. In other words, around 38 children will leave the care system in our patch annually, and we must make provision for them.

Integrated planning needs, and how we cope with those 38 children leaving care given their life histories and emotional stability and their social and intellectual strengths, are reflected in the legislation. The availability of

informal support, including contact with extended families, is a major issue for us.

Given the importance of training and education, our trust particularly welcomes the emphasis on an inclusive, comprehensive, planning pathway for the transition from care to independent living. That emphasis is underpinned in the Children (Leaving Care) Bill by an individualised needs-led assessment model, the promotion of training and educational themes, and the proposed role of the personal adviser.

We are concerned about the proposed financial arrangements and how they could negatively impact on the young person's relationship with the trust. We are especially concerned about the proposal to move income support from the Social Security Agency to the trusts because that will impact on the independence of young people who leave care. We will talk about that in more detail. It also changes the relationship between the social worker and the young person.

The resources that will be required to implement the legislation must be considered. Young people who leave care require intensive, well-resourced, diverse and flexible provision. Research carried out in England suggests that children who leave care find themselves in difficult situations; they may become homeless or find themselves in prison. It is, therefore, important that the correct provision is put in place.

The participation and views of young people are central to ensuring responsible and effective service. An integrated, dynamic and robust collaboration between all agencies, including those that deal with education and housing, is important and will inform the strategic vision that addresses the role of the voluntary sector too. It will also provide an integrated model of service delivery, which is imperative.

Thirty eight children a year leave care in our trust area, which indicates how many young people do so in Northern Ireland each year. Moving a child from care to independent living is a cost-intensive process. Although it is a small number of children overall, it will cost the trusts a substantial amount to fulfil the requirements of the legislation. Therefore, adequate resources are essential.

The Committee will be aware of the problems encountered in the implementation of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 because adequate resources were not provided. The Committee was involved in the report 'Children Matter: A Review of Residential Child Care Services in Northern Ireland' and in the inquiry into residential and secure accommodation, which both highlighted measures that should have been funded by the Order. We had serious problems as a consequence.

Mr Growcott: Mr Rooney referred to the planning process, which from the trust's perspective is one of the great strengths of the proposed legislation. It mandates a

multi-agency inclusive approach that acknowledges the centrality of young people's perspective and their role in planning for themselves. It is a dynamic process that will demand a response from the agencies involved by forcing them to recognise its needs-led dimension. It should be individualised, with a pathway plan developed with the young person.

The key theme that the staff group discovered through talking to young people is the sense of isolation, loneliness and vulnerability that is so typical in young people who leave the care system. The continuum of need is substantial. The trust has experience of exceptionally damaged young people who require intensive support and of young people who have successfully managed their lives and careers. The trust has several young people at university. We must, therefore, provide a service that straddles that continuum of need and is responsive to the circumstances of young people.

We wish to highlight the importance of appropriate accommodation provision and, as noted in the legislation, the significance of employment and education. Young people who are without family and who, in many respects, lack the social competencies and maturities that are expected of young people of their age must have accessible and responsive services available to them on their terms. Those services must respect their autonomy and their right to make decisions about their own lives and seek to provide for their needs through balanced and supportive parenting.

Mr Boyle: I will briefly concentrate on areas where the trust could have difficulties in implementing the proposed legislation.

One area, which I am sure has been commented on, is the transfer of moneys from social security to social services. That is a potential problem, not because of the administrative bureaucracy and difficulties that it would cause the trust, but from a young person's point of view. Young people are already stigmatised when leaving care and may be further stigmatised by their peer group. They will have different circumstances to other 16- and 17-year-olds who claim income support.

We understand why that provision is built into the legislation. Many young people leaving care drift away from the trust or social services, and having an income is a means of keeping them tracked on board; as a corporate parent, it is important to do that. There may be particular difficulties in relation to the income provision in the legislation and linking it with social services. It may also, as Mr Rooney said, cause further difficulties with the social worker/young person relationship. The legislation has a participative theme in that it aims to bring young people along. There is a paternalistic aspect to the income support provision.

Another point worth highlighting is the resource issue. Mr Growcott mentioned the differentiated group —

those leaving care. In our trust area around 40 young people leave care every year, and one third of them come from children's homes. Their behaviour can be particularly difficult and demanding, and they may also be in conflict with the law. Some current provision comprises hostels such as the Starting Points Hostel and hostels provided by the Simon Community, which may not be able to meet those young people's demanding behaviour. We will need resources to negotiate with the Housing Executive and other housing providers to have a range of provision for those young people leaving care.

The Chairperson: The Bill will impose extra duties on trusts. How prepared is your trust to meet the needs of young people leaving care? The Homefirst Health and Social Services Trust is well on its way with pathway planning.

Mr Rooney: We support the concept of integrated care and pathway planning, which covers being in care, through the transition to independent living. We have an aftercare team currently operating in north and west Belfast, which is funded by some of the money that the trust received from the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. That aftercare team will help us to facilitate the transition in legislation needed because of the proposed legislation. We are preparing for that.

Mr Growcott: We have a model of review that, in many respects, pre-empts the pathway plan. There is a review structure for each young person in our care, and we are developing a system to capture, regularly review and update the progress of young people who have left our care system. The trust's leaving care team will play a key role in this process. We encourage young people and agencies that work with and represent young people to attend reviews. We want to develop advocacy arrangements for young people to ensure there is an independence element. Hopefully our practice shadows the proposals in the legislation, which capture best practice. We are striving to reach those standards.

Mr Berry: Thank you for your presentation. How will trusts determine when a young person is ready to leave care? Will that impact on your resources? Will the Bill pressurise trusts to move young people out of care before they are ready to make way for incoming young people?

Mr Growcott: The decision to move a young person on is one that must be paced on the basis of the young person's needs. The notion of volition — of a young person acceding to being involved intricately in the decision — is critical. Therefore it is inappropriate and over-paternalistic for someone to decide that a young person's time in care had come to an end. It must be paced to meet and reflect a young person's needs. The review process is in situ and the pathway planning process seeks to reinforce that.

As Mr Boyle and Mr Rooney mentioned, there will be pressure on the current resources to provide appropriate facilities and on the development and expansion of a resource base to meet those commitments. As part of our ongoing residential strategy and the development of services in the trust we wish to address that matter as proactively as we can. As far as any coercive dimension is concerned, it is not our practice to impose a decision on a young person which they were not party to.

Mrs Courtney: Your submission highlighted the resource implications of the Bill. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has had to bring together: the existing resources of the trust; the funds from the Department for Social Development; £500,000 to underpin implementation in the first year, with higher amounts in future years; and a further £1.2 million from the Executive programme funds over three years to establish leaving care and aftercare services. Is the money currently available enough to make the Bill work? If not, which areas need further resources?

Mr Rooney: The Committee will be well aware of the problems we have with the implementation of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The Committee has been instrumental in bringing us resources to implement that Order over the past couple of years, and we are grateful. We have put several systems in place in the aftercare team; the leaving care team is a recent development based on some of the resources available.

It is the correct way to capture all the resources. Whether it be housing, social security, juvenile justice or social services; we must get together to ensure that young people do not “fall between the stools” when they leave care, which is a problem across the UK. They tend to fall between the different agencies once they reach 17 or 18 years of age. It is a good idea to fuse those resources, and we agree with the principles behind that. However, the difficulty for trusts is that we will develop, for example, different types of accommodation, and we will have to work with the Housing Executive in a different way. The Housing Executive already finds accommodation for older people and adults with mental health difficulties: now they will also have to find accommodation for young people who are leaving care. Resources will be needed so that trusts can work closely with the Housing Executive.

Advocacy on behalf of young people, for example, will create substantial resource implications right across the trusts — and particularly in our patch because of the higher number of young people leaving care. We will need resources over and above the existing pockets that are available, and that has to be taken into consideration.

Mr Boyle: One resource issue involves the young people leaving care with a learning or physical health disability. Although they would be small in number, they would be a huge draw on resources.

Rev Robert Coulter: You have stated that the provision will ensure that trusts do not lose contact with care leavers, but it may promote overdependence and stigmatise them. Is that a realistic expectation? How do we reconcile these opposing outcomes?

Mr Rooney: It is a vital issue for us. On one hand we have a corporate parenting responsibility for the 380 children that I referred to, and we have to discharge that responsibility.

Under existing legislation, once children reach the age of 18 they are no longer our responsibility. They drift off to different places, and all of the evidence shows that there are significant problems. On the other hand there is the issue about how we keep in contact with those young people. The Bill proposes that if trusts were to be responsible for young people's benefits once they reached the age of 18, they would keep in contact with us. However, young people believe that they are entitled to the same independence as everyone else.

The Chairperson: I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr Rooney, but I am afraid that someone's mobile phone is on and it is interrupting the transmission. Would everyone please make sure that his or her mobile is switched off? Thank you.

Mr Rooney: The transfer of funding would ensure that contact between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the young people is not lost. There may be a third way; after all, social security payments are the entitlement of all children, particularly those who leave care. There may be other ways of maintaining the relationship between social services and children after they leave care. For example, an aftercare fund could be established to enable us to provide funds.

Mr Growcott mentioned the example of three children in our care who have gone to university. As corporate parents, we provide support while they are at university. There is no reason why we cannot establish a fund to assist the development of young people who have reached the ages of 17 and 18. It will not necessarily mean that their social security income transfers to us as well. It should be possible to create special circumstances to maintain the relationship.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Gentlemen, for your interesting and informative presentation.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 29 May 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL
SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mrs Courtney
Mr Hamilton
Mr J Kelly

Witnesses:

Mr P Deazley)
Mr J McKeown) Department of Health, Social
Ms J Smyth) Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: For reasons that have been discussed recently, it is important that we agree the Health and Personal Social Services Bill today. On Monday, Members received a folder containing the results of the Minister's consideration of the issues that were before the Committee last week. The Committee must complete its consideration of the remaining clauses today in order to meet the Committee Stage deadline. Our concerns centre on, first, the consultation on the professional assessment tool; secondly, the fast-track review and appeal mechanism; and, thirdly, the payment system.

I welcome Mr Peter Deazley, Mr John McKeown and Ms Janice Smyth. The document concerning the assessment tool is lengthy. Some Committee members may have received it on Monday, but not have had time to look at it. Perhaps you could outline its central points, bearing in mind what we requested.

Mr Deazley: Ms Smyth will cover the central points, but there are a couple of issues that I must raise first. Prof McCormack has got back to us to change the title of the assessment tool.

The Chairperson: The long title?

Mr Deazley: The title of the actual assessment tool; it is now simply called the "nursing needs assessment

tool", as opposed to the "older people's nursing assessment tool", because it applies across the board. That is the only change that has been made in that area.

Ms Smyth: Prof Brendan McCormack and his research associate Paul Slater, from the University of Ulster, developed the nursing needs assessment tool. Prof McCormack is well known for his expertise in the development of assessment tools. The tool was commissioned by the working group established by the Minister and chaired by the chief nursing officer, Judith Hill.

The terms of reference were to review what was available in England, Scotland and Wales and to look at what was available in Northern Ireland. Then, those tools were to be measured against the national service frameworks. A tool was to be developed for Northern Ireland to determine the nursing needs of people who need continuing care in a nursing home setting. That was done.

Once the tool was developed, we piloted it in seven sites across Northern Ireland. We asked all the trusts if they wanted to participate. Seven replied positively, and between them those trusts represented all four health board areas. The assessment tool was used to assess the nursing needs of people who require nursing home care.

The Chairperson: Is there much difference between this assessment tool and the original one in England? Have there been many changes made in order to accommodate Northern Ireland?

Ms Smyth: Changes were made to the tool after the pilot exercise. There were originally 22 assessment domains in the tool. The tool is based on professional judgement; it is not a box-ticking exercise. One must take biographical information from the patients, assess their need under each of the domains and determine how the nursing care is going to meet those needs. It then asks whether that nursing care has to be met directly by a registered nurse or through care supervised by a registered nurse, or whether it is directive, where the nurse teaches someone else to do it.

The review amalgamated two of the domains. It also amended the risk assessment, where assessors were asked whether the patient's condition was stable and predictable or unstable and unpredictable. The nurses felt that some of the clients whom they assessed fell somewhere in the middle of that; it was not black and white. So, that was amended. Some of the language was also amended because the nurses felt it was not user-friendly and that those who were being assessed, or their carers, would not understand some of the terminology. After the pilot exercise, the review made minimal changes to the structure and content of the tool.

The Chairperson: On other aspects, such as the fast-track review and the payments system, we will be using the Welsh system — is that right, Mr Deazley?

Mr Deazley: I must also point out to Committee members that, as stated in the covering letter to the Department's consultation document, the assessment tool is capable of identifying nursing care needs at three separate dependency levels — low, medium and high. That is not a comment on how the nursing care will be paid for; it has been decided that there will be one single rate for nursing care.

However, the nursing tool will still be a major help in the care planning process. It will help care planners to decide where nursing care is best delivered. The fact that a person needs nursing care does not mean that it will best be delivered in a nursing home. The detailed output from the tool will go a long way to assisting that care planning process.

The Chairperson: I assume that there was agreement on the part of the various professionals and trusts involved in this exercise?

Ms Smyth: Yes. The pilot exercise was successful and the comments received about the tool and its ability and suitability to assess people's needs were positive.

Mr Deazley: The Minister has decided that we will apply a single rate for each person who is assessed as needing nursing care in a nursing home. The actual amount has not yet been decided. We have written to the trusts today asking them to survey in detail the number of people who fully or partly self-fund their care in nursing homes. We can then put forward proposals to the Minister on the weekly amount that will be paid towards nursing care.

The Chairperson: Will it be at least £85?

Mr Deazley: It will be no less than £85 a week.

The Chairperson: It is certainly not "free nursing care". I appreciate that you are using a particular definition.

Mr Deazley: We could call it "a contribution towards residents' nursing costs in a nursing home".

The Chairperson: The other matter was the appeal mechanism.

Mr Deazley: I am not sure if Members have had time to look at the documents. I have included a very early version of the departmental directions that will issue along with the other guidance.

The first two paragraphs are as they will appear in the final version. They set out the legislation under which we are issuing the directions to the trusts — article 17(1) of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 — and the action required of boards and trusts to commence health and personal social services payments.

I have outlined what will be included in the directions. There will be a brief outline of the legislation under which nursing care is being introduced, detail on implementation,

and directions to go out to the trusts identifying every nursing home resident who makes a contribution towards their nursing care and who will, therefore, be entitled to some contribution from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

We will require trusts to inform those residents of their right to a nursing care assessment. The trusts will be required to seek the consent of those residents for an assessment to be carried out. Nursing care assessments are entirely voluntary and cannot be imposed on residents.

The directions will describe the assessment and review process, which will be set out in detail. If a resident is not satisfied with the first assessment, he or she is entitled to a review assessment by another nurse within one week. If that is not satisfactory, a review panel must be set up and the case heard within a further two weeks. The process will take three weeks from start to finish.

The experience of the review and appeal procedure in England has almost totally revolved around the three tiers: when people are assessed as being in the lower group, the appeals are to get them into the second group, and when they are in the second group, the appeals are to get them into the top group.

In our case, if nursing care need is assessed, people will automatically be entitled to £85, or to whatever contribution they currently make to the cost of their care.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that the fast-track appeal takes three years?

Mr Deazley: No, I am referring to the three tiers. The main volume of appeals in England is due to their three-tiered system. It is not that people have been assessed as not needing nursing care, but rather that the assessment has placed them at the lower level or the intermediate level, and people are inclined to appeal when money is involved.

The Chairperson: Mr Deazley has set out for the Committee the areas to be covered in the departmental directions and guidance, which will be referred to the Committee for consideration. There are different headings, including legislation, implementation and identification. Is the Committee happy with the departmental directions? Has everyone had time to look at them?

Mr Berry: I am concerned about the directions on information. You say that trusts will be required to inform residents. If the matter is left to the trusts, they might inform only the home's owners, not the residents. How can we be sure that all residents and their families or carers will be informed, as well as the home?

Mr Deazley: There are two points. First, the consent of the resident — or their family or carer — to an assessment must be sought. It is a voluntary process. Secondly, it is feasible that someone who is funding their own care will not want social services to be involved. In order to obtain clear consent, the assessments and all

other matters are carried out directly with the individual, or, where the individual is incapable of making decisions, with their family, their carer or an appointee. That will be clearly specified in the directions.

The Chairperson: As there are no other queries, I assume that the Committee is happy with the directions. The various headings are detailed. Requiring trusts to identify all nursing home residents who are funding their own care in nursing homes is terribly important.

We have covered information, advocacy and short-term placement. Is the Committee happy, or are there other questions?

Mr Deazley: The identification process has already started. The Department issued the survey request today.

The Chairperson: That goes right across Northern Ireland. Is the Department sending it directly to the trusts, or will it go via the boards?

Mr Deazley: We are dealing directly with the trusts.

The Chairperson: That will be quicker. The Committee wants to clear up clause 1 and the other clauses today. If my Colleagues have nothing further to add, we will move on to that.

Clause 1 (Charges for nursing care)

The Chairperson: Members will be aware that we have a potential amendment to clause 1 in the briefing paper, which can be considered in the context of the evidence given by the officials. Before concluding consideration of clause 1, the Committee will wish to formally record its views on personal care in the context of the introduction of free nursing care as outlined in the Bill.

Members will be aware of the views expressed by witnesses on the introduction of financial assistance for nursing care for self-funding residents of nursing homes. Many witnesses called for the approach to personal care taken in Scotland to be adopted here. If resources were available now, the Committee would wish to see free care covering the nursing and personal care needs of residents. However, the working group on personal care has not yet reported to the Executive on the outcome of

its investigation. A decision is not due to be made until late June 2002, and we do not know what position the Executive will take. However, the estimated cost of free personal care is in excess of £25 million a year, in addition to the £9 million a year cost of free nursing care.

If the Committee were to recommend free personal care now, the money would have to come from the block grant allocation at a time when the pressures on funding for key health, education, transport and regional development priorities are preventing many desperately needed projects from being funded. It would mean making hard decisions on how the health budget should be spent.

However, clause 1 is essentially about equity and correcting an anomaly faced by some 2,000 self-funding residents of nursing homes who have been put at a distinct disadvantage. In comparison, nursing care is supplied free, as a health service, to a person in his or her own home or to a resident in a residential care home, if it is supplied externally by a trust via the community nursing service. Adopting clause 1 should be seen as a first, necessary step to meeting basic equity of provision. It will ensure that we will be able to provide similar benefits to those already provided in England and Wales. Although it is limited in its intent, the Committee welcomes the aim of the clause.

The Committee and the Assembly may wish to reconsider free personal care and the conclusions of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly in the future. We will then be able to learn from the Executive's examination of personal care and the experiences of the Scottish Parliament. We will be better able to gauge the benefits and costs of introducing free personal care.

Do members have any further comments to make before we vote on clause 1?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clauses 3 to 5 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 30 May 2002

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL
(NIA 7/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Lewsley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Armstrong
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr McClarty
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr D Barr) The Department
Ms M Finnegan) of the Environment
Dr T Power)
Mr J McConnell)

The Chairperson: There are some outstanding issues that you may want to address before we move on to the other questions.

Ms Finnegan: I shall update you, clause by clause, on what the Department has done. As regards clause 2(4), the Department has accepted that it will amend the explanatory and financial memorandum to match the Bill, but it will not amend the Bill. It will do that on the basis of legal advice. The subsection is simply a definition of “formula”. We have agreed to amend the wording of clause 2(5) to reflect the consultation of district councils and other bodies that represent them.

The Chairperson: As regards clause 2(4), if the explanatory and financial memorandum is wrong — as we drew to your attention in questions (a) and (b) — where in the Bill is the power to amend the Regulations relating to the formula?

Ms Finnegan: I shall clarify the effect of the different subsections of clause 2. Clause 2(1) is an enabling power to make Regulations for the formula; subsection 5 is also an enabling power. It will be used to introduce any supplementary provisions or refinements by Regulation. When we introduce the formula for the first time, it will

be on the strength of clause 2(1); however, if we wish to revise the data used in the formula, we will lean on subsection 5. We would consult councils on any changes that we propose, and we would then draft subordinate legislation to bring before the Committee.

Mr Ford: The Department referred today to consultation on subsection 5 solely with district councils and other bodies. The Committee asked about consultation with other interests such as staff. Do you intend to confine the legislative reference to consultation with councils, or will you include other appropriate bodies?

Ms Finnegan: I said “other bodies representative of councils”.

Mr Ford: Yes. However, that is not what I was talking about.

Ms Finnegan: The Department, if it wishes to extend the exercise, could consult with any body.

The Chairperson: The wording of clause 4(4) implies a limit, because it is specific. It refers to

“such associations or bodies representative of councils”.

The council will make the decisions. As we asked at a previous meeting, will the consultation include the representatives of council workers, for example, the unions?

Ms Finnegan: The Department will revise the wording of that subsection. It will ensure that consultation extends to bodies such as the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA).

Mr McConnell: The Department is still discussing the issue, but it could refer to “other interested bodies”, for example.

Mr Ford: I would be happy with that. However, the document mentions only consultation with district councils — not the other relevant bodies.

The Chairperson: That is an important point; the Committee wants to ensure that the consultation includes bodies representative of councils and other interested parties, including those representative of council workers.

Mr McConnell: There was no intention to exclude anyone. It was purely an effort to get those people who had — *[Interruption]*.

The Chairperson: The Committee will take that in good faith, but we would like to see it in writing.

Mr McConnell: You will see it.

Ms Finnegan: The Department accepts the Committee’s view on clause 4 and will re-draft subsections 4(1) and 4(2) to update the existing legislation. The Committee will recall that the draft mirrored the existing provisions; therefore, it will have a different effect. The legislation will spell out the role of the local government auditor with reference to his reporting a case to the Department; the role of the Department in recommending to the

Assembly the amount to be deducted from the general grant; and the role of the Assembly in approving the reduction. No reduction will be made without the Assembly's approval. The wording of the Bill will be changed substantially.

The Chairperson: The Committee asked before about the wording of clause 4(1)(b), which mentions "any other relevant circumstances". Would it not be better to make that clearer, by rewording it to "other circumstances relevant to a district council"?

Ms Finnegan: I shall use an example to explain that point. The Department said that it felt the need to retain the wording "other relevant circumstances".

The Chairperson: You misunderstand me. I do not claim that those words should be excluded. However, the Committee suggests that the phrase "other circumstances relevant to a district council" might be clearer. The wording must be examined carefully.

Ms Finnegan: We will reconsider the matter. Would it require a big extension?

Mr McConnell: We will return to the Committee when we have reviewed the matter. Would it help if we discussed a district council's functions or other relevant points?

Ms Finnegan: Some points about clause 4 have not been clarified. They were not specifically referred to in the Committee's letters, but they have since been raised. Clause 4(5), which we discussed last week, states:

"Regulations under this section shall be subject to negative resolution."

Subsection 5 relates directly to subsection 3(a), which contains the wording "specified in regulations". In addition, that provision relates indirectly to subsection 4, which refers to subsection 3 as regards consultation. The Regulations are not referred to in every section; however, subsection 5 states that, where they are referred to, they should be subject to negative resolution.

The preference of negative resolution over affirmative resolution is based on legal advice that, in this instance, negative resolution is the correct procedure. The reason is that the Regulations would not impose financial burdens or raise statutory limits on the amounts that may be borrowed by, or granted to, public bodies. We have been advised that in certain circumstances there must be an affirmative resolution; however, in this case our legal advisers are satisfied that a negative resolution is appropriate.

Mr Ford: Clause 4(5) has been clarified, although I accept that that is subject to the precise rewording of subsections 1 and 2. You have rectified my inability to distinguish between Regulations and reports, a distinction that was unclear last week.

I am still not entirely persuaded by your previous point. Negative resolution may be legally acceptable for

Regulations made under subsection 3, but that does not persuade the Committee that it should not prefer affirmative resolution.

Mr McConnell: The Department has no choice; its legal adviser said that we must apply the method of negative resolution.

The Chairperson: It may be helpful if the Committee seeks legal advice on the matter.

Mr McConnell: If the Committee's legal advice conflicts with ours, we should discuss that.

The Chairperson: The Committee can assist in that way.

Ms Finnegan: Clause 6 deals with economic development. The Department conveyed the Committee's views on clause 6(4) to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We will meet departmental officials next Wednesday, the soonest date that we could arrange, to examine the wording and to address the matters of directions and consultation.

Mr McConnell: At our meeting with the Department, we will convey the Committee's view of how the Bill should progress.

The Chairperson: The Committee will have to wait to see the wording of the subsection.

Ms Finnegan: On page nine of the original index of questions, the Department was asked whether councils retained all the proceeds of the disposal of land.

The Chairperson: Can we deal with page seven first?

Ms Finnegan: Yes. I apologise. In response to a question last week, I said that we had not consulted on the specific terms of the clause, but that we had consulted on the proposals of the 1997 consultation. There was a big response from councils, 23 of which supported the proposal to drop the 5p limit and to extend the powers to those councils that could acquire land, et cetera. Comments were made about going further than that, but the two Departments at that time, the former Department of the Environment (DOE) and the former Department of Economic Development (DED), would probably have considered those and did not take anything further on board. The draft legislation is exactly what was agreed then. There are no problems with that, and we will talk to DETI about directions, guidance, consultation, and so forth.

Mr McConnell: Until earlier this year, minimal pressure was put on the Department about this exercise. We tried to take a finance Bill through late, because of Peace II money and other factors. Councils prevailed upon us to fulfil our earlier obligations; that is to say, the responsibilities of all the Departments, not necessarily ours. We agreed that the legislation would be used as a vehicle to alter councils' functions and to enable them to go beyond the 5p limit.

That is the history, and I am trying to get the legislation through so that councils can quickly obtain the Peace II moneys. We are addressing councils' issues with them, but we need to do more work on this.

The Chairperson: What are you doing with the requests for the removal of the 5p expenditure limit?

Ms Finnegan: The existing legislation will be repealed, which will remove the 5p limit. That is not mentioned in the wording of the draft Bill, but it is unnecessary because of the repeal.

The Chairperson: Are you introducing any limit to replace the 5p limit?

Ms Finnegan: No.

A letter from the Committee, dated 23 May, raised the equality impact assessment, which was described in the explanatory and financial memorandum. That memorandum does not cover economic development, as the consultation took place before equality impact assessments were required. We propose to screen the economic development proposals, and we can do that fairly quickly and insert the results in the explanatory and financial memorandum as an amendment. It is possible that there will be no differential impact, but we must go through the procedure to ascertain that.

The Chairperson: The original question was whether councils had been specifically consulted about the precise terms of clause 6(4). Will the councils be consulted?

Mr McConnell: The Department is trying to enable councils to work beyond the 5p limit, and other relevant issues must be addressed. For the purposes of this exercise, the Department assumes that 23 of the 26 councils want to exercise their economic functions more freely. However, that requires more consultation, because some councils want to do more, and others wish to do less.

Ms Finnegan: The Department will be in a better position to assess that situation when it has examined the councils' responses.

Mr McConnell: Some councils say that they want more power — perhaps they should have that. However, the prime function is to enact the legislation. If consultation is required on further issues, it is unlikely that the Bill will be passed. The Department is reflecting councils' need for freedom to go beyond 5p in the pound. However, I will get back to you on the matter.

Ms Finnegan: Page nine asks whether councils retain all proceeds from the disposal of land. Section 59 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 requires that capital receipts derived from the sale of any asset held by a council be initially offset against the repayment of any borrowings in relation to that asset. If there are no borrowings, or if only part of it needs to be offset against the borrowings, the council must come to

the Department for approval to use those capital receipts for another purpose.

Last week, we discussed councils' vesting powers in relation to economic development. Does the Committee want those powers built into the draft legislation? At present vesting powers are not allowed.

Mr Ford: I raised that point because a councillor asked me whether vesting powers were included. Last week you implied that vesting powers did not exist for the economic development function, even though they do in respect of other functions of the council. Why is that?

Mr McConnell: That will have to be discussed with other Departments, because problems could arise. For instance, a situation may arise in which a council and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure wish to vest the same land for development. That will not necessarily be the case, but it will be investigated if the Committee wishes the Department to do so.

Mr Ford: Under the current vesting powers, is a council not required to have departmental approval to vest?

Mr McConnell: I do not suggest that economic development vesting powers are necessarily easy to confer, or that they are similar to other such powers. There are some differences, and departmental officials will explore those and outline them to the Committee later. A Department's vesting powers for economic development may cut across those of a council, thereby creating difficulties. For example, a big development is proposed in Belfast, for which one Department seeks to acquire land. Belfast City Council may not agree to provide that land; it may want it for another purpose. We need to consider such factors.

If the Committee so wishes, the Department will return to confirm whether vesting powers in respect of economic development can be extended.

Mr Ford: There is potential for conflict between different public bodies, but that does not apply solely to councils' economic development powers. That is why I suggested that if the Department's approval is required for a council to vest, in any circumstances, it should negotiate with other Departments. In attempting to extend councils' economic development powers, it would be illogical not to allow them vesting powers for that purpose, given that they have them for other functions.

Mr McConnell: The Department will report back on that issue. We are not opposed to the councils' having vesting powers; we simply want to ensure that we make the correct decisions.

Mr A Doherty: The Department should consider that, according to some councillors, there would be significant benefits in including vesting powers in the Bill, as it would enable them to acquire brownfield sites that might not otherwise have been available to them.

Mr Barr: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss the community safety strategy. In my response, I will review the queries that were raised. Under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill there are two forms of community safety partnership (CSP): voluntary CSPs, to be established under section 70 of the Bill, and permanent CSPs, which the NIO suggested should be formed under section 71.

Our Bill is concerned only with empowering councils to engage in voluntary CSPs. We must take care not to commit councils to permanent CSPs, which would have to be fully examined and consulted upon separately if, and when, the time is appropriate. The NIO said in its strategy that it did not propose to introduce permanent CSPs until the review of public administration has taken place. It would be wrong of the Department to advise the Committee, or anyone else, to commit district councils to permanent CSPs.

Clause 7(1) of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill confers on councils the discretionary power to engage in voluntary CSPs. Clause 7(2) is not connected with permanent CSPs; it enables the Assembly to introduce a further dimension to community safety. For example, if provisions in respect of voluntary CSPs do not enable councils to carry out a preferred activity, the Assembly may confer additional powers; hence the use of the term “other” in the Bill. Alternatively, the Assembly may wish to place statutory duties on councils, hence the use of the term “impose”. The Department would not impose any duty on councils without the will of the Assembly, and we made that clear in the Bill. It would be by affirmative resolution. It is important to remember that clause 7(2) does not override clause 7(1).

Ms Lewsley: If a council does not voluntarily create a community safety partnership, I assume that it cannot apply for the available funding?

Mr Barr: That is correct; the NIO is clear on that. It would fund the voluntary CSPs under section 70 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill; therefore, a council would have to engage in CSPs to avail of that funding.

Mr Poots: Should not the “permanent” CSPs referred to under section 71 be described as “statutory” partnerships?

Mr Barr: I used the terms “voluntary” and “statutory” in my response in order to distinguish between the two. A further statutory power may be introduced by the NIO or a devolved Administration later.

Mr Poots: In outlining clause 7(1), you referred to voluntary community safety activity. Do you intend to include the word “voluntary” in the Bill?

Mr Barr: I do not think so, because we define clearly what we mean by CSPs in clause 7(4):

“Community safety partnership” means a body established for an area in accordance with the community safety strategy devised

by the Secretary of State under section 70 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002”.

That is in response to the provision created by section 70 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill. It is meant to be a so-called voluntary CSP, established under section 70 of that Bill.

Mr Poots: I still do not accept that the word “impose” needs to be included in clause 7(2). If it is a voluntary scheme, “confer” is a strong enough word to introduce additional powers, if that is so desired by local authorities.

Mr Barr: Subsection 2 exists to enable the Assembly to introduce additional community safety powers, which may apply to all councils, if it wishes to do so. Some councils might not enter into voluntary CSPs, but the Assembly may decide that it wants all councils to carry out a certain activity under the community safety strategy. The word “impose” is included because provision is being made in primary legislation that will enable the Assembly to introduce subordinate legislation in the future.

Mr Poots: Does clause 2 refer specifically to section 70 and not to section 71?

Mr Barr: Clause 2 is specific only to section 70 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Mr Poots: The Assembly can choose to impose it; therefore the CSP is not a voluntary function for local authorities.

Mr Barr: If it is the will of the Assembly, it can introduce an additional community safety power. I am not referring to the permanent CSPs, which may follow under section 71.

Mr Poots: That is my concern. You are considering introducing powers to enable the Assembly to impose the “voluntary” CSPs on local authorities, despite the fact that they had not previously volunteered to participate in them.

Mr Barr: We cannot predict what the will of the Assembly will be in a year’s time. Circumstances may change, with the result that the Assembly will wish to introduce an additional community safety power for all councils; hence the creation of the provision. However, that provision will be subject to detailed consultation with all local government interests, including this Committee. It would have to be passed through the Assembly by a process of affirmative resolution.

Mr Poots: I am trying to clarify this: if that provision is included, the voluntary aspect will be removed from section 70, because the Assembly will be able to override local authorities and create statutory obligations.

Mr McConnell: The Assembly can override local authorities in many circumstances; no trickery or deviousness is intended. For example, it was suggested in the NIO’s consultation paper that the community

safety exercise and function would be transferred to the Assembly and the Executive. The Department was merely trying to provide for the possibility that the Assembly might wish to take that course; it is not a big issue.

The Chairperson: A more basic question remains. Councils find it difficult to get money for meaningful or urgent functions. I refer you to the Assembly's debate, which I must consider. We hope to seek the opinion of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) because the Bill proposes to duplicate a duty that already exists. Councils will be paying for, and looking after, two groupings whose functions are identical — the community safety partnership and the district policing partnership.

Given that public bodies have to fight to acquire finance for major functions, where is the sense in giving councils £2 million to carry out a duplicate function? Councils are not crying out for duplicated functions; they need £2 million to fund their current functions, which they cannot finance. That point was raised in the House, therefore it must be considered, and I fear that the Assembly will vote against the Bill on that basis. The matter was highlighted by MLAs who are not members of the Environment Committee and by MPs at Westminster. The Department should reconsider the matter with the NIO. No council should have two committees that carry out the same function. Members of this Committee have declared their interests as councillors, so we know how difficult it is to get sufficient officers to carry out work, because they are strapped for finance.

Mr McConnell: There is no problem here, and the change did not happen as a result of the Department's discussions with the NIO. The Department might not have been accused of being too helpful in the past; however, it will review the matter and come back to the Committee.

The Chairperson: I refer you to the debate in the Assembly.

Mr McConnell: If the Committee and the Assembly believe that the provision should not be included, we will look at it again and report back on the matter.

The Chairperson: The questions that were asked in the Assembly deserve to be answered. It would be remiss of the Committee to ignore Members' opposition to the provision.

Mr McConnell: The Department was asked to facilitate councils' ability to adopt a community safety strategy, but it does not want to contradict the will of the Committee or the Assembly. Its aim was simply to facilitate councils. I heard about community safety for the first time on 25 February 2002. The Committee has helped the Department to reach this stage of the process, and it will seek to resolve any difficulties.

The Chairperson: The debate in the Assembly raised matters that I had not considered, but they deserved to

be reviewed. I ask the Department to do that before continuing to discuss the matter.

Mr Barr: I believed that the Committee was consulting with the NIO, because it led the initiative.

The Chairperson: It is.

Mr Barr: I assume that the Committee deals directly with the NIO.

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McConnell: It is our collective responsibility to enact this legislation in order to allow councils to do what they wish. The Department will return to the Committee on that point.

The Chairperson: Your Department is introducing this Bill, while it is facilitating another. The Committee is aware that the provision was to be contained in the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill. We gave it a general welcome. However, questions that were asked in a recent debate must be answered.

Mr McConnell: Do those questions revolve around the term "impose" in the Bill?

The Chairperson: No. It is the more general point that councils would be given a duplicate function, which they would be duty bound to service.

Mr Barr: Councils would not be duty bound to service those functions. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill provides an enabling power to enable councils to enter into community safety partnerships if they so wish. They are not required to do so.

The Chairperson: Yes; however, if they entered into a community safety partnership, they would have to service it.

Mr Barr: The council would become a partner in the CSP. The Northern Ireland Office is providing funding to employ a co-ordinator. That may have been explained to the Committee.

Mr McConnell: Those are issues for the NIO to deal with. The duplication point is not one for the Department to deal with. I mistakenly addressed Mr Poots's point about the term "impose" and missed the other point. The Department cannot decide whether the duplication of functions should be allowed to exist.

When the Committee discusses the matter with SOLACE, it will say that it was pushing for a general power for councils to enter into CSPs. The Department was merely responding to that request.

The Chairperson: That will be clarified when SOLACE comes before the Committee. The question was raised with that body, because it had not considered the duplication either.

Ms Lewsley: Councils wanted the power to enter into CSPs because money was being set aside for it. The

problem is that councils will tap into the money if they can. I agree that there will be duplication. In the end, there could be competition between the two groups, especially as regards funding.

Mr McConnell: The Department is being asked to discuss matters for which it is not responsible. The function was proposed because the district councils lobbied the Secretary of State to be given a general power. The Department responded to allow the councils — *[Interruption]*.

The Chairperson: That is why I ask the Department to discuss the duplication of functions with the NIO. The Committee is not asking you to answer questions.

Mr McConnell: We will raise that with the NIO. However, we would prefer if the NIO came back to the Committee. Is the Chairperson happy with that?

The Chairperson: I am happy with that. You have your own sins to answer for, therefore you should not have to answer for another body's — is that what you are saying?

Mr McConnell: You may say that — I could not possibly comment.

Ms Lewsley: Can I have clarification? The key issue is that Mr McConnell has been lobbied to introduce legislation. He seems to be saying that he is blinkered; therefore, he cannot consider any other factor. He is not considering the other possible implications of the legislation. Is that not also part of his responsibility?

Mr McConnell: The Department is responding to a request from councils to introduce legislation. It assumes that, before doing so, councils would be aware of the implications of their request. I agree that CSPs would give councils an opportunity to do something good for communities and to acquire funding for that purpose.

As the Committee is aware, councils could engage in community safety strategies today, if they so wished, without this legislation — they could use 0.5p per pound to do so. The Department does not wish to impose a duty on councils in that regard.

The Chairperson: The Committee was lobbied solely by the Department on this matter. Before the proposal came forward, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee — I am not certain whether it was Ms Lewsley or Ms Hanna at that time — and I received a telephone call about it from the Minister. The provision should have been contained in the Criminal Justice

(Northern Ireland) Bill, but it is now being transferred for inclusion in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. In principle, the Committee did not object to the proposal, but it was not lobbied by councils to create the power.

Mr McConnell: I hope that SOLACE will convey the view that it gave to the NIO at the outset. The Department is here on account of that recommendation.

Mr Barr: The Department is not being blinkered in its approach; it has considered all the implications. It has been very careful not to commit district councils to any provision that might fall under section 71 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is geared towards considering what must be done under section 70.

The Chairperson: The Committee forwarded further general points to the Department.

Mr McConnell: Dr Power will discuss the proposed formula. First, I remind the Committee that on Wednesday 5 June, the Department is holding a briefing session for Mr Poots and other Members who wish to attend. The issue is difficult to grasp, although Members may have been briefed already.

Dr Power: Does the Committee wish me to discuss the subject now? I am aware that you may have run out of time.

The Chairperson: That is correct; the session has run 15 minutes beyond the time allotted. We will return to the matter at a later date.

Mr McConnell: In any case, the detail of the proposed formula could be explained better in an overall briefing.

The Chairperson: Thank you for attending the session. The Committee will consider carefully the points that the Department has made. Also, in the light of today's discussion, the Department will have further matters to take into account.

Mr McConnell: Thank you, Chairperson. Our developing relationship will be very positive as regards the passage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. I thank the Committee Clerk and his team.

The Chairperson: We appreciate your presence and the presentation.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 30 May 2002

**PLANNING (AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 12/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Lewsley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Armstrong
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr McClarty
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr D Small) The Department
Mr I Maye) of the Environment

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr David Small and Mr Ian Maye from the Department of the Environment. They will give a presentation, after which Members can ask questions.

Mr Maye: I thank the Committee for inviting us here. It is a pleasure to reach the stage of presenting a Bill to the Assembly, because it seems to be a long time since we first discussed this issue last June. We have achieved our set target, which was to bring the Bill to the Assembly before the summer recess. We are now on target to have the Bill introduced on 10 June, subject to the Speaker's clearance. He received a letter this morning, and we do not foresee any difficulty.

The Chairperson: It is of course also subject to clearance of the Committee.

Mr Maye: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: Do not take anything for granted.

Mr Maye: I will now bring you up to speed on how we reached this juncture, and what we intend doing now. I will then pass over to Mr Small, who will talk in more detail about the timetable for the rest of the Bill.

We received Executive Committee clearance to introduce the Bill yesterday, which is why we were able to go to the Speaker overnight, and also the Secretary of State's clearance for the current provisions. As you saw from

the letter, the Minister has entered into discussions with the Secretary of State on issues that this Committee has raised regarding higher fines in Magistrate's Courts, creating a new offence of commencing development without lawful permission, and third-party appeals. Although we do not require the Secretary of State's consent, there is a wider UK interest, since what we do will inevitably influence the other jurisdictions.

The Minister has briefly discussed the principle with the Secretary of State, who now wants concrete evidence and details. That is the process in which the Minister and the Department are now engaged. Over the next few weeks the Minister would like to engage further with the Committee, particularly on higher fines, but also the creation of a new criminal offence. As you know, we are committed to bringing a paper on creating the new criminal offence to the Committee before the summer recess, and we are actively working on it. We want to have the final version of the Queen's University research so that we can polish up the Bill for the Committee. However, we are certainly on target to deliver it before the summer recess — hopefully, as soon as possible.

We want to engage with the Committee on the correct level of fines. At present we are aiming for £20,000, but the Committee has expressed its concern that the figure is too low. Indeed, the original level of £20,000 was set back in 1991, and we will need to take such matters as inflation into account. The Department will soon put a short paper to the Committee on how we might assess the appropriate level of fines in the Magistrate's Court, bearing in mind our commitment to take cases to the Crown Court where appropriate, an arena in which there will be no limit on what fines may be imposed. We wish to strike a balance and are aware of the Committee's concerns, as is the Minister. He is sympathetic to those concerns, and has informed the Secretary of State as such.

At present we are on target to introduce the Bill on 10 June 2002. If we do so, the Second Stage debate may take place on 24 June. Procedures recently agreed by the Assembly would mean that the Bill goes straight to the Committee after the debate on 24 June, so you will receive it before the summer recess. We forwarded a draft of the Bill last week, since we were keen for you to see it before its introduction. We also thought that it would be useful for you to see the letter to the Secretary of State; indeed, we agreed that when we last met.

I have talked about the higher fines and the proposed new offence. The Minister is sympathetic to the Committee's wishes, but wants to discuss the detail, which is why we are bringing forward a paper. The Department is also committed to bringing forward a detailed policy paper on third-party appeals before the summer recess, and we are engaged in discussions with the Minister on what that paper will cover. We await the final report from Queen's University to refine the paper, but once we have done so we aim to present it to the Committee

as soon as possible — certainly before the summer recess. When we provide the papers on the new offence and third-party appeals, we also will provide the Committee with copies of the Queen's University research so that you have all the information to hand when considering the issues. When we have done so, we will be at the Committee's disposal to discuss the issues. The Minister has also made it clear that he wants to work with the Committee on these matters.

Mr Small: I have nothing particular to add on the wider issues that Mr Maye has covered, except to explain the anticipated timetable for the Bill. Mr Maye has indicated that the Bill may be introduced on 10 June, and the Second Stage would then be anticipated for 24 June, but that has to be confirmed. It would then pass to Committee Stage and, depending on the duration of that stage, we would then hope to reach Consideration Stage around October. It is difficult to judge how long that process will take, but we would aim to reach Final Stage of the Bill by December or early January 2003, in time to allow Royal Assent to be secured before Assembly is dissolved in advance of next spring's elections.

The Chairperson: This is heavy stuff, and we must ensure that we are getting this right. With the greatest respect, there seems to be great haste, which can sometimes lead to bad examination. You may have your timetable set, but we must get this right because we have a very important duty to fulfil.

Mr M Murphy: I have great difficulty with the £20,000 fine, considering that an entire block of terraced houses was demolished in Portadown. Under the present legislation, how many enforcement actions have been taken, and what way were they dealt with through the courts?

Mr Maye: I will write to you with the precise figures. With regard to enforcement action, the Planning Service deals with about 1,500 cases a year. Most are resolved through negotiation, and the developer puts right what has been done beyond the terms of his planning permission, or does things that he should not have done. Around 50 formal cases are taken each year, and a proportion of those end up in court. The aim of taking enforcement action is to put right what has been done, and, in the majority of cases, we can achieve that without taking people to court. In some cases, however, it is necessary to do so. I will write to the Committee with the precise figures.

Mr M Murphy: If a developer demolishes a row of terraced houses, he is fined £4,000 or £5,000, but there is no way that the houses can be replaced.

Mr Maye: It is absolutely clear that the fine levels being imposed and the maximum fine available to the Magistrate's Court do not match the gravity of the offence or the value of the property that has been destroyed. One

of our key aims is to give magistrates more leeway to issue higher fines.

We want to take cases to the Crown Court, as some cases must be treated very seriously. The Planning Service was reluctant to take cases to the Crown Court in the past, but the Department is determined to address that. It is important that the Department sends out the strongest possible message to developers and others — if they mess with the system they will get their fingers burnt.

Mr M Murphy: Your recommended figure is over £20,000, but this has not been stated clearly.

Mr Maye: The Department does not yet feel that it is a position to state it clearly, which is why we want to engage further with the Committee to identify what level of fine we should aim for. You have made it clear that £20,000 is not high enough, so what level of fine should we aim for — £30,000, £40,000 or higher? We must bear in mind that the Department intends to take cases to the Crown Court, where there will be no limit to the fine. The Crown Court will be able to set a fine at whatever level it sees fit. In doing that, it will have to consider the profit that has accrued to the developer by his committing the offence. That is important, because in some cases — the case that you cited is a good example — developers can make several hundred thousand pounds or, in some cases, several million, and a fine of £20,000, £30,000, or £40,000 will not make a dent in their profit.

Mr Small: As well as higher levels of fines, the Bill also proposes the introduction of custodial sentences in cases where listed buildings are demolished. It is hoped that the risk of a custodial sentence will carry more weight, and be a greater deterrent than the higher fines.

Mr Maye: Another issue is the attitude of magistrates and the judiciary to the cases, and recent evidence suggests that the attitude is beginning to change. In the dark days of the troubles, magistrates believed that this type of offence was not that important in the grand scheme of things, but that is changing. In a recent case in Rostrevor, a magistrate imposed the maximum fine of £5,000. He said that he would have imposed a higher fine had he had the authority in statute to do so. Magistrates are taking cases more seriously than they would have done before.

The Chairperson: For clarification, the letter that we received from the Minister contained no evidence that he had asked the Secretary of State to consider fines higher than £20,000. Can you show the Committee the relevant paragraph? The letter states the opposite as it says "up to". There is no mention of fines above £20,000.

Mr Maye: The letter had two purposes. One was to secure clearance for the provisions that are already in the Bill, which was necessary for the Department to bring the Bill before the Assembly. The Minister decided to

take it in two bite-sized chunks. His first aim was to get clearance for the current provisions in the Bill, which he has agreed. Secondly, in the final paragraph, he wanted to raise the broader issues that the Committee is concerned about, and on which he has views, such as fine levels, the new offence, and third-party appeals.

He decided to divide it tactically into two stages. First, he would discuss the principles with the Secretary of State and bring to his notice the Committee's concerns and the views of other Members of the Assembly, which had been raised with him in general correspondence. He also wanted to sound out the Secretary of State on the principle of going beyond parity with England and Wales — a point that we have discussed with the Committee previously. Having done that, and judged whether the Secretary of State was warm to the idea, the Minister will now consider concrete proposals. Those proposals are not, and cannot be, on the table at present, because the Department has not decided what they should be. The Department and the Committee must agree the level of fines we are aiming for, and why, so that we can put the case to the Secretary of State.

If a new criminal offence is created, there should be agreement on what that offence should be, what it should cover, what the fines and penalties should be, and in what circumstances it should be applied. That is essentially the Minister's tactic in approaching the Secretary of State about these issues, and I re-emphasise that he wants to work with the Committee on these issues. When he goes to the Secretary of State he wants to put a good case — one that commands the Committee's agreement and support.

The Chairperson: Is the Minister making the case on your acknowledgement that the situation in Northern Ireland is radically different?

Mr Maye: He has made the case that there is strong feeling on these issues across Northern Ireland that will not go away. The public, the Assembly and the Committee for the Environment feel strongly that we should be doing these things.

The Chairperson: You want the Committee to set a figure. From the example that you got this morning, you should know that the Committee could not set a figure for that. Surely a court must be — not may be — made to take regard of the financial benefit. It would be useless for the Committee to set a figure of £35,000 if someone earned £1 million. Rather than tying a court to a maximum, the judgement must consider the financial benefit.

Mr Maye: We are proposing that for the Crown Court.

The Chairperson: I am not talking about the Crown Court; I am talking about the Magistrates' Court. Why can it not be included in the legislation?

Mr Maye: The cases that go to the Crown Court will be included in the legislation. We must take those cases

in which the developer stands to make a profit of £1 million out of the Magistrates' Court and into the Crown Court, so that the Crown Court can look at it seriously and set the appropriate fine.

In the UK justice system, magistrates are given a fine level to work with, and, until now Magistrates' Courts have traditionally had limited powers. That reflects the nature of the cases that should be brought before the Magistrates' Court. If they are sufficiently serious to attract a very heavy fine — *[Interruption]*.

The Chairperson: The number of cases that the Department has taken to any court does not give us confidence that any other cases will reach the Crown Court. Frankly, if a case gets to the Magistrates' Court, the Committee would like to know that the person will not get a mere rap over the knuckles, but something that they will fear. It is hard enough getting the Department to bring a case to the Magistrates' Court, but it is another matter to promise the Committee that all will be well when it gets to the Crown Court. I am not confident about that.

Mr Armstrong: It should be calculated on a percentage basis of the value of the property.

Mr M Murphy: In Rostrevor, the contractor was fined £5,000. The same contractor paid £80,000 to the resident to knock down her garage. This issue must be tackled seriously.

Mr A Doherty: You mentioned three policy papers setting out your position on enforcement liabilities and third-party appeals. When do you expect those to be available, and to whom will you make them available?

Mr Maye: We will give them to the Committee. We are committed to doing that before the summer recess, but I want to have those papers with the Committee within the next couple of weeks, to give you an opportunity to consider them before the summer recess.

Mr A Doherty: I asked because the Committee must also examine the consultation on 'Modernising Planning Processes', and the deadline for that is 14 June. Could you meet that date?

Mr Maye: I cannot commit to that, because we are still waiting for the final report from Queen's University. We want to see their final report so that we can build any of that evidence into the papers that come to the Committee. We will present you with the best possible case.

The Chairperson: Being honest, you are not going to introduce it in this Bill.

Mr Maye: I would not necessarily rule that out.

The Chairperson: This Committee forcefully holds this view. It may be just starting to percolate into the Department, but make no mistake; it is not going to go away. The Department can resist it, but the will of the elected representatives will have to be tested and proved

if the Department is not willing to deal with that head-on.

Mr Maye: The Minister is under no illusion that that is the case. At present he is not persuaded of the case for the introduction of third-party appeals, but he wants to enter into more detailed discussion on the matter with the Committee. With regard to higher fine levels in the Magistrate's Court, and a new criminal offence, I would not rule those out. We can bring forward amendments, if necessary, during the passage of the Bill, as can the Committee, so I would not rule those out at all.

Mr Ford: I do not want to go over the issue of the fines again. However, I note in paragraph 12 of the explanatory memorandum that there are likely to be some marginal financial implications for the Department with the introduction of the main provisions. What is the point in having enforcement powers, or talking about taking matters to the Crown Court if you are only talking about marginal financial implications? It sounds to me like the Department is not going to take the matter seriously, even with these powers. Surely the point of having these powers is to make use of them. We have had enough instances highlighted in every part of Northern Ireland of the need for much more action on enforcement powers. You have just been talking about the issue of the Crown Court, so is that not a misleading statement?

Mr Maye: We are looking at the whole structure of the Planning Service — how it delivers its work and its Programme for Government commitments. We will not necessarily need much more resources to do a better job on enforcement. We are looking at the balance of how our work is done, and whether we have sufficient resources within the Planning Service already devoted to enforcement work. The Minister is keenly aware that up until now we have not devoted a substantial proportion of our resources to enforcement. This legislation should simplify the whole process, so that with current resources we should be able to do a great deal more because the process will be simpler and more streamlined. It will be much easier to progress, and get to court if we need to get to court. There is an issue about the balance of resources in the existing Planning Service that we devote to enforcement work, and we are working quite actively on that.

In addition, we are currently engaged in a review of planning fees, and propose to bring forward a consultation paper later in the year. We will look at whether enforcement work, or at least a proportion of that work, should or can be funded from the fees paid by applicants. At the moment it is not. The fees cover development control work, but do not cover enforcement, the development of planning policy, or many other things that the Planning Service does. It may well be that we can generate more income through planning fees to devote to enforcement. There would be no greater drain on the public purse if more of the burden were placed on applicants and others. We are looking at a range of issues here.

Mr Ford: In taking that approach, you place more of a burden on those who are going through the planning process properly to deal with those who are making a mockery of the law. That seems to me to be the reverse of what you should be doing.

Mr Maye: We have not reached any decision on the matter, which is why we want to engage in public consultation. However, we are looking at whether we should go along that line, or, indeed, whether we should introduce punitive fees for those who go ahead and commence development without permission. They should pay a higher fee than someone who follows the process.

Mr Ford: That is the exact reverse of what you outlined earlier.

Mr Maye: No. It is one of the options — and they are nothing more than that. Some may be mutually contradictory, but they must all be expounded, discussed and debated with the Committee and the public. We are examining the issue, and you will see what we have in mind when we bring forward the consultation paper. We look forward to the debate.

Mr Ford: Should the concept of punitive fees not be included in the Bill?

Mr Maye: If the policy had been developed, we would have done that. The issue is only now beginning to come to the fore, and it is being explored in Northern Ireland and in England. In England it is part of their review of planning fees. The idea had not been generated before, and would not have arrived in time to build into this Bill, but I should not rule out its being in the next Bill.

Mr Ford: What provisions are there currently for the Department to obtain costs for taking enforcement action through the courts?

Mr Maye: We can ask for costs, and it will be up to the magistrate or judge to decide what costs are awarded against the offender. In some cases they have been awarded, and in others they have not. The judgement is one for the court to make, but we can and do apply for costs.

Mr Ford: It would be interesting to see the current statistics on how successful that has been.

Mr Maye: We do not do very well, since courts and magistrates do not see the Government as needing costs. We press for them in every case.

Mr Ford: Your being so unsuccessful because of magistrates' failure to impose costs proves the case for punitive fees as an additional statutory measure.

Mr Maye: We need many tools in our armoury to deal with enforcement issues and unauthorised development. That is one of the options that I want to explore with the Committee and the public. The issue is being explored across the UK, and in some other jurisdictions.

We should be ready to present proposals for discussion on that and a range of other issues after the summer.

Mr Poots: Mr Ford has taken us well down the road that I wished to take. Where does the money from court fines go?

Mr Maye: It goes back to the UK Government — not the Department of the Environment.

Mr Poots: It goes back to the Treasury?

Mr Maye: Yes. It goes back to the consolidated fund, which is managed by Treasury. We cannot currently get our hands on that money.

Mr Poots: I agree with Mr Ford that it would be wholly inappropriate to increase fees for those making legitimate planning applications to pay for those breaking the law. We should seek some self-sustaining mechanism, whereby the fines imposed on those breaking the law flow back into your own coffers to run the enforcement section properly.

Mr Maye: We shall explore that.

Mr Poots: I look forward to seeing you go down that route.

Mr McClarty: I agree with the provision of third-party appeals in principle, but what do you perceive as the effect of such a procedure on the planning application process? Would it slow it down, and could that be resolved by an increase in fees to enable more personnel to be employed for planning applications?

Mr Maye: We could speed up the initial process to some degree, and that is part of the aim of 'Modernising Planning Processes'. We also intend to recruit new staff so that we can process more applications, more quickly than at present.

The Chairperson: Cut through some of the bureaucracy.

Mr Maye: You are quite right. There is no doubt that, with the best will in the world, third-party appeals will introduce substantial delays for those cases that are appealed, though not necessarily for the others. The evidence so far from our research in the Republic is that it introduces an average delay of around 11.4 months on top of the time it takes to reach the initial decision. The Committee and the Assembly will need to consider this issue, since it could have a substantial impact, not only on the planning system, but also on the wider economy. By their very nature, applications likely to be appealed by third parties are those that are contentious, and attract objections at the outset. We quite often find that applications that invite objections, and which are considered contentious, are those that will help develop the economy if delivered. However, there is a balance to be struck; natural justice speaks for third-party appeals, which allow everyone a "fair crack of the whip".

On the other hand, we must look quite seriously, not only at the impact of such factors as delayed applications and additional costs on the planning system, but also at the potential impact on the Northern Ireland economy as a whole. Other jurisdictions have designed their whole system around third-party appeals. They have examined the initial process to make it as streamlined as possible. The initial decision is made very quickly, after which the applicant — or the third party — has the right of appeal. In those jurisdictions, the majority of applications are determined very quickly. Those that go to the appeals system take longer, but a balance is struck between the two.

In Northern Ireland we are starting from a slightly different position, since we already have a system in place. That system will be examined as part of the review of public administration, and I have no doubt that the review team will consider this issue, which will generate a great deal of debate. The issue has regularly arisen during my visits to councils in recent weeks. Where should power for development control decisions lie? You can imagine that there are various views on the issue, but it is likely to be considered in the review of public administration. There is an opportunity to examine the fundamentals of the whole system and get things right, moving away from the system introduced in 1973, which moved planning from locally accountable representatives on councils to central government. The issue must be seriously examined as part of the review.

The Chairperson: Of course, if you were the offended person, you would like to have natural justice. By all means speed everyone else's cases, but be sure that you get justice for yourself. The issue is justice and human rights for all.

Mr Armstrong: Everything in this world has a lifespan. We expect historical buildings to last — to be renovated and remain for ever. Trees too have a lifespan, and some have orders placed on them so that they cannot be removed. However, a tree might only have a two or three year lifespan left, so what do you propose to fine someone if you can determine the life left in a tree? How will you manage that?

Mr Maye: In taking a case to court, we would have to convince the court that the tree was not dead, dying or dangerous, which really depends on the assessment made by a professional arboriculturalist, on whose advice we would rely. If the tree has or is reaching the end of its natural lifespan, that will have an impact on whether we take action against the person who might have cut it down — provided they can demonstrate that. That is part of the equation that the court, and the Department — as a prosecuting authority — would consider in making a decision. That happens at present.

The Department's suggestion in the Bill is that it is too easy for a person who cuts down a tree to argue that

the tree was dead, dying or dangerous, and we want to tighten that up. However, there will be cases where the tree is just about to fall over or has reached the end of its life, and it is perfectly fine to cut it down. The Department wants the landowner to seek permission before he or she cuts it down, because the Department can then consider the evidence presented by the professional arboriculturalist, and make a judgement about whether or not the tree should be cut down.

Tree preservation orders are not necessarily about eternal preservation. They are about the management of trees and woodland. Management takes account of the fact that woodland, by its very nature, changes with time. Trees grow, mature, eventually die and need to be replaced. The orders are the Department's tools with which to manage that process. There will be occasions when a tree is close to, or has reached the end of its natural life, and may become a danger. In that case, if the landowner seeks permission from the Department to cut down the tree, the Department may grant that permission. However, it may also insist on replanting a tree.

Mr Armstrong: In other words, you are saying that it is not the tree that matters, but the area where the tree should be.

Mr Maye: Absolutely. The character and overall "feel" of the area, and the amenity that it provides to the public are important and must be protected. Trees are a limited natural resource. Northern Ireland does not have many trees, so we should protect the ones we have.

Mr Armstrong: Regardless of a tree's condition, is it possible that if it comes down another tree may go up in its place?

Mr Small: That is one of the provisions in the Bill. It is designed for that kind of situation, so that the Department can insist on replacement.

Mr Armstrong: On the point I raised earlier, I believe that the fine should not be £20,000, but a percentage of the value.

Mr Maye: The Department will consider that suggestion.

Mr A Doherty: I hesitate to revisit the third-party appeals issue. However, if the planning policies and procedures were clearer and stronger, and less prone to misinterpretation or to a variety of interpretations, would there be less need for third-party appeals? Having a measure for third-party appeals, but also making them less likely to happen through having clearer policies might resolve the problem.

Mr Maye: I think so, because if planning policy was clearer, and if it commanded widespread support — not only among the political community but also the wider community — and if area plans were correct and up to date, there would be much less opportunity for people to disagree with a decision. The Department hopes that, in

those circumstances, it would get the decision right first time, and that it would be defensible. I agree that that would make the case against a decision slightly weaker, though not altogether remove it. However, it would be a step in the right direction.

The Chairperson: You mentioned higher fines, and you talked about drawing up a case. Is it possible for the Committee to obtain a draft copy? To date, the Committee has no knowledge of the case being drawn up, and there was no indication of it in the Minister's letter.

Mr Maye: The Department's next stage is to bring the case to the Committee for discussion.

The Chairperson: Is it possible for the Committee to obtain a draft soon, so that there can be meaningful discussion? We want to feed in our proposals now rather than at the end of the process.

Mr Maye: Much work needs to be done on higher fine levels, particularly given the points raised today. The Department hopes to present it to the Committee soon. However, in its current state it would not be of much help to the Committee.

The Chairperson: The Committee would like to see the draft as early as possible. We will decide whether it is helpful or not.

Mr Maye: It is hoped that you will have all the papers in the next few weeks.

The Chairperson: I would also like to receive the Queen's University research as soon as possible.

I want to mention one other thing before we finish. Even though this is an important issue, I am concerned that you have only sent the Committee responses that date from April 1999. There are no up-to-date papers. The Committee has the proposed amendments to planning legislation, and an analysis of responses to the discussion document. There are a lot of them, but what do they mean? In some instances there is a "yes" or "no" with a general comment, but the Committee has no details of what the concerns were or if they were met. It is doubtful whether or not the responses from 1999 are meaningful because they may be out of date. To make a judgement, the Committee requires more detailed comments and documentation with more than a "yes" or a "no". Relevant analysis is required and the Committee must know what concerns were expressed and how they were addressed.

Mr Maye: The Department will work with your officials to provide that. Would it be helpful in the meantime to give you copies of the responses? Some respondents asked for their responses not to be released, but I can give you details on other responses, and then we may work on the broader analysis.

The Chairperson: In these days of open government and freedom of information, I am not sure if such

requests for anonymity are allowed. What is good enough for your eyes is good enough for ours.

Mr Maye: As the responses were made in 1999, the people who made responses were entitled to say that they did not want them to be released. The Department must respect that until the Freedom of Information Act becomes fully effective in January 2005. The Department

can, if you wish, write to the respondents informing them of the Committee's request for sight of their response.

The Chairperson: Yes, that would be helpful. The Committee wishes to be sensitive, but we do want the papers.

Thank you for your contribution to this morning's Committee session.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 6 June 2002

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL
(NIA 7/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Lewsley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr McClarty
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr P McNaney) Belfast City Council
Mr C Quigley)
Mr R Wilson) Craigavon Borough Council
Mr T Reaney)

The Chairperson: Welcome Mr McNaney and Mr Quigley from Belfast City Council, and Mr Wilson and Mr Reaney from Craigavon Borough Council. It would be helpful if both groups could make initial statements. The Committee will then ask questions.

Mr McNaney: We are delighted to have the opportunity to make submissions on this matter. I have spoken to my colleague Trevor Reaney before the meeting, and I will lead off. I will not say a great deal about the initial five clauses of the Bill because they do not affect Belfast City Council; that was set out in our letter of 20 May to the Committee. It would be more appropriate for councils that have an interest in those clauses to make their comments. Mr Reaney will speak about that aspect of the Bill.

The aspects of the Bill that we wish to comment on start at clause 6: ‘Powers of district councils in relation to economic development’. We welcome the extension in powers that the Bill offers local government. Some of the issues contained in the Bill are matters that Belfast City Council and many district councils have been advocating for some time. We welcome the initiative shown by the Minister and his officials in introducing the Bill. We commend it to the Committee as a welcome addition to local government powers in this area.

The Committee will be aware that there has been a change of wording, and this is reflected in the Bill. Previously, councils could participate in economic development activities subject to the consent of the Department — that has now been changed. The Bill states that a district council shall exercise its functions

“in accordance with such directions as may be issued from time to time by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.”

I am not suggesting that such directions would be inappropriate, but we are concerned that a much more restrictive interpretation will be placed in legislation than previously existed.

When this matter was presented to Belfast City Council — and it was approved last night — the council endorsed our concern that the word “direction” was too strong. We would prefer that councils come up with overall economic development plans for their districts subject to the “consent” or “approval” of the Department. However, we recognise that, with Invest Northern Ireland, it will be important to have a joined-up and integrated approach to economic development activities.

We have found that there is more impact on economic development activities when it is left to local areas to be innovative. We believe that the word “direction” is a tad too strong.

Currently there is no power to acquire land compulsorily for economic development purposes. There is a power to acquire, hold and develop land — and we welcome that very much. Committee minutes show that some consideration has been given on whether Schedule 6 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 would permit councils to acquire land by vesting. I have a legal background, and the council’s Director of Legal Services, Mr Quigley, is with me today. Our legal advice is that Schedule 6 is purely procedural. For councils to have the power to vest land for economic development purposes, a provision would need to be added to the Bill — paragraph 6(2)(c) perhaps — that would permit councils to acquire land compulsorily. That will be a matter for the Committee and the Assembly to determine.

There would be occasions when it would be helpful to permit a land bank to be assembled in order to enable an area to be regenerated. For example, the purpose of Belfast’s arterial route strategy is to map areas of deprivation on a geographical information system. The result of that is that the council can then concentrate economic development resources to build a critical mass to rejuvenate deprived areas. The power to compulsorily acquire land, perhaps from someone who may have personal reasons to object to the rejuvenation, would be extremely helpful to councils.

Community safety is a more contentious area. Councils are considering the issue in the context of the Northern Ireland Office consultation document on community safety partnerships. Councils have been concerned that they

did not have the power to participate in community safety. The extent to which the Bill gives councils power to participate is welcome, though it could be more positively framed: it is framed in a negative way.

Our letter suggests that it would be better if it were framed in the positive way that economic development powers are framed, which state that councils may promote the enhancement of community safety and may incur associated expenditure, subject to whatever restrictions are deemed appropriate.

We are not saying that councils alone should develop individual community safety partnership plans. Such plans should be prepared in the context of a broad partnership, because many people are involved in community safety. Our letter details how it might be achieved; by building in safeguards to allay the concerns of the Committee or the Assembly. I do not intend to repeat the points made in paragraphs 1 to 6 of our letter. However, I am happy to amplify or add detail to any of the comments made if the Committee considers that to be appropriate.

Councils must have the power to participate in community safety partnerships, and they need the Bill in its present form, though they would prefer it to be more positively framed. However, this must be seen in the context of councils having the power to set up district policing partnerships — and Belfast City Council is setting up district policing partnerships.

When one looks at the objectives set out in the Northern Ireland Policing Board's corporate strategic plan, the outcomes that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has to achieve through district policing partnerships are similar to those that must be achieved through community safety partnerships. There needs to be an administrative connection between the partnerships. The secretariat of district policing partnerships will be based in district councils. At the very least, there should be a shared secretariat with community safety partnerships to ensure constancy and integration of advice.

Some councils might go further than that and say that there should be a commonality of membership. I am not advocating to the Committee that councils should not have powers to participate in community safety partnerships, because, as elected representatives, members know that district councillors are concerned with this issue. They want to be involved and use their expertise.

Mr Reaney: Craigavon Borough Council has not endorsed the comments contained in our submission in full council: our policy and resources committee has endorsed them. It is hoped that the council will endorse the comments on 10 June.

Grants to district councils have been the subject of much debate and scrutiny for many years, and a conclusion has not yet been reached: we hope that the Bill will

bring the matter to a conclusion. A fundamental flaw in the current system is the difficulty that councils have in planning expenditure for a number of years ahead. The current formula is, in some cases, widely unpredictable. Information is available only very late in the process of preparing rate estimates and leads to very significant adjustments during the early months of the year — particularly in the run-up to striking the rates in February.

Having a much more stable formula, with a three-year planning framework as currently suggested by the Department, is welcome. It will be of great assistance to councils in planning expenditure. For that reason, Craigavon Borough Council would encourage that the new general grant formula be provided for the 2003-04 financial year.

The definitions of the words “reasonable” and “excessive” cause Craigavon Borough Council concern — and I believe that Committee members have also expressed concern about them. We are concerned about how those words will be defined. We would never argue against the need for some oversight of expenditure; however, there needs to be clarity about the words in the context of councils' expenditure.

Our council shares the views of Belfast City Council on powers relating to economic development. We welcome the proposals, but the word “directions” is too strong; “guidance” would be more appropriate. There certainly needs to be close consultation with district councils in the preparation of any guidance or directions.

We welcome the introduction of powers to enable us to participate formally in community safety. However, we are concerned that there are two tracks to the process — one through the community safety partnerships and the other through the Northern Ireland Office/Policing Board district policing partnerships. We are concerned that the end result will be a fragmented approach to community safety — with duplication, overlap, and perhaps contention along the way — arising from two essentially different partnerships tackling 80% of the work that is common to both of them. We feel that the opportunity should be taken to clarify the position and reduce the potential for duplication and contention.

In particular, the Bill refers to councils undertaking community safety activities through a partnership and the action plan prepared by that partnership. There is a need for councils to have some flexibility — to operate in addition to that provision and outside of it. Issues come to councils' attention that either require urgent action, or can be dealt with directly: there should be provision for that. Councils should be able to spend funds directly on community safety activities. As the Committee is aware, Craigavon Borough Council has carried out work such as the installation of CCTV, fencing of properties and so on, which has greatly improved safety in local estates and communities.

We concur with the view expressed by Belfast City Council that there is a need to find a way of structurally integrating district policing partnerships and community safety partnerships. There are two ways in which Craigavon Borough Council envisages that being facilitated given that it appears that we cannot have a single partnership to do both jobs. One way would be through having a commonality of membership; the other would be through having a joined-up secretariat serving both groups. Both ways would reduce the potential for duplication and would assist in a more joined-up approach to the issue.

I wish to comment on behalf of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), which considered the Bill on 31 May. The Committee Clerk contacted me to find out whether SOLACE had any comments. The society generally supports the views expressed by Belfast City Council and Craigavon Borough Council. However, there are two particular points that I want to highlight.

First, in respect of economic development, SOLACE feels that vesting powers in relation to acquiring land for development purposes are needed in the Bill to ensure that councils can fulfil that role fully. Secondly, an issue not covered in the Bill, but which might be, is emergency planning. Councils — and, in particular, chief executives of councils — have an informal role to deal with the co-ordination of a response to an emergency. There is no legislative cover for that particular situation, and it should be given consideration in the Bill. There should be a permissive power — not a statutory or directive power — for councils to participate and spend money. It covers councils and their staff if they undertake activities and spend money in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

With those two comments, made on behalf of SOLACE, I conclude my remarks.

The Chairperson: As regards your last point, what do you define as an emergency?

Mr Reaney: It is defined extensively in the emergency planning documentation, nationally and through the central emergency planning unit. It is deemed to be a situation beyond the normal competence or capability of organisations to respond. For example, the River Bann might flood at Portadown. If it did, there would be a need to respond. The lead agencies would be the Rivers Agency, Water Service and so on. However, in the past, councils have been involved in providing sandbags and assisting with the clear up. That expenditure would normally be outside a local authority's competence.

Mr A Doherty: Mr McNaney, I take it that you believe that the Bill will be ineffective if clause 6 does not give councils vesting powers. I say that because the Minister made it fairly clear when he spoke to the Committee that it was not the Department's intention to include vesting powers in the Bill.

Mr McNaney: When normal negotiations fail, the ability to undertake a vesting process would considerably assist district councils in pursuing regeneration and promotion of economic development in their districts. In the public interest, a piece of land could be assembled with other land for the purposes of economic development. I am not saying that the Bill would be ineffective; I am saying that it would be more effective if we had the provision.

Mr A Doherty: It has been suggested that councils have sufficient powers under other legislation. Do you agree with that?

Mr McNaney: Councils have powers to vest land in specific circumstances; a specific statutory power must be shown in relation to a statutory function. If we are being given a statutory function as regards economic development, we need a specific statutory power to vest for that. I would defer to Mr Quigley to correct me if I am wrong.

Mr Quigley: The chief executive is correct on the legal position concerning the compulsory acquisition of land, otherwise known as vesting.

A council's vesting power must derive from primary legislation. Throughout the range of local government enactments, from the Public Health Acts to those that regulate environmental control, there is always a specific enabling power to acquire land compulsorily where it cannot be acquired through agreement. In the context of promoting economic development — and if the Committee were to take the view that it was appropriate — a specific power to acquire land compulsorily in default of agreement would be required.

The chief executive covered all the issues relating to economic development except the formation of companies: Belfast City Council mentioned that in its letter. Such a power exists across the water, but not here. In the context of promoting economic development, which is what we are talking about, had we the power to be involved safely in companies, the ability of councillors to undertake the promotion of economic development projects through companies would be guaranteed. That would give some comfort to councils, because the current position is unclear and leads to potential liability for individual councillors. We would like to avoid that.

The issue requires primary enabling legislation. Schedule 6 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 deals with the procedures for vesting land; therefore, there is no need to worry about further legislation on how vesting operates.

Mr A Doherty: As regards community safety, your letter states that clause 7(1)(d) should include the power to "establish and lead" community safety partnerships. Could you expand on the nature and scope of the leadership you expect from councils in such partnerships?

Mr McNaney: In the context of the consultative document issued by the Northern Ireland Office, if a district council's role were examined and reviewed alongside developments taking place in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, you would find that the role of a local authority is to be a community advocate. Its role is to speak on behalf of the citizens in its district on the topics that concern them. What grounds a district council in that regard is the representative nature of its members. Councillors are elected to speak on behalf of the citizens of an area, express their concerns and bring those concerns to the legitimate agencies that oversee, or can influence, items such as drugs, burglaries, vandalism and antisocial behaviour.

Belfast City Council feels that that civic and community leadership role is inherent to the operation of a successful community safety partnership. It should be clarified that councils can pursue that role in leading and establishing such partnerships rather than have them hang in the ether of an undefined Northern Ireland Office document suggesting that partnerships can be properly administered by several bodies. The electoral and democratic credibility that councils can bring is essential to the effective operation of such partnerships, though I fully accept that for them to operate effectively there must be a partnership.

Mr Reaney: I support what Mr McNaney has said. We share the views of Belfast City Council on civic leadership, the role of local government and local governance. It is vital to get those roles right.

Ms Lewsley: I have serious reservations about the duplication and the overlap of community safety partnerships and district policing partnership boards. Do you see a defined line where they differ? If you are talking about commonality of membership and joint administration, then why does there need to be two separate committees comprising the same people? Why can there not be one committee? Part of the reason for having two committees is probably due to funding, which comes to them separately.

Mr Reaney: As regards commonality of membership, it would be fair to say that we would not see there being exact commonality. There are interests that need to be represented on community safety partnerships that would not be involved in district policing partnerships. Craigavon Borough Council will be looking towards taking the district policing board membership and adding some of the statutory agencies such as the Housing Executive and Roads Service to form the community safety partnership. We would also bring in the elected representatives and the independent community members from the district policing partnership.

If you are saying to me that I should start with a blank sheet of paper and that there should be one partnership with two functions, then I think that the legislation will not enable us to achieve that. The best we can do is to achieve some commonality of membership and a joint

administration that will reduce duplication. We need to ensure at the start of the process that the legislation facilitates commonality so that councils can achieve it locally if they wish to do so.

Ms Lewsley: Are you suggesting taking the district policing partnership board and increasing it by including the wider community?

Mr Reaney: I referred specifically to the statutory agencies because we have community representatives on the district policing partnerships through independent appointments. Particular statutory agencies not represented on the policing partnerships would need to be directly involved in community safety partnerships.

Mr Poots: I am concerned about the methodology for establishing the general grant. It is a fairer methodology than what we currently have but I am surprised to find, as regards the tourism adjustment, that councils such as Coleraine, Down and North Down will lose out. That will be a surprise to most people, and it is regrettable that representatives from Coleraine Borough Council are not here today to speak about it.

Significant tourism is taking place in all those council areas. Did SOLACE raise that issue with the Department? Those councils are losing out under tourism adjustment.

Mr Reaney: Individual councils have raised that issue with the Department, but, to the best of my knowledge, SOLACE has not.

Mr Ford: The number of points of common interest between the councils and the Committee has been interesting. Councils may be aware that the Committee has already raised several of those points with the Department, and it is awaiting a response.

Would it be acceptable to you, as council representatives, if the reference in clause 6(4), "in accordance with such directions", were replaced by "councils shall have regard to guidance issued by Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment"?

Mr McNaney: As a council officer, I would welcome that. There is a need to integrate economic development activities. We have the new economic development body, Invest Northern Ireland, and we do not need duplication. However, local initiative and creativity promotes economic development. Central control can sometimes militate against that. I would welcome the amendment the Committee is considering.

Mr Ford: Is that a view from Craigavon or SOLACE?

Mr Reaney: This is a personal view. There is a need for joined-up governance between local and central government. If you are in a situation where you want to achieve that and have partnership working, words such as "directions" seems to be counter to that. Guidance, formulated in consultation with local authorities, would be the appropriate way forward.

The Chairperson: Mr Reaney, a written submission from SOLACE would suffice instead of you coming back to the Committee to make a presentation. Thank you for coming. Several of the points that you raised have also been raised by Committee members.

Do councils unanimously welcome the removal of the 5p restriction?

Mr Reaney: Yes. It provides local authorities, or district councils, with an opportunity to decide how much they spend. They may choose to spend more or less than 5p, but it is local discretion to meet local needs, and we all welcome that.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 6 June 2002

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL
(NIA 7/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Lewsley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr D Barr)
Ms M Finnegan) Department of the Environment
Dr T Power)
Mr P McNaney) Belfast City Council

The Chairperson: I welcome Dr Tracy Power, Ms Marie Finnegan and Mr David Barr from the Department of the Environment, and Mr Peter McNaney from Belfast City Council.

Dr Power: Mr Poots made a point about tourist adjustment when he was speaking to Mr Reaney from Craigavon Borough Council earlier.

Tourism adjustment is made up of tourist bed nights and also a measure of deprivation. We thought about whether that should be included, and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) pushed to have it included. Tourism needs to be encouraged into areas that are deprived in other ways.

If the Committee feels that it is not appropriate, there is still time for it to be discussed and removed. If the deprivation aspect were removed, north Down et cetera would gain on the tourism adjustment side.

Mr Poots: Everyone used to go on holiday to Bangor, but unfortunately they no longer go there. I used to go to Portrush. The figures for North Down Borough Council are down by 921 people; Down District Council, which covers the Mountains of Mourne and Newcastle — strategic tourism areas — is down 201 people; and Coleraine Borough Council, which covers Portrush, Portstewart, Castlerock and the north coast is down 81 people. It is

outrageous that you have devised a formula that says that the tourism adjustment goes down, on the basis of TSN, for three main tourism areas in Northern Ireland — with respect to other councils and areas.

With respect to OFMDFM and the TSN adjustment, people cannot be persuaded to go on holiday to a deprived area. People want to stay in a pleasant environment. Traditionally, they stayed in those three areas and other areas. It is scandalous that those areas lose out as a result of the methodology.

Dr Power: That is a fair point. We can put that to the other Departments if the Committee feels that that needs to be adjusted. OFMDFM may have to bite that bullet.

The Chairperson: There is sense behind the argument. There is much deprivation in provision in some of those areas. The provision must be enhanced if we want to attract people from overseas.

Dr Power: It is the Committee's call either way, depending on how you want to play it.

The Chairperson: It is important to get clarification.

Ms Finnegan: I shall make two points on clause 6, which covers economic development. The views expressed this morning by the representatives from Belfast City Council and Craigavon Borough Council made it clear that there has been difficulty since the beginning with the word "directions" in clause 6(4). I met yesterday with representatives from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It is supportive of all the views that have been expressed, and it feels that clarification is needed. It wants to issue guidelines within which councils can work, and it wants to work with councils and consult with them to draw up the guidelines to be followed. The Department would like us to reflect that in the legislation and drop the word "directions". That would seem to tie in with what councils have said this morning.

The Chairperson: What are you going to replace it with?

Ms Finnegan: We have not drafted the words yet.

The Chairperson: One word could be replaced only for people to find that word equally objectionable.

Ms Finnegan: It would clearly say that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will produce guidelines in consultation with councils.

The Chairperson: Will you comment on vesting?

Ms Finnegan: We did not take that on board. However, following the Second Stage of the Bill in the Assembly, the point was made about vesting powers with regard to economic development. The Department consulted its solicitors, who were of the view that the wording did not give councils vesting powers. From the correspondence that I have read from councils, it seems to be coming through loud and clear that that is

something they wish to see. The Department would have no problem with that. However, it would mean inserting a new paragraph in clause 6.

The Chairperson: Would that be clause 6(2)(c)?

Ms Finnegan: Yes. We would consult our solicitors about where best to insert that, but it would go in as a separate item so that no doubt might arise.

Mr Poots: In relation to the community safety function — *[Interruption]*.

The Chairperson: We shall return to that, because Mr Barr is champing at the bit to say something. We shall hold him back for a few moments, because Mr Ford also wants to say something.

Mr Ford: To return to the two points about clause 6 that were raised, I welcome the fact that the Department, councils and the Committee are in agreement, subject to its precise wording.

Ms Finnegan: That is all that I have to say.

The Chairperson: That is a shame — you have charmed us on every other occasion. We shall see whether Mr Barr is just as amenable, or whether he will put the foot out of the bucket.

Mr Barr: I probably have more to say than Ms Finnegan, as community safety was raised more frequently than other issues.

The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has responsibility for district policing partnerships as it does community safety partnerships (CSPs); they are reserved matters that involve NIO strategy.

The Chairperson: We have already written to the NIO about that.

Mr Barr: We have spoken to NIO officials and relayed the Committee's comments. We have also responded as a Department to the NIO strategy and relayed the concerns that have been expressed about that. I hope that the NIO will respond to the Committee shortly.

Craigavon Borough Council said that councils should be allowed wider powers to engage in community safety; Belfast City Council also mentioned that, and the idea was carefully considered. However, we must be mindful that this NIO strategy is trying to encourage a joined-up approach to community safety activity. The NIO obviously feels that a CSP approach is the best way to deal with that. We shall not discourage councils from engaging in community safety as a single body.

Section 115 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides councils with an opportunity to spend money on matters that they consider to be in the interests of the council, its area and its citizens. Therefore, although it is cash-restricted — half a penny in the pound — some councils may not have much scope with that. However, they still have statutory cover if they wish to spend on

community safety in its broadest sense. The Bill is trying to enable councils to engage in community safety partnerships. We must be mindful that that is the situation.

It was asked whether councils should take leadership roles or whether we should make provisions in the Bill that enable them to do that. We must consider that carefully, because the NIO strategy does not specify who should assume leadership or who should select members. If we introduced something such as that into our Bill, we would perhaps override the NIO strategy, which is a reserved matter. I am unsure whether councils would want the power to take responsibility for the leadership of community safety partnerships; only two councils have made that representation. We must be careful that we do not give councils a responsibility that they perhaps do not want.

The Chairperson: The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) also raised that point. That group represents all councils, not only two.

Mr Barr: I have not read what SOLACE has said on the matter, but I have heard — *[Interruption]*.

The Chairperson: It will be interesting to see SOLACE's response when it arrives. Your point may be superseded if you are basing it on a false premise.

Mr Barr: Perhaps. It is strange that the individual councils did not make the same representation in their submissions. The Bill is discretionary; in other words, it suggests that councils may wish to engage in community safety partnerships. Therefore, several councils may choose not to do that.

The issue of emergency planning was raised, and a fair comment was made that emergency planning is separate from community safety. There is a link in the sense that both require consideration to be given to the safety of citizens. There has been no detailed consultation with councils on emergency planning. We are concerned that the introduction of such a clause at this late stage of the Bill would require further consultation with councils, and we must be careful not to delay the progress of the Bill. We shall not forget about that issue. The Minister has already assured SOLACE that he will consider the matter and address it, and perhaps, develop a further piece of legislation in the future.

The Chairperson: What if an emergency happens before the matter is addressed? It is not a contentious matter. If there were an emergency everyone would wish to assist.

Mr Barr: Emergency planning has been going on for some years — it is not a new concept. The Department issued a circular letter in June 2000 that set out the responsibility of chief executives in emergency planning and response. That letter was cleared through the local government emergency management group, on which SOLACE is represented, as well as the Chief Environmental

Health Officer and departmental officials. The letter was agreed by all parties and issued to all councils. The councils have taken on board those responsibilities and are preparing emergency plans in accordance with guidance that the Department issued through the local government emergency management group. Emergency planning is actively taking place.

The Chairperson: Therefore there should be no problem inserting the provision into the Bill.

Mr Barr: We would need to be very careful about the wording. If it were a matter of inserting a simple clause, I would be content to put that in the Bill. However, it is never that simple. We would have to define what is meant by emergency planning, and I would be concerned that there would be a delay. I am happy to take the matter back to the Department to explore it.

The Chairperson: Any delay would be caused by the Department rather than the Committee. We shall see how quickly you respond.

Mr Barr: If it were a case of inserting a straightforward clause, we would consider it. If I felt that it would not delay the Bill, and if the Committee and district councils were content with it, it could be considered.

The Chairperson: It will be interesting to see the outcome.

Mr Poots: With regard to the community safety function, although it may be an issue for the NIO and the district policing partnership boards, councils will have to pay for both. It is important that we get it right, and that the two groups are not tripping over each other and duplicating work. We need greater clarity on the role of the community safety function, how it relates to the district policing partnership boards, and how the two groups can interconnect. I am not satisfied to proceed with the community safety function until we have that clarification.

Mr Barr: Do you suggest that clarification be included in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill?

Mr Poots: Guidance is needed on what the community safety function is, and how it will fit in with the district policing partnership boards. For example, the Housing Executive has a role in tackling drug abuse, but how will it make that role compatible with the role of the district policing partnership boards? There may be poor lighting in some areas, and Roads Service may be able to help, but, again, how does that fit in with the role of the district policing partnership boards?

Mr Barr: The Department of the Environment cannot answer that question. That is a strategy matter for the NIO to address, and I am sure that it will address that in its submission to the Committee.

The Chairperson: With the greatest respect, Mr Barr, if that is to be included in the Bill, you cannot cop

out of answering the question. If it is to be included in your Bill, it must mean something — the Committee must know what it means. It is no use to say that the Bill will include a certain provision, but that no one knows what it means. Is this duplication? I am fed up with quangos — the country is full of quangos. We are establishing two groups to do the same work. Some 80% of the two groups' work will be the same, serviced by the council. That is not good enough. The functions, and how they will be introduced so that there will not be duplication and fragmentation, are unclear. With the greatest respect, Mr Barr, the provision appears in your Bill. Whether you say that it is a matter for the NIO is not relevant; it is in the Bill, and the Bill is coming from the Department of the Environment. We must clarify the meaning.

Mr Barr: The Bill is there to enable district councils to engage in community safety partnerships, if they so wish. The community safety strategy is out for public consultation by the NIO, and, as a result of that consultation, only the NIO can determine what community safety policy it will introduce. I assume that everyone will have the opportunity to respond. The Bill cannot go into the detail of community safety strategy; it is there to enable district councils to engage in CSPs.

The Chairperson: Unless the Committee knows what the provision means, do not expect us to give our seal of approval to it. The provision is balanced between two Departments. If the Committee is to approve a Bill that includes such a provision we shall need to know what we are approving. I do not care where the responsibility lies. Make no mistake: we want to know what we are approving. If you do not come up with the answers, no harm to you, do not expect us to give our seal of approval.

Members are saying that they are not happy with what is being said; that is their prerogative and their duty in scrutinising legislation.

Ms Lewsley: I tried to find out from Belfast City Council and Craigavon Borough Council representatives whether they could identify any defined difference between CSPs and district policing partnerships. They could not, because they said that 80% of the both groups' functions would probably be the same. The only difference was that other statutory agencies would be included at CSP level. No one can tell us what the two defined roles will be. Accepting your point that the district policing partnership boards are a reserved matter and the NIO's responsibility, we do not know your strategy for CSPs. That is the problem.

Mr Barr: The Department of the Environment is not responsible for the community safety strategy. Therefore we do not have a strategy. We can respond to the NIO strategy and we have done so; district councils and others have also provided comment. It is not for me to respond to the Committee about NIO strategy on community

safety; it is a reserved matter. Undoubtedly, the NIO will respond to the Committee in due course.

The Chairperson: There is no point asking you questions such as this if you do not have the power to answer them.

Mr Barr: With respect, Mr Chairperson, you are asking me a question about the district policing partnerships and the community safety partnership strategy. The Department of the Environment has no responsibility for those. How do you expect me to answer that question?

The Chairperson: We are asking you that question because the provision appears in the Department's legislation. One of the strategies is being provided for in your legislation.

Mr Barr: If we go back to square one, Mr Chairperson; the Department reacted to —

The Chairperson: We understand where it came from. However, there is still not clarity. Councils will have responsibility for two functions, and there seems to be an overlap. Someone said that there would be an 80% overlap. One has to ask questions about that. I am not trying to take away from your responsibility, but if you cannot give us the answers we shall have to go to the person who can. The Committee will have to get answers before the Bill can pass.

Ms Lewsley: My question was on the general grant. Craigavon Borough Council asked for clarification on clause 4(1)(a),

“a district council has failed to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the discharge of its functions”,

and clause 4(1)(b),

“the expenditure of a district council has been excessive having regard to its financial resources and other relevant circumstances”.

Ms Finnegan: The Committee raised those questions before, and we provided written answers. “Reasonable” cannot be quantified. First, we would have to consider the grant that a council actually receives. For example, there is a wide variation in the payment of grants between Strabane and Craigavon, as Craigavon sometimes does not get any, or very many, grant payments. We have to look at what is reasonable, and, as we made clear at the previous meeting, we intend to change considerably the wording of that clause. At present, we are using the exact wording that is in existing legislation, going back to the 1972 Order. We shall change it substantially so that the local government auditor will have a clearly defined role. He does have a role at present, but it is not expressed in the Bill. We shall clearly set out the local government auditor's role in reporting to the Department on whatever the inefficiency or inadequacy may be.

Secondly, we shall state the Department's role, which again is a reporting role — this time to the Northern

Ireland Assembly. The Department will make a recommendation of what we consider to be a reasonable amount to be deducted, taking into account all the circumstances. The Assembly would approve the amount to be determined, and if it did not consider the amount the Department was recommending to be reasonable, the Department would have to accept its decision.

The Chairperson: We must move on as we are running out of time. We have to make one decision before 1.00 pm.

Mr A Doherty: Much has been said today about partnerships, and I feel that there is room for more effective partnership between the different arms of government. Is the NIO's stance on every aspect of the Bill set in stone, or is it open to persuasion? You seem to be indicating that what the NIO says is fixed. Moreover, if the passage of the Bill predates the NIO introducing its community safety partnership strategy, what will be the consequences in that case? The NIO's strategy does not conform to the Bill.

Mr Barr: I shall answer your final question first. Obviously, the two have to run together. The NIO strategy is out for consultation, which confirms that it is prepared to take into account the views being expressed by several important bodies, such as the Committee. The Bill has to be made in time for the general grant to be cleared, and we cannot wait until such times as the NIO strategy is finally defined and cleared.

Undoubtedly, councils are looking to have involvement in community safety and wish to avail themselves of resources that the NIO has secured. Total funding is not going to fall on district councils. The NIO has already secured resources for the next three years and has indicated that it will be funding the feeding system in establishing CSPs. If councils decide to take the lead on that matter, they will want to benefit from it.

I shall make another important point on community safety, which may involve a potential amendment to the Bill. Some councils have indicated that clause 7(1)(d) in the Bill could be more explicit in allowing them to expend money on community safety. It is implied in clause 7(1)(d) that councils, in assisting and facilitating a CSP, could contribute financially to that body in implementing community safety projects. I have taken legal advice on that and, in the interest of legal certainty, perhaps we should include an addition to that clause. It should be amended to read:

“generally assist financially and otherwise and facilitate such a partnership in the exercise of its functions.”

The legislative draftsman will prepare a draft for that, and the Department, in turn, will seek the Minister's approval.

The Chairperson: You said, Ms Finnegan, that you had to consider some legal advice; for example, on the

changing of the word “directions”. Will you get those proposed changes to the Committee as soon as possible?

Ms Finnegan: Yes. We wanted to take on board councils’ views. The Department has started to prepare a redraft in which it has considered the wording that Committee members have recommended in the past few weeks. It is hoped that it will be with you next week or, at the very latest, the following week. It depends on our getting clearance from the Assembly draftsman.

The Chairperson: That would be helpful.

Mr McNaney: I shall write to the Committee Clerk with some reflections on community safety. I sympathised with Mr Barr when he was attempting to answer questions for the NIO. Belfast City Council welcomes the Committee’s intervention with the NIO because some rigour needs to be given to consideration of its strategy. The Department wants to give legal powers to councils to participate in community safety, activities for which there is a strong degree of support from all councillors. It is an issue that deeply affects their constituents. Time will be well served

in asking the NIO to bring clarity to a document that lacks clarity on how to effect implementation. I support the clause that gives councils the power to participate because without it their ability will be limited and a vacuum will be created.

I shall write to the Committee Clerk with informed views on that. I could also send the Committee the council’s endorsed comments on the community safety strategy, which may strengthen the Committee’s ability to interrogate the NIO.

The Chairperson: The Committee has sympathy for a person presenting something over which he does not have complete control. However, the Committee wants clarity from those who have the responsibility, which is why it has written to the NIO. We await a response from the NIO, and its representatives will probably appear before the Committee shortly. Before the Committee puts its stamp of approval on something it must get clarity.

Mr Barr: I welcome that.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Friday 7 June 2002

**FUR FARMING (PROHIBITION) BILL
(NIA 8/01)**

**CONSIDERATION OF RESPONSES TO
CONSULTATION**

Members present:

Rev Dr Ian Paisley (Chairperson)
Mr Savage (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Armstrong
Mr Bradley
Mr Douglas
Mr Ford
Mr Kane
Mr M Murphy
Mr Paisley Jnr

The Chairperson (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): We are considering responses to consultation, which are all contained in your document files. The Committee Office has provided a summary comparing the implications on respect for animals and the British Fur Trade Association. A copy of the submission of the Council for Nature, Conservation and the Countryside has also been distributed to members.

We must look at the submissions in the context of possible amendments to the Bill. We have not heard of any amendments, but perhaps members of the Committee will put some. We must also decide the way forward, including options laid out in the summary paper. It states that we need to consider whether we want those people who gave us representations to be examined by the Committee.

We had a fairly long canter over this field at the last meeting, and clarified our views on it. Whether it is a question of morality or expediency is not our business; we are not going to dissect the motives of those who sponsored the Bill.

The summary document notes that economic considerations relating to respect for animals have not been raised. As regards the British Fur Trade Association (BFTA), it notes that the fur trade represents a turnover of over £50 million a year for the UK, with BFTA

members responsible for buying the majority of world trade at primary level as pelts. Fur sales have grown in the UK over the past 5 years due to a re-channelling of fur through fashion outlets. Sales of fur, including fur trim, increased by well over 30% in the UK in 1999-2000. The summary also refers to the IFTF (International Fur Trade Federation)/EFBA (European Fur Breeders' Association) paper 'the Socio-Economic Impact of European Fur Farming'.

The arguments put in the representations that have been made to us are for or against the Bill, rather than about the wording of the Bill. It is like a second reading in that respect, rather than a Committee Stage where phrases are added or deleted.

The Committee Clerk: Chairman, I would bring one thing to the Committee's attention. In the submission from the Council for Nature, Conservation and the Countryside, Dr Lucinda Blakiston Houston refers to her comments of 16 May 2001. We have established that those comments were made to the Department as opposed to the Committee, and given what the council goes on to say, the Committee may need to see those comments. The council mentions clause 2(1) and the wording "in respect of animals of a particular description", and asks whether that is clarified anywhere. Members may be minded to pass that on to the Department and ask for it to be included in its response. The Department owes the Committee a response about other issues from the previous session.

The Chairperson: Are we agreed that we send that letter on and ask the Department to answer it while considering its answer to previous representations?

Members: Yes.

The Committee Clerk: The council is also concerned about the legal definition of fur. This coincides somewhat with an issue raised by the Committee last time, as the council wants to know if this would extend to the breeding of rabbits for meat and fur, or to other domesticated animals.

The Chairperson: Also hides, and pigskin?

The Committee Clerk: Precisely.

The Chairperson: Is pigskin regarded as fur?

Mr Armstrong: It all depends on its age.

Mr Savage: I see that fur farming uses 647 million tonnes of waste from the fish and meat industries each year. That is a significant way of getting rid of waste. Is that the figure for Great Britain?

The Chairperson: No, I think it is for the European Union.

This letter needs an answer from the Department. We can back it up with our request for an answer.

Do you have any idea when they are going to reply to our other briefs?

The Committee Clerk: The Department is aware that their officials are due back again on 21 June. They know that they need to reply in advance of that date.

The Chairperson: We now come to the ethical part of the debate. The summary document notes that on these grounds, the Bill can be welcomed “wholeheartedly”, because

“fur farming is morally indefensible as it involves an inherently unacceptable element of cruelty to produce a frivolous product for which there are many alternatives.”

As regards the British Fur Trade Association (BFTA), the document states that

“No case (for public morality) [is] made in the Bill or in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum nor are the wider implications for other sectors explored. The BFTA state that they believe that the real reason behind the GB Act was a £1 million donation made to the Labour Party by the Political Animal Lobby.”

Was that right? The document goes on to say that

“The BFTA express surprise that the policy objective in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (which states that it is necessary to prohibit fur farms in Northern Ireland to bring the law in line with that in GB) suggests that the law in Northern Ireland must follow English law.”

There are two sides to the matter. One is an ethical argument; the other economic.

The last time we discussed this matter, the attitude was that if we had had a strong ethical approach, we should never have let the Bill get so far. The Bill is now on its way, and there is no way to stop it. I have not had much correspondence about the matter. Usually, a big issue like this, with great conviction behind it, leads to an overwhelming amount of letters. I do not know whether other Members have been lobbied about the matter.

Mr Douglas: We went through this matter at length and work has been done behind the scenes. I am not sure that it is all that important. There are other more serious matters that we should spend our time on. The fur farming Bill is going to happen anyway. I have no great difficulty with it.

The Chairperson: We certainly had a fair canter over the matter. I do not think that we can add much to that. There was no great opposition from anybody on the Committee.

Mr Armstrong: I agree with Mr Douglas that we should move on to more serious matters.

The Chairperson: Does the Committee wish to take oral evidence from any of the consultees that have provided written submissions?

Mr Ford: We have enough evidence in writing. We have no need to take oral evidence when the mind of the

Committee seems to have been determined by the written evidence that we have received.

Mr Savage: I have been reading about foxes in the document. They are increasing in number. Do you remember when there was a bounty?

The Chairperson: You took the tongue of the fox into the police station.

Mr Savage: Foxes are not scarce.

The Chairperson: Those foxes are not in the wild; they are foxes that are being kept for their fur, which is another issue.

We do not want to put all the information into the Committee’s report. It is a waste of money to include copies of every submission that we receive in the report. The Committee could make its main submission and lodge copies of the other representations in the Assembly Library.

Mr Ford: Our staff could adequately prepare a two- or three-page summary, which is all that we require. They have already done that, although other representations that have agreed with the purposes of the Bill, but have not spelt it out in detail, have not been included. Those should be added in.

The Chairperson: We should lodge them in the Assembly Library in case anyone wants to consult them. However, it would be a waste of public money to publish all the submissions. Nobody will read them anyway. We shall move to the next item of business.

Mr Douglas: We should acknowledge the research and work that has been done by our staff. Though the issue was important, we felt that we should not spend much more time on it, and, because the relevant information was available, it was easy to deal with it quickly. I express my thanks.

The Chairperson: We have heard from everyone we wanted to write to us, and their propositions are before us. Only one proposition has yet to arrive, and that is from Newtownabbey Borough Council, which could not reply in time.

Mr Ford: The Committee is to have a further meeting with the Department on 21 June. It is hoped that that will not be a long session. Will it be possible to complete the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill to allow the staff to get it printed over the summer? Given the potential legislative programme, we ought to be able to get a Bill like that out of the way.

The Committee Clerk: Chairperson, you have raised a few items with the Department, which has yet to reply to them. They may require consideration of an amendment. On the other hand, as with the Dogs (Amendment) Bill, the Committee may agree with the Department’s rationale that there is no need for an amendment for those items of business. Until that is known, it is impossible to say.

Mr Ford: A limited number of points remain to be discussed; there should be limited discussion on them.

The Chairperson: That is up to the Committee.

The Committee Clerk: It should be possible to finish taking evidence and to go through the Bill clause-by-clause at the same session. The Committee can then agree that it is content with the clauses or recommend amendments to them.

Mr Ford: We should set that today as our aspiration, unless complexities arise when the Committee meets the Department on 21 June. This business could be completed and signed off by the summer.

The Committee Clerk: A report must be signed off, but that could be done on 28 June.

The Chairperson: All Members are agreed on that.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 12 June 2002

**CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL
(NIA 5/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr J Clarke)
Mr D McGowan) Department of Health, Social
Ms M Reynolds) Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: I welcome the officials, Mr John Clarke, Mr David McGowan and Ms Marion Reynolds. We must complete our consideration of the Bill by Wednesday 26 June and may need extra meetings. We shall begin with clause 1. Perhaps you will explain it, Mr Clarke.

Clause 1 (Further duties of authorities towards children whom they are looking after)

Mr Clarke: Clause 1 introduces the concept of an eligible child, one of the key terms used in the legislation. An eligible child is one who has been in care for a period and from an age prescribed by regulation. The consultation period indicated that the probable prescribed period was 13 weeks and the probable prescribed age 14. However, those are not mentioned in the legislation itself.

The Bill also provides, under 34A(4), for the Department to include or exclude groups through regulation. It places a duty on trusts to assess the needs of each eligible child to determine what advice, assistance and support a young person will need on leaving care. All eligible children are to have a pathway planned from their sixteenth birthday based on the assessment. A pathway plan is in a sense an extension of a care plan covering the transition to independent adult living.

The Chairperson: Do you intend to specify the required period by regulation? If not, should it not be in the Bill?

Mr Clarke: We intend to prescribe the period by regulation.

The Chairperson: Clause 1 inserts a new article, 34A, into the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and deals with preparations for their ceasing to be looked after. There are 10 paragraphs. Are members content with paragraph 1?

Ms McWilliams: You are asking us to move through each of the clauses today. Perhaps we might return to them after the officials have given their evidence.

The Committee Clerk: Mr Chairman, the officials have already been before the Committee about the Bill's general intent, along with witnesses. The intention today was to allow Members to consider each clause in turn to ensure that they are content with them and sign them off.

The Chairperson: That is the idea.

Ms McWilliams: That might be the easiest way to do it. Perhaps we could go through them after the officials have given their evidence.

The Chairperson: The Committee Clerk and his colleagues will explain the content of each clause. A lot of the people we consulted were in agreement, but clause 6 is a problem, and we will come back to that.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee has an opportunity, today and next week, to consider the Bill clause by clause. We expect to have that completed by 26 June when we will seek approval of the draft report. The benefit of having officials here as we move through the clauses is that they can answer questions. One of the reasons for scrutinising the Bill now is that the oral and written submissions received by the Committee largely supported it. However, some questions were raised about how it would be implemented and what guidance would be issued. One or two possible amendments have been put forward by witnesses, and they are tabbed. The prime concern was clause 6, "Exclusion from benefits". That was raised by two or three organisations. This opportunity enables members to ask officials about the consequences of, for instance, removing that clause.

The Chairperson: I had hoped that we would get through a few of the clauses today.

Ms McWilliams: That is fine. We will look at the uncontentious clauses and come back to the others.

The Chairperson: Clause 1 is to insert new article 34A after article 34 of the 1995 Children Order. There are 10 paragraphs in article 34A, and, if agreed, we will move through the clause fairly quickly.

Paragraph 1 says that the existing duty of an authority is to advise, assist and befriend a child in its care. Paragraphs 2 and 3 place additional duties on the authority and define an “eligible child” as a 16- or 17-year-old who has been looked after for a prescribed period. Paragraph 4 enables the Department to make regulations to include or exclude particular groups from the definition of “eligible children”, for example, children who normally live at home with their families. Paragraphs 5, 6 and 7 require an authority to assess the needs of each eligible child; to prepare pathway plans for each child; and to review those plans regularly. Any such review may be carried out at the same time as a review of the child’s case under article 45 of the Children Order. Paragraphs 8 and 9 enable the Department to make regulations about needs assessments, and paragraph 10 requires an authority to arrange for a child to have a personal adviser.

Ms McWilliams: Was paragraph 10 contentious?

The Chairperson: Evidence has supported the intent of the clause.

Ms McWilliams: We will come to that later; that is fine.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 2 (Additional functions of authorities in respect of certain children)

Mr Clarke: Clause 2 amends article 25 of the Children Order 1995. It introduces the concept of the “relevant child”, which is a 16- or 17-year-old who has left care. An “eligible child” is a child who has been in care and who fulfils the definition in the proposed article 34A. A “relevant child” has left care, but was an “eligible child” while in it. The clause introduces the concept of the “responsible authority” as being the last trust that looked after the young person while in care.

That trust would remain responsible for the young person wherever he or she moves to live. Some of the duties of the responsible authority towards a relevant child are stated generally in the clause. The authority must keep in touch with him, and, where contact is lost, the trust must continue to take reasonable steps to re-establish it. The intention is to prevent the child drifting away and losing contact with the trust’s responsibility. The clause we dealt with mentioned arranging for a personal adviser, and the trust must appoint one for each relevant child.

Clause 1 says that the responsible trust must ensure that a relevant child has a regularly-reviewed pathway plan based on an assessment of his needs. The Department, by means of regulations, may prescribe who is to be consulted in relation to an assessment, the way in which an assessment is carried out and the recording of the results and any other considerations to which the trust must have regard. Additionally, the responsible trust must safeguard and promote the welfare of a relevant child, supporting, maintaining and accommodating him and providing

other such support as may be prescribed by the Department. Prescribing suitable accommodation by the Department is significant, because there is always concern about the accommodation in which young care-leavers find themselves. Again, those regulations are subject to consultation.

Mr Berry: Is it realistic for a trust to take steps to re-establish contact with a relevant child until it succeeds?

Mr Clarke: The trust has a duty to try. It is difficult for legislation to say “you shall maintain contact”. It may be possible. The point is that an attempt must be demonstrated, and if the attempt fails, the trust will not have been failing in its duty. Life is like that.

Ms McWilliams: Much of the representation has concerned appointing as opposed to arranging. The Department must have seen that evidence. What is your view on the amendment?

Mr Clarke: The arrangement is the lead-up to appointment. An appointment is required.

Ms McWilliams: I assume you have seen the amendment suggested by Barnardo’s. It proposes that, instead of appointing a personal adviser for each relevant child, a personal adviser should be arranged for him and a named worker appointed. Why is such an amendment not acceptable?

Mr Clarke: That means a named worker and a personal adviser.

The Chairperson: Barnardo’s proposed amendment seems reasonable.

Ms McWilliams: The concern was that there would be no input into the role of the personal adviser and that some kind of partnership would be preferred.

Mr Clarke: It depends on the exact definition of the role of the personal adviser. There is a possibility of duplication. I have no problem with the suggestion that two people be involved with a child.

Ms McWilliams: One of the good practice pilot projects that I read about suggested that that policy is not ruled out.

Mr Clarke: No, it is not. Although it has yet to be implemented, the Bill will enhance provisions that already exist. In implementing the Bill, we must be careful to remember that leaving aftercare teams already operate. Barnardo’s and others suggest that the fact that there is an identified person in the trusts responsible for leaving aftercare should be recognised. There is no great difficulty with that.

The Chairperson: Would it be helpful if you were to consider that as a possible amendment?

Mr Clarke: The only problem is that another person with a statutory responsibility would be created whose role we might have to define. The role of a young person’s adviser will be defined in regulations. I do not

reject the proposed amendment. Groups and consultees would like to see it included, but we must consider it in a legislative sense.

The Chairperson: So, you are happy to look at that again.

Ms McWilliams: The need for a detailed estimate of costs and the implications for trusts have come up in every piece of legislation that we have looked at so far. Have you made an estimate?

Mr Clarke: We have more work to do on that. We mentioned it generally. We had set up a reserve of £1.5 million against legislative pressures, but, as part of the implementation, we will have to refine it.

Ms McWilliams: Is the £1.5 million set aside for all legislative pressures facing your division or just for this Bill?

Mr Clarke: No. This Bill will have resource implications for trusts. The proportion of the £1.5 million will have to be determined. As a rule of thumb in the lead-up to the introduction of the legislation and before the requirements kicked in, we estimated that £500,000 would be a reasonable amount to cover the legislative pressure. That sum would equate to about 15 personal advisers.

Ms McWilliams: So £500,000 has been set aside for 15 personal advisers. How many children leaving care need a personal adviser?

Mr Clarke: Approximately 200 young people leave care each year. These are enhancements to a system to support care for leavers that already exists.

Ms McWilliams: Will 15 children, out of the 200 leaving care, be selected to have personal advisers?

Mr Clarke: No. Each adviser will deal with several children. It will not just be those 15 extra people who will be dealing with the children. People already work with them in leaving and aftercare teams. The sum of £0.5 million would allow you to enhance the system with 15 extra people.

Ms McWilliams: This is the crunch: it all depends on the cap on the funding, and, given that a substantial sum needs to be found to do that adequately, a lot of children may be attached to one personal adviser.

Mr Clarke: I always imagined several children for each personal adviser. It would never be a one-to-one.

Ms McWilliams: Fair enough. Have you a target for how many children a personal adviser would have?

Mr Clarke: We have not set a target.

Ms McWilliams: Have you set a cap on the funding?

Mr Clarke: We have bid for funding. At this early stage we must make assumptions about what is reasonable.

However, we have bid for £1.5 million to deal with legislative pressures in advance.

Ms McWilliams: Could we do with some money? You have £500,000, which you think will provide for 15 staff, and 200 children leave care each year: that is about 13 young people to each adviser. Am I right?

Ms Reynolds: That would only happen if the services currently provided to the children by leaving and aftercare social workers were stopped. A group of staff already provides aftercare support to these children. The 200 children would not, therefore, all require new personal advisers.

Mr Clarke: It is important to note that this is enhancing something already in place. We are not inventing leaving and aftercare services; these are amendments to those provisions that already exist. That is how we want to enhance the service prior to assessing what is needed in the longer term.

Ms McWilliams: That is excellent, but it will only work if it is well resourced. We will expect the personal advisers to make pathway plans, follow-up and maintain contact, and if we overload them, the spirit of the legislation may never be implemented.

Mr Clarke: There are several matters that we must be careful about. For example, who are the young person's advisers? Some young people do not want social workers as their advisers, and there are issues to do with how that is implemented and how we use the resources. Apart from the financial resources, there is the pressure on social work staff. There is a suggestion in England and Wales that a young person's foster carer could become his adviser, giving a continuing relationship. Most children in care are looked after by foster carers. There is a variety of options.

The Chairperson: Article 34C sub-paragraph 11(b) requires the trust to continue to take steps to re-establish contact with a young person classified as a relevant child until it succeeds. Is that realistic? We are not going to get through article 34C today, but we can clear parts of the clause leading up to that. Subsection (1) of clause 2 amends article 25 to allow an authority to provide accommodation for a child who has left care, and its doing so, classifies the child as still being looked after.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause 2(1), put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause 2(2), put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: Subsection (3) inserts new articles, 34B, 34C and 34D. Article 34B has five paragraphs. Paragraph (1) provides for an authority to have the functions set out in the new article 34C.

Question, That the Committee is content with paragraphs (1) to (5) of subsection (3) on article 34B, *put and agreed to.*

The Chairperson: We will have to return to the part of the clause that refers to article 34C. We can move on to article 34D, which deals with continuing functions in respect of former relevant children. It sets out the duties of the responsible authority towards former relevant children. It is a similar provision to those set out in article 34C and contains 10 paragraphs. Paragraphs (1), (2), (3) and (10) place similar responsibilities on authorities to those in article 34C, and paragraphs (4) and (5) require authorities to provide financial and general assistance with employment, education and training. Paragraph (6) provides for the duties to last until the person reaches the age of 21.

Question, That the Committee is content with paragraphs (1), (2), (3) (4), (5), (6) and (10) of subsection (3) on article 34C, *put and agreed to.*

Ms McWilliams: I am trying to follow this. Have we evidence that any of this is problematic?

The Chairperson: No. Evidence from organisations including the Human Rights Commission supports the intent of the clause.

Ms McWilliams: Is it correct to say that concerns have been raised only about article 34C and that we can therefore proceed with clauses that do not cause any problems?

The Chairperson: That is correct. That is why we will return to article 34C at a later date.

The Committee Clerk: If article 34C has an impact on article 34D we will consider that before we agree clause 2.

The Chairperson: Paragraphs (7), (8) and (9) provide for assistance to last beyond the age of 21 where a programme of education or training is already under way and for any interruption to that programme to be disregarded where reasonably practicable.

Question, That the Committee is content with paragraphs (7), (8) and (9) of subsection (3) on article 34D, *put and agreed to.*

The Chairperson: We will return to article 34C later. We cannot agree clause 2 until we have dealt with that.

Clause 3 (Personal advisers and pathway plans)

The Chairperson: Mr Clarke, can you explain what this clause is about?

Mr Clarke: You have rattled through this very quickly. I am still trying to read the detail of the clause.

The Chairperson: We will return to clause 2 next week to deal with article 34C.

Mr Clarke: The Department may, by regulations, set out details on the provision of personal advisers and pathway plans. Regulations may be made to allow other individuals aged between 16 and 21 to have a personal adviser in addition to those children and young people covered in clauses 1 and 2. Paragraph 2 provides for regulations on the functions of advisers appointed under the Bill. We will give guidance to deal with, among other things, how personal advisers are to be selected and what to do should the relationship between a child and his adviser break down.

Article 34F deals with the content of pathway plans and provides for regulations to give more detail on what they are to cover and how they are to be reviewed. These are enabling powers.

The Chairperson: Evidence has been supportive of the clause's intent, although questions have been asked about the implementation of personal advisers and pathway plans. That is to be covered in the guidance.

Mr Clarke: It will be covered by regulations and guidance.

The Chairperson: Will those regulations be brought before the Committee?

Mr Clarke: I am told that they will. I accept that these are enabling provisions and that they are not saying a great deal. Their meat will be set out in regulations and guidance, and it will be important for the Committee to look at them.

The Chairperson: Who will the advisers be responsible to?

Mr Clarke: The personal advisers will be the trusts' responsibility.

The Chairperson: The trusts that appoint them are responsible for the advisers?

Mr McGowan: The trusts will have a duty to appoint the personal advisers.

The Chairperson: I presume that they are paid posts?

Mr Clarke: Returning to what I said earlier, we want to give people a choice. Some could be foster carers, and they would have to be compensated for carrying out that function. I am trying not to get tied down to their all being more and more social worker posts. It is important for many reasons that they are not just viewed that way.

Mr Berry: Pathway plans should be flexible enough to respond to the often quickly changing circumstances of young people. How will they be involved in that?

Mr Clarke: Pathway plans should be agreed as far as possible with the young people, and there is provision for them to be reviewed regularly. I accept the point entirely. Everyone's life changes quickly, but for this age group changes are frequent, even changes of intent by the young people. They may not have such fixed

notions as older people, so it is important to keep the plans under review.

Ms McWilliams: Will it just say that the plans will be kept under review? Is there a timescale for reviewing them?

Mr McGowan: They are to be reviewed at least every six months or earlier if requested.

Ms McWilliams: That will be in the guidance?

The Chairperson: And it will be in the regulations, which will come to the Committee.

Mr McGowan: There will be a review at least every six months, but it can be sooner if a personal adviser or young person requests it because of a change of circumstances.

Mr Clarke: It would be an imposition on a young person if the plans had to be reviewed every month, for example. That would be too frequent, but they will be kept under review.

Ms McWilliams: If many children are attached to one adviser, the adviser could have a backlog. The regulations say that he must carry out a review every six months. What happens if he does not do so?

Mr Clarke: The advisers will be required to do a review every six months. We do not want to burden them and young people with constantly having meetings to review things that do not need to be reviewed. However, if a young person wants the plan reviewed in less than six months, that should be done.

The Chairperson: Clause 3 inserts the new articles 34E and 34F. Article 34E is on personal advisers and has two paragraphs that enable the Department to make regulations to allow individuals aged between 16 and 21 to have a personal adviser and to regulate their functions. Paragraphs 1 and 2 are agreed.

Article 34F describes the pathway plans. Paragraphs 1 and 2 define them and enable the Department to regulate what may be included in the plans and how they will be reviewed.

The Clerk: Barnardo's submitted a consequential amendment to clause 3. In article 34E, line 21, the word "appoint" is used. Barnardo's suggested that the word "arrange" would be better. The Committee should consider that change in the context of article 34C and the earlier proposed amendment, so rather than signing off the clause formally today, we should come back to it next week.

The Chairperson: That is agreed.

Clause 3 referred for further consideration.

Clause 4 (Advice and assistance for certain children and young persons aged 16 or over)

Mr Clarke: Clause 4 restates and amends articles 35 and 36 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Paragraphs 1 to 3 restate the definition of a person qualifying for advice and assistance, which is contained in the Children Order. Where a young person who has left care qualifies for advice and assistance, paragraph 4 establishes a new duty on the trust that last looked after him to keep in touch with him as it sees fit. That will apply to children who leave care but do not qualify for the full package of support under the Bill. It could be called a "catch-all" for the other children, and it restates a large part of the provisions in the Children Order. It is technical to follow.

Mr McGowan: As Mr Clarke said, clause 4 essentially restates the existing provisions in articles 35, 36 and 37 of the Children Order. However the clause places some new powers and duties on trusts in respect of qualifying persons in relation to education, employment and training and accommodation for higher and further education. So, although the clause is restating certain provisions in the Children Order, it goes beyond the existing provisions and gives additional powers and duties in the four new articles.

Mr Clarke: We must bear in mind that the new provisions relate to young people who must be eligible under the terms of the Bill and that the provisions in clause 4 relate to other young people.

Mr McGowan: It will provide for those who do not qualify because they do not meet the eligibility criteria —

Mr Clarke: They never were eligible.

Mr McGowan: It will also provide for those who were in care after the age of 16 for a short time but do not reach the qualifying period. In many ways it is a safety net for children who may not receive the full benefit of the previous articles.

Ms McWilliams: Did you get evidence on the exceptional circumstances referred to in article 35A, paragraph 5?

Mr McGowan: That provision is not new; it is provided for in the Children Order.

The Chairperson: Which parts are new, as opposed to the provisions in the Children Order?

Mr McGowan: Articles 35 to 35C are similar to current provision. The new provisions are spread throughout those articles.

Mr Clarke: The main point is the difference between the new legislation and the Children Order. What concerns people who qualify for advice and assistance is a repeat of the 1995 Order. That is not new. Responsibility for a young person on the part of the trust that last looked after him is.

Ms McWilliams: Is it presently the case that assistance can be given in cash where necessary?

Mr McGowan: In exceptional circumstances.

The Chairperson: What does exceptional circumstances mean?

Mr Clarke: The point about exceptional circumstances is that the Children Order did not intend them to be a substitute for support. In other words, there was not an ongoing maintenance arrangement. If a washing machine broke, for example, a young person could get money under exceptional circumstances to have it fixed. Trusts did not have a duty to support young people through regular cash payments. That might have raised questions about their responsibilities. The provision is in the Children Order, and that is why the words “exceptional circumstances” are used.

Ms McWilliams: I understand that, but sometimes “exceptional” becomes “normal”, because it happens so often. Is it the case that, although it is in previous legislation, it has turned out to be a frequent occurrence? The evidence that we have suggests that we might do well to drop that.

Mr McGowan: First, the reference to exceptional circumstances refers to the circumstances of an individual young person rather than the general policy.

Ms McWilliams: So it is infrequent?

Mr Clarke: “Exceptional circumstances” are clearly intended in legislation to indicate infrequency.

Ms McWilliams: But is that what happens?

Mr Clarke: It happens that the exceptional circumstance provisions in the Children Order are used and sometimes abused to make regular payments. However, that is not the intention of the legislation. If we did not make it clear that the circumstances were exceptional, we would be placing a duty on social services to provide support for everything. From that point of view, the purpose of the exceptional circumstance provision is to limit responsibility while assisting young people in exceptional circumstances. The words should mean exactly what they say.

Ms Reynolds: The phrase exceptional circumstances does not relate to regularity or frequency but to a young person’s circumstances. The phrase has been carried through from the Children and Young Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1950 and the Children and Young Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1968 to the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. It is intended to indicate that there is no automatic right to a cash payment. Social Services might want to help a child in kind, so that food is available or a bill paid. The provision allows social services to decide how best to support a child.

Ms McWilliams: I remember some overlap in the past with social security where exceptional circumstances turned out to be a regular occurrence. Exceptional needs payments were not exceptional.

Mr McGowan: Children getting exceptional circumstances payments will still be eligible for social security benefit. Under social security legislation, payments made under these provisions by trusts would be disregarded.

Ms McWilliams: Deducted?

Mr McGowan: No, they would not be deducted, because they were made in exceptional circumstances. One of the reasons for retaining the word “exceptional” is that social security could not deduct the money pound for pound. Any payments made are excluded from income or capital.

The Chairperson: I presume the advisers will have some influence on what constitutes exceptional circumstances?

Mr McGowan: I would have thought so, yes.

The Chairperson: Let us move on to article 35(b), paragraphs 1 and 2, page 7, line 26. Line 30 is to be amended by replacing “may” with “shall”. The word “may” is frequently used in legislation, but “shall” is stronger. It is proposed to replace “may” with “shall” in article 35B, paragraphs (1) and (2).

Mr Clarke: Use of the word “may” could be seen as weakening the provision.

Mr McGowan: Children will qualify for help if they spend perhaps a week in care after age 16, so to place a duty on a trust for a child who has spent an exceptionally short period in care would be rather much.

Mr Clarke: Consider what the use of the word “shall” will mean. To say that the relevant authority shall give assistance to anyone does not create a great entitlement — it could mean giving £5, which is not what the suggested amendment presumably intends. It could still give the trust a discretion.

Ms McWilliams: I differ with you on that. I have negotiated many clauses. When the word “shall” is used, it is much less discretionary than the word “may”, which leaves a provision up to the individual.

Mr Clarke: The intention behind the proposed amendment is clear. A person reading the provision in legislative terms would ask what it entitles someone to. This legislation is not only for individual young people, but for all young people.

Ms McWilliams: The word “may” could be substituted by the word “will”, and the clause would then read “that the relevant authority will give assistance to any person who qualifies for advice and assistance.”

Mr Clarke: The difference between “will” and “shall” is up to the draftsman.

The Chairperson: Could clarification of the words “may” and “shall” be included in the legislative guidance?

Ms McWilliams: It is a very important legislative term.

Mr Clarke: The guidance will address that. However, if people are saying that the provision needs to be strengthened by the word “shall”, including it in the guidance will not address that concern. Trusts would still be given discretion.

Ms McWilliams: If I were a child who qualified for assistance and came to you and the legislation said that you “may” give me assistance, it would be entirely up to you whether you did so. However, if the legislation says that you will give assistance, I will have some legal backing.

The Chairperson: That is an important point. Will you consider that?

Mr Clarke: I will. The intention is clear. By inserting the word “shall”, there will still be discretion. I accept that the word “shall” will strengthen the provision, but it will not create an absolute entitlement to a particular level of support.

The Chairperson: We can come back to clause 4 on that point.

Ms McWilliams: Mr Clarke is not averse to accepting the word “will”, and I take his point about the level of assistance.

Mr Clarke: It does strengthen it.

Ms McWilliams: It gives a ceiling to the level of assistance, but there is at least a basic level.

Mr Clarke: I do not want to argue strongly against it because I know why people are suggesting the amendment. If the word “shall” is used, there may be an element of needs-led legislation that would be running ahead of an assessment of need. That raises a question about how the assessment is conducted and the discretion that will creep in.

The Chairperson: We will come back to that, and you will investigate it for us.

Clause 4 referred for further consideration.

Clause 5 (Representations)

The Chairperson: Clause 5, which concerns complaints, seems to be straightforward. It aims to insert a new article, article 35D, into the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. It requires authorities to establish arrangements for dealing with complaints about its services under articles 34B and 34D and article 35B(2). Paragraph (1) of the new article requires authorities to establish a procedure for hearing representations, including complaints made by young people, while paragraph (2) requires authorities to comply with departmental regulations. Evidence that has been submitted supported the intent of the clause. Do you have any comments to make, Mr Clarke?

Mr Clarke: No. Essentially those additions reflect provisions that are already in the Children Order, but the Bill needs guidance because there are issues regarding

complaints about personal advisers, for example. That may make the Bill unique, but it is a restatement of a provision that already exists.

Ms McWilliams: The only concern was that there should be a common approach to the complaints procedures, and paragraph (2) gives the Department discretion to make regulations that require authorities to comply with any procedure for making complaints and representations.

Mr Clarke: The complaints procedures that already exist are Province-wide. Individual trusts and boards implement them while trying to ensure a common approach. They are legally separate, but in practice they are not, and I do not expect that to be so under the Bill. Issues with complaints about personal advisers must be addressed, and existing guidance may not cover that sufficiently.

Ms McWilliams: That raises concerns if the complaints procedure varies depending on where one lives.

Mr Clarke: No, I am saying that the four boards implement those procedures.

Ms McWilliams: I know; I heard that, but they are all different.

Mr Clarke: Although the structures are in place, boards and trusts are legally required to implement the procedures, because they are what we have in practice. They all reflect each other, and they come together. It is a pedantic distinction between the legal requirement and what actually happens.

The Chairperson: Clause 5(2) states:

“In considering representations under paragraph (1), an authority shall comply with regulations (if any) made by the Department for the purposes of this paragraph.”

The words “if any” puzzle me.

Mr Clarke: That seems to give the Department some discretion. I have no doubt that we will be making regulations. I would have no problem with removing those words.

The Chairperson: The words seem a bit odd.

Ms McWilliams: OK; we should remove them.

Mr Clarke: The words “may make regulations” are usually used.

Mr McGowan: That paragraph is not about regulations per se; it states that an authority must comply by considering any representations that are made to it by a child.

The Chairperson: Do you suggest that we leave those words in the paragraph?

Ms McWilliams: No, because the parenthesis comes after the word “regulations”.

Mr Clarke: If people wish to remove the words, I do not see any problem. I have no doubt that we will be making regulations — I cannot see how not making regulations is an option for the Department.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 6 (Exclusion from benefits)

The Chairperson: Clause 6 has caused some acrimony. Perhaps, Mr Clarke, you could explain why it is in the Bill, because those with whom we have consulted have said that it should not be.

Mr Clarke: I was unsure whether we would get to clause 6, but I have written a short note on it. The Department does not think that the Bill would collapse without clause 6, but the Committee should be mindful of those things when considering it. I do not want to push it any further.

The Chairperson: Various bodies are unanimous in asking why clause 6 exists or in saying that it should be removed, so if someone can explain why it should be there, the Committee might agree with it.

Mr Clarke: Even before we brought forward the Bill, voluntary organisations had seen the equivalent in England and Wales, so they raised the issue, and we have always been aware of it. First, we are talking about planning for a young care leaver's future, but do we want to plan for him to go into the benefit system before he has even left care? Is that our expectation for those young people? Secondly, all resources, existing and additional, would be deployed in a way which would assist a young person to progress to independent living. Deleting clause 6 may limit flexibility in how resources are deployed, for example, on arranging further education or training.

If this clause stands, we will have to get resources transferred from the Department for Social Development. If clause 6 is accepted, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the resources deployed by the Department for Social Development are done so in a way that best meets the needs of young people. I apologise — this seems very trite, but we must look at the holistic needs of young people. There is a possibility that removing clause 6 would lead to a fragmented approach increasing the number of agencies and individuals involved with young people.

With regard to the extent that the needs of young care leavers can be fully addressed in the system, there have been suggestions that care leavers could be made a special case in social security legislation. Again, what does that say about our expectations for young care leavers? With regard to the practical aspects in the Bill, it is not necessarily disastrous, but the provision for the trust to provide a young person with suitable accommodation

may be prejudiced by cutting off those funds. Those requirements in the Bill need to be examined carefully because we are placing a statutory requirement on people.

The Chairperson: Having listened to what you have said, there are points that I have not thought out. The information that you have given us has been very helpful, and the Committee will think about it.

Mr Clarke: I got the thrust of the argument, and I do not want to go overboard. I am trying to put to the Committee the arguments that would counter its removal. It is a fine judgement at some levels.

Mr Berry: I am concerned that some people might become dependent on benefits, which is the last thing that the Committee wants. The Committee wants those children to get into a more stable environment, with an education and a job. The children should be taken through a proper system gradually rather than being suddenly cut off from the system, and the Department should work in partnership with the agencies on that.

Mr Clarke: The Department is not taking anything away from them because they would not be entitled to anything.

Mr Berry: It is about the Department and the agencies working in partnership.

Mr Clarke: I can see why clause 6 is there, and also possible implications of its not being there. There are arguments for and against it.

Ms McWilliams: The Department's argument is that the children would still be in receipt of the same amount of benefit. However, evidence suggests that the Department would be putting a dependence on trusts that they may not wish to have. I am also concerned that there may be an increased level of stigma attached to the benefits — and there might already be. Not everyone understands what social security is and that it is a universal benefit. This is just a different way for the children to receive funds from their peers, and they will be immediately identified as having left care.

I have a third concern, which did not arise in evidence sessions. People on jobseeker's allowance can graduate to other forms of allowance. Therefore if the young people have not been on that benefit they may be denied some types of training.

Mr McGowan: I need to check with the Social Security Agency about other allowances. We must remember that sanctions can be applied to young people on jobseeker's allowance who do not take up offers of training or employment. Their jobseeker's allowance could be reduced or extinguished if they do not take up offers of training or employment.

Ms McWilliams: It can work both ways.

Mr McGowan: If a young person did not take up an offer of training or employment, sanctions could be

applied by the Social Security Agency. Young people are allowed a couple of refusals, but after that sanctions will be applied which might lead to a withdrawal of benefit.

Ms McWilliams: At present, the young people have some support and assistance. It is hoped that whoever is advising them, and taking care of their assistance in the care system, will make representations on their behalf. Have some young people had their benefits denied to them? Why move to this system? If it is the case that young people are denied benefits and then told by the trust that they may get a benefit because they were in care, then that is a good rationale for moving to this system.

Ms Reynolds: Most children at that age are dependent on their parents. Part of the rationale for the financial arrangements in the Bill is to give effect to the notion of corporate parenting. At present, children in the care of the trust, or who have just left that care, are moving around agencies and social security offices looking for housing and other benefit and then going to the trust for exceptional help. The clause seeks to have those children comprehensively dealt with.

The Chairperson: It is taking a more parental approach.

Ms Reynolds: Yes. It is to underscore the parental duties of the trust. The trust cannot cast aside these children just because they are 16, 17 or 18 years of age, because most children would still be living with their parents or still dependent on them much later than at that age.

The Chairperson: If trusts were totally responsible, the social security aspect would work all right. However, it is this parental responsibility.

Mr Clarke: We have pointed up arguments that we would use in favour of the clause. I know that trusts may view clause 6 in terms of a burden, but another way of saying this is that it places responsibility on them for every aspect of a young person's life. There are two competing arguments, but there is an element of distance between them.

Ms McWilliams: I am concerned about that. In the light of what you have said regarding young people's

mobility — particularly when leaving care — dealing with such movement between different areas will entail a great deal of bureaucracy if they are to rely on one trust.

Ms Reynolds: One of the safeguards would be that, because the trust has to keep in touch and fund such children, fewer young care-leavers would be lost in the system. From the Fred West case in England we know that many care-leavers were killed without social services being aware of what had befallen them. Part of the legislation aims to develop a much more comprehensive and long-term strategy so that children do not fall between stools.

Ms McWilliams: I hope that happens with the pathway and the assistance. However, it sounds like the long arm of the state saying that it will keep a tag on someone dependent on it for his or her income.

Ms Reynolds: I hope I do not sound naïve, but these children are very vulnerable young adults who need state assistance. It is not so that they become dependent on benefit or the state, but to ensure that, in moving them on to independence, they have the support and help to make it worthwhile and can achieve quality of life.

The Chairperson: We shall not agree clause 6 today. Your comments have been very helpful, since they have shown us another point of view. There are two strong opposing opinions. My colleagues have read the documentation from the various bodies, and what you have said in addition has been very helpful. Since we shall not agree the clause today, perhaps my colleagues will re-examine the evidence, allowing us to return to the issue next week.

The Committee Clerk: I suggest we conclude consideration.

Clause 6 referred for further consideration.

The Chairperson: Since the matters following are straightforward, we shall do so. Mr Clarke, Mr McGowan and Ms Reynolds, thank you very much. We shall see you again next week. We have made as much progress as we could, taking in all the points.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING
COMMITTEE**

Thursday 13 June 2002

**EMPLOYMENT BILL
(NIA 11/01)**

Members present:

Dr Birnie (Chairperson)
Mr Carrick (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Adamson
Mr Dallat
Mr A Doherty
Mr Hilditch
Mr R Hutchinson
Ms McWilliams
Mrs Nelis

Witnesses:

Mr D Munster)
Mr W Mitchell) Federation of Small Businesses
Mr G Roberts)

Ms McWilliams: There is currently another meeting, that of the Ad Hoc Committee on access to justice. That may or may not be quorate, and I apologise in advance if I have to go in and out for that reason.

The Chairperson: I welcome the delegation from the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) — Mr David Munster, Mr Wilfred Mitchell and Mr Glyn Roberts. Thank you for coming. This is the first formal evidence session in the Committee Stage of the Employment Bill. I thank you for the written evidence that you supplied and the document that you launched recently. Perhaps you could make a short statement before taking questions.

Mr Mitchell: The FSB welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's consideration of the Employment Bill. We are the largest group representing the interests of the self-employed and those who direct businesses in Northern Ireland. The federation has 170,000 members nationally, of which almost 3,000 are based in Northern Ireland. It is run by businesspeople for businesspeople, and is funded solely by member subscriptions. The membership in Northern Ireland elects a policy committee, which is supported by a full-time policy officer. We also run a full-time press and parliamentary office.

The FSB recognises and welcomes the positive aspects of the Bill. However, it has many concerns about how it will affect the small business community, which is the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy. We are disappointed that the Bill does not distinguish between large and small employers. We are gravely concerned that it does not address the inequalities faced by the self-employed.

There are many ambiguities in the Bill. For example, it does not address how employers can claim back administration costs. Implementing costly regulations on the large proportion of the business community which already recognises and offers flexible working policies over and above the current statutory standards would not be in the best interests of employers or employees in Northern Ireland.

For the purposes of the submission we shall concentrate on the three areas of greatest importance to the small business community: flexible working; simplification advice and guidance; and managing absences.

Mr Roberts: The legislation is intended to give working parents with children under six or disabled children under 18 who have been with their companies for a minimum of six months the right to make written requests for flexible working. Companies can reject the requests, but they must set out a considered business case for doing so. Employees will be able to seek redress from an employment tribunal if they feel that their requests have not been taken seriously. Tribunals will be able to rule only on procedures, facts, and whether a business case has been made.

If employers follow correct procedure, they are unlikely to see their decisions overturned by the tribunal. Nevertheless, the consequence of the proposal is likely to be an increase in employment tribunal applications from employees who feel that their employer has failed to give adequate consideration to their request to work part-time. The measure's implications are directly contrary to the Bill's objective of reducing the number of employment tribunal applications.

We recommend that the resources be geared to educating and supporting businesses that do not already have flexible working policies or the in-house expertise required to implement them. There should be a clear focus on helping those businesses that do not recognise the competitive benefits of doing so.

Cover can easily be arranged in a large company, often from within the same department, and, if needed, a temporary worker can easily be afforded. However, for a small business with, for example, four employees, a member of staff on leave represents 25% of the workforce. It should be recognised that in small firms, each worker plays a key role — one that often requires specialist training. In fact, one worker may constitute a whole department. If a key worker is absent, the owner of the

business will not only have to take on cover, but spend time training that temporary employee.

The simplification of current regulations to reduce the complexity of red tape would be welcomed by the business community, since a one-off cost must be more economical than introducing systems with continual costs to both the Northern Ireland economy and the business community. On advice and guidance, we would like to see suggested options available with targeted distribution of flowcharts, maternity leave, contracts and guidance setting out the rights and responsibilities to the business that will benefit from it.

For much of the legislation, the implications of introduction will depend on the payment mechanisms adopted. The worry is that if Government continues to regulate, the burden of administrative costs on the business community will become unbearable. In the context of the Bill, we feel that payment mechanisms are not the key area for focus. We wish to stress that small businesses strongly resent being unpaid tax-collectors. The whole issue of tax collection by small businesses must be addressed by Government.

Our final point concerns managing absences. That is the key to moving successfully towards a more flexible working culture. Advice and guidance on managing absences must focus on supporting the education of businesses so that they develop best practice in the workplace, as well as examining relationships with employment services and private recruitment agencies. If the Department wishes to support the development of flexible working, it must allow individual businesses the opportunity to explore flexible working options that fit the employee but not the company.

If implemented, the legislation would restrict employees' opportunities for flexible arrangements and restrict business development by imposing impractical routines on employers and reducing profits, as well as inflicting unnecessary regulatory costs. The Committee will be aware of the amount of regulation and red tape with which businesses, particularly small businesses, must work; resentment would build. One thing that contradicts the whole idea of the Bill is that it will encourage recruitment discrimination against men and women of childbearing age. It will also discourage the business community from positively embracing the culture of work-life balance.

Mr Munster is our spokesman on this area and deals with the issue as a small businessperson with 26 employees. He can discuss the other day-to-day problems that businesses will face because of the Bill.

Mr Carrick: Small businesses are the unpaid collectors of National Insurance, tax, statutory maternity benefit, statutory sick pay and student loan repayments — the list is long and looks set to grow. How far can small

businesses go before the straw that breaks the camel's back?

Mr Munster: That will obviously differ from one business to another. In my experience, a great deal of my time is taken up with ensuring that we comply with all the regulations. My primary focus is to ensure that we sell enough to make sufficient profit to cover wages and the other costs of running the business. I am spending an increasing amount of time dealing with such issues simply to ensure that I am on the right side of the law. That is not productive time, and it will ultimately affect profitability.

It will vary from business to business. I am concerned about us becoming uncompetitive vis-à-vis businesses in the Republic. I am also concerned that I might become uncompetitive against national companies in the same line as ourselves.

Mr Carrick: In the context of administering the Employment Bill proposals, have you any suggestions as to how the Government could deal with that issue without imposing a burden? In the past, the compensation paid to small businesses has been paltry.

Mr Munster: Take paternity pay, for example. When I had children I was an employee, and I wanted to have time off. I used part of my annual leave, and there was no administrative burden on the company whatsoever. I do not see any need to introduce legislation to ensure that the employee gets paid that. No matter how it is done, it ends up being complex, meaning the money must be claimed back through National Insurance. It all adds to the burden. The other option, which we refer to in our paper, is a mechanism whereby the employer is compensated for that extra work. My preference would be for simplicity.

Mr Mitchell: Nationally, the federation does not want to be compensated, since there is an attendant burden of responsibility, and we do not know where that would end. We would rather that the Government took ownership of the matter.

Mr R Hutchinson: We all know the importance of small businesses in Northern Ireland. They employ a large number of people. In the federation, what percentage of businesses have some kind of inbuilt structure for such matters as maternity leave and flexible working hours?

It has been suggested that additional maternity leave should not depend on a woman fulfilling a qualifying service condition. If that were introduced, how would it impact on small businesses?

Mr Munster: You asked whether we have systems in place. I suppose that we all have to deal with such things when they arise, but it is very difficult to have a mechanism in place for every eventuality when you employ a small number of people. In general, there will

not be a system as such. We simply have to examine the rules and regulations and deal with them at the time.

On the issue of employees who have not served the existing qualifying period for extended maternity leave, we are concerned about people's increasing right to be absent from work, rather than, in this particular case, the cost of administering it. A key person in my business has taken maternity leave, and I have had to bring in a temporary worker — it must by law be a temporary worker, because you have to keep the job open. When it is a key position, that person has to be trained. It is very difficult to get a temporary worker capable of doing such a key job. The person was in charge of my purchase ledger. There was a disaster when we were paying suppliers whom we should not have been paying, and not paying others whom we should have.

Mr R Hutchinson: You had never done that before.

Mr Munster: You can understand that being of concern to me. That is a cost. The Bill contains an analysis of the actual cost of paying out the money. The cost is not the main issue, however — it is the disruption caused by people being away from the business.

Mr R Hutchinson: Will some businesses decide that it is not worth the hassle and cut their losses? Will it be the straw that breaks the camel's back?

Mr Munster: It is more likely that people will make a negative decision on whether to recruit, where otherwise they would have made a positive decision.

Mr Hilditch: In relation to the impact on colleagues and fellow workers who remain in the workplace, in your own case you envisaged agency workers being brought in. Others may not be able to afford such a luxury, and that may cause stress to the remaining workforce, at which point sickness will kick in. That is a concern.

Mr Munster: Mr Roberts made a point on work-life balance. Flexible working hours are designed to enhance that. However, the stress and strain that it causes to other employees affects their work-life balance, since they are trying to make the business work when it is understaffed.

Mr Hilditch: It therefore imposes a practical and financial burden.

Mr Munster: Unlike a football team, businesses cannot carry an extra 22 people from whom they pick a team of 11. The people required to run the business — and no more — must be employed, and any absence puts a strain on the remaining workers. We are talking about legislating for additional absence, and that will increase the strain.

Mr Hilditch: The compensation factor might kick into the argument if an extra person were brought in.

Mr Munster: If a person is to be absent only for a relatively short period of time, it is not practical to bring in and train someone. It would be worthwhile only if

someone were off for a longer period. The difficulty with maternity regulations as they stand is that it is not known until after the baby is born if the employee is coming back at all.

Dr Adamson: I have worked a rota system for most of my life as a medical doctor. On one occasion I worked for six months on a one-on-one rota, which sounds strange, but people were sick or on maternity leave — or simply left the country during the latter part of the troubles.

The proposed legislation gives some people with caring responsibilities the right to request flexible working, but not others, such as parents with disabled offspring over 18 and those caring for elderly or sick parents. Do you consider that discriminatory, especially for small businesses?

Mr Munster: The impact on small businesses will be greater than that on larger ones, where there is an ability to cover absences. Whether the proposals discriminate against other groups of people who might make a valid case for taking time off work is not at issue. My concern is that we keep in mind a new group of people for whom we wish to provide. There have been test cases in relation to equality, which have established that either parent can have time off if a child is sick. Many rules already exist, and any additional regulations make the situation difficult. As employers, we are not unreasonable in helping people or allowing them time off, but there is no protection for the business — the legislation and the protection is directed at employees' interests. If someone is to be away from the business, it might mean losing a new contract. There is no recourse for the business in that case.

Mr Munster: That is where the imbalance lies.

Mr Dallat: When this Employment Bill was debated in the Assembly, I expressed many of the concerns of small businesses — and of course you know my position. I attended the launch of those documents in the Odyssey. I am concerned at certain things that have been said today. Given the abuses against employees on the part of certain of your larger rivals, is a proper Employment Bill not absolutely necessary to protect them against the appalling conditions under which they have had to work?

Mr Munster: Are you speaking historically?

Mr Dallat: I am not going back very far. I speak of some of the recent arrivals, whom I do not wish to name.

Mr Mitchell: We have stated in this document that there should be a difference —

Mr Dallat: They are not members of your federation.

Mr Munster: Such things impact on small employers quite differently from how they impact on large

employers. We are not in any way against having some kind of protection mechanism to ensure that those employees are treated fairly. We are concerned about over-regulation and feel there is already too much. All we are doing is making that worse.

Mr Dallat: We have recently heard evidence from employers — many of them small businesses — about their difficulty recruiting. To attract people into the small businesses which you represent, is it not important that they have the best possible working conditions, particularly regarding maternity leave? I was shocked to hear that some members might not recruit women of childbearing age out of fear that they would have a baby. As a mere man, that really —

Mr Munster: You are misinterpreting that remark slightly. The matter does not concern members of the FSB exclusively. It can have the exact opposite effect to that which you desire. I am being devil's advocate here, and I stress that I am not talking about myself or any member of the federation. However, if an employer has a choice between two candidates — one not long married and another slightly older — that might be in the back of his mind. I am pointing out the fact to you rather than suggesting that we should do it.

Mr Dallat: I am asking these questions for my own benefit. You said that you wished to remain competitive against businesses in the Republic. This legislation is all inspired by European law. Is there any evidence to suggest that businesses of similar size in the Republic are not playing the game properly, or that the jurisdiction has no such legislation?

Mr Roberts: That is not a question on which I could provide you with evidence. I was merely flagging up our need to remain competitive. We must examine the experiences of our colleagues in the Small Firms' Association and other small business organisations in the Republic. If the Committee were interested, we could provide the evidence in written form.

Mr Dallat: You are giving evidence to this Committee now, and one assumes that you have done your research.

Mr Roberts: It is not possible for us to know the exact legislative situation in the Republic. We have considerable difficulty keeping track of this Assembly, never mind the Oireachtas.

Mr Dallat: Perhaps enough has been said on the issue. Ultimately, we surely want an Employment Bill which affords employees protection against the rogues, of which there are plenty — not the fine, honourable members of your federation. I know from personal experience that some people believe that they are still in Victorian times, treating employees as they please. The Bill is necessary. However, of the criteria, only three ask for guarantees.

Mr Munster: As I said in my point about maternity leave, the FSB is not convinced that extra regulation is needed in those areas. Mr Dallat said that people have difficulty trading. Therefore, if employers want to retain good employees in the competitive employment marketplace, they will treat them fairly, without regulation.

Mr Dallat: I am not suggesting that men are the rogues in that area. Last night, three young students came to me. They had been unable to attend college for several weeks, and because it is the end of term they were asked to go to college for an extra day. Their employer, who is a woman, sacked them. Therefore, among the employers there are people who abuse employees.

Mr Roberts: The FSB is not completely opposed to the Employment Bill. There are details in the areas it would like to consider which, in its experience, concern its 3,000 members. The FSB urges all employers to respect their employees. The FSB employs 130 staff nationally; its 3,000 members in Northern Ireland employ hundreds of thousands more. Therefore, the FSB encourages businesses to follow good practice, stay within the law and ensure that their employees are given every protection under it.

Mr A Doherty: I am a new member of the Committee and inexperienced in this subject. In your submission you expressed disappointment that the Bill does not distinguish between large and small firms. There is a vast gulf in the scale of the problems faced by a firm that employs up to 10 people and a large multinational. Is there a clear dividing line between what constitutes a large firm and what constitutes a small firm? Is it realistic to think that the Bill could make a fine distinction between the two? Could there be different legislation for a firm that has 1,000 employees; one that employs 100 people; and a self-employed businessman?

Mr Munster: There is scope, without being too complex, to determine what would affect businesses with different numbers of employees. However, the impact on a small business is proportionately higher, and the needs and concerns of small businesses are not taken into account. Small businesses are treated in the same way as those that employ more than 1,000 staff.

Mr Mitchell: The FSB accepts membership from businesses with up to 150 employees, which seems quite large. However, in Europe and the UK, 97% of businesses employ fewer than 10 people. The FSB deals with new starts employing one or two people. It wishes to provide reasonable treatment so that an entrepreneur, who is not an expert in working with employees, will be encouraged to employ people. We do not want entrepreneurs to receive a raft of regulations that they read and decide that they are not interested. For example, if a young electronic engineer thinks of an idea and wants to manufacture a product, he must employ people. The FSB wishes to encourage that.

Ms McWilliams: I want you to take my questions in good spirit. If I went for a job in your company, would you think that I was a woman of childbearing age?

Mr Munster: It is not a case of being of childbearing age; it is a case of whether you are likely to have children.

Ms McWilliams: How do you make that judgement?

Mr Munster: I am not suggesting that a judgement should be made.

Ms McWilliams: I noted your words “encourage recruitment discrimination against men and women”. I will deal with the women first.

Mr Mitchell: ‘Time’ magazine has stated that a certain age group is likely to be infertile.

Ms McWilliams: I know all about that.

Mr Mitchell: A medical position has been stated.

Ms McWilliams: What is it?

Mr Mitchell: ‘Time’ magazine said that 90% of women over the age of 42 would have infertile or defective eggs.

Ms McWilliams: So you would make that judgement?

Mr Mitchell: No, that is what ‘Time’ magazine said.

Ms McWilliams: What about men? Would Dr Adamson be a man of childbearing age?

Mr Dallat: Oh yes.

Mr Mitchell: Fertility also drops off with men according to ‘Time’ magazine.

Ms McWilliams: Do you see the point that I am making? There is variation. You make the point about men of childbearing age and then you reflect on women of childbearing age. There is a big difference when you consider men of childbearing age. The population shrinks further when you refer to women, and it shrinks even further when you refer to people being of high fertility.

I like your statement that employers should deal fairly. That was the view even before legislation was introduced and the reason why it was introduced. The Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 and Equal Pay Act 1970 were introduced, and I accept that they have probably increased the regulatory burden on you. However, has that legislation benefited the labour market?

Mr Munster: Are you asking whether it has increased the opportunities for women?

Ms McWilliams: I am thinking of issues such as equal pay for work of equal value.

Mr Munster: The statistics show that there is still a gap between what women and men earn on average, but the gap has narrowed. That would suggest that the legislation has benefited women. However, people are becoming more enlightened and aware of the fact that

women are capable of doing just as good a job as men, and that is more likely to have had an effect.

Ms McWilliams: The legislation was introduced because there was such a variation in the way people were being treated. Basic guidelines or Regulations were introduced to deal with that. Comparative studies show that the measures have retained the labour force, that there is a higher level of loyalty in the labour force, and, in some instances, that productivity may have increased.

Mr Munster: That is as a result of retaining more women in the workplace.

We are focusing on legislation that gives people rights to more time off work, as opposed to more time in work. We are focusing on the difficulties that having more time away from the job would cause to a business, rather than on whether women should have equal rights to men.

Ms McWilliams: I accept that. However, would you not anticipate that women might stay longer instead of dropping in and dropping out? With the same employee from start to finish, you would save on training, recruitment and advertising costs. The turnover of staff would not be so high — people would not drop out and not come back, and the situation where those who had shorter maternity leave took time off on sick leave, or did not return at all, could be avoided. Some of the research suggests that it would be beneficial to introduce the proposed measures.

Mr Mitchell: Did your research show whether that applied to a large company or small company?

Ms McWilliams: It suggests both. Obviously, the larger companies can cover matters on a corporate basis. Your argument is that the provisions would result in an extra administrative burden. That is your difficulty, rather than the costs involved, because under the legislation the costs would be recouped.

Mr Munster: It is the administrative burden, and the fact that administering the provisions means being diverted from what you are in business to do. There is also the disruption caused by people not being at work when you need them to be.

Ms McWilliams: Yes, but if they were to give up completely and not come back, you would have a higher turnover — or you would go down the road of employing men only.

Mr Munster: Because of the extended right to come back to work — there is no obligation, for practical reasons, for an employee to make that decision right away — it is extremely difficult to cover a position knowing that you will be bringing someone in on a temporary basis. You have, by law, to keep the job open for the person going off on maternity leave. In that sense, it would be preferable if the individual simply left, because you could then recruit someone to do the job on a permanent basis.

Ms McWilliams: But that is not what is being introduced in this legislation. Those provisions are already in place, so we cannot go back and change them.

Mr Munster: I know that; I just do not want to make the situation worse.

Ms McWilliams: If you bring someone in on a temporary basis, you still have your problem. All that happens is that that person would stay longer when you give extended maternity leave. That might even defeat your own argument.

Mr Munster: I do not think so. If the temporary person were not doing the job in the way that the permanent employee did it — which was the experience that I had — it would be a potentially disastrous situation.

Ms McWilliams: You had a bad experience, but can you envisage circumstances where you would not have such a bad experience? Those provisions are already in legislation.

Mr Munster: It very much depends on the position held by the employee going off on maternity leave. The legislation obviously does not take account of that aspect, but if the job can be done by a vast number of people and does not require a great deal of training or knowledge about a company's needs, then you could bring someone in on a temporary basis. However, if someone is doing a key job and they are away from that job, it could potentially put a company out of business. The smaller the business, the greater the extent to which that would apply.

Ms McWilliams: What worries me is that you are making an argument against paying maternity pay or giving maternity leave at all.

Mr Munster: I am making an argument against making matters more difficult for businesses than they currently are. I am not arguing against maternity leave. People obviously have to have maternity leave, and they have to have protection from being discriminated against because they have a baby. I am simply arguing against making the situation worse.

Mr Roberts: I recognise the points that Prof McWilliams has made. As a business organisation, we work very closely with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; we are part of the bill of rights consortium and are involved in the debate about a bill of rights; and we are playing a full role with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. We want to be part of the solution to this problem. We are simply giving the collective view of almost 3,000 small businesses in Northern Ireland. We make a huge contribution to the economy, and the Northern Ireland economy is a small-business economy. We are bringing forward views that are based on practical experiences, particularly those of business people working in smaller businesses.

We want to have the Employment Bill. There are parts that we would like to see changed, but, as we said in our submission, we welcome the spirit of the Bill. I am sure that everyone here today wants to see the Northern Ireland small business sector flourishing, developing and contributing to the economy. They would want it to continue to contribute to the Exchequer through income tax, VAT and so on — all the areas where we have contributed throughout the difficulties of the past 30 years. We are a positive and progressive organisation, and we want to ensure that matters will work in practice.

Mrs Nelis: I was going to say that you are very welcome, but, after listening to what you have said, I am not too sure whether you are very welcome or not. At the Second Stage of the Bill in the Assembly last week, practically every member of the Committee expressed concern that the Bill did not clarify sufficiently the distinction between small and large businesses and that there needed to be some flexibility. We all shared those concerns.

In saying that, I must remind you that this is a parity Bill from Westminster. It is not terribly enlightening or supportive of women's rights to work and have children. The Bill concerns business. The Bill is really about the retention of working parents in the market, and the introduction of this legislation will help that. The Bill is not so much concerned with the rights of women to hold down jobs and have their babies or whether they have, as you described, not-so-important jobs or very important jobs.

I cannot believe that in this day and age you said that you were a bit worried about the disruption that a woman having a baby might cause to your business and that you would prefer there to be no absences. Does that mean that, as Ms McWilliams said, you do not want to employ women who might potentially have a baby, or do you want them to have the baby on the premises? I thought that we had left that sort of attitude behind. Do you prefer to employ women who will give you a guarantee, perhaps in writing, that they will not have children? That is what is coming across from you. We must put that out of the way.

I want to give some statistics. Approximately —

The Chairperson: Could you be brief, Mrs Nelis? Do you have a question on the Bill?

Mrs Nelis: With respect, Mr Chairperson, you did not interrupt anyone else so do not interrupt me.

The Chairperson: I also told Roger Hutchinson to be brief, and I was about to tell Monica McWilliams the same.

Mrs Nelis: I want to put the issue into context. Thirty per cent of mothers in the North of Ireland fail to return to employment after maternity leave. Seven thousand women do not return because they are not welcome

back and are not given guarantees that their job will be there. They will be doing exactly what you said. Another 80% of economically inactive women do not want a job; their reason is that they want to have a family and look after a home. They would like to have a job, but they need the co-operation of employers to be able to do so.

The Bill is giving them some measure of co-operation. It asks you, as employers, to co-operate in allowing women to be economically active and to have, and be able to look after, a family. That is really what the Bill is about. Can you tell me what legislative flexibility we can introduce to the Bill, given that you have administrative concerns? Tell us about your proposals to overcome your concerns, and we will try to introduce a clause to deal with those.

The Bill aims to enhance your business by allowing women to have their rightful place in the market. It is about allowing parents their rightful entitlement to maternity and paternity leave and allowing them to negotiate with you.

If I were a smart business person and wanted to run a successful business, I would be delighted if an employee said that they had children under six years old, for example, or were looking after an older person but that they valued being in my employment and wanted to come to some arrangement with me so that they could do their work efficiently but also meet their responsibilities at home. That is what the Bill is about.

Mr Munster: I employ quite a number of women who have been off work to have babies and who have asked me if they could work part-time. Where possible, I have agreed to that. I did so without any legislation because it made sound business sense. Our argument today is not that it is not good to encourage people back into jobs after they have had a baby. It is about shackling businesses with more Regulations that will discourage them and make it difficult for them to operate. That is our argument. Questions were asked, and I apologise if we did not answer them particularly well. However, you misunderstand me, and the federation's position, if you think that we are asking to return to the Dark Ages. We are most certainly not.

Mrs Nelis: You are misreading the Bill, if you will forgive me for saying so. You are misreading its contents. The Bill contains safeguards for businesses. It also contains clauses that will enable you to recoup administration costs in advance.

Mr Roberts: It is by no means right to suggest that we are in favour of going backwards. We are here to try to make the situation work. We are not opposing the Employment Bill. We have concerns about red tape and Regulations. We want the situation to work for employees and employers, particularly those self-employed people who have one, two or three members of staff. Many self-employed people earn below the minimum wage.

Many small business people who are not particularly well off struggle to find business. It would be wrong if we did not communicate their concerns, but we want to be positive and make the situation work. We want to work with the Committee, the Department and other business organisations to get a resolution. However, just because we have concerns about red tape and Regulations does not mean that we want to go back to the Dark Ages. Even within the senior membership of the federation, there is a high proportion of women who are successful entrepreneurs — women who have had families and have made a major contribution to the economy. That is what we want to see.

Mrs Nelis: Women who did not disrupt your work?

Mr Roberts: We are working with organisations such as the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to try to take forward the broader situation about rights, both for employers and employees. That is why we are here today. We are not in favour of going backwards: we want to move forwards. We want to ensure that employees are protected and that there is a dynamic economy where small businesses thrive, where there is prosperity and where people have jobs.

We are not against women having children. We suggested that there may be people who would decide to employ a certain person because of the Regulations. Because of the Bill, people may seek to employ a certain person because it would be easier for them to do so. We are not in favour of that. If they were to take that view, it would be completely wrong. We are trying to prevent that.

Mr Mitchell: Much of what I was going to say has been said. The number of young women who are becoming members of the federation and starting their own businesses has encouraged us recently.

The Chairperson: The Bill seems to make arrangements for financial compensation to companies, particularly small ones. The Bill also attempts to cover some of the administrative costs of processing maternity and paternity pay. You seem to have concerns that those provisions are not strong enough. Do you want to elaborate on that? Are they not definite or clear enough?

Mr Munster: We are concerned that even administrating that will be a problem.

Mr Roberts: That is the problem in a nutshell.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that the provisions will not fully compensate companies? Is the bottom line that they will be out of pocket?

Mr Munster: It is about how to measure the cost of the key person in the small business having to take the time to administer the mechanism used to pay the benefit; to reclaim whatever percentage they are allowed; and also to reclaim what they are allowed for administration.

Ms McWilliams: You do not like the Bill in its entirety. Will you be proposing any amendments?

Mr Roberts: We have highlighted three areas of the Bill, and we have made representations to the Department on this broad area. We need to consider specific practical amendments.

Ms McWilliams: So there may be amendments?

Mr Roberts: Yes. We are not completely opposed to the Bill. If there are practical amendments that we can make to address our concerns, we will go down that road.

The Chairperson: We would be interested to see any ideas on detailed amendments that you come up with. The same will apply to other groups giving us evidence. I want to return to Arthur Doherty's point about definition. The federation seems to be suggesting that it would like the Committee to amend certain provisions to exclude small businesses or to change the way in which they are treated. However, how should the Committee define a small business? Should it be defined as one with fewer than 10 employees, fewer than 25 or fewer than 50?

Mr Mitchell: It would not be one number. There would need to be a graduated approach.

Mr Carrick: I wish to express an interest: my wife is a small employer. Contrary to the impression that the Committee might have given this afternoon, I appreciate the contribution of small businesses to the Northern Ireland economy and the employment that they provide. I hope that they will continue to provide jobs.

Mr Munster: Thank you.

Mr R Hutchinson: I agree with Mr Carrick. Do not be put off by some of the Committee's questions.

Mrs Nelis: According to your statistics, women own only 7.6% of businesses.

Mr Mitchell: Business ownership by women is increasing nationally, according to the latest survey.

Mr Roberts: I presume that you refer to our 'Barriers to Growth' document. We had hoped for a better response rate to our survey.

The Chairperson: On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for your oral evidence and for your written submission. I wish you well.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 13 June 2002

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL
(NIA 7/01)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Lewsley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr Molloy
Mr McClarty
Mr Poots

Witnesses:

Mr J McConnell)
Mr D Barr) Department of the Environment
Dr T Power)
Ms M Finnegan)

The Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, Mr McClarty, Mr Molloy and Mr Poots declared an interest.

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr John McConnell, Mr David Barr, Dr Tracy Power and Ms Marie Finnegan from the Department of the Environment. You have been very helpful in our meetings to date, and we appreciate that. We should like you to make an opening statement, after which we shall ask questions.

Mr McConnell: We shall take you through our working draft. I apologise for its lateness; there is much for us to do before we reach this stage in consultation with the draftsman.

Ms Finnegan: Clause 4(4), which we will come to later, has yet to be finalised. The Office of the Legislative Counsel and Local Government Audit Office have been consulted, but we shall have to go back to them. The Minister has not seen the draft, and will not do so until it achieves its final form. Of the Bill's 11 clauses, four — clauses 2, 4, 6 and 7 — will have to be amended. I shall deal with the first three, and Mr Barr will take clause 7.

I begin with clause 2, which is concerned with subordinate legislation connected with the general grant. We have drafted a new subsection (7). The new subsection makes provision for consultation on the regulations

referred to in subsection (6). The wording in 2(7)(b), "such other interested bodies or persons", will allow for consultation with any interested bodies, including the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) and other associations or bodies with employee interests. You will be familiar with similar wording used later in the Bill in clause 4. We are also suggesting an amendment to that clause, and we shall come to that in due course. In clause 2, we have removed the words "bodies representative of district councils".

Mr A Doherty: The provision allows the Department to consult "such other interested bodies or persons ... as the Department considers appropriate." If a body or person believes that they have an interest and wishes to be consulted, but the Department considers that inappropriate, does the Department have to defend its decision?

Mr McConnell: Yes, we would have to defend our decision. Although I am speculating, I believe that any body that thought that it had a right to be consulted, and which the Department did not consult, would have recourse to the courts.

Mr Ford: NIPSA has previously suggested that the clause should be phrased to include "bodies representative of council staff". Is that wording used anywhere in other legislation?

Mr McConnell: I am not aware of anywhere that it is used. Indeed, part of our difficulty is in using parliamentary language that the draftsman is comfortable with. Mr Ford highlighted that point. The draftsman is comfortable with the language and believes that the terms do not exclude anyone. However, if a body that thought it should be included were excluded, it would still have recourse to the courts. As the provision is quite wide, it is hoped that such recourse would never be needed.

Mr Ford: I hope that we agree that it is preferable that the Department should presume that the interested bodies included bodies representing staff and that nobody should have to go to court over it.

The Chairperson: There appears to have been a very clear statement that that was the intent. Is that correct?

Mr McConnell: Absolutely. We want to be as inclusive as possible.

Mr Ford: If that is the draftsman's language, and that is your intent, then fair enough.

Ms Finnegan: There is quite a bit of detail in clause 4, which relates to reductions in grant where there has been a failure on the part of a district council. We are proposing substantial changes. There are now seven proposed subsections, where previously there were five. Subsection 4 has not yet been finalised. Further work must be done on that.

Mr McConnell: I shall amplify that. We are trying to reflect what the Committee has asked us to do. It is a

matter of getting the wording right, which is not easy. Increased and closer working relationships with the Committee Clerk on such issues, as long as we can reflect the Committee's wishes, will mean that we will not have to continually bother the Committee members.

Ms Finnegan: The Committee wanted us to address the roles of the local government auditor, the Department and the Assembly: specifically, the auditor's reporting role, the Department's recommending role and the Assembly's approving role.

The Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) has highlighted some reservations, but has also suggested a solution. The OLC said that our suggestion might not be constitutionally proper. The OLC explained that the Assembly is a legislative body, not a judicial body or one with an administrative role. The OLC said that the proposal appears to set the Assembly in the role of adjudicating authority as to the amount to be deducted from the grant. The district council involved would then be able to have that decision reconsidered through a judicial review.

The OLC has come up with a possible solution that would involve the Assembly as a legislative body. The solution involves a Statutory Rule subject to approval by the Assembly under normal procedures. The Department would lay before the Assembly a draft Order, together with a document setting out the details, which would include the local government audit report and the Department of the Environment's proposal for the amount to be deducted. The proposed redraft contains new subsections (2) and (3) to deal with that arrangement.

As you have received the document for the first time this morning, you will want time to consider it.

The Chairperson: We will have that checked by our legal office.

Mr McConnell: That would be appreciated, rather than having toing and froing if a difficulty or problem arises. It is our intention to reflect the wishes of the Committee in the legislation.

Ms Finnegan: The local government auditor's role is provided for in the proposed subsection (4), which defines "relevant report". Those words are suggested for insertion into subsection (1). Subsection (4) needs to be re-examined in relation to other legislative references to the auditor's duties. We have given one example, but there may be others, and we need to be sure that we are covering all of them.

Mr Poots: Will that enhance the powers of the local government auditor?

Ms Finnegan: We are saying here that the auditor may have these powers already, and we want to make reference to them.

Mr Poots: You use the word "may".

Ms Finnegan: The work is not finalised. There is more to do on it.

Mr McConnell: That is why we have more work to do. Legally, we must consult again to see if the auditor has those powers. I am sorry for using the term "may", but that is all we can say at the present.

Ms Finnegan: One other point on the proposed change is that we must consider whether we should extend subsection (3) to deal with the case where the Assembly does not agree with the amount proposed by the Department of the Environment. That is not covered in the draft, but was covered at an earlier meeting. We will consider that aspect, also.

In paragraph 4(1)(b), members wanted the word "excessive" related to the circumstances of the council in question. That was raised a few times. The legislative draftsman has examined the wording and has amended it slightly. To explain, the proposed wording of the paragraph has two aspects. First, the word "excessive" is linked to "having regard to the council's financial resources". The wording relates excessive expenditure to the council's total budget resources. The draftsman is happy that the wording reflects that.

We consider that the words "other circumstances relevant to the council" are still necessary in this paragraph, as that would address non-adherence to the Department's statutory directions or non-application of the code of practice on local authority accounts. Two separate matters are being addressed there. You will want to consider that further.

The Chairperson: We will now consider clause 4. Have members any specific points they wish to raise? We need to get clarification on the matter. It would be interesting to see that the local government auditor fulfils his current role, before increasing it.

Mr McConnell: The intention is not to do that, but to ensure that we do not cut across existing legislation.

Mr Poots: I am surprised that there is so little clarity on the matter. Has the local government auditor been exercising some of these powers, or not exercising his existing powers?

Ms Finnegan: This power has been in existence since the Local Government &c. (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. According to our records, it has never been applied. A deduction has never been made from a council in relation to general grant. When we were drafting the Bill we felt that the power should be retained, as there was no reason to scrap it. The Committee looked at the matter from a different angle and felt that the Assembly should have a role, so we have proposed fairly dramatic changes.

Mr Ford: We have received one witness submission questioning which aspect of the general grant might be reduced. There was a query about it being applied to the

derating element. My reading of it is that this could still apply to the derating element.

Ms Finnegan: That is correct.

Mr Ford: That may, or may not, be valid. You wish to retain that option, given that some councils will only have the derating element.

Ms Finnegan: All councils are entitled to the derating element.

Mr Ford: Yes, but for some councils it is the only grant.

Ms Finnegan: Yes. I take your point. It is intended that it should apply to all general grants.

Mr Ford: Presumably the “other circumstances relevant” in paragraph 4(1)(b) might include equality and environment, for those of us who are keen on the five Es, rather than the three Es named in paragraph 4(1)(a). A council might wish to substantiate any expenditure on that basis, and could make a case to the Assembly that that was the reason why it had incurred certain expenditure.

Mr McConnell: Paragraph 4(1)(b) is wide enough to cover that. It does not prohibit councils from making cases. There are soft cases and hard cases, and the soft issues must be taken into account along with the hard issues. That will be for the Assembly to determine.

Mr Molloy: Over the years, some councils have not maintained small sections of road or pavement. Will that infrastructure and neglect be covered under clause 4? The Department of the Environment does not have that responsibility.

Ms Finnegan: I do not think that it will. The local government auditor would not pick that up.

Mr McConnell: None of these intentions would interfere with any existing powers, or lack of powers, that councils have. The primary legislation would cover that.

Mr Molloy: Other circumstances relevant to the council could justify it in making a payment.

Mr McConnell: The justification that councils would seek to make could only be made on the basis of something that the council had the power to do.

Ms Finnegan: If the auditor detected that councils had spent money on something for which they did not have authority, then that could be looked at and applied. Every case would have to be looked at on its merits.

The Chairperson: We may have to seek clarification from the auditor when we have the final copy of the Bill.

We will move on to the next clause.

Ms Finnegan: Clause 6 relates to economic development powers. In our proposed amendment, there are three new subsections — (3), (5) and (6).

Subsection (3) gives district councils vesting powers in relation to economic development activity. The wording we have used is “acquire it otherwise than by agreement”. That is the standard wording for such a provision.

Subsection (5) makes it clear that district councils must follow any guidance relating to economic development issued by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Subsection (6) is linked with subsection (5), and makes provision for DETI to issue such guidance following consultation with district councils.

Mr McConnell: To clarify that point, the wording is “shall have regard to any guidance”.

Ms Finnegan: DETI has seen the wording of this draft and has this morning confirmed that it is content with it.

The Chairperson: What does “shall have regard” mean?

Mr McConnell: It means that they should take the guidance into account and be able to demonstrate that they have done so.

The Chairperson: There is no mention of the 5p in that clause.

Ms Finnegan: The 5p is automatically removed by the repeals at the end of the Bill.

The Chairperson: I just wanted to clarify that, and also that subsection (3) referred to vesting under the name of “the power to acquire land”.

Ms Finnegan: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do Members have any comments to make on the proposed amendment of clause 6?

Mr Poots: From subsections (5) and (6) it is evident that, should a council wish to go down a certain route and DETI disagrees, the council would be obliged to take the Department’s advice. Is that correct?

Ms Finnegan: That is correct. The council would have to adhere to the Department’s guidelines.

The Chairperson: If, for example, a council had entered into consultation, and felt that the Department had ignored its recommendations, could the council take the Department to court?

Mr McConnell: I do not have the answer to that. We have not examined that possibility.

The Chairperson: Can we find that out? If a council reaches a unanimous decision to do something about economic development, but is advised by the Department to follow its advice, surely it is entitled to some recourse if it feels that the direction of the Department is wrong for its area?

Ms Finnegan: It is not much different from the present arrangements. Councils have to come to the Department of the Environment for project approval. We

ask the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for its advice, so that there is no overlap with the activities of LEDU, or of the new agency, Invest Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: In planning, however, as you know, Planning Service goes to the Department of the Environment, which goes to the Department for Regional Development for advice on roads matters, for example. But the buck stops with the Department of the Environment. It can overrule the advice of the Department for Regional Development, and can give planning permission after it has taken the advice of the relevant Department. What happens in that instance? Your Department takes the advice of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr McConnell: It is a cumbersome matter. The Department of the Environment has no expertise in this field. We have no option but to consult with those that we regard as the experts. We have no expert knowledge to say that they are wrong. That is the situation at present. We will, however, get back to you on the point that you made.

The Chairperson: Equally, it could be said that you have no expert knowledge about roads. The Department for Regional Development and Roads Service could decide that a planning application was not acceptable. In the past, the final say on planning applications has been with the Department of the Environment, which has said that, although it has taken advice, it has still granted applications.

Mr McConnell: I understand what you are saying. I am not sure that we are talking about the same thing. We will certainly consider that point.

Ms Finnegan: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is clear about non-statutory guidelines. It would not class these provisions as statutory guidelines.

Mr Poots: Will this legislation provide cover for councillors? We could be talking about substantial amounts of money being involved in funding economic development. Could a council take decisions that, in hindsight, were not in the community's best interest? If that were so, the council would be squandering money. That has been the case in the past, and in cases where the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been consulted. Will this legislation remove the responsibilities from councillors per se and take away the possibility of them being surcharged for making such decisions?

Ms Finnegan: I do not think so. Economic development is a council function, and the acquisition of land or buildings is part of that. It would be for councils to decide how much to spend on that function within their overall budgets.

Mr McConnell: If a council were considering economic development and took advice from the Department of

Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which said that the council was going about it in the wrong way, and the council proceeded in spite of the advice given, then its defence would be minimised. That would be the case in any circumstances where advice is taken and the choice is then made to ignore that advice.

It has always been an issue in Planning Service as to where responsibility would lie if advice from Roads Service, for instance, were ignored, planning permission were granted, and an accident took place. It has not happened yet. However, it is a possibility.

Mr Barr: I would like to begin with the broader issues about community safety partnerships that are concerning the Committee. I have contacted the Northern Ireland Office and relayed the message given to us last week by the Committee. I can confirm that a comprehensive response will be sent to the Committee as early as possible. The NIO may accept the Committee's invitation to give evidence if the Committee feels it necessary. I have been asked to relay that to the Committee.

The Chairperson: The Committee has contacted the NIO, but its letter to us has not arrived yet. We wanted to talk to the officials eyeball-to-eyeball on this issue. However, they want to communicate by letter first, and the Committee has no problem with that. It would be helpful for the Committee to see what recognition they have taken of its concerns. Thank you for the part you have played.

Mr Barr: Turning to clause 7, and leaving that issue aside, the only amendment we are suggesting is at paragraph 7(1)(d). We are suggesting the addition of the words "(whether financially or otherwise)". Those words should be inserted, because some councils have suggested that the paragraph was not explicit enough to enable them to spend money, if they wished to do so, within their community safety partnerships. We are happy to add the words, and we are happy that councils will be satisfied with that.

We gave careful consideration to other matters that were discussed by councils, such as giving them the power to take the lead in community safety partnerships (CSPs), and to determine the membership of CSPs. We felt that that would be outside the remit of the Department of the Environment, particularly as the NIO strategy, which is currently being determined, will examine the membership and role of CSPs. It would be wrong for us to suggest that we give councils those powers in the context of the Bill. There is nothing to stop councils from taking the lead if that is the wish of a local CSP. One suspects that that will probably be the case, given councils' representative role for local areas.

The NIO would probably like councils to take the lead role in CSPs, because of their expertise and knowledge of local areas. The NIO will be making resources available for the establishment of CSPs, and it

has written to councils to explain that they will be funded if they decide to take the lead in a CSP. The Department felt that it would be inappropriate to give that specific power to councils in the Bill. We would prefer councils to go down the route of deciding themselves if they want to engage in CSPs and making their own case within those CSPs as to whether they want to take the lead role. The membership of a CSP should not be for any one member organisation to determine. That is why we feel that councils should not seek to take on that task.

Another issue that has been raised by the councils is the desire to undertake community safety outside of CSPs. We have explained on other occasions that section 115 of the Local Government Act 1972 enables councils to engage in community safety in its broadest terms, because that could be considered as looking after the well-being of local people. Section 115 is financially restricted to them, but there are some powers for them to engage in community safety if they wish.

When the Executive considered the initial policy paper and draft Bill, they thought that it would be wrong to give councils a wider power for community safety, at least until the community safety programme was bedded in. That is why we have included, under subsection 7(2), the power for the Department to “confer or impose on district councils” any functions aimed at enhancing community safety in their districts.

That will enable the Committee and district councils to be involved in consultation, and it will enable the Assembly to decide if councils should be given a broader power to engage in community safety. Hence, we have not extended to councils the power to undertake community safety outside of CSPs.

Those are the key areas that were raised by district councils. We are suggesting that there should be only one amendment proposed under this clause.

The Chairperson: First, the NIO has to deal with the central part, and then everything else will fall into place. The Committee needs to hear what the NIO says before we comment. However, that in no way detracts from anything that Mr Barr has said. It is genuinely to try to see where the Committee should go on the matter, because the wording will fall into place thereafter.

Mr Ford: You have made no response to the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) point on emergency planning powers. Is that omission or commission?

Mr McConnell: There has been no consultation on emergency planning. We attend meetings on emergency planning, which are chaired by a member of SOLACE, and there is non-statutory work going on on emergency planning. However, it is my view — with a great deal of evidence to support me — that there is no concerted

view in councils as to whether they should take on emergency planning.

As you know, SOLACE represents officers, and at the last meeting of the local government emergency management group (LGEM) that I attended, I asked each whether the chief executives had been requested to put emergency planning issues before their councils. I am waiting for a reply, because I do not think that that request has been made. Some councils favour considering emergency planning issues; others do not. The eastern group recently held a meeting at which the Department of the Environment assisted, and it was clear from that that several councillors were opposed to the idea.

Ms Lewsley, Mr Poots and Mr Ford said that this is an additional cost for councils. We are not sure if SOLACE speaks on behalf of elected members, and once we are clear on that, we will take its views and move into a consultative process in which the Committee will be involved. The Minister, Dermot Nesbitt, is aware of that situation.

The Chairperson: Perhaps we could write to individual councillors about that and request that chief executives put the matter before councils to get their opinions. As you know, elected members are an important part of councils.

Mr McConnell: You smiled when you said that, but in fact, all elected members have a mandate, which we in the Department of the Environment do not have. I take that seriously, and that is why I raised the issue at LGEM. Perhaps the Committee will consider asking SOLACE whether it represents councils' views. However, that is a matter for the Committee.

Mr Poots: Emergency planning is in the remit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister; it is not a matter for the Department of the Environment. It is a function of chief executives to oversee emergency planning in their districts. Some members referred to putting something on paper to ensure that chief executives have more authority than at present to prepare for emergency planning. God forbid that something should happen, but if it did, the chief executive of the local council is the principal responsible officer.

Mr McConnell: In 1979, the Development Office co-ordinated emergency services in councils, and when that service was discontinued, chief executives became responsible. However, that duty was not given to councils, and you are right: chief executives are concerned about spending money, because councils do not cover that expenditure.

Section 115 of the Local Government Act 1972 covers that point. It states that councils can spend money on whatever they like. Although the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister may ultimately become

responsible, the Department of the Environment would have to enact that power so that councils could operate it.

Mr Poots: I know.

Mr McConnell: However, the Department of the Environment is willing to do that.

The Chairperson: Councils want emergency planning included because it gives them that cover. That is why they have raised it under the auspices of SOLACE, rather than as councils.

Mr McConnell: That is right, and Mr Barr attended a meeting in Castlereagh at which it was clear that some councillors either did not want to take it on, or wanted to consider it further. That is why consultation in this area is necessary. I have some experience in this. For example, following the Omagh bomb, the chief executive of the council was seen to be in charge. Councillors came to him and asked what was happening and said that they wanted to be seen to be doing something. It was exactly the same in Castlereagh when the forensics laboratory was blown up; the council took the lead, and

there was no question of looking round to see who else was taking the lead.

You may be interested to know that councils spent money for which they were not fully accountable. In both instances, money that had been spent on matters that were not the councils' responsibility was refunded to them. We are already working on a protocol to guide councils, should they spend money, in the event of an emergency, that is not properly their responsibility.

The Chairperson: It is important to clarify that.

Ms Finnegan: As a result of the redraft, we must make changes to the explanatory and financial memorandum.

Mr McConnell: May I take this opportunity to thank the Committee? The Bill has improved because of the consultation and the scrutiny. I do not wish to impinge on the Committee's responsibilities, but our timetable seeks to have the Bill in place in time to apply the new formula next year. We are in your hands.

The Chairperson: We shall endeavour to assist. Thank you very much.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 3 May 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if local Councils are informed when a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council is to be held within their area of responsibility.

(AQW 2419/01)

Reply: Local Councils are not normally officially informed when meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council are to be held in their respective District Council area.

However, Mayors / Chairmen of Councils are usually invited to participate where there is an accompanying lunch. Over the last six months invitations have been extended to the Mayors / Chairmen of Leitrim, Antrim, Fermanagh and Ballymena councils.

Female Representation in Public and Political Life

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to increase female representation in public and political life.

(AQW 2827/01)

Reply: Publicity campaigns about public appointments have specifically targeted groups representing women and other under-represented groups, and a six monthly list of vacancies is issued to a number of organisations and published on the internet at www.ofmdfmini.gov.uk/publicappointments. We are considering a review of public appointments in Northern Ireland to help determine whether the current arrangements are suitable for use by the devolved administration. The review will address a number of issues including ways of ensuring as far as possible that public bodies are as representative as possible.

In terms of increasing female participation in political life, the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 permits registered political parties to regulate the selection of candidates in order to reduce inequalities in the numbers of men and women selected as candidates of the party. The Northern Ireland provisions of the Westminster Act apply to parliamentary elections, and elections to the European Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly and district councils. The Act does not compel parties to use such selection procedures if they do not wish to do so.

North Belfast

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on its current work in North Belfast. (AQO 1235/01)

Reply: As we have indicated before, we are fully committed to ensuring that all of the measures announced on 23 November last year are progressed as speedily as possible with both communities fully involved in that process. Substantial progress has already been made on a range of measures in the package and we have had extensive discussions with elected and community representatives.

We met recently with the North Belfast Community Action Project Team. They will report to us by the end of May. We look forward to receiving this report. The Project is supporting community capacity building activity in various parts of North Belfast including both Glenbryn and Ardoyne.

Over the past few weeks we have been discussing with community leaders and elected representatives how we can develop a process resulting in the sequencing of both community dialogue and the road realignment project at the Ardoyne Road/Alliance Avenue interface in the very near future.

We have engaged in an extensive consultation process with both communities on the proposed road realignment project. The consultants' designs have been made available to both communities and officials have obtained their reactions. We now want to move this on. Having given this matter very careful and detailed consideration we would propose to bring the work forward in stages. Work to realign the road and to provide a protective screen to houses in Hesketh Park could be the first stage and this could commence immediately. We also want to have some discussion with both communities on how to provide a protective screen to houses at the Alliance Avenue/Ardoyne interface and to address concerns over sight lines. We want to discuss all these proposals with elected and community representatives and to give them an opportunity to respond. To this end we will be arranging meetings with them later this week.

We have also been exploring how facilitation might be provided to assist with the development of community dialogue. Since we became involved in this area last year, we have continually emphasised that community dialogue is the key to resolving this situation. We recognise that both communities are committed to dialogue and as we have explained in the past, we stand ready to offer assistance to move this forward. We also want to discuss this further with elected and community representatives when we meet them later this week with the expectation that community dialogue can be brought forward in tandem with the road realignment project.

Executive Meetings

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 1206/01)

Reply: The last meeting of the Executive was held on 25 April. A copy of the Press Release issued following the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) why there has been a delay in bringing forward a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland; and (b) any discussions which have been held to process this matter urgently. (AQO 1215/01)

Reply: This matter is the responsibility of the Secretary of State. The Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act require the Human Rights Commission to advise the Secretary of State on the scope for defining, in Westminster legislation, a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

We understand that the Commission, having reflected on its initial advice and the outcome of consultation, considers that more time is required in order to consider the complex and wide ranging issues involved. We have not jointly discussed this matter with the Secretary of State. Ministers Haughey and Leslie plan to meet the Commission early next month.

Review of the Civic Forum

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Review of the Civic Forum. (AQO 1234/01)

Reply: As indicated in the report to the Assembly on 15 February 1999, a review of the Civic Forum was to be undertaken in close consultation with the membership of the Civic Forum with a view to reporting within 12 months of the Civic Forum becoming operational.

To allow the Civic Forum to have some time to establish its working practices and ensure a more meaningful review we decided that the review should be deferred until Spring 2002.

We have agreed draft Terms of Reference for the review and these are currently with the Civic Forum for consideration.

Freedom of Information Bill

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the proposed timetable for the introduction of a Freedom of Information Bill.

(AQO 1209/01)

Reply: There are no plans to introduce a Freedom of Information Bill in Northern Ireland. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 extends to Northern Ireland and will be fully in force by January 2005. The desirability of separate Northern Ireland legislation for the future will be considered in the light of experience of the operation of the Act.

Disability Discrimination

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps it intends taking to extend the protection against discrimination offered to disabled people. (AQO 1233/01)

Reply: We recognise that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was an important development in outlawing discrimination against disabled people but it fell short of providing comprehensive and enforceable civil rights. We are committed to addressing this shortfall and will achieve this through implementation of the Executive's detailed response to the recommendations made by the Disability Rights Task Force. A report on the consultation on our response is in preparation.

When we have finalised this, we will bring forward appropriate legislation to implement legislative proposals for improving disability rights.

As set out in the Programme for Government, we will establish an Interdepartmental Working Group this year under the Promoting Social Inclusion element of new TSN to develop a strategy to implement the proposals in the Executive's response and any wider issues raised in the consultation.

Furthermore, we have asked the Equality Commission to consider further a range of issues raised by the Task Force.

North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr McNamee asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the Dublin Government's

National Development Plan and the Regional Development Strategy have been jointly considered at any North-South Ministerial Council meetings; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1239/01)

Reply: The National Development Plan and the Regional Development Strategy have not been jointly considered at any North/South Ministerial Council meetings.

Consultation Documents

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what consideration is being given to reducing the list of organisations which receive consultation documents. (AQO 1224/01)

Reply: Consultation on key policy issues provides an important opportunity for the Executive to listen to and understand the needs and views of the public. Arising from our statutory equality duties we are also required to equality assess the impact of our policies and, as part of that process, to consult with those likely to be effected.

We are committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and as meaningful as possible. We are continually looking at ways to improve our methods of consultation. We recognise that the consultation process has given rise to some difficulties both for those consulting and those consulted.

Over the next few months we will be working with officials in the Department for Social Development to explore how the consultation process might be improved. We hope to involve the Equality Commission and the voluntary and community sector in this exercise.

Consultation with the Public

Mr C Murphy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the pursuit of open Government necessitates an extensive consultation with the public. (AQO 1237/01)

Reply: Consultation on key policy issues provides an important opportunity for the Executive to listen to and understand the needs and views of the public. Arising from our statutory equality duties we are also required to equality assess the impact of our policies and, as part of that process, to consult with those likely to be effected.

We are committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and as meaningful as possible. We are continually looking at ways to improve our methods of consultation. We recognise that the consultation process has given rise to some difficulties both for those consulting and those consulted.

Over the next few months we will be working with officials in the Department for Social Development to explore how the consultation process might be improved.

We hope to involve the Equality Commission and the voluntary and community sector in this exercise

Civic Forum

Mrs E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the circulation list for the minutes of the Civic Forum. (AQO 1201/01)

Reply: We have been advised by the Civic Forum that a copy of all minutes of Civic Forum plenary meetings and standing committee meetings are placed in the Assembly Library when they have been agreed.

A copy of the minutes of plenary meetings and minutes of General Purpose Committee meetings [when agreed] are also made available on the Civic Forum's Internet site. Additionally all members of the Civic Forum receive copies of the minutes of the Civic Forum's plenary meetings.

All members of Civic Forum Committees and Project Groups receive copies of the minutes of those meetings and Civic Forum members, who are not members of Committees or Project Groups, may receive copies of the minutes of those meetings on request.

Refunds of Dairy Exports

Mr Kane asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what representations have been made to secure export refunds of dairy exports; and to make a statement. (AQO 1203/01)

Reply: We have not jointly made representations to secure refunds of dairy exports.

When world dairy commodity markets declined in 2001 we understand the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her officials worked hard to secure increases at the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee meetings. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Bríd Rodgers, raised this matter with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Margaret Beckett) and impressed on her the need to put pressure on the EU Commission to secure an increase in export refunds. In addition, in advance of the crucial EU Management Committee meeting on 24 January 2002 the Department of Agriculture and Regional Development Minister ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the importance of this matter for Northern Ireland.

We understand that Department of Agriculture and Regional Development officials have continued to lobby on behalf of Northern Ireland on export refunds for skimmed milk powder and whole milk powder and continue to keep the market situation under review in conjunction with the dairy industry.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Part-Time Farmers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of part-time farmers in the last 3 years. (AQW 2708/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The numbers of part-time farmers in Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years, as estimated from the June Agricultural Census, are shown below.

1999	16,073
2000	15,386
2001	15,786

The figures refer to farmers who work less than 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).

Food and Hospitality Industries

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department currently promotes the Northern Ireland food and hospitality industries. (AQW 2947/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department is involved in generic promotion of Northern Ireland products which includes financial support for the marketing of Northern Ireland red meat on the basis of its quality. In addition financial support for marketing in the pig meat sector has been provided.

I would add that there are very strict EU rules limiting the extent to which Government can support publicity campaigns which promote domestically produced goods in preference to similar goods from other parts of the EU. Consequently public funds cannot be used to endorse food produced on the basis of its region of origin.

My schedule of visits to lend support to various conferences and to local producers and food companies help to keep the characteristics of all sectors at the forefront of my Department's considerations. Active participation at events including the Balmoral Show, the Winter Fair, European Dairy Farmers Congress and the European Seafood Exhibition are especially important as the audience crosses national boundaries. I have also met with major food retailers in Northern Ireland to encourage greater use of locally sourced products.

My Department independently and in conjunction with other Government Agencies and food related bodies

promote the Northern Ireland food industry in other ways including:

- Providing a platform for individual companies to display their products at events held in Northern Ireland (IFEX), Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.
- Sponsoring event organisers, such as local Agricultural Show Associations, to mount displays of Northern Ireland produce and sponsoring launches of events such as Northern Ireland Food Promotion Initiative.
- Producing publications such as the Loughry Food Business Incubation Centre brochure.
- Featuring Northern Ireland produce on the menu for Ministerial receptions such as the DARD breakfast at Balmoral Show.
- Under the Northern Ireland Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme launching a joint Marketing Initiative (Promotions) Scheme for Fisheries and a Marketing of Quality Agricultural Products Grant Scheme.

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, in each of the past 5 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 2951/01)

Ms Rodgers: New Targeting Social Need is the Executive's main policy for addressing social deprivation and has been integrated into the Programme for Government. New TSN policy is a theme which applies to all relevant programmes and services, and operates by using existing resources to benefit people in greatest objective social need. While a considerable amount of my Department's activities are subject to the constraints imposed by the EU CAP and CFP I am nevertheless wholly committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, resources are directed to where they are most needed. The principles of New TSN feature prominently throughout the decision making process.

New TSN is a long-term approach. By consistently addressing the problems of those who are objectively shown to be in greatest social need, New TSN should, over time, contribute to the erosion of inequalities. In particular, New TSN addresses social need in 3 complementary ways:

- tackling unemployment and increasing employability;
- tackling social need in other policy areas;
- promoting Social Inclusion (PSI).

The Executive adopted New TSN in June 2000, and I took full responsibility for its effective implementation in my Department. My Department has therefore been working hard to implement its New TSN Action Plan which runs for three years from 1 January 2000.

By way of example, New TSN was one of the issues which I took into account in determining that additional milk quota allocation, secured as part of the Agenda 2000 agreement, was allocated to small milk producers in 2000/01 and 2001/02.

During the past year, my Department agreed with the European Commission a new scheme of support for farmers in the Less Favoured Areas (LFA) of Northern Ireland. In meeting the European Commission's requirements, the Department was able to produce a scheme which is consistent with, and contributes to, New TSN objectives. Payments made at 31 March 2002 total £22.98m in respect of 542,688ha of LFA land. Of this £18.17m (79%) was paid to producers in the most disadvantaged areas with the remaining £4.81m (21%) paid to those producers in the less disadvantaged areas.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to an evaluation of the benefits and achievements of New TSN. The initial evaluation, which will be subject to external validation to ensure objectivity, is currently underway, with initial 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 report will be made publicly accessible.

My Department is currently updating its New TSN Action Plan for March 2002 to April 2003.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail those parts of her Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes. (AQW 2994/01)

Ms Rodgers: Land at:

- (a) Desertcreat, Cookstown;
- (b) Tullyhogue, Cookstown;
- (c) Home Farm estate, Loughry College, Cookstown;
- (d) Fairhill Street, Ballycastle; and
- (e) Carnroe, Lower Bann River.

Buildings:

- (a) Camus store, Coleraine.

Prospect Road, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if officials from the Rivers Agency have refused to meet with elected representatives, Council officials and other officials of statutory bodies on a constituency matter at Prospect Road, Carrickfergus. (AQW 3114/01)

Ms Rodgers: Rivers Agency has not refused to attend a site meeting with elected representatives and others to discuss the condition of a watercourse at Prospect Road, Carrickfergus. I can assure you that the Agency wrote on 19 April to Carrickfergus Borough Council confirming that an Agency Representative will attend the site meeting scheduled on 1 May 2002.

Gosford Castle, Markethill, Co Armagh

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 2919/01, to provide a list of those (a) individuals (b) groups and (c) consortia who have submitted bids to purchase or lease Gosford Castle, Markethill, Co Armagh. (AQW 3285/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Forest Service is considering proposals from a number of potential purchasers and has requested more detailed information from each by 24 May. Forest Service is unable to provide a list of those (a) individuals (b) groups and (c) consortia who have submitted bids to purchase or lease Gosford Castle as it is policy on procurements not to divulge the details of commercial negotiations.

Future of Farming in South Down

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the future of farming in South Down. (AQO 1247/01)

Ms Rodgers: I do not believe that anyone is in a position to predict with accuracy the future of the agricultural industry anywhere in Northern Ireland. We can point to certain trends and challenges, such as the continuing reform of the CAP or changing consumer tastes and demands, which will have a profound influence on the industry. What we cannot predict, of course, are the unexpected events, such as the BSE crisis or the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. The vast majority of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead are not, of course, unique to the industry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, what will, in large measure, determine our future success is how we respond to these pressures compared with the response of our competitors. That is why it so important that we adopt a strategic approach to our future development and prepare as best we can the meet the challenges that we can reasonably

foretell, and that is why I attach such importance to the Vision exercise.

The agri-food industry in Northern Ireland as a whole currently faces many challenges. The Vision Steering Group's task was to identify these, come forward with a Vision for the future development of the industry and make recommendations for the achievement of this Vision. This I believe it has done.

The Vision Steering Group did not attempt any area by area analysis but I believe that, if we get things right at the Northern Ireland level, this will be to the benefit of farmers in all parts of the North including South Down, Mid-Ulster, Fermanagh, Newry and Armagh.

Consultancy Documents

Mr Close asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over the last 3 years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs. (AQO 1213/01)

Ms Rodgers: The figures requested are £74,100 in 1999/2000, £77,800 the following year and £89,350 last year.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline a date for the resumption of the E-Plan element of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme; and to make a statement. (AQO 1253/01)

Ms Rodgers: I fully recognise the importance of the discretionary enhancement plan element of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme to many farmers in Northern Ireland. Indeed this has been recognised in the inclusion of a specific recommendation in the recent "Vision for the future of the agri-food industry" report, which calls for the reintroduction of capital enhancement measures.

This report has been the subject of extensive public consultation, and I hope to be in a position to announce my response to the Vision exercise in coming months. Until then, I am not in a position to give a more definitive answer about the reintroduction of this element of the ESA Scheme.

In addition, I do not wish to speculate on a likely re-opening date before all the necessary budgetary and administrative processes are in place. To do otherwise could give rise to some unrealistic expectations and I would not wish to encourage ESA Scheme participants to plan any enhancement type works before the details of what may, and may not, be claimed for are finalised.

Payments Profile

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement in relation to her Department's capacity to pay the 'producers' premium balance'. (AQO 1205/01)

Ms Rodgers: In accordance with the Payments Profile which I published last October, balance payments under the cattle schemes are now due to commence and to be completed by the end of June.

My Department is proceeding in accordance with this timetable and will be issuing payments in the date order in which claims were received.

Agenda 2000

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give an assessment of the major issues facing Northern Ireland agriculture at the forthcoming mid-term reviews of Agenda 2000. (AQO 1227/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Agenda 2000 Agreement contains in-built reviews of cereal support prices, milk quotas and budgetary issues. In addition, the Commission is known to be contemplating widening these reviews to include, for example, the beef regime.

Commissioner Fischler has made no secret of his desire to see a further shift in support from Pillar I (production based) to Pillar II (rural development). Also, with the WTO Doha Round underway, the CAP is likely to come under pressure for further reform of export subsidisation and the level of domestic agricultural support. Issues such as modulation and decoupling therefore are also likely to surface.

Of particular concern to Northern Ireland are:

- the consequences for producers of any further changes to the support prices for beef, cereals or milk;
- the impact on exports to third countries of further reductions in EU export refunds, especially for beef and dairy products;
- the impact on milk producers of any decision to abolish milk quotas after 2008; and
- the effects on farm incomes of any proposals such as modulation or decoupling affecting direct producer payments.

In general, an important priority in future negotiations will be to try to ensure that any re-orientation of the CAP is suitable to the requirements of agriculture and the protection of the viability of local communities in Northern Ireland.

Meat from Third World Countries

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action (a) she has taken to ensure that no meat from Third World countries enters the food chain and (b) is taken when meat from Third World sources enters the food manufacturing process both in terms of processing and end-product.

(AQO 1252/01)

Ms Rodgers:

- (a) Meat from Third Countries, including that from developing Countries, may enter the Food Chain but must do so in accordance with EU Regulations governing intra-community trade.
- (b) Beef from Third Countries must be labelled in accordance with Beef Labelling Rules.

Farming Co-operatives

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) her support for the development of farming co-operatives; and (b) how she intends to encourage them.

(AQO 1226/01)

Ms Rodgers: I believe the principles of collaboration amongst farmers and the integration of farmers and processors to meet the requirements of a rapidly evolving market place is key to the competitiveness of the agri-food industry in Northern Ireland. To assist the agri-food sector to meet this challenge my Department has in particular encouraged the development of farmers co-operatives. Since 1995 £1 million of financial assistance has been awarded to 16 projects approved under the Marketing Development Scheme for activities involving producer co-operation. Also earlier this month I launched a new EU Marketing of Quality Agricultural Products Grant Scheme. Support under this Scheme is available towards the establishment, expansion or merger of a collaborative marketing group, including co-operatives, and I am seeking to increase the funding available for this purpose.

Future of Farming in Mid-Ulster

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the future of farming in Mid-Ulster.

(AQO 1246/01)

Ms Rodgers: I do not believe that anyone is in a position to predict with accuracy the future of the agricultural industry anywhere in Northern Ireland. We can point to certain trends and challenges, such as the continuing reform of the CAP or changing consumer tastes and demands, which will have a profound influence on the industry. What we cannot predict, of course, are the unexpected events, such as the BSE crisis or the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. The vast majority of the

challenges and opportunities that lie ahead are not, of course, unique to the industry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, what will, in large measure, determine our future success is how we respond to these pressures compared with the response of our competitors. That is why it so important that we adopt a strategic approach to our future development and prepare as best we can to meet the challenges that we can reasonably foretell, and that is why I attach such importance to the Vision exercise.

The agri-food industry in Northern Ireland as a whole currently faces many challenges. The Vision Steering Group's task was to identify these, come forward with a Vision for the future development of the industry and make recommendations for the achievement of this Vision. This I believe it has done.

The Vision Steering Group did not attempt any area by area analysis but I believe that, if we get things right at the Northern Ireland level, this will be to the benefit of farmers in all parts of the North including South Down, Mid-Ulster, Fermanagh, Newry and Armagh.

Diversification

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) what programmes are currently available to allow farmers to diversify away from intensive livestock production; and (b) what programmes are currently available to promote biomass production (growing of willow coppice for energy purposes).

(AQO 1229/01)

Ms Rodgers: In response to the first part of your question about diversification I can advise you that under the Peace II Programme farmers, and members of farm families, will have opportunity to diversify. This programme, which will open for applications later this year, will be delivered through a change management programme involving re-skilling.

My officials are presently developing a new competence development programme to help farmers and farm families consider and develop alternative enterprises utilising farm resources.

Conversion of land from agriculture to forestry is another diversification option open to farmers. The Woodland Grant Scheme offers grants toward costs of establishing woodland and the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme pays an annual premium over 10 or 15 years to compensate for the loss of income from converting agricultural land to woodland.

There may also be diversification opportunities under the Rural Development Programme, and there is scope for farmers to benefit from the Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme under the Collectives/Co-operatives and sectoral initiatives. The EU LEADER+ Initiative may also be able to provide support to assist certain farm diversification projects.

Likewise, the Natural Resource Rural Tourism Measure may be able to provide support for farmers in the Sperrins, Fermanagh, Mourne, Antrim Glens and Coast and South Armagh to diversify into tourism.

Turning to the second part of your question, I can advise you that assistance is available under the Woodland Grant Scheme for the establishment on suitable sites of approved clones of willow, poplar and alder intended for short rotation coppice for renewable energy purposes. Whether or not the coppice has been cut, the stumps must continue to be present and satisfactorily maintained throughout a 10 year period to qualify for grant. Grant will be £600 per hectare for non set-aside land and £400 per hectare for set-aside.

Future of Farming in Fermanagh

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the future of farming in Fermanagh. (AQO 1249/01)

Ms Rodgers: I do not believe that anyone is in a position to predict with accuracy the future of the agricultural industry anywhere in Northern Ireland. We can point to certain trends and challenges, such as the continuing reform of the CAP or changing consumer tastes and demands, which will have a profound influence on the industry. What we cannot predict, of course, are the unexpected events, such as the BSE crisis or the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. The vast majority of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead are not, of course, unique to the industry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, what will, in large measure, determine our future success is how we respond to these pressures compared with the response of our competitors. That is why it so important that we adopt a strategic approach to our future development and prepare as best we can the meet the challenges that we can reasonably foretell, and that is why I attach such importance to the Vision exercise.

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Future of Farming in Newry and Armagh

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the future of farming in Newry and Armagh. (AQO 1248/01)

Ms Rodgers: I do not believe that anyone is in a position to predict with accuracy the future of the agricultural industry anywhere in Northern Ireland. We can point to certain trends and challenges, such as the continuing reform of the CAP or changing consumer tastes and demands, which will have a profound influence on the industry. What we cannot predict, of course, are the unexpected events, such as the BSE crisis or the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. The vast majority of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead are not, of course, unique to the industry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, what will, in large measure, determine our future success is how we respond to these pressures compared with the response of our competitors. That is why it so important that we adopt a strategic approach to our future development and prepare as best we can the meet the challenges that we can reasonably foretell, and that is why I attach such importance to the Vision exercise.

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CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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 2952/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department has two credit cards in use. These are held by the Permanent Secretary, and my Private Secretary.

During the financial year ended 31 March 2002, the total amount charged to each card was as follows:

Permanent Secretary:	£3,231.78
Private Secretary to the Minister:	£7,334.23
Total	£10,566.01

There are no other public body credit cards used by my Department, including executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies, cross-border bodies, and other funded bodies.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail those parts of his Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.
(AQW 2995/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department currently has its headquarters within the Interpoint building in central Belfast. The Accommodation and Construction Division of the Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for this building and will respond in respect of Interpoint.

DCAL has responsibility for the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland at Balmoral Avenue, Belfast, the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland at Stranmillis Road, Belfast, and three Inland Waterways and Inland Fisheries properties at Bushmills, Movannagher Fish Farm in Kilrea and Riversdale in Co Fermanagh, and I confirm that all parts of my Department's estate are used purely for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

Youth Development Programme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the budget available to deliver the first year of the £1.6 million Youth Development Programme being administered by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland; (b) the actual budget spend in the first year; (c) any underspend; and (d) how this underspend was allocated.[R]
(AQW 3033/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The total budget available in the first year of the youth development programme (January - March 2002) was £100,000. The actual budget spent was £56,675 and this was used for four main purposes:

- to appoint a development officer at the Sports Council to plan and administer the scheme;
- to help sustain existing high quality youth and community football schemes already in operation in Northern Ireland in the short term;
- to ensure that the Irish Football Association, Irish Football League and senior clubs receive guidance and direction on the long-term management and delivery of successful youth and community football development programmes and;
- to ensure that essential equipment is accessible to youth and community football development centres in Northern Ireland as soon as they are established.

The Sports Council plans to carry over the remaining balance of £43,325 from year 1 into year 2 (April 2002 - March 2003) so that sufficient funding will be available

to meet the long-term administration and delivery costs of the scheme which is currently being developed in conjunction with the Irish Football Association.

Youth Development: Sports Council for Northern Ireland

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment can he make in relation to the £1.6 million Youth Development 3-year programme being administered by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland.[R]
(AQW 3034/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I regard the youth football development programme being administered by the Sports Council as an important means of addressing the sporting, health and educational needs of young people and local communities across Northern Ireland. I also believe that the programme, now being established, will contribute significantly to improving the image of football in Northern Ireland and to the development of the sport as a whole, both of which are key objectives identified within the Soccer Strategy process.

The success of the scheme, however, depends very much on the quality of the coaching and community programmes that will be provided at grass roots level, and the extent to which they genuinely reflect community needs. To this end, I would expect that the programme, including any application process, will be as open as possible so that resources are ultimately channelled to those best placed to deliver the most effective results on the ground.

Soccer Strategy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment can he make in relation to discussions taking place between the Irish Football League and the Irish Football Association in relation to the Soccer Strategy document and the future administration of soccer.[R]
(AQW 3036/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Following my Department's publication of the Advisory Panel's report, the IFA and IFL formed a joint group to discuss how matters might be taken forward in the light of the Advisory Panel's recommendations, particularly those in relation to the governance of football, including the structure and management of the Irish League. More recently, my Department has engaged the services of a consultant to facilitate the group's discussions. I am aware that the group has recently presented proposals to its respective constituent bodies and is currently awaiting responses to these before moving on to finalising a more detailed plan. It would be prudent on my part to await this plan before making any comment or assessment.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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 3045/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department's equality scheme lists at annex D the groups and individuals that will be consulted as part of any equality impact assessment. This list was compiled using the criteria determined by the Equality Commission's guidance, approved by a former Secretary of State, on the implementation of the statutory duties, which states: "Consultation must be carried out with relevant interest groups as well as the Equality Commission, other public bodies, voluntary, community, trade union and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter".

The Department is committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and meaningful. The consultation process has difficulties for both those consulting and those consulted. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in conjunction with Departments, will be exploring how to improve the consultation process. It is hoped to involve the Equality Commission together with the voluntary and community sector in this quest to better the consultation process.

European Charter

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 2621/01, to make available the policy guidance for the implementation of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 3070/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As indicated in my reply to AQW 2621/01 the Charter Group is currently finalising central policy guidance on implementing the European Charter. It had been intended to submit the draft policy guidance to the Executive meeting on 16 May 2002 for approval. Unfortunately, this timetable has now slipped. It will be a matter for the Executive to decide what circulation to give to the policy document.

European Charter

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 2621/01, to make available an overall position paper on the implementation of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by each Government Department. (AQW 3071/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My responses to AQW 2621/01 and AQW 3070/01 explain 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.

As indicated, it is a matter for the Executive to inform the Foreign Secretary on how the Charter is being implemented by the devolved administration. In the circumstances you will appreciate that it would not be appropriate to make an overall position paper available before the Executive has had the opportunity to inform the Foreign Secretary.

Charter Group

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when was the Interdepartmental Charter Group to co-ordinate implementation of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages established. (AQW 3072/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Interdepartmental Charter Group held its inaugural meeting on 8 February 2001.

Navan Centre

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what recent steps have been undertaken to ensure that the Navan Centre is re-opened; and to make a statement. (AQO 1245/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I share the Member's desire to see the Navan Centre reopened as soon as possible, and my Department has been working with the trustees and other interested parties to secure that outcome.

In order to determine if the Centre has a viable future, my Department is supporting the preparation of a business plan that will show how the facility might operate in the future. In addition, we are meeting the Centre's security and maintenance costs for a limited period to defer it going into liquidation.

My Department remains committed to seeing the Navan Centre reopened and continues to do what it can to achieve this.

Guillaume d'Orange

Dr Adamson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there are any plans to promote our shared European heritage in relation to the early medieval epics of Guillaume D'Orange and the Early Irish Church. (AQO 1220/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is unaware of any plans to promote our shared European heritage in relation to either the medieval epics of Guillaume d'Orange or the early Irish church.

Consultation Documents

Mr Close asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of producing documents for

consultation over the last 3 years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs.

(AQO 1212/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Since December 1999, my Department has issued 6 documents for public consultation.

The quantifiable costs relating to the preparation, printing, and distribution of these documents over the period is just under £64,000.

This figure excludes staff costs that cannot be separately identified.

Lottery Funds for Capital Sports Development

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures will be taken to ensure the continuation of Lottery Funds for Capital Sports Development.

(AQO 1242/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The National Lottery is a reserved matter under the functional responsibility of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure acts as agent of DCMS in relation to the receipt and distribution of the proceeds of the National Lottery by the Sports Council.

Decisions on the allocation of the Sports Lottery fund are a matter for the Sports Council based on recommendations from its Lottery Committee. Such decisions are also made against set criteria drawn up by the Council having regard to Policy Directions issued to it by my Department on behalf of DCMS. Funding decisions by the Sports Council are made independently of myself and my Department and I do not seek any input to the process before decisions are made. My role and my Department's role is in agreeing the strategic context for such decision making whether it be in respect of capital or recurrent grant.

Angling

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) his present and proposed financial commitment to angling; and (b) the extent of Peace and Reconciliation funding that will be available for angling development over the next 4 years. [R]

(AQO 1218/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department currently spends around £440k per annum on running the Public Angling Estate. This is used to maintain and improve existing angling facilities, develop new facilities and also to stock and bailiff the Department's waters. I have recently obtained funding to employ four additional industrial staff, which will speed up the maintenance programme. I have also submitted a bid to the Executive Programme Infrastructure Fund for £1.5m to upgrade and improve the Public Angling Estate.

Furthermore, to encourage anglers, I have not increased the license fees or permit charges for this year's angling season and concessionary licence fees have been introduced for disabled anglers.

I have also obtained £1.5m from Executive Programme Funds to buyout the Commercial Salmon Nets and while this is primarily a conservation measure to improve salmon stocks, it should also assist angling.

The Department continues to commit funds to the salmon hatchery at Bushmills where angling clubs can bring brood fish from their rivers for rearing of eggs and fry which are then returned to their native river to improve the stock of fish.

The Department has also been successful in obtaining approximately £5m over the next 4 years for a Water Based Tourism Measure under Peace II which will be used for Angling Development and Water Recreation Projects. I cannot be precise about what share of this will be available for angling as that will depend on the quality of the applications submitted.

Minority Languages

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the measures he is taking, consistent with the Good Friday Agreement, to implement Article 12 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

(AQO 1211/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department through the North South Language Body, the Arts Council, Iomairt Cholm Cille (ICC), Museums and Galleries, and the Education and Library Boards supports a range of measures. These measures contribute to promoting tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, are in accordance with the Belfast Agreement and meet commitments in respect of culture under Article 12 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

They include Arts Councils grant support programmes which have assisted the development of facilities and artistic programmes; Foras na Gaeilge funding for Irish language culture and arts as detailed in its Business Plan; cultural activities organised and funded by ICC, and Irish language collections in libraries.

Sign Language

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give an update on developments in the recognition and promotion of sign language.

(AQO 1219/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I refer to your Assembly Question (AQO 1219/01) and to my written response of 19 March 2002 to your Assembly Question (AQO 1057/01). Since I wrote officials in my Department have organised a

preliminary meeting with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf for 29 April 2002. The intention is to explore terms of reference for the Working Group and begin to draw up a work programme.

Derry City Council

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to give a block grant to Derry City Council in order that it can re-distribute the grant to Arts projects. (AQO 1221/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I do not have any plans to give a block grant to Derry City Council for distribution to arts projects. Funding for arts projects is made available through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and it is the responsibility of the sponsors of each project to make application under the Arts Council's programmes.

Arts projects can also access funding from their local District or Borough Council.

Queen's Parade Development

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give an update on the provision of a new public library for Bangor in light of the delay in the Queen's Parade Development. (AQO 1202/01)

Mr McGimpsey: When you asked in March 2001 about library provision in Bangor, I reported that exploratory discussions had taken place between the South Eastern Education and Library Board, North Down Borough Council and the developers of the Queen's Parade site about the possible inclusion of library facilities in the development. Since then the developer has made no further approaches to the Board on this matter.

However, the Board is currently finalising an economic appraisal, which will set out the various options for library provision in Bangor including the seafront development, upgrading the existing Carnegie Library on the Hamilton Road and building a new library on a greenfield site. The appraisal is expected to be completed shortly.

EDUCATION

Glastry College, Ballyhalbert

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the commencement date; and (ii) the completion date for the new canteen at Glastry High School, Ballyhalbert. (AQW 2969/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): School meals accommodation at Glastry College is a matter for the South-Eastern Education and Library

Board in the first instance. I understand from the Board that its minor capital works budget for this financial year is fully committed and that the upgrade of school meals provision at Glastry is on a list of projects which will have priority next year.

Truancy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) if he is aware of the anti-truancy schemes in the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK; and (b) if he is willing to undertake an investigation into such schemes in relation to formulating a truancy policy in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3020/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does have a Public Service Agreement target to reduce the number of pupils who are persistent non-attenders at school. Action to achieve the target includes developing good practice materials for the primary sector in promoting regular attendance and in early referral of pupils whose attendance patterns give cause for concern. This work will be informed by drawing on the experience of schools here, in the Republic of Ireland and the UK on effective interventions.

Truancy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps he will take to implement an innovative scheme to build upon existing policies to help prevent truancy in schools, specifically in the Primary School sector. (AQW 3021/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does have a Public Service Agreement target to reduce the number of pupils who are persistent non-attenders at school. Action to achieve the target includes developing good practice materials for the primary sector in promoting regular attendance and in early referral of pupils whose attendance patterns give cause for concern. This work will be informed by drawing on the experience of schools here, in the Republic of Ireland and the UK on effective interventions.

Arts and Culture in Schools

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to promote the arts and culture in schools. (AQW 3038/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The current curriculum allows young people to be taught about the arts and culture through the programmes of study for Art and Design, Music, Drama, Design and Technology, English and Physical Education, and also through the cross-curricular themes of Cultural Heritage and Education for Mutual Understanding.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is currently undertaking a review of the curriculum here. CCEA's proposals for both primary and post-primary education include curriculum areas covering Creative and Expressive Development which are designed to give children greater access to, and to enhance the status of, arts and culture within the curriculum.

In addition to providing a number of syllabuses for GCSE, AS and A level examinations that focus on the arts and culture, CCEA is also involved in a number of competitions and events which all help to promote and celebrate arts and culture among young people here.

Admissions Criteria

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education if his Department or Education Board can influence or alter admissions criteria for P1 classes set by the Board of Governors of individual Primary Schools.

(AQW 3042/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for drawing up admissions criteria for P1 classes are a matter for the Board of Governors of each primary school but are subject to regulations set by my Department. The regulations specify matters to be included, or not included, in the criteria. My Department also provides advice to schools on issues related to admissions criteria.

Financial Assistance: Criteria

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria for financial assistance for uniformed youth organisations in the Western Education and Library Board.

(AQW 3046/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All part-time voluntary organisations (including uniformed youth organisations) registering for financial assistance in the Western Education and Library Board must have suitable premises; an appropriate constitution; a child protection policy; appropriate cash handling/recording procedures; be in existence a minimum of 6 months; have a membership of 15 in the 4-25 year age range and be open a minimum of 26 weeks per year and a minimum of 2.5 hours per session (if open between 1 hour and less than 2.5 hours per session, grant is reduced by 25%).

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education 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 3047/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The criteria used with regard to consulting on equality impact assessments are set out in my Department's Equality Scheme as approved by the Equality Commission.

Section 4.3 of the Scheme states:

"The nature of the policy under review, and its relevance to any particular body or interest group, will determine which organisations are consulted on any given policy. The Department will consult with the Equality Commission and the Community Relations Council, voluntary, community and trade union groups and organisations representing the various categories included in Section 75 on issues relevant to the fulfilment of the Section 75 obligations. The full list of bodies is set out at Annex F. The list is not exhaustive and may be amended or augmented in light of experience. The Department will consult any representative organisation or group which has an interest in its work and/or the impact of its policies on the promotion of equality and good relations."

In any particular case, therefore, it is a matter for my Department to determine which are the most appropriate groups or individuals to consult as part of the equality impact assessment process.

School Crossing Patrol Personnel

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (a) vacancies there are for School Crossing Patrol personnel in each of the Education and Library Board areas; and (b) posts which have been vacant for (i) more than 3 months; (ii) more than 6 months; and (iii) more than a year.

(AQW 3073/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have been advised by the Education and Library Boards that the numbers are as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
School Crossing Patrol Personnel Vacancies	35	5	10	11	11
Vacant for more than 3 months	-	0	2	2	-
Vacant for more than 6 months	8	0	2	1	2
Vacant for more than a year	27	0	6	8	8

Head Teachers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to maintain differentials for Head Teachers.

(AQW 3137/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully appreciate the concerns of principals and vice-principals about their salary arrangements, and the need for appropriate salary differentials to ensure that we have dedicated professionals with the qualities to lead our schools. The terms of reference for an independent inquiry into teachers' pay and conditions

of service, which Teachers' Side and Management Side of the Negotiating Committee have agreed, provide for an urgent interim report on the impact of the implementation of the Pay Award 2000 on the salaries of principals and vice-principals. I announced on 23 April that I had decided to establish the inquiry, which will be looking at this matter first.

Teacher Welfare Survey

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education when will the Teacher Welfare Survey undertaken by Price-waterhouseCoopers be published. (AQW 3183/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I refer to my previous answer to AQO 967/01.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Information Technology

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps are being taken to allow East Down Institute of Further and Higher Education in Downpatrick to provide a wide range of Information Technology and Software Engineering courses; and to make a statement. (AQW 2931/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): East Down Institute of Further and Higher education had 731 enrolments in Information Technology and related courses as at 1st November 2000, the latest date for which figures are available. This equated to 18% of the institute's total vocational enrolments. There are no restrictions on the number and range of part time or full time FE courses that the institute may offer or indeed the level of part-time higher education (HE) places other than the normal course approval process. Due to financial considerations the number of publicly funded full time HE places is restricted. Should additional resources become available I will review the issue of full-time HE provision on a Northern Ireland basis in line with existing priorities.

Basic Skills Innovation Fund

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list, by District Council area, (a) all community educational projects supported by the Innovation Fund; and (b) the degree of support given to each project. (AQW 2955/01)

Ms Hanna: The Basic Skills Innovation Fund was established in 1999 as a key function of the Basic Skills Unit to promote and support innovative approaches in

the delivery of basic skills to adults within the wider community. A total amount of £154,886 was awarded for the 2 year period ending 31 March 2002. A detailed breakdown of the projects and degree of support has been placed in the Assembly library for your information.

Forbairt Feirste

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the steps taken to core fund the work of Forbairt Feirste as the major provider of Irish Medium courses to school leavers. (AQW 3011/01)

Ms Hanna: Forbairt Feirste does not have Training Organisation status from the Department. Consequently funding for the academic year 01/02 has been provided through the Belfast Institute for Higher and Further Education, a recognised Training Organisation under the Jobskills programme and a partner with Forbairt Feirste in the delivery of programmes.

Irish Language Groups

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list the groups consulted as part of the review of Irish Language medium vocational, educational and training opportunities. (AQW 3012/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department has recently taken delivery of research work carried out by Gairm and will now develop a scoping paper to form the basis for consultation with interested groups. The Irish Language Groups identified in the Gairm report and others will be included in the consultation. Any policy implications arising from the review will of course be subjected to a specific consultation on equality in line with the Department's published practice.

Irish Language

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the review of Irish Language medium vocational, educational and training opportunities will be completed. (AQW 3013/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department has recently taken delivery of a research report from Gairm and will now develop a scoping paper which will form the basis of an initial consultation with interested parties. Following contributions from those interested parties I would intend making a statement on future policy development on this issue. I would expect to have that work completed before the summer recess.

Irish-Medium Education

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list the courses to be made available for

young people leaving Irish-medium education and seeking further vocational, educational or training opportunities through the medium of Irish in September of this year.

(AQW 3014/01)

Ms Hanna: There are two Irish Medium Secondary Schools in Northern Ireland. There is an expectation that relatively few young people achieving the minimum school leaving age will leave school this summer and seek further vocational, educational or training opportunities. Each of those young people will receive careers education and guidance and make a determination on their choice of career development. The small demand to date for Irish Language Medium vocational education and training for school leavers poses a challenge for providers. However Springvale Training Ltd, North West Institute for Higher and Further Education and other Training Organisations have provision and support in the Irish Language.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail those parts of her Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

(AQW 3022/01)

Ms Hanna: There is no part of the Departmental estate, not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how the awards of funding under Measure 2.3 'Promoting a Labour Market Open to All' of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity reflect the findings of the Noble Deprivation Index.

(AQW 3119/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department's "New TSN Action Plan for the period April 2001 – March 2003" makes specific reference to the Measures of Deprivation in Northern Ireland, also known as the Noble Indicators. The Plan states: "The central focus of DEL's responsibilities is individuals rather than areas", and "DEL will not be targeting its activities by reference to binary maps which divide Northern Ireland into New TSN and non-NTSN areas". In relation to EU Programmes specifically, the Action Plan says "Projects and actions funded under these programmes will complement and add to the Department's contribution to New TSN". There are eight Measures in Priority 2 of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity, agreed by the Executive and the Commission, that reflect DEL's policy on the Measures of Deprivation in Northern Ireland. To be eligible for assistance projects had to comply with the PBSP Measure criteria which cater for NEW TSN issues.

Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total cost of consultants associated with the Economic Appraisals of Measure 2.3 'Promoting a Labour Market Open to All' of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity.

(AQW 3120/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department received 54 applications for assistance under Measure 2.3 of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity. 33 of the 54 applications required economic appraisals. These were undertaken by consultants appointed following a call for tender in line with Government Purchasing Agency requirements. The 33 economic appraisals cost £142,080 exc. VAT.

Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the process by which applications were assessed for Measure 2.3 'Promoting a Labour Market Open to All' of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity.

(AQW 3121/01)

Ms Hanna: The detailed application forms for the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity, PBSP, helped to establish eligibility for the European Social Fund, ESF, compliance with Section 75 requirements as well as containing specific scoring questions. The applicants were told the scoring questions and their respective marks. The scoring questions included ones which asked the applicants to identify why the project is needed, who the project is for and how it would fit the objectives of the PBSP and the overarching Community Support Framework for Northern Ireland. Once eligibility for ESF and compliance with Section 75 had been established selection was carried out. For individual Measures selection panels, of two officials and an independent non civil servant, scored only the answers provided for the scoring questions. On this competitive basis applications were ranked on the basis of their total scores.

TSN Action Plan

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how her Department's TSN Action Plan reflects the findings of the Noble Deprivation Index.

(AQW 3122/01)

Ms Hanna: As outlined in my Department's New TSN Action Plan (April 2001 to March 2003, copy available in the Assembly Library) the Central focus of DEL's responsibilities is individuals rather than areas. For example, labour market interventions such as the New Deals and Jobskills Access are designed to meet the needs of specific groups of people wherever they live. Similarly, from the perspective of New TSN, further and higher education are primarily about meeting

the needs and aspirations of individuals. DEL, therefore, targets its activities according to the needs of individuals rather than by reference to binary maps which divide Northern Ireland into New TSN and non-TSN areas.

Queen's University Belfast: Students

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the total number of students registered at Queen's University Belfast for the academic year 2001-02; (b) the number who are classed as mature; and (c) the number who are in their first year of undergraduate study (freshers). (AQW 3153/01)

Ms Hanna:

(a) There are 19,931 students enrolled at Queen's University Belfast for the 2001/02 academic year.

(b) Mature students are defined as those aged 25 years and over, or alternatively those aged 21 years and over.

Of the 19,931 students enrolled at QUB for the 2001/02 academic year, 4,932 were aged between 21 and 24 years inclusive and 6,366 were aged 25 years and over.

(c) Of the 19,931 students enrolled at QUB for the 2001/02 academic year, 6,486 students were in their first year of undergraduate study, of which 606 are aged between 21 and 24 years inclusive and 2,028 are aged 25 years and over.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Invest NI

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures he intends to take to assist entrepreneurs into sustainable business.

(AQW 2907/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): [holding answer 25 April 2002]: Invest NI was established on 1 April 2002. The Keynote for Invest NI's activities will be innovation and entrepreneurship. A key element of this approach has been the establishment of a new Entrepreneurship and Start-Up Team within Invest Northern Ireland with responsibility for implementing the Northern Ireland Business Birth Rate Strategy. The Strategy aims to increase the number of people who aspire to run their own business and then progress from thought to action, and to increase and widen the population base for potential business starts, with specific attention to high-growth/technology based ideas and under-represented groups.

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 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 2956/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

(a) There are (i) no Departmental credit cards in use in my Department. There are however, two Government Procurement Cards. (ii) My Department does not have any Executive Agencies. (iii) My Department's NDPB's currently hold two credit cards, one in the former Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) and one within the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). (iv) InterTradeIreland which is one third funded by my Department and two thirds funded by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment ROI, has one credit card.

(b) In the financial year 2001/2002 expenditure on the LEDU card was £92,126.33. NITB had one card in 2001/2002 with spend of £891.39. A second card, issued by the British Tourist Authority to the New York NITB office manager incurred spend of £12,680.68 – this card was cancelled in November 2001. Inter-TradeIreland card totalled £4,229.14. Expenditure on the two Government Procurement Cards was, card one £150,799.44 and card two £7,641.32.

NVQ Level 4

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline, by District Council area, the proportion of the working age population who have a qualification below NVQ Level 4. (AQW 2970/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The latest figures available detailing the proportion of the working age population who have a qualification below NVQ level 4 by District Council Area are included in Table 1 overleaf.

TABLE 1 - QUALIFICATION LEVELS OF PERSONS OF WORKING AGE AT 2000 BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (DCA)

District council	Percentage with qualification below NVQ level 4	Percentage with no qualifications
Antrim	53%	28%
Ards	55%	28%
Armagh	68%	22%
Ballymena	58%	24%
Ballymoney	60%	*
Banbridge	63%	*
Belfast	51%	26%

District council	Percentage with qualification below NVQ level 4	Percentage with no qualifications
Carrickfergus	57%	*
Castlereagh	52%	19%
Coleraine	58%	25%
Cookstown	53%	39%
Craigavon	58%	27%
Derry	51%	31%
Down	58%	24%
Dungannon	40%	39%
Fermanagh	43%	41%
Larne	56%	*
Limavady	66%	*
Lisburn	55%	23%
Magherafelt	52%	31%
Moyle	*	*
Newry & Mourne	55%	26%
Newtownabbey	57%	23%
North Down	60%	*
Omagh	52%	34%
Strabane	49%	39%
Northern Ireland	54%	27%

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2000 Local Area Database

Working age is taken as 16-64 for men and 16-59 for women.

* Too small for a reliable estimate, as below minimum quotation level of 6,000 cases.

Below NVQ level 4 comprises NVQ levels 1, 2 and 3.

NVQ levels 1,2, and 3 are equivalent to A level, AS level, GCSE, Trade Apprenticeships and other vocational qualifications.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail those parts of his Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes. (AQW 2999/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's estate has, since the former Industrial Research and Technology Unit site in Lisburn moved to Invest NI, been reduced to the Trading Standards Service in Newtownbreda. I can confirm that this property is used only for departmental business.

NIE Critical Care List

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, by constituency, the number of people currently on the NIE Critical Care List. (AQW 3010/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A total of 2,820 NIE customers are currently on the company's Critical Care Register

- the information is routinely held by NIE by Customer Service Centre area. An analysis by valid postcodes indicates that a total of 2,571 Critical Care registrants can be identified by Parliamentary Constituency, as listed in the following Table:

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Critical Care Registrants
Belfast East	108
Belfast North	134
Belfast South	94
Belfast West	119
East Antrim	199
East Londonderry	130
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	114
Foyle	144
Lagan Valley	134
Mid Ulster	163
Newry and Armagh	156
North Antrim	173
North Down	133
South Antrim	167
South Down	187
Strangford	139
Upper Bann	144
West Tyrone	133
Total	2,571

The balance of 249 Critical Care registrants cannot be identified by Parliamentary Constituency due either to postcodes which could not be matched during analysis (53) or non-availability of postcodes (196).

IDB Investments in East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all IDB lead investments in East Londonderry in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3049/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Selective Financial Assistance offered by IDB to client companies in East Londonderry for the years 1998/1999, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 is shown in the following extract from table 3.4 of IDB's Annual Report for 2000/01. Equivalent data for 2001/2002 is in the process of being compiled and will be available later in 2002.

East Londonderry P.C.	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
IDB Selective Financial Assistance	£3,200,000	£9,500,000	£7,200,000

Investments in East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make it his policy to increase

the number of business start-ups and encourage further inward investment in the East Londonderry constituency. (AQW 3050/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Through Invest Northern Ireland, my Department will implement the Northern Ireland Business Birth Rate Strategy incorporating a range of initiatives, which will assist many new entrepreneurs into sustainable businesses thus increasing the number of business starts in Northern Ireland, including the East Londonderry constituency.

The Northern Ireland Business Start Programme, funded by Invest NI, Councils and EU has recently been relaunched. The programme provides support to new locally focused businesses and is delivered in East Londonderry by Coleraine Enterprise Agency.

Invest NI will continue to market Northern Ireland as an investment location. We will encourage perspective investors to visit all areas of Northern Ireland including East Londonderry and promote the capabilities of all our educational establishments including the UU at Coleraine and its science park at major exhibitions and conferences.

Invest NI, the University of Ulster and the Councils of Coleraine and Derry are exploring the possibility of marketing the North West as a Science Park Region.

Equality Commission Guidance

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment 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 3051/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The criteria used to determine who is consulted is that contained in the Equality Commission's guidance, approved by a former Secretary of State, on the implementation of the statutory duties and states, "Consultation must be carried out with relevant interest groups as well as the Equality Commission, other public bodies, voluntary, community, trade union and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter ...". The DETI Equality Scheme notes that in consulting on any matter to which this Scheme relates, the Department will write to bodies listed within the Scheme's consultation list. DETI is committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and as meaningful as possible and is working with OFM/DFM and relevant organisations in this regard.

Electronic Communications

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the progress of reaching his target for electronic communications between the public and Government Departments. (AQW 3141/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Electronic communication and service delivery is not just about using IT to deliver existing services but rather to take a fundamental look at what is being delivered, how it is being delivered and what improvements could be made having considered the service from the customers viewpoint. Ultimately e-Business will improve communication, deliver services with wider access, faster and more cost effectively to the public.

We are applying this approach to Companies Registry where a project is underway which will result in transforming the business from a paper-based facility into an electronic registry with the capacity to support the search, registration, filing and updating and regulation of registered documents using 'e' capabilities. A public consultation on the Companies Registry e-Business project will issue in May 2002 and will include a section dealing with equality issues. The project will act as the 'e' exemplar for DETI and will be used to develop a generic framework for implementing change across DETI.

In addition we have developed an Internet presence providing information directly to the public and have established an Editorial Board to ensure that DETI's web sites are developed and maintained with useful and relevant information. We have taken the lead in running a pilot for Electronic Records and Document Management and have published the lessons learned to the rest of the NICS. Implementation of EDRMs is a key plank in DETI's plans to bring structure to information holdings and facilitate the access to information that is guaranteed by the Freedom of Information Bill.

DETI has developed an IT Strategy which ensures that the same technology underpins multiple delivery channels so that solutions can be tested in-house before unleashing on the public. We have consolidated and upgraded our infrastructure, had it successfully security accredited and have trained staff in using the new facilities. In addition we have structured ourselves around the integration of business and technical expertise to create the synergy necessary to make a difference through electronic service delivery.

In summary we are making steady progress with our plans for electronic service delivery. Our approach is very much centred on ensuring that the services and information we provide are designed to meet customer needs and in so doing we expect to meet the targets set.

ENVIRONMENT

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment 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 2984/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt):

- (a) The number of credit cards in use is as follows:
- (i) other than those in use in Executive Agencies of my Department, the Private Office has one card;
 - (ii) the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has one Government Procurement Card in use and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland (DVLNI) has three business credit cards in use;
 - (iii) none; and
 - (iv) this information is not available.
- (b) Expenditure incurred on the cards for the financial year ended 31 March 2002 is as follows:

Private Office	£960.85
EHS	£4331.59
DVLNI	Card 1 £6151.36
	Card 2 £1886.27
	Card 3 £962.44
Total	£14292.51

Testing Water Purity

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to share information with other European countries in respect of our methods to test water purity. (AQW 3001/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department is taking a number of steps to ensure that information on water testing is shared with European colleagues. The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is involved in a wide range of quality assurance schemes in the chemical analysis of marine and estuarine waters, microbiology, and, marine and fresh-water biology. These often have a significant European dimension.

For example, in the area of environmental water quality analysis, EHS participates in the Quality Assurance in Marine Environmental Monitoring in Europe (QUASIMEME) scheme. QUASIMEME regularly organises conferences and technical workshops in particular areas of analysis, which enable information to be shared between participating countries.

On behalf of the UK, EHS supports the technical secretariat of the European Standards Committee working group, (CEN/TC 230 WG 2), which deals with the standardisation of biological and ecological assessment methods. The parent committee, (CEN/TC 230 – Water Analysis) has responsibility for the European standard-

isation of relevant methods, which automatically become the EU reference methods as required in the EC Water Framework Directive.

Further to the work of the European Standards Committee, a European wide expert network group of over 100 scientists, including EHS representatives, corresponds on specific ecological issues relevant to EU legislation.

EHS is also actively collaborating with Scandinavian scientists in developing ecological assessment methodologies in support of the EC Water Framework Directive.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail those parts of his Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

(AQW 3023/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There are no parts of the Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

Meeting: County Hall, Coleraine

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the outcome of the meeting held on 11 April in County Hall, Coleraine between officials of the Departments of the Environment and Employment and Learning, and authorities from the University of Ulster at Coleraine. (AQW 3052/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The meeting held on 11 April 2002, which was also attended by a representative from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, was essentially a fact-finding exercise.

There was an open and frank discussion on the roles of the various interested parties; the relevant policies and current programmes; the issues under consideration, and a general synopsis of the current position.

The meeting concluded with a number of those present being tasked to collate the information they hold and, subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act, to forward it to the other interested parties in order that an overall picture can be formed. No further meeting is proposed at this stage.

I have asked officials from my Department to keep you informed of the findings of the 'group' and also any developments that may arise out of their deliberations.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment 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 3053/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department determines who is to be consulted as part of each equality impact assessment in accordance with the advice in the Equality Commission's Guide to the Statutory Duties. The Department's Equality Scheme gives officials discretion to consult relevant organisations drawn from the consultation list in the Scheme. Consultation lists are prepared for each equality impact assessment on an individual basis drawing from the Equality Scheme consultation list.

The Department is committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and as meaningful as possible. We are continually looking at ways to improve our methods of consultation, and have discussed this with representatives of the main Section 75 Groups.

Carrickfergus Castle

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment why the Environment and Heritage Service does not promote Carrickfergus Castle through the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Organisation. [R/]
(AQW 3090/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Further to AQW 2853/00 answered on 18 May 2001, I regret that, because of other pressures, the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department was not able to complete during 2001/2 the marketing strategy which, among other things, would have considered the opportunities to promote Carrickfergus Castle.

However, subject to the recruitment of a marketing officer EHS expects to prepare during the current financial year a marketing strategy to promote all its sites and properties.

In developing this strategy, EHS will consider the opportunities for using the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Organisation, and similar bodies, to promote Carrickfergus Castle.

Leylandii Trees

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment to state if it is his intention to introduce legislation to restrict the planting of leylandii trees in residential areas.
(AQW 3124/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have no plans at present to introduce legislation to restrict the planting of leylandii trees in residential areas.

However, my officials will continue to monitor the position, and consider the need for, and most appropriate means of dealing with leylandii, and other problem trees and hedges.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the timescale for publishing the draft Ards and Down Area Plan; and (b) why the launch of the Plan has been delayed until September 2002. (AQW 3134/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

(a) I anticipate that the draft plan will be published during August 2002.

The Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 is the first to be prepared in the context of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), which was formulated in September 2001.

The Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 requires the Plan to be "consistent with" the RDS. 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.

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) is currently consulting on changes to the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 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. Clearance on 'consistency' will require consultations with the Department for Regional Development on the completed draft prior to publication.

(b) As a result of these considerations Planning Service now expects to publish the draft Plan in August 2002.

Cheston Street/Governor's Place, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made regarding Planning Application V2000/0359 at Cheston Street/ Governor's Place, Carrickfergus.
(AQW 3144/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The application, seeking approval for the demolition of properties at 5-13 Cheston St and 4,5 & 7 Governor's Place, Carrickfergus, the retention of the façade of a listed building at 4 Governor's Place, and the erection of 26 apartments with associated on site parking, was received on 22 December 2000. There are two other concurrent applications for Listed Building Consent and Conservation Area Consent in respect of the development.

Contextual drawings were requested by the Department to ensure a proper assessment of the proposal. After a series of discussions and meetings with the applicant, agent, and officials from the Construction Service and Environment and Heritage Service, it was determined that the Listed Building could be retained without wholesale demolition.

The applicant subsequently agreed at a site meeting on 5 February 2002 to withdraw the application for demolition of the Listed Building, and to submit a fresh application based on retaining the majority of the property.

The current position is that revised sketch proposals have been received, and these have been circulated to consultees for appraisal. A meeting has been arranged between Planning officials and the applicant to discuss the revisions on 9th May 2002.

Land Prices: ASSI

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment what information is available on the effect on agricultural land prices pursuant to an area being declared of special scientific interest; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3275/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am not aware of any information on agricultural land values being directly affected as a consequence of the declaration of Areas of Special Scientific Interest. Agricultural land values are known to react to trends and factors within the industry and I am advised by the Valuation and Lands Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel, that it is not possible to identify the specific effects of an ASSI declaration. ASSIs are declared under Article 24 of the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985. Article 26 provides for compensation to be paid to any person who shows that the value of his/her estate within the ASSI is less than it would have been if the declaration had not been made. There have been no successful claims to the Department under this Article since the legislation came into operation.

Owners and occupiers of agricultural land within an ASSI may receive payments for income foregone if they chose to enter into a management agreement with the Department. 250 management agreements, many of them in respect of agricultural land, have been successfully negotiated to date.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

NICS

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of civil servants in the NI Civil Service in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 2961/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

The total number of civil servants in the NI Civil Service on the 1st July in each of the last ten years i.e. 1992 – 2001, is shown in the table below.

Year	Non-Industrial	Industrial	Total
1992	21591	4453	26044
1993	22111	4227	26338
1994	21609	3838	25447
1995	21208	3526	24734
1996	21369	3421	24790
1997	21228	3223	24451
1998	21146	3047	24193
1999	21513	2889	24402
2000	21947	2866	24813
2001	22953	2825	25778

The figures above include members of the NICS working in the 11 Northern Ireland Ministerial Departments, serving abroad, and on secondment to other organisations.

They do not include staff in - the NIO, NIO Prisons Admin, PSNI (Civilian Staff), Policing Board, NI Audit Office, NI Assembly; or staff on Career Breaks.

NICS: People Recruited

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people recruited to the NI Civil Service in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 2962/01)

Dr Farren: The information requested is as follows:

1991	1575
1992/93	1650
1993/94	538
1994/95	415
1995/96	711
1996/98	1757
1998/99	2001
1999/00	1972
2000/01	5810
2001/02	3037

Notes

(i) The 1992/93 figure covers the period 1 January 1992 to 31 March 1993. Thereafter figures refer to financial year.

(ii) Responsibility for recruitment passed from the Civil Service Commissioners to DFP on 1 December 1996. No separate figures are available for 1996/97 and 1997/98.

(iii) 2000/01 figure includes some 3,000 temporary Census staff.

(iv) Figures exclude industrial and casual staff.

NICS: Graduate Entry Level

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the rates of pay for graduate entry level to the NI Civil Service in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 2963/01)

Dr Farren: The information is as follows:

Year	Competition	Entry Salary Range
1992	Administrative Trainee Scheme	£12,640 - £14,701
1993	Administrative Trainee Scheme	£12,640 - £23,263*
1994	Administrative Trainee Scheme	£13,144 - £24,139
1995	Administrative Trainee Scheme	£13,396 - £24,589

* Pay scales for all the grades in the scheme were amalgamated in this year into one continuous pay scale, covering the full range of grades within the administrative scheme that graduates would progress to, following assimilation and promotion etc.

Year	Competition	Entry Salary Range
1996	Management Trainee Scheme	£13,324 - £15,678
1997	Management Trainee Scheme	£13,324 - £15,839
1998	Management Trainee Scheme	£13,737 - £16,330
1999	Management Trainee Scheme	£14,019 - £16,665
2000	Management Trainee Scheme	£14,601 - £17,358
2001	Graduate Recruitment Scheme	£17,714 - £25,034

NICS: Graduate Entry Level

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of civil servants recruited into the NI Civil Service at graduate entry level in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 2964/01)

Dr Farren: The information is as follows:

1991/92	3
1992/93	4
1996/97	20
1999/00	15
2001/02	46

Information relates to administrative grades: information on graduate recruitment to other grades is not held.

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel 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 2980/01)

Dr Farren: (a) The Department of Finance and Personnel, its Agencies and NDPBs had a total of 20 credit cards in use during the Financial Year ending 31 March 2002. The breakdown is as follows:

(a) The Department of Finance and Personnel, its Agencies and NDPBs had a total of 20 credit cards in use during the Financial Year ending 31 March 2002. The breakdown is as follows:

(i) 16

(ii) 3

(iii) 1

(b) The amount spent on each card during the financial year ended 31 March 2002 was as follows:

The Department	
Card 1	£118.23
Cards 2-16	£4,872.83
Executive Agencies	
Card 1	£1,517.39
Card 2	£437.94
Card 3	£187.80
NDPBs	
Card 1	£8,294.09

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what criteria is used to determine which groups or individuals are consulted as part of the equality impact assessment of any new proposals.

(AQW 3079/01)

Dr Farren: The criteria used to determine who is consulted are those contained in the Equality Commission's guidance, on the implementation of the statutory duties which states, "Consultation must be carried out with relevant interest groups as well as the Equality Commission, other public bodies, voluntary, community, trade union and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter ...".

In addition the Department's Equality Scheme states at paragraph 4.8, "Equality impact assessments will therefore concentrate on those categories where impact has been identified. As new policies emerge within a current main policy area, any necessary equality impact assessment will, as a minimum, concentrate on those Section 75 categories where an impact has already been identified. However additional categories will be addressed as necessary".

The Department is committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and as meaningful as possible. We are aware of the difficulties experienced by some groups in the voluntary and community sector as a result of the volume of consultation material being

issued. As a consequence we have been in contact with all those on our full list of consultees and asked them to confirm that they wish to remain on it and whether there is an umbrella body that would adequately represent their interests.

Redemption of Ground Rents

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the process implemented by Land Registers for the purchase of freeholds of residential properties; (b) the possible causes of delay in completing this process; and (c) any specific problems when freeholds are held by charitable institutions. (AQW 3084/01)

Dr Farren: The voluntary scheme for redemption of ground rents under the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 will come into operation this summer. At that time, householders who want to secure the freehold to their properties will complete an application form obtainable from the Land Registry and return it with evidence of title, a receipt for the last payment of ground rent, and remittance of the compensation payable under the Act. At the same time the householder will give notice to the rent-owner that the compensation money will be obtainable from the Land Registry. When the Land Registry is satisfied that all the requisite information has been accurately supplied, it will issue a 'certificate of redemption' which will enable the householder to have his or her interest registered as freehold.

The timescale for the Land Registry's part in this process will to some extent depend on take-up, but we hope it will be possible to complete a normal case within a few weeks.

Charitable trusts which receive ground rents will be affected by the Act in the same way as other landowners.

A guidance booklet on applications under the Act will be published nearer its implementation. In the meantime, an Office of Law Reform factsheet on the Act is available at <http://www.olrni.gov.uk/home.htm>

Radon-Affected Areas

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he raised the issue of designated radon-affected areas with his counterpart in the Irish Government, and, if so, are there any implications for the amended building regulations, which he now proposes. (AQW 3101/01)

Dr Farren: I have not raised the matter of radon designation with Ministers in the Republic and have no plans to do so at present. However, as my predecessor indicated in a previous written answer on this issue on 14 February 2001, regular contact does take place at official level both on radon and other environmental protection issues.

Barnett Formula Spend

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to close the gap between the Barnett formula spend for our health service and the funding needed to match the planned growth in health spending in England. (AQW 3289/01)

Dr Farren: In my Statement to the Assembly on 22 April following the Chancellor's Budget, I highlighted a major discrepancy between what we received via Barnett and what would be needed to match the planned growth in health spending in England.

It has come to my attention that the figures used in our Press Release, and in the Statement to the Assembly, did not reflect the full picture and were inaccurate in that they did not take account of the additions for Personal Social Services in England, which will lead to some further Barnett Consequentials over the planned period. As such, the extent of the disparity has been overstated.

Officials in Treasury, DFP, OFMDFM and DHSSPS are currently checking the details fully and full clarification will be provided as soon as possible. On behalf of my Department I owe an apology to the Assembly for the need to amend and clarify the position and will do so as soon as possible.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Cockles: Strangford Lough

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will the harvesting of cockles resume on the shore of Strangford Lough. (AQW 2676/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Food Safety and Public Health protection in this area are matters for the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The normal criteria for allowing harvesting of cockles are two consecutive negative results ie absence of Diarrhetic Shellfish Poison toxins from samples tested at the laboratories of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Developments Veterinary Sciences Division.

Following the second negative result the FSA permitted cockle harvesting to resume in Strangford Lough on 19th April 2002.

Is ábhar don Ghníomhaireacht Caighdeán Bia (FSA) sa réimse seo é Sábháilteacht Bia agus cosaint Sláinte Poiblí. Is iad na gnáthchritéir do cheadú fómhar ruacan a bhaint ná dhá thoradh diúltacha as a chéile, is é sin, gan

aon tocsainí Nimhe Sliogéisc is siocar leis an mBuinneach a bheith i samplaí a thástáiltear ag saotharlanna Rannóg Eolaíochtaí Tréidlíochta na Roinne Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha Tuaithe.

Tar éis an dara toradh diúltach cheadaigh an FSA leanúint d'fhómhar ruacan a bhaint i Loch Cuan an naoú lá déag d'Aibreán dhá mhíle agus a dó.

Herceptin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been allocated for the drug 'Herceptin'. (AQW 2726/01)

Ms de Brún: Treatment using the drug 'Herceptin' may only be initiated by cancer specialists in a hospital setting. As there is no specific allocation made for hospital pharmacy, it is not possible to say how much is attributable to the prescription of this drug.

Ní fhéadann ach saineolaithe ailse tús a chur le cóireáil i suíomh otharlainne ag úsáid an druga 'Herceptin'. Mar nach bhfuil airgead ar leith tugtha do chógaisíocht otharlainne, ní féidir liom a rá an méid áirithe a thugtar leis an druga seo a ordú.

Physically and Mentally Ill: Funding

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the amount of funding spent by each Health Trust on the provision of services for the physically and mentally ill for each of the past three years; and (b) this figure as a percentage of the total amount of funding allocated. (AQW 2815/01)

Ms de Brún: The amount of funding spent by each Health and Social Services Trust on the provision of services on the physical and sensory disability and mental health Programmes of Care for each of the past three years is shown in the following tables:

1998/1999

Trust	Mental Health	Physical & Sensory Disability	Total
Belfast City Hospital	2,377,239	0	2,377,239
Royal Group of Hospitals	225,760	0	225,760
Ulster Community & Hospital	6,328,780	2,625,185	8,953,965
Down Lisburn	12,396,863	4,767,583	17,164,446
South & East Belfast	18,562,779	4,811,166	23,373,945
North & West Belfast	9,027,630	3,932,221	12,959,851
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	6,045,000	2,059,175	8,104,175
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	0	0

Trust	Mental Health	Physical & Sensory Disability	Total
Newry & Mourne	2,560,693	1,824,786	4,385,479
Green Park	1,263,650	6,111,105	7,374,755
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	1,959,850	0	1,959,850
Causeway	3,509,103	2,203,238	5,712,341
Homefirst Community	19,264,654	4,401,851	23,666,505
Foyle	9,284,333	2,848,987	12,133,320
Sperrin Lakeland	14,790,237	2,642,529	17,432,766
Armagh & Dungannon	7,097,759	2,352,377	9,450,136
Altnagelvin	0	0	0
United Hospitals	8,635	0	8,635

1999/2000

Trust	Mental Health	Physical & Sensory Disability	Total
Belfast City Hospital	2,513,126	0	2,513,126
Royal Group of Hospitals	270,451	0	270,451
Ulster Community & Hospital	6,647,311	2,965,904	9,613,215
Down Lisburn	12,761,749	4,860,395	17,622,144
South & East Belfast	19,956,294	5,065,002	25,021,296
North & West Belfast	9,682,392	4,680,454	14,362,846
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	6,513,940	2,889,252	9,403,192
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne	2,893,559	2,044,790	4,938,349
Green Park	1,291,835	6,662,050	7,953,885
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	3,434,497	0	3,434,497
Causeway	3,673,854	2,428,769	6,102,623
Homefirst Community	21,498,495	5,031,771	26,530,266
Foyle	10,252,331	3,280,386	13,532,717
Sperrin Lakeland	15,237,600	2,998,204	18,235,804
Armagh & Dungannon	7,401,243	2,595,189	9,996,432
Altnagelvin	0	0	0
United Hospitals	0	0	0

2000/2001

Trust	Mental Health	Physical & Sensory Disability	Total
Belfast City Hospital	2,823,130	0	2,823,130
Royal Group of Hospitals	351,132	0	351,132
Ulster Community & Hospital	7,200,854	3,038,270	10,239,124
Down Lisburn	13,343,534	5,096,687	18,440,221
South & East Belfast	21,865,011	5,203,418	27,068,429

Trust	Mental Health	Physical & Sensory Disability	Total
North & West Belfast	10,542,753	4,924,988	15,467,741
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	7,276,715	3,187,336	10,464,051
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne	3,035,476	2,294,378	5,329,854
Green Park	1,419,492	6,751,285	8,170,777
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	3,993,244	0	3,993,244
Causeway	4,820,082	2,565,802	7,385,884
Homefirst Community	22,128,102	6,342,262	28,470,364
Foyle	10,542,638	3,812,238	14,354,876
Sperrin Lakeland	15,931,086	3,120,257	19,051,343
Armagh & Dungannon	7,816,681	2,796,891	10,613,572
Altnagelvin	0	0	0
United Hospitals	16,834	65,442	82,276

The percentage of each Trusts' total expenditure in each year which these amounts represents is as follows:

1998/1999

Trust	1 Total Mental Health/ Physical & Sensory Disability	2 Total Expenditure	3 % 1 of 2
Belfast City Hospital	2,377,239	88,496,742	2.69%
Royal Group of Hospitals	225,760	115,621,951	0.20%
Ulster Community & Hospital	8,953,965	107,391,597	8.34%
Down Lisburn	17,164,446	89,290,408	19.22%
South & East Belfast	23,373,945	94,497,029	24.74%
North & West Belfast	12,959,851	88,735,740	14.60%
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	8,104,175	35,820,763	22.62%
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	39,256,164	0.00%
Newry & Mourne	4,385,479	47,690,527	9.20%
Green Park	7,374,755	41,631,272	17.71%
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	1,959,850	18,896,997	10.37%
Causeway	5,712,341	54,094,624	10.56%

Trust	1 Total Mental Health/ Physical & Sensory Disability	2 Total Expenditure	3 % 1 of 2
Homefirst Community	23,666,505	99,029,301	23.90%
Foyle	12,133,320	58,604,715	20.70%
Sperrin Lakeland	17,432,766	79,149,812	22.03%
Armagh & Dungannon	9,450,136	59,719,481	15.82%
Altnagelvin	0	47,122,030	0.00%
United Hospitals	8,635	70,910,306	0.01%

1999/2000

Trust	1 Total Mental Health/ Physical & Sensory Disability	2 Total Expenditure	3 % 1 of 2
Belfast City Hospital	2,513,126	104,419,307	2.41%
Royal Group of Hospitals	270,451	132,283,346	0.20%
Ulster Community & Hospital	9,613,215	116,707,747	8.24%
Down Lisburn	17,622,144	91,320,583	19.30%
South & East Belfast	25,021,296	99,419,646	25.17%
North & West Belfast	14,362,846	93,957,120	15.29%
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	9,403,192	39,916,167	23.56%
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	42,876,950	0.00%
Newry & Mourne	4,938,349	53,099,078	9.30%
Green Park	7,953,885	39,139,853	20.32%
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	3,434,497	22,091,641	15.55%
Causeway	6,102,623	57,893,471	10.54%
Homefirst Community	26,530,266	108,906,942	24.36%
Foyle	13,532,717	62,394,532	21.69%
Sperrin Lakeland	18,235,804	86,453,940	21.09%
Armagh & Dungannon	9,996,432	63,053,820	15.85%
Altnagelvin	0	50,907,250	0.00%
United Hospitals	0	75,200,700	0.00%

2000/2001

	1	2	3
Trust	Total Mental Health/ Physical & Sensory Disability	Total Expenditure	% 1 of 2
Belfast City Hospital	2,823,130	104,294,066	2.71%
Royal Group of Hospitals	351,132	150,594,189	0.23%
Ulster Community & Hospital	10,239,124	126,801,000	8.07%
Down Lisburn	18,440,221	98,441,582	18.73%
South & East Belfast	27,068,429	110,776,518	24.44%
North & West Belfast	15,467,741	98,948,444	15.63%
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	10,464,051	43,786,814	23.90%
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	0	63,843,976	0.00%
Newry & Mourne	5,329,854	57,302,301	9.30%
Green Park	8,170,777	43,343,441	18.85%
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	3,993,244	24,273,813	16.45%
Causeway	7,385,884	71,597,216	10.32%
Homefirst Community	28,470,364	118,167,729	24.09%
Foyle	14,354,876	67,907,316	21.14%
Sperrin Lakeland	19,051,343	90,544,466	21.04%
Armagh & Dungannon	10,613,572	54,465,420	19.49%
Altnagelvin	0	25,663,066	0.00%
United Hospitals	82,276	81,889,073	0.10%

Taispeántar sna táblaí a leanas méid an mhaoinithe caite ag gach Iontaobhas Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta ar sholáthar seirbhísí Cláir Chúraim um míchumas fisiceach agus céadfach agus um shláinte meabhrach le gach bliain le trí bliana anuas:

1998/1999

Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach	Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach	Iomlán
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	2,377,239	0	2,377,239
Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	225,760	0	225,760

Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach	Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach	Iomlán
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	6,328,780	2,625,185	8,953,965
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	12,396,863	4,767,583	17,164,446
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	18,562,779	4,811,166	23,373,945
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	9,027,630	3,932,221	12,959,851
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	6,045,000	2,059,175	8,104,175
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	0	0	0
An tIúr & Múrna	2,560,693	1,824,786	4,385,479
Páirc Ghlas	1,263,650	6,111,105	7,374,755
Otharlann an Mater	1,959,850	0	1,959,850
An Clochán	3,509,103	2,203,238	5,712,341
Pobal Homefirst	19,264,654	4,401,851	23,666,505
An Feabhal	9,284,333	2,848,987	12,133,320
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	14,790,237	2,642,529	17,432,766
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	7,097,759	2,352,377	9,450,136
Alt na nGealbhan	0	0	0
Otharlanna Aontaithe	8,635	0	8,635

1999/2000

Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach	Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach	Iomlán
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	2,513,126	0	2,513,126
Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	270,451	0	270,451
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	6,647,311	2,965,904	9,613,215
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	12,761,749	4,860,395	17,622,144
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	19,956,294	5,065,002	25,021,296
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	9,682,392	4,680,454	14,362,846
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	6,513,940	2,889,252	9,403,192
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	0	0	0
An tIúr & Múrna	2,893,559	2,044,790	4,938,349
Páirc Ghlas	1,291,835	6,662,050	7,953,885
Otharlann an Mater	3,434,497	0	3,434,497
An Clochán	3,673,854	2,428,769	6,102,623
Pobal Homefirst	21,498,495	5,031,771	26,530,266
An Feabhal	10,252,331	3,280,386	13,532,717
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	15,237,600	2,998,204	18,235,804

Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach	Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach	Iomlán
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	7,401,243	2,595,189	9,996,432
Alt na nGealbhan	0	0	0
Otharlanna Aontaithe	0	0	0

2000/2001

Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach	Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach	Iomlán
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	2,823,130	0	2,823,130
Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	351,132	0	351,132
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	7,200,854	3,038,270	10,239,124
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	13,343,534	5,096,687	18,440,221
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	21,865,011	5,203,418	27,068,429
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	10,542,753	4,924,988	15,467,741
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	7,276,715	3,187,336	10,464,051
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	0	0	0
An tÍúr & Múrna	3,035,476	2,294,378	5,329,854
Páirc Ghlas	1,419,492	6,751,285	8,170,777
Otharlann an Mater	3,993,244	0	3,993,244
An Clochán	4,820,082	2,565,802	7,385,884
Pobal Homefirst	22,128,102	6,342,262	28,470,364
An Feabhal	10,542,638	3,812,238	14,354,876
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	15,931,086	3,120,257	19,051,343
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	7,816,681	2,796,891	10,613,572
Alt na nGealbhan	0	0	0
Otharlanna Aontaithe	16,834	65,442	82,276

Tá na suimeanna seo léirithe mar chéatadán de chaiteachas iomlán gach Iontaobhas i ngach bliain mar a leanas:

1998/1999

	1	2	3
Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach/ Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach san Iomlán	Caiteachas Iomlán	% 1 de 2
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	2,377,239	88,496,742	2.69%

	1	2	3
Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach/ Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach san Iomlán	Caiteachas Iomlán	% 1 de 2
Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	225,760	115,621,951	0.20%
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	8,953,965	107,391,597	8.34%
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	17,164,446	89,290,408	19.22%
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	23,373,945	94,497,029	24.74%
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	12,959,851	88,735,740	14.60%
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	8,104,175	35,820,763	22.62%
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	0	39,256,164	0.00%
An tÍúr & Múrna	4,385,479	47,690,527	9.20%
Páirc Ghlas	7,374,755	41,631,272	17.71%
Otharlann an Mater	1,959,850	18,896,997	10.37%
An Clochán	5,712,341	54,094,624	10.56%
Pobal Homefirst	23,666,505	99,029,301	23.90%
An Feabhal	12,133,320	58,604,715	20.70%
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	17,432,766	79,149,812	22.03%
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	9,450,136	59,719,481	15.82%
Alt na nGealbhan	0	47,122,030	0.00%
Otharlanna Aontaithe	8,635	70,910,306	0.01%

1999/2000

	1	2	3
Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach/ Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach san Iomlán	Caiteachas Iomlán	% 1 de 2
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	2,513,126	104,419,307	2.41%
Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	270,451	132,283,346	0.20%
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	9,613,215	116,707,747	8.24%
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	17,622,144	91,320,583	19.30%

	1	2	3
Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach/ Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach san Iomlán	Caiteachas Iomlán	% 1 de 2
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	25,021,296	99,419,646	25.17%
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	14,362,846	93,957,120	15.29%
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	9,403,192	39,916,167	23.56%
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	0	42,876,950	0.00%
An tÍúr & Múrna	4,938,349	53,099,078	9.30%
Páirc Ghlas	7,953,885	39,139,853	20.32%
Otharlann an Mater	3,434,497	22,091,641	15.55%
An Clochán	6,102,623	57,893,471	10.54%
Pobal Homefirst	26,530,266	108,906,942	24.36%
An Feabhal	13,532,717	62,394,532	21.69%
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	18,235,804	86,453,940	21.09%
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	9,996,432	63,053,820	15.85%
Alt na nGealbhan	0	50,907,250	0.00%
Otharlanna Aontaithe	0	75,200,700	0.00%

2000/2001

	1	2	3
Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach/ Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach san Iomlán	Caiteachas Iomlán	% 1 de 2
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	2,823,130	104,294,066	2.71%
Grúpa Rioga Otharlann	351,132	150,594,189	0.23%
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	10,239,124	126,801,000	8.07%
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	18,440,221	98,441,582	18.73%
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	27,068,429	110,776,518	24.44%
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	15,467,741	98,948,444	15.63%

	1	2	3
Iontaobhas	Sláinte Meabhrach/ Míchumas Fisiceach agus Céadfach san Iomlán	Caiteachas Iomlán	% 1 de 2
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	10,464,051	43,786,814	23.90%
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	0	63,843,976	0.00%
An tÍúr & Múrna	5,329,854	57,302,301	9.30%
Páirc Ghlas	8,170,777	43,343,441	18.85%
Otharlann an Mater	3,993,244	24,273,813	16.45%
An Clochán	7,385,884	71,597,216	10.32%
Pobal Homefirst	28,470,364	118,167,729	24.09%
An Feabhal	14,354,876	67,907,316	21.14%
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	19,051,343	90,544,466	21.04%
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	10,613,572	54,465,420	19.49%
Alt na nGealbhan	0	25,663,066	0.00%
Otharlanna Aontaithe	82,276	81,889,073	0.10%

Acute Hospital Services: Fermanagh and Tyrone

Mr Foster asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she intends to detail her plans for future provision of Acute Hospital Services in Enniskillen and so help alleviate fears of residents in Co Fermanagh that services at the Erne Hospital might be reduced. (AQW 2817/01)

Ms de Brún: The future provision of acute hospital services for the people of Fermanagh and Tyrone will form part of the overall package of acute hospital services being considered as part 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.

Beidh soláthar seirbhísí géarotharlainne do mhuintir Fhear Manach agus Thír Eoghain sa toadhchá mar chuid den phacáiste sheirbhísí géarotharlainne a bhfuiltear ag déanamh machnaimh air mar chuid den Athbhreithniú ar Ghéarotharlanna. I ndiaidh caibidil a dhéanamh sa

Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhchomhairle iomlán phoiblí. Táthar ag súil cinnidh deireannacha a ghlacadh i rith 2002.

Chuir mé in iúl go soiléir go bhfuil mé ag dúil go ndéanfar gach iarracht na seirbhísí atá ann faoi láthair a choinneáil inár ngéarotharlanna go léir go dtí go nglactar cinnidh fhadtéarmacha.

Waiting Lists

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1162/00 and AQW 1168/00, whether the additional funding received by her Department has made a difference in waiting lists; and to make a statement. (AQW 2851/01)

Ms de Brún: There has been a reduction of almost 24% in waiting lists for occupational therapy services in the period December 2000 to December 2001. This is a result of additional funding provided to recruit an extra 20 occupational therapists, and changes in procedures arising from the recommendations of the Joint Housing Executive/DHSSPS review of Housing Adaptations Service.

Tá laghdú chóir a bheith 24% ar liostaí feithimh do sheirbhísí teiripe saothair sa tréimhse ó Nollaig 2000 go Nollaig 2001. Is toradh é seo ar mhaoiniú breise a tugadh chun 20 teiripeoir saothair breise a earcú, agus ar athruithe ar ghnáthaimh a tharla toisc moltaí comhathbhreithniú Feidhmeannas Tithíochta/SSSSP ar Sheirbhís Oiriúnuithe Tithíochta.

Hepatitis C

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what support is currently being offered or may be offered to patient groups suffering from Hepatitis C; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2870/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has set up a Group to draw up a strategy to deal with all aspects of the disease. Much work has been done on this, and voluntary groups and individuals with the disease have been involved.

Before finalising the strategy, officials from my Department will meet with concerned voluntary groups and individuals in June to discuss in more detail the needs of patients and patient groups e.g. counselling services, care pathways, nursing support services. Meantime individual patients with the disease are referred to a specialist who will investigate and advise on treatment regimes such as “alpha-interferon”

Bhunaigh mo Roinn Grúpa le straitéis a chumadh le déileáil le gach gné den ghalar. Tá cuid mhór oibre déanta uirthi seo, agus bhí grúpaí deonacha agus daoine a bhfuil an galar orthu páirteach ann.

Sula gcuirfear an dlaoi mhullaigh ar an straitéis, buailfidh oifigigh ó mo Roinn le grúpaí deonacha agus le daoine leasmhara aonair a bhfuil inní orthu i Meitheamh le riachtanais othar agus grúpaí othar m.sh. seirbhísí comhairle, agus cosáin chúraim agus seirbhísí tacaíochta altranais, a phlé go mion. Idir an dá linn, seoltar othair aonair a bhfuil an galar orthu chuig saíneolaí a fhiosróidh agus a thabharfaidh comhairle ar chórais chóireála amhail “alpha-interferon”.

Chiropodists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a lack of chiropodists within the Health Service and, if so, is emergency treatment only being carried out.

(AQW 2923/01)

Ms de Brún: Demand for Chiropody services currently exceeds that which can be fully provided within the existing level of resources. My Department will shortly conduct a Workforce Planning Review for Chiropody services and will make an assessment of the number of Chiropodists needed. Treatment is not restricted to emergency treatment only, however existing service providers prioritise delivery of Chiropody services to those with greatest clinical need, in order to target those most at risk. Those needs identified as non-priority are placed on waiting lists and responded to when possible.

Tá an t-éileamh ar sheirbhísí cosliachta i láthair na huaire níos mó ná mar is féidir a sholáthar go hiomlán laistigh den leibhéal acmhainní atá ann cheana. Stiúrfaidh mo Roinnse go gairid Athbhreithniú Pleanála an Fhórsa Saothair do sheirbhísí Cosliachta agus déanfaidh sí measúnú ar an líon Coslianna atá de dhíth. Níl an chóireáil teoranta do chóireáil éigeandála amháin, tugann na soláthróirí seirbhíse atá ann cheana áfach tosaíocht do sheachadadh seirbhísí Cosliachta dóibh siúd a bhfuil an riachtanas cliniciúil is mó orthu, ionas gur féidir spriocdhírú orthu sin is mó atá i mbaoil. Cuirtear na riachtanais a dtugtar aitheantas neamhthosaíochta dóibh ar liostaí feithimh agus déantar freagairt ina leith nuair is féidir.

Chiropodists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made regarding (a) the current number of chiropodists employed by the Health Service compared to the population size; and (b) the numbers pursuing chiropody as a medical career.

(AQW 2924/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) Currently there are 8.75 whole time equivalent Chiropodists employed by the HPSS per 100,000 of the population here.

- (b) The Total Number of Chiropodists here is currently 175.
- (a) I láthair na huair tá comhionann lánaimsire 8.75 de Choslianna fostaithe ag an HPSS in aghaidh gach céad míle duine den daonra anseo.
- (b) Is é an Líon Iomlán Coslianna anseo faoi láthair ná 175.

Speech Therapy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the number of pupils currently requiring speech therapy.

(AQW 2926/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of children currently requiring speech therapy is not available. Information on the number of children currently awaiting assessment by Speech & Language therapists in each Health and Social Services Board is shown in the table below.

CHILDREN WAITING FOR ASSESSMENT BY SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPISTS, BY BOARD

Board	
EHSSB	1,729
NHSSB	377
SHSSB	629
WHSSB	210
Total	2,945

Níl eolas ar líon na bpáistí a bhfuil teiripe urlabhra de dhíth orthu faoi láthair ar fáil. Léirítear sa tábla thíos eolas ar líon na bpáistí atá ag fanacht ar mheasúnú ag Teiripeoir Urlabhra & Teanga i ngach Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta.

PÁISTÍ AG FANACHT AR MHEASÚNÚ AG TEIRIPEOIR URLABHRA & TEANGA, DE RÉIR BOIRD

Bord	
BSSSO	1,729
BSSST	377
BSSSD	629
BSSSI	210
Iomlán	2,945

Eastern Multifund

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources she is taking to safeguard the jobs of staff working within the Eastern Multifund, Belvoir Park, Belfast and other former fundholding practices.

(AQW 2927/01)

Ms de Brún: The jobs of staff employed by the Eastern Multifund and by other fundholding practices to carry out fund management work will inevitably come to an end with the closure of the GP fundholding scheme. There are, however, a number of possibilities for the alternative employment of such staff.

The majority of those who have been employed by practices to manage fundholding also have other jobs within the practice and will continue to be employed by those practices after the ending of the scheme. The Eastern Multifund will also continue to employ a number of its staff for some further months in order to close down the accounts of its constituent practices.

Any members of staff who may be faced with redundancy as a result of the ending of fundholding will have access to a Staff Redeployment Unit that has been in operation for some time within the HPSS. Staff who register with the Unit will be assisted in finding alternative employment within the wider HPSS. A number of staff from the Multifund have registered with the Unit and some have already been found new jobs as a result.

Upwards of 30 new jobs will be created to support the operation of the Local Health and Social Care Groups and the process of recruiting staff to fill these vacancies will start once LHSCG Management Boards have been established. Employees of the Multifund and of former fundholding practices will of course be free to compete for these posts.

Is cinnte go gcuirfear deireadh le postanna oibrithe fostaithe ag an Ilchiste Oirthearach agus ag clinicí cistesheilbhe eile le hobair stiúradh maoinithe a dhéanamh, ag cealú na scéime cistesheilbhe Gnáthdhochtúirí. Tá roinnt féidearthachtaí eile ann áfach lena leithéid de na hoibrithe sin a fhostú i bpostanna eile.

Tá postanna eile laistigh den chlinic fosta ag formhór na ndaoine sin a bhí fostaithe ag clinicí leis an scéim chistesheilbhe a stiúradh agus fostóidh na clinicí go fóill iad i ndiaidh chealú na scéime. Fostóidh an Ilchiste Oirthearach cuid dá oibrithe go fóill le roinnt míonna eile le cuntais na gclíní ina limistéar a dhruidim.

Beidh oibrí ar bith a bhfuil an iomarcacht ag teacht sa bhealach air de dheasca chealú na scéime cistesheilbhe ábalta Ionad Athfhostaithe Oibrithe a bhí ag feidhmiú le tamall maith laistigh de na SSSP a úsáid. Cuideofar le hoibrithe a chláraíonn leis an ionad post eile a fháil laistigh de na SSSP iomlána. Chláraigh roinnt oibrithe ón Ilchiste leis an Ionad agus fuair siad postanna nua dá thoradh.

Cruthófar breis agus 30 post nua le tacú le feidhmiú na nGrúpaí Áitiúla Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta agus tosófar ar an phróiseas le hoibrithe a earcú chun na postanna a líonadh a luaithe is a bheidh Boird Stiúrtha na nGÁSCSÍ bunaithe. Leoga, beidh fostaithe an Ilchiste

agus iarfhostaithe chlinicí na scéime cistesheilbhe saor le dul san iomaíocht do na postanna seo.

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, in each of the past 5 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 2928/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on (a), (b), (c) and (d) is not available. In relation to (e) and (f), my Department has revised and published its New TSN Action Plans for the period April 2001 to March 2003, taking account of progress and new priorities arising through the Programme for Government. The revised Action Plan contains details on progress made towards all of the Department's TSN objectives and targets for the period up to 31 March 2001 and in Section 3, shows the targets and actions achieved in the published "Making it Work" targets for 2000/2002. To date, the achievements include:

- Development of the Investing for Health Strategy;
- Establishing two Health Action Zones;
- Taking forward actions arising from the Drugs Strategy;
- Publishing the report of the Promoting Social Inclusion group on teenage parenthood "Myths and Reality" and consulting on the proposals;
- Ensuring that funding allocations are more equitably distributed according to health and social care need;
- Development and implementation of 23 Sure Start projects aimed at families with young children in disadvantaged areas.

Níl eolas ar (a), (b), (c) agus ar (d) ar fáil. Maidir le (e) agus (f), leasaigh agus d'fhoilsigh mo Roinn a Pleananna Gníomhachta DRS Nua don tréimhse Aibreán 2001 go Márta 2003, ag cur san áireamh an dul chun cinn agus na tosaíochtaí nua a tháinig as an Chlár um Rialtas. Sa Phlean Gnímh leasaithe tá sonraí ar an dul chun cinn déanta ar chuspóirí agus ar spriocanna DRS go léir na Roinne don tréimhse suas go 31 Márta 2001 agus i Mír 3, léiríonn sé na spriocanna agus na bearta bainte amach sna spriocanna foilsithe i "Á Thabhairt i gCrann" don bhliain 2000/2002. Seo a leanas ar baineadh amach go dtí seo:

- Forbairt na Straitéise Infheistíocht sa tSláinte;
- Bunú dhá Chrios Gnímh ar Shláinte;
- Cur chun cinn beart ag teacht as an Straitéis Drugaí;
- Tuairisc an Ghrúpa um Chuimsiú Sóisialta a Chur Chun Cinn ar thuismíocht déagóra "Miotais agus

Réalaíocht" a fhoilsiú agus ag dul i gcomhairle ar na moltaí;

- Cinntiú go ndáilfear maoiniú níos cothroime de réir an riachtanais shláinte agus chúraim shóisialta;
- Forbairt agus cur i bhfeidhm 23 scéim Sure Start dírithe ar theaghlaigh le páistí óga a chónaíonn i gceantair faoi mhíbhuntáistí.

Shadow Trust

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) why the Shadow Trust Organisation in South Belfast did not receive funding to continue to support people with mental health problems; and (b) what support they will receive in its absence. (AQW 2937/01)

Ms de Brún: The withdrawal of this funding of the Shadow Trust is a matter for the Minister for Employment and Learning. The Trust already receives some funding from the South and East Belfast HSS Trust and is being helped by that Trust to look for alternative sources of funding to replace that withdrawn.

Is ceist don Aire Fostaíochta agus Foghlama é aistarraingt mhaoiniú Iontaobhas an Fhreastóra. Faigheann an tIontaobhas roinnt maoinithe cheana féin ó Iontaobhas HSS Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir agus tá an tIontaobhas sin ag cabhrú le foinsí malartacha maoinithe a lorg le dul in áit an mhaoinithe atá aistarraingthe.

Child Protection Guidelines

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to protect the children of parents who misuse drugs. (AQW 2958/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is about to issue revised child protection guidelines to all professionals with responsibility for the protection of children. In cases where there is evidence to suggest that parents or carers may be abusing substances to an extent which may impair their ability to care for the child, the professionals are advised to give consideration to the need for a child protection investigation on the grounds of neglect.

All children who are assessed as being "at risk", including those whose parents misuse drugs, are managed in accordance with the policy and procedures of the four Board Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs). Each ACPC, which is a multi-agency, interdisciplinary committee, is ultimately responsible for the protection of children in their area, who may be at risk of abuse. Each Committee also has responsibility for the promotion and safeguarding of children's welfare. In cases where risk is suspected, it is policy to notify the Child Care Team of the situation and to work jointly with them

thereafter. This includes information sharing and regular attendance at childcare case conferences.

Tá mo Roinn ar tí treoirilnte leasaithe ar chosaint páistí a chur chuig na gairmithe go léir atá freagrach as cosaint páistí. I gcásanna a bhfuil fianaise ann a léiríonn gur féidir go bhfuil tuismitheoirí nó altramaíthe ag mí-úsáid substaintí sa mhéid go bhfuil tionchar aici ar a gcumas le haire a thabhairt don pháiste, moltar do na gairmithe smaoineamh ar an ghá le fiosrúchán chosaint an pháiste a dhéanamh bunaithe ar chúiseanna neamhchúraim.

Déileáiltear le gach páiste, na páistí sin chomh maith a mbaineann a dtuismitheoirí mí-úsáid as drugaí, a mheastar mar “i mbaol” de réir polasaí agus gnáthaimh na gceithre Choiste Bordcheantair Cosanta Páiste (CBCPanna). Tá gach CBCP, ar coiste ilghníomhaireachta agus ildhisciplíneach é, freagrach sa deireadh thiar as cosaint páistí ina limistéar féin ar féidir leo bheith i mbaol drochíde. Tá gach Coiste freagrach fosta as cur chun cinn agus as cosaint leas páistí. I gcásanna a bhfuil amhras baidil ann, is é an polasaí an riocht a chur in iúl don Fhoireann Chúram an Pháiste agus le comhoibriú leo as sin amach. Tá malartú eolais agus freastal rialta ar chomhdhála chas chúram an pháiste i gceist chomh maith.

Methadone

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently prescribed Methadone on a regular basis.

(AQW 2959/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Cockles: Strangford Lough

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the date the cockle harvest will commence on Strangford Lough; and (b) the criteria for the re-opening of the shell fishery.

(AQW 2966/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to AQW 2676/01

Tagraim an comhalta do AQW2676/01

Oral Health Promotion

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding has been made available to Health and Social Services Boards for Oral Health Promotion since 1999.

(AQW 2985/01)

Ms de Brún: In 1998/1999 funds totalling £124,000 were made available to Health and Social Services Boards

specifically for oral health promotion. For 1999/2000, 2000/2001 and 2001/2002, £500,000 was allocated each year on a capitation basis to Boards to develop, implement and evaluate local measures to address oral health needs and to increase oral health promotion.

Sa bhliain 1998/99 cuireadh maoiniú de £124,000 san iomlán ar fáil do na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta go háirithe do chur chun cinn sláinte béil. Sna blianta 1999/2000, 2000/2001 agus 2001/2002, dáileadh £500,000 gach bliain ar bhonn ceannsráithe ar Bhoird le bearta áitiúla a fhorbairt, a chur i bhfeidhm agus a mheasúnú le tabhairt faoi riachtanais shláinte béil agus le cur chun cinn sláinte béil a mhéadú.

Dental Health

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can he make in relation to dental health in each Health and Social Service Board area compared to the Health Authority areas in (a) the rest of the United Kingdom; and (b) the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 2986/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is not available in the form requested. Some comparisons are shown in the tables below.

PERCENTAGE OF 5-YEAR OLD CHILDREN WITH NO CARIES EXPERIENCE

	NI	UK	England	RoI
1983	22%	48%	52%	47% (1984)
1993	37%	54%	56%	65% (1994/95)

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS WITH 18 OR MORE SOUND TEETH

	NI	UK	England
1978	15%	22%	23%
1988	25%	35%	36%
1988	33%	40%	41%

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm iarrtha. Léirítear roinnt comparáidí sna táblaí thíos.

CÉATADÁN NA BPÁISTÍ 5 BLIAIN D'AOIS GAN LOBHADH FIACLA

	TÉ	RA	Sasana	P na hÉ
1983	22%	48%	52%	47% (1984)
1993	37%	54%	56%	65% (1994/95)

CÉATADÁN NA NDAOINE FÁSTA LE 18 FIACAIL SLÁINTIÚIL NÓ NÍOS MÓ

	TÉ	RA	Sasana
1978	15%	22%	23%
1988	25%	35%	36%
1988	33%	40%	41%

Sub-Fertility

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to monitor the impact of her policy for sub-fertility.

(AQW 3000/01)

Ms de Brún: The service established in December is an interim service. A consultation document on sub-fertility services is currently being prepared. The consultation process will inform the provision of a permanent service and in particular the eligibility criteria and equality issues.

Is seirbhís idirthréimhsiúil í an tseirbhís a bunaíodh i mí na Nollag. Tá doiciméad comhairlithe ar sheirbhísí fothorthúlachta á ullmhú faoi láthair. Rachaidh an próiseas comhairlithe i bhfeidhm ar sholáthar seirbhíse buaine agus go háirithe na critéir cháilitheachta agus ceisteanna comhionannais.

Sub-Fertility

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) consultations that have taken place with clients prior to the implementation of her policy for sub-fertility; and (b) the results of these consultations.

(AQW 3026/01)

Ms de Brún: The service established in December is an interim service. A consultation document on sub-fertility services is currently being prepared. The consultation process will inform the provision of a permanent service and in particular the eligibility criteria and equality issues.

Is seirbhís idirthréimhsiúil í an tseirbhís a bunaíodh i mí na Nollag. Tá doiciméad comhairlithe ar sheirbhísí fothorthúlachta á hullmhú faoi láthair. Rachaidh an próiseas comhairlithe i bhfeidhm ar sholáthar seirbhíse buaine agus go háirithe na critéir cháilitheachta agus ceisteanna comhionannais.

Administrative Staff

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) administrative staff in general practice; (b) nursing staff in general practice, and how this compares with England, Scotland and Wales.

(AQW 3027/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the tables below:

ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL STAFF

	Headcount	WTE ¹	Per 1000 head of population
North of Ireland ²	2,439	1832.1	1.08
England ³	Not collected	51,390	1.03
Scotland ⁴	7704	5,641.8	1.10

	Headcount	WTE ¹	Per 1000 head of population
Wales ³	Not collected	3,281	1.11

¹ Whole time equivalent

² Figures are at April 2002

³ Figures are at 1st September 2001

⁴ Figures are at 1st October 2000

NURSING STAFF¹ IN GENERAL PRACTICE

	Headcount	WTE ²	Per 1000 head of population
North of Ireland ³	680	403.7	0.24
England ⁴	19,846	11,163	0.22
Scotland ⁵	1746	1,065.2	0.21
Wales ⁴	1,238	761	0.26

¹ Figures include Treatment room and Practice nurses.

² Whole time equivalent

³ Figures are at April 2002

⁴ Figures are at 1st September 2001

⁵ Figures are at 1st October 2000

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sna táblaí thíos:

FOIREANN RIARACHÁIN AGUS CLÉIREACH

	Comhaireamh Cinn	WTE ¹	In aghaidh gach 1000 den daonra
Tuaisceart Éireann ²	2,439	1832.1	1.08
Sasana ³	Níor bailíodh	51,390	1.03
Albain ⁴	7704	5,641.8	1.10
An Bhreatain Bheag ³	Níor bailíodh	3,281	1.11

¹ Comhionann Lánaimsire

² Figiúirí ag Aibreán 2002

³ Figiúirí ag 1^ú Meán Fómhair 2001

⁴ Figiúirí ag 1^ú Deireadh Fómhair 2000

FOIREANN ALTRANAIS¹ I NGNÁTH-CHLEACHTAS

	Comhaireamh Cinn	WTE ²	In aghaidh gach 1000 den daonra
Tuaisceart Éireann ³	680	403.7	0.24
Sasana ⁴	19,846	11,163	0.22
Albain ⁵	1746	1,065.2	0.21
An Bhreatain Bheag ⁴	1,238	761	0.26

¹ Áirítear ar an figiúirí altrai seomra cóireála agus altrai cleachtais.

² Comhionann Lánaimsire

³ Figiúirí ag Aibreán 2002

⁴ Figiúirí ag 1^ú Meán Fómhair 2001

⁵ Figiúirí ag 1^ú Deireadh Fómhair 2000

Anti-TNF Drugs

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to make available anti-TNF drugs to sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis. (AQW 3031/01)

Ms de Brún: The approach adopted here to the prescribing of these specialist drugs for the treatment of adults with severe rheumatoid arthritis and children with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, is broadly in line with recent recommendations made by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence. While NICE has endorsed the use of these drugs within clearly defined guidelines, it has identified the need for further assessment to determine their long-term clinical effectiveness.

A recent report by rheumatologists here has also concluded that while these drugs represent a major advancement in the treatment of this illness, it is essential that their use should continue to be strictly controlled and monitored, particularly in light of possible serious adverse effects. My Department is continuing to work with Boards and clinicians to promote a cautious approach to their introduction, within the resources available.

Despite the additional resources I have recently been able to announce for 2002/03, Health and Social Services continue to be under severe financial pressure. I am committed to introducing drugs that offer significant improvement in patient care and I have been able to allocate modest new resources for specialist drugs. Where new drugs are expensive but offer real advances in patient care, I will continue to seek the support of Executive colleagues in securing the necessary resources.

Tá an cleachtas anseo maidir le hordú na saindrugaí seo do chóireáil daoine fásta le géarairtríteas réamatóideach agus páistí le hairtríteas ideapaiteach don óige go ginearálta de réir na moltaí déanta ar na mallaibh ag an Fhoras Náisiúnta um Fheabhas Cliniciúil (FNFC). Cé gur aontaigh FNFC le húsáid na saindrugaí seo laistigh de threoiríní soiléire, ghlac sí leis an ghá le tuilleadh measúnaithe a dhéanamh lena n-éifeachtacht chliniciúil fhadéarmach a fháil amach.

Chinn tuairisc fosta déanta ag réamaitheolaithe anseo ar na mallaibh cé go léiríonn na drugaí seo dul chun cinn mór i gcóireáil an tinnis seo, tá sé riachtanach go rialaítear a n-úsáid go dian go fóill agus go ndéantar monatóireacht orthu go háirithe ag cur san áireamh féidearthacht na seachthorthaí dochracha tromchúiseacha. Tá mo Roinn ag comhoibriú le Boird agus le dochtúirí go fóill le modh cúramach oibre dá dtabhairt isteach a chur chun cinn, laistigh de na hacmhainní ar fáil.

In ainneoin na n-acmhainní breise a bhí mé ábalta fógaire ar na mallaibh don bhliain 2002/03, tá na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta faoi dhianbhrú airgeadais go fóill. Tá mé geallta do thabhairt isteach drugaí a chuireann feabhas mór ar chúram othar agus bhí mé ábalta

acmhainní nua measartha a dháileadh do shaindrugaí. Nuair atá drugaí nua costasach ach cuireann siad feabhas ar chúram othar, leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh le hiarraidh ar thacaíocht ó mo chomhghleacaithe san Fheidhmeannas leis na hacmhainní riachtanacha a fháil.

Breast Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1083/01, what further funding has been made available for research into the causes of breast cancer. (AQW 3032/01)

Ms de Brún: No new funding has been identified for breast cancer research by the Research and Development Office for the HPSS since my answer to AQW 1083/01.

Funding for research into breast cancer may have become available from sources outside the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for example the Medical Research Council.

Ní bhfuair Oifig Taighde agus Forbartha na SSSP maoiniú nua ar bith do thaighde ar ailse chíché ó d'fhreagair mé ceist AQW 1083/01.

B'fhéidir go mbeadh maoiniú do thaighde ar ailse chíché ar fáil ó fhoinsí eile taobh amuigh den Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí, ón Chomhairle um Thaighde Míochaine mar shampla.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to reduce the prevalence of coronary heart disease. (AQW 3040/01)

Ms de Brún: Action is being taken on many fronts. Last year the Health Promotion Agency spent £1 million on initiatives to tackle the risk factors associated with coronary heart disease. These efforts were complemented at local level by the health promotion work of Health & Social Services Boards and Trusts and by general medical practitioners.

I have recently issued the "Investing for Health" public health strategy which aims to address the wider determinants particularly social and economic inequalities which cause ill-health and premature death. A considerable amount of activity under the "Investing for Health" Strategy is being directed at reducing coronary heart disease. In addition I have also recently given a commitment to control tobacco advertising and promotion here.

Tá beart á dhéanamh ar a lán dóigheanna. An bhliain seo a chuaigh thart, chaith an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur

Chun Cinn Sláinte £1 milliún ar scéimeanna le tabhairt faoi fhachtóirí an bhaoil bainteach le galar corónach croí. Ar leibhéal áitiúil cuireadh leis na hiarrachtaí seo trí obair chur chun cinn sláinte na mBord agus Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus na ngnáthdhochtúirí.

D'eisigh mé an straitéis sláinte poiblí "Infheistíocht sa tSláinte" ar na mallaibh a bhfuil sé de chuspóir aici tabhairt faoi na factóirí leathana, go háirithe faoi éagothromaíochtaí sóisialta agus eacnamaíochta ar cúis le drochshláinte agus le bás roimh am iad. Tá cuid mhór den obair faoin Straitéis "Infheistíocht sa tSláinte" á díriú ar laghdú i ngalar corónach croí. Ina theannta sin, thug mé gealltanais fosta ar na mallaibh fógraíocht agus cur chun cinn tobac a rialú anseo.

Waiting Times

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the median waiting time from GP referral to surgery for all forms of cancer, and (b) the equivalent figures for each of the last 10 years broken down by Health Board. (AQW 3041/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Fertility Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of couples currently awaiting fertility treatment who are excluded from free treatment as a result of age. (AQW 3059/01)

Ms de Brún: At the time of writing, 47 couples have been declined fertility treatment solely on the basis of age.

Ag am a scríofa, diúltaíodh cóireáil torthúlachta do 47 lánúin ar bhonn aoise agus ar an mbonn sin amháin.

Data Protection Policy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if her Department has a Data Protection policy; and (b) what protection of anonymity it affords to individuals. (AQW 3061/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety complies fully with the Data Protection Act 1998. The Department ensures that personal data about individuals is protected by strict compliance with the eight Data Protection Principles set out in Schedule 1 of the Data Protection Act 1998. All personal information held by the Department is shared only on a need to know basis, and disclosed only in a manner compatible with the purpose for which it is held.

Comhlíonann an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí go hiomlán an tAcht um

Chosaint Sonraí 1998. Cinntíonn an Roinn go gcosnaítear sonraí pearsanta daoine tríd na hocht bPrionsabal ar Chosaint Sonraí, leagtha amach i Sceideal 1 den Acht um Chosaint Sonraí 1998, a chomhlíonadh. Tugtar gach eolas pearsanta coinneáilte ag an Roinn de réir an ghá le heolas a thabhairt, agus ní thugtar ach ar dhóigh é atá oiriúnach don chuspóir lena bhfuil sé coinneáilte.

Disciplinary Action: Fire Brigade/Fire Authority Personnel

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any disciplinary action taken against personnel in the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade or the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland who have been named in cases alleging discrimination in the last 5 financial years. (AQW 3062/01)

Ms de Brún: There has been no disciplinary action taken against personnel in the Fire Brigade or the Fire Authority arising from cases of alleged discrimination in the past five financial years.

Níl aon ghníomh smachtaithe tógtha i gcoinne pearsanra sa Bhriogáid Dóiteáin nó san Údarás Dóiteáin ag eascairt as cásanna de leatrom líomhnaithe sna cúig bliana airgeadais seo caite.

Fire Authority: Compensation for Discrimination

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, in the last 5 financial years (a) the total amount paid in compensation to members of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade for alleged discrimination; (b) the number of alleged discrimination cases defended by the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland (FANI) in an industrial tribunal; and (c) the number of alleged discrimination cases settled out of court by FANI. (AQW 3066/01)

Ms de Brún: Over the past 5 financial years the Fire Authority has paid a total of £92,700 in compensation in four cases of alleged discrimination, all of which were settled out of court. The Authority successfully defended a further two cases at industrial Tribunal.

Leis na cúig bliana airgeadais seo caite d'íoc an tÚdarás Dóiteáin £92,700 ar an iomlán i gcúiteamh i gceithre chás de leatrom líomhnaithe. Socraíodh gach ceann acu lasmuigh den chúirt. Chosain an tÚdarás go rathúil dhá chás eile ag Binse tionsclaíoch.

Diabetes

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the percentage increase and (b) the number of children diagnosed with

diabetes in 2001 compared with (i) 5 years ago; and (ii) 10 years ago. (AQW 3075/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Diabetes

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what research is currently being undertaken to determine the cause of diabetes.

(AQW 3076/01)

Ms de Brún: In 2000/01 the R&D Office established an Endocrinology and Diabetes Recognised Research Group and has committed almost £2.5 million to the funding of 9 research studies into various aspects of diabetes. In addition, since 1998, the R&D Office has committed £541,000 to studentships and fellowships in the field of diabetes research. Funding for research into diabetes may be available from sources outside the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for example Diabetes UK.

I 2000/01 bhunaigh an Oifig T&F (Taighde agus Forbartha) Grúpa Aitheanta Taighde ar Inchríneolaíocht agus ar Dhiaibéiteas agus gheall sí chóir a bheith £2 milliún do mhaoiniú 9 staidéar taighde ar ghnéithe éagsúla de dhiaibéiteas. Ina theannta sin, ó 1998, gheall an Oifig T&F £541,000 do scoláireachtaí agus do chomhaltachtaí ar thaighde diaibéitis. Is féidir go mbeidh maoiniú do thaighde ar dhiaibéiteas ar fáil ó fhoinsí eile taobh amuigh den Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí, ó Dhiabéiteas na Ríochta Aontaithe mar shampla.

Diabetes

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if cases of diabetes are clustered in certain areas of the Province; and (b) the number of current cases in each constituency area.

(AQW 3077/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Pregnant Women: Smoking

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the annual expenditure to inform pregnant women of the harm caused to their unborn child by smoking.

(AQW 3129/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Miscarriages: Smoking

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of miscarriages which occurred in 2001 and which were attributed to smoking during pregnancy; (b) the comparable figures for the previous 2 years; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3130/01)

Ms de Brún: No information is available on the number of miscarriages which can be linked 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 miscarriages.

I established an inter-sectoral Working Group on Tobacco 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.

Níl eolas ar fáil ar líon na mbreitheanna anabái ar féidir baint dhíreach a dhéanamh le caitheamh tobac amháin i rith iompar clainne. Cé gur ceist thromchúiseach shláinte í don mháthair agus don leanbh níl sí ach ar cheann den roinnt fachtóirí bainteach le breitheanna anabái.

Bhunaigh mé Grúpa idir-rannógach Oibre ar Thobac i Márta an bhliain seo a chuaigh thart le cur i bhfeidhm Plean chuimsithigh Ghnímh le tabhairt faoi chaitheamh tobac a fhorbairt agus a stiúradh. Tá an dlaoi mhullaigh á cur leis an Phlean, a aithneoidh mná ag iompar clainne agus a chaitheann tobac mar eochairghrúpa sprice, agus eiseofar le haghaidh comhairlithe é go luath sa samhradh.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Comber Bypass

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the date for inviting tenders for Phase II of the Comber bypass; (b) the closing date for the receipt of the tenders; (c) the date contract work will commence on site; (d) the anticipated date for the completion of the contract; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2774/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I am pleased to advise that the Comber By-Pass scheme is making good progress. The objection to the vesting order has been withdrawn, thus avoiding a public inquiry and the associated delay. This means that all statutory procedures are now complete.

Further ground testing has been undertaken and the design and tender documents are being adjusted in accordance with the findings.

My Department's Roads Service has commenced the tender process and a list of tenderers has been compiled. The exact dates for each stage of the tender programme have yet to be finalised, but I will be making an announcement in due course.

Strabane Bypass

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware of any identified difficulties in relation to the construction of the current stage of the Strabane Bypass. (AQW 2987/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can advise the Member that the construction of Stage II of the Strabane By-pass from Melmount Road to Bradley Way is progressing as programmed.

However, as might be expected with a major scheme of this nature in an urban area, my Department's Roads Service has received and responded to a number of representations from householders adjacent to the new route. These cover a variety of matters ranging from the security of their boundaries to road safety issues.

If the Member is aware of a particular difficulty in relation to the scheme and provides me with the relevant details, I will be happy to have it investigated.

Wastewater Treatment Works at Clady

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the current standard of sewage treatment at Clady in West Tyrone; and (b) any plans he has for the improvement of the current sewage works. (AQW 2989/01)

Mr P Robinson: The existing wastewater treatment works at Clady was constructed in the late 1960s. Due to population increases in the area, the Works is now significantly undersized and is unable to treat the current volume of wastewater from the catchment effectively.

Although the effluent discharge from the Works is presently failing to meet the regulatory consent standards set by the Department of Environment's Environment and Heritage Service, there is no evidence of pollution being caused to the River Finn.

Water Service proposes to construct a new wastewater treatment works on a new site on the Urney Road, to the south of the village. The new Works will be designed to cater for the estimated growth in population in Clady up until the year 2025. The project will also include the provision of new sewers and the upgrading of the existing wastewater pumping station. Work is scheduled to commence in the 2004/2005 financial year. It is expected to take one year to complete at an estimated cost of around £400,000. The commencement date is subject to

the availability of funding, planning approval, and land acquisition.

In the interim, Water Service is considering options to effect minor improvements to the operation of the existing Works, in order to improve the quality of the effluent.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing List: Ards Borough

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applicants are on the housing list for Ards Borough in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2975/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The information that you requested is as follows:

April 1999-March 2000	1,235
April 2000-March 2001	1,226
April 2001-March 2002*	1,353

* The figure for this financial year is only available to the end of September 2001.

Housing Development: Clady, West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any factors that currently militate against new housing development at Clady in West Tyrone. (AQW 2988/01)

Mr Dodds: I am not aware of any factors that would militate against new housing development in Clady. There is still a considerable amount of development land available for housing use.

As far as social housing is concerned, the number of people in housing stress is relatively low. North and West Housing Association proposes to start work in the current financial year on the provision of 5 new houses on a portion of land that is owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and which it is in the process of transferring to the Association.

These houses will be sufficient to satisfy immediate housing need in the village.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of pensioners who (a) are entitled to the minimum income guarantee; and (b) are not claiming this entitlement. (AQW 2990/01)

Mr Dodds: Just over 75,000 Pensioners receive the Minimum Income Guarantee. The Department does not

hold figures for the number of eligible pensioners who have not applied for the Minimum Income Guarantee but continues to actively encourage uptake of the Minimum Income Guarantee to ensure that all pensioners claim and receive all the help to which they are entitled.

E-mail

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) if an employee of the Housing Executive is being investigated for issuing an e-mail to other employees; (b) if the e-mail sent was within working time; (c) if the e-mail was issued via the Housing Executive network; (d) if the e-mail breached the terms of the Housing Executive's contract of employment; and (e) what action is taken when a contract of employment is broken.

(AQW 3006/01)

Mr Dodds: There are currently 3 cases under investigation about inappropriate e mails involving 3 different people. The e mails were all sent during working time over the Housing Executive's network and breached the terms of its Code of Practice, which specifically prohibits staff from sending, forwarding or storing e mails containing inappropriate material. In such cases, which are internal matters for the Housing Executive, I am advised that it treats a breach of its Code of Practice as a serious matter and deals with it through its Internal Disciplinary Procedures.

Charities Commission

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to establish a Charities Commission; and to make a statement. (AQW 3007/01)

Mr Dodds: The Department for Social Development is presently monitoring developments in England and Wales and elsewhere with a view to considering whether changes to the existing Northern Ireland charity legislation would be desirable. Any proposed changes will, of course, be the subject of public consultation as well as consultation with interested bodies.

Insurance Claims: Housing Executive Tenants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale for administering insurance damage claims for Housing Executive tenants.

(AQW 3029/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive treats damage to property or personal belongings as a public liability claim and seeks to complete the claim process as soon as possible. No time-scales have been set, given the constraints imposed by the diversity and complexity of claims.

Factors affecting time lapse include:

- Accuracy and completeness of information provided by the claimant.

- The need for further research into all claims to establish any negligence.
- The involvement of 3rd parties.

While time-scales vary, all claimants are notified within seven days of receipt, that their claim has been received.

Where claims are legally contested, the time taken to settle the claim is dependent upon the Courts.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail those parts of his Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

(AQW 3030/01)

Mr Dodds: I can confirm that the Department for Social Development's estate is used exclusively for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what are his targets for people claiming incapacity benefit returning to work.

(AQW 3048/01)

Mr Dodds: There is currently no target for people claiming Incapacity Benefit returning to work.

Social Housing

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) how many units of social housing were built by each local authority in each of the last 3 years; and (b) how many such units are projected to be built by each local authority in each of the next 2 years.

(AQW 3067/01)

Mr Dodds: Responsibility for new social house building has progressively been transferred to Registered Housing Associations (RHAs). The information contained in Table 1 shows the number of units started in each District Council area by RHAs and Northern Ireland Housing Executive over the period requested.

In Table 2, the forward planning information for 2002/03 and 2003/04 is provided on the basis that current budget allocations remain in place.

TABLE 1
SOCIAL HOUSING STARTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	1999/00		2000/01		2001/02		Total
	RHA	NIHE	RHA	NIHE	RHA	NIHE	
Antrim	4	-	16	-	9	-	29
Ards	45	7	14	-	18	-	84
Armagh	4	-	15	-	10	-	29
Ballymena	2	-	46	-	-	-	48

	1999/00		2000/01		2001/02		Total
	RHA	NIHE	RHA	NIHE	RHA	NIHE	
Ballymoney	10	2	-	-	6	-	18
Banbridge	10	-	-	-	-	-	10
Belfast	610	-	386	-	588	-	1584
Carrickfergus	39	-	-	-	15	-	54
Castlereagh	20	-	-	-	6	-	26
Coleraine	-	-	12	-	11	-	23
Cookstown	-	-	7	-	-	-	7
Craigavon	16	-	10	-	-	-	26
Derry	414	-	302	-	99	-	815
Down	54	12	-	23	53	-	142
Dungannon	4	-	24	-	-	-	28
Fermanagh	14	-	37	-	6	-	57
Larne	-	-	-	15	-	-	15
Limavady	23	-	37	4	-	-	64
Lisburn	229	-	76	-	26	-	331
Magherafelt	8	8	-	-	5	-	21
Moyle	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Newry Mourne	95	-	25	-	32	-	152
Newtown-abbey	27	-	12	-	18	-	57
North Down	14	-	-	-	100	-	114
Omagh	21	-	30	-	1	-	52
Strabane	81	20	55	-	2	-	158
Total	1744	49	1104	42	1005	-	3944

Note: - RHA - Registered Housing Associations

NIHE - Northern Ireland Housing Executive

TABLE 2 - PLANNED SOCIAL HOUSING STARTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	2002/03	2003/04	Total
Antrim	45	-	45
Ards	5	25	30
Armagh	16	-	16
Ballymena	18	27	45
Ballymoney	2	7	9
Banbridge	1	5	6
Belfast	600	636	1236
Carrickfergus	38	68	106
Castlereagh	4	11	15
Coleraine	38	29	67
Cookstown	4	5	9
Craigavon	19	39	58
Derry	130	142	272
Down	14	23	37
Dungannon	16	7	23
Fermanagh	4	19	23
Larne	6	4	10

	2002/03	2003/04	Total
Limavady	18	11	29
Lisburn	230	65	295
Magherafelt	18	5	23
Moyle	18	28	46
Newry & Mourne	50	30	80
Newtownabbey	18	26	44
North Down	24	152	176
Omagh	19	15	34
Strabane	45	21	66
Total	1400	1400	2800

Note: - All will be provided by Housing Associations

Parents with Care

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of 'Parents with Care' who will (a) benefit; and (b) be disadvantaged, by the reform of child maintenance due to be introduced in April 2002.

(AQW 3068/01)

Mr Dodds: On 20 March 2002 a decision was made to defer the implementation of the child support reforms as the new IT system was not yet ready. A new date for the introduction of the new scheme has not yet been announced.

There are currently some 35,819 Parents with Care in Northern Ireland. When the new scheme is implemented it is anticipated that most Parents with Care in Northern Ireland could be better off than at present. In the main this will be due to the fact that most Parents with Care receiving Income Support or Income Based Jobseekers Allowance could benefit by up to £10.00 per week from the Child Maintenance Premium. Currently some 58% of Parents with Care are in receipt of these benefits.

Under the new scheme there will be changes in the way earnings will be calculated and revised arrangements on the treatment of cases where care of children is shared between both parents. Some Non resident Parent's liabilities will be less under the new scheme as a result of these changes. However, it is difficult to be precise about the numbers of Parents with Care, those not on Income Support or Jobseekers Allowance, who will benefit or be disadvantaged by the reform of child support. A key factor in determining whether they will be better off or disadvantaged lies in the value of their current maintenance assessment coupled with the extent of the Non Resident Parent's compliance with the determined level of child support.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development what criteria is used to determine which groups or

individuals are consulted as part of the equality impact assessment of any new proposals. (AQW 3083/01)

Mr Dodds: The Department for Social Development's Equality Scheme contains a list of around 350 groups and individuals representing the 9 categories of section 75 groups. The 9 categories concern religious belief, political opinion, race, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender, dependants and disability.

In consulting on equality impact assessments the Department draws from this list, making sure that it consults with all those considered to be affected by the policy. This is in line with the commitment contained in the Equality Scheme.

In particular, the Department ensures that its consultation process embraces representatives of each of the 9 section 75 groups even where there is no evidence that a particular section 75 group would have an interest in the policy being consulted on. In doing so the Department ensures that all section 75 groups have an opportunity to influence the process.

The Department also publishes equality impact assessments in the three Belfast newspapers and posts them on the Internet so that anyone else who wishes to contribute to the consultation process can do so. The Department's consultation list is already a fairly comprehensive one but it can be amended at any time by groups or individuals asking to be added or removed from the list.

In consulting on new or revised policies, even where this is not in the context of the statutory equality duty, the Department would consult the list in its Equality Scheme and would ensure that representatives of all section 75 groups are covered in the consultation exercise, in addition to those known to be affected by or who have an interest in the particular policy.

NIHE: Cleaning Contractors

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail which NIHE District Offices have engaged a specialised cleaning contractor for the removal of rubbish in areas within their responsibility.

(AQW 3117/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has appointed specialised contractors to clean void properties in all of its District Offices.

The purpose of the contracts is not solely to remove rubbish from properties but to carry out a specialised cleaning service that includes sanitising and cleaning all hard surfaces, ceilings, walls and floors within the property. This is necessary because of the health and safety implications for incoming tenants and for Housing Executive staff who need to enter the property.

In instances where only household rubbish has been left by an outgoing tenant, there are provisions within

existing building contracts that allow the Housing Executive's nominated building contractor to remove household rubbish, when completing remedial repairs. This contract also caters for removal of rubbish from unadopted areas. Rubbish removal from green areas is carried out under existing Grounds Maintenance contracts.

Deductions from Pensions

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement in respect of regulations allowing deductions from pensions of pensioners admitted as in-patients to hospitals. (AQW 3123/01)

Mr Dodds: There is no reduction during the first 6 weeks in hospital and then a limited reduction is made. After 6 weeks in hospital, a person with a standard basic rate pension receives £58 a week, or £44×20 if he has no dependants.

However, although it is considered that the reduction in benefit after 6 weeks strikes a fair balance between what the state should provide financially and the provision individuals should make for themselves, it is also recognised that people have on-going financial commitments while in hospital. Therefore, it has been decided that the period before benefits are downrated will be extended by a further 7 weeks. This will mean that people previously affected by the 6 week rule will be able to keep their benefits untouched if their stay in hospital is under 13 weeks. This change will be introduced to coincide with the introduction of State Pension Credit in October 2003

Pipe-laying: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail which agency was responsible for pipe-laying work carried out over land belonging to NIHE at Northlands, Carrickfergus. (AQW 3126/01)

Mr Dodds: I am advised that the work is being carried out by the Rivers Agency.

Winter Heating Allowance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any plans he has to extend the Winter Heating Allowance to people with disabilities.

(AQW 3148/01)

Mr Dodds: Winter Fuel Payments are paid to older people who are most at risk from the effects of cold weather. Disabled people who satisfy the qualifying conditions are already included in the scheme. There are no plans to extend the scheme further.

Disabled people can already receive disability benefits, and the disability premium in income-related benefits, in

recognition of their extra costs which could include heating costs. Also, Cold Weather Payments are made to vulnerable groups, including people who get disability premium in their Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance regardless of age, when there is severe weather in their area.

All Works Test

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development how often the All Work test for incapacity benefit is required to be filled in. (AQW 3179/01)

Mr Dodds: In general anyone who applies for Incapacity Benefit is subject to the Personal Capability Assessment, which has replaced the All Works test. There are however, exceptions in respect of people with certain disabilities, the terminally ill and others suffering from specific medical conditions. Following the first

Personal Capability Assessment, a decision-maker will take into account the advice from the approved doctor and then decide when the customers incapacity should be reviewed again.

Traveller Encampments

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development what is the proposed timetable for the consultation on legislation to address illegal traveller encampments. (AQW 3200/01)

Mr Dodds: The recommendations of the Working Party on illegal encampments will be part of an Equality Impact Assessment on Traveller Accommodation which it is proposed will issue for consultation in May 2002. The consultation period will be about 2 months, after which a decision will be made on the question of whether to proceed with legislation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 10 May 2002

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

On-Farm Burial

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the implications of the European prohibition of 'on farm burial' of fallen animals from 31 January 2003; and (b) her plans to facilitate a sustainable solution to this problem. (AQW 3176/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): In response to the first part of your question, I can advise that while on-farm burial has been a permitted method of disposal of fallen stock this option may be significantly constrained when the EU Animal By-Product Regulation comes into force, probably in the first half of 2003. The introduction of the Regulation will have significant implications for Northern Ireland in that it will ban on farm burial except in remote areas. At best only very limited parts of Northern Ireland could qualify as being remote. You will appreciate that this is a UK-wide issue, which will need to be addressed by key stakeholders.

In relation to the second part of your question, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), together with the devolved administrations, held a meeting in London on 3 April 2002, of key stakeholders to discuss options for the disposal of fallen animals and various funding mechanisms. The Ulster Farmers' Union was represented.

Following discussion of the issues there was general agreement that, recognising that various factors had changed which impacted on the issue, there was a need for a new system or approach to the collection and disposal of fallen animals. It was also agreed that any system should be national rather than regional in its approach, although, given the geographical separation Northern Ireland will likely have to implement its own system. You will not

be surprised to learn that funding was the critical issue identified.

On funding it was agreed that there was a need to quantify the cost likely to be involved taking account of the numbers of the different species, start up costs for any new facilities required to fill in the gaps in the coverage of the existing network of disposal facilities and the sources of the necessary funds. These issues are to be taken forward by a smaller stakeholder group which DEFRA will convene.

My officials will obviously be keeping in close touch with DEFRA developments, especially on funding, and will seek to be actively involved in the stakeholder group.

You will appreciate that I will wish to await the outcome of any discussions of the stakeholder group before formulating a sustainable solution to the problem of fallen animals in Northern Ireland.

Rivers Agency

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 633/01, when will the Rivers Agency scheme be implemented. (AQW 3267/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Rivers Agency's scheme to upgrade drainage infrastructure at Glenkeen Avenue/Jordanstown Road, Newtownabbey is now complete. In my response to your earlier question I explained that remaining site reinstatement works were affected by concurrent private development, and would be done with the agreement of the property owners concerned. The agreement with the two property owners, whose garden reinstatement was to be completed in Spring 2002, has now been waived, as the property developer who purchased both properties has commenced building operations on the site. As a result it is no longer necessary for Rivers Agency to complete the reinstatement.

Climate Change

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what provisions are being made to safeguard areas which already have severe flooding each year, given the recent findings on climate change. (AQO 1348/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am conscious of growing concerns about the implications of climate change although the effects are difficult to measure with any certainty at the present time. I can assure you that my Department's Rivers Agency has an ongoing programme of flood and sea defence projects to protect areas currently prone to flooding, where it is economically viable to do so. The Agency is actively monitoring the results of research on climate change in its area of responsibility and is taking

account of the potential effects on its design standards for flood defences, and for designated sea defences which it maintains.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Youth Development Programme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the timetable for the implementation of the £1.6 million Youth Development 3-year programme being administered by the Sports Council of Northern Ireland. [R] (AQW 3035/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): It is anticipated that a network of football development centres will be established at football clubs across Northern Ireland over the next two-three years using the monies available under the youth football development programme. Each development centre is expected to house a full time development officer who will be responsible for leading the programme on behalf of his or her respective club. It is envisaged that development officers will be in post by September 2002. The Sports Council ultimately hopes to bring 10,000 children and young people into the programme on an annual basis.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment can he make of the work carried out by the Northern Ireland Events Company since devolution. (AQW 3037/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Events Company plays a crucial role in contributing to the Programme for Government and to DCAL's corporate strategy commitment to contribute to a positive image of Northern Ireland at home and abroad.

Every application for funding is assessed for economic benefit, social cohesion, and the projection of a positive image through media coverage. The company is also required to secure private sector sponsorship to a level of at least 50% of total Events Company spending on events.

Public Libraries

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the percentage of the public libraries' budget directed to the stocking of (a) books by Irish authors; and (b) books and tapes in the Irish language. (AQW 3085/01)

Mr McGimpsey: This information is not available as the education and library boards do not keep separate accounting records for these categories of materials.

A new library management system is being procured under the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland project and it will then be possible to obtain information on the amount spent by the education and library boards on books by Irish authors and on items purchased in the Irish language. It is intended that all libraries will be linked to this system by July 2003.

Milk Cup and Foyle Cup Tournaments: Funding

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail all funding awarded in respect of (a) the Milk Cup; and (b) the Foyle Cup tournaments, over the past 5 years. (AQW 3086/01)

Mr McGimpsey: There has been no direct Sports Council funding awarded in respect of the Milk Cup during the last five years. However, I understand that as a condition of grant from the Sports Council, the Irish Football Association provided financial support of £5,000 per annum for the tournament from its own funds up to 2001. In addition, the Northern Ireland Events Company has provided funding of £90,000 for the tournament in 2001 and is currently assessing an application for funding in 2002.

The Sports Council has provided Exchequer funding to the Foyle Cup as follows:

1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £	2000/01 £	2001/02 £
Nil	Nil	1,500	2,500	2,500

An application for funding to the Northern Ireland Events Company for 2002/03 is currently being assessed.

I am aware that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) provided a total of £21,750 from its Events Support Scheme to both events between 1998 to 2001. This is detailed in the table below. The NITB contribution to the 2002 events has still to be confirmed. In addition the NITB co-hosts and presents 2 trophies at a Welcome Reception in conjunction with Coleraine Borough Council. The NITB contribution to the 2001 reception totalled £1,404.40.

	1998 £	1999 £	2000 £	2001 £	2002 £
Northern Ireland Milk Cup	3,500	3,500	3,500	5,000	To be confirmed
Foyle Cup	1,750	1,500	1,500	1,500	To be confirmed

Misuse of Public Funds

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he is satisfied that agencies in receipt of financial and other support from his Department, are not being used as a cover-up for child sexual abuse or the distribution of pornographic material. (AQW 3087/01)

Mr McGimpsey: It is not possible to provide an absolute assurance in the terms requested. I am satisfied that my Department operates a rigorous policy of ensuring that public funds are not misused through the normal requirements of financial accountability, control and audit. The agencies which are the responsibility of my Department take all reasonable steps to prevent the activities in question, including clear and detailed policies and procedures on child protection. Child sexual abuse and the distribution of pornographic material are most likely to be detected by co-workers of the perpetrator and by the families, friends, teachers and others who know the victim or victims of such abuse. I would strongly urge anyone in possession of information regarding this kind of activity to bring it to the immediate attention of the appropriate authorities.

Football for All

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment can he make in relation to the Irish Football Association Community Relations Programme 'Football For All'; and to make a statement. [R] (AQW 3088/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As I outlined in my response to AQW 1719/01 the Sports Council for Northern Ireland has been working with the Irish Football Association on its community relations programme 'Football for All'.

I also informed you that the issue of community relations was one of those identified as being central to the development of a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland. I would refer you to chapter 10 of the report 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I hope to be in a position to publish a draft strategy as soon as possible.

Although there is much work to be done, I believe that the 'Football for All' programme, along with the proposed soccer strategy and the broader equality agenda, has the potential to contribute to an improvement in community relations in Northern Ireland.

Sportsmatch

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider introducing, through the European Structural Funds, a similar scheme to 'Sportsmatch' which provides matching funding for sports clubs in England and Wales. [R] (AQW 3099/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The introduction of the Sportsmatch scheme is a matter in the first instance for the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. When the scheme was introduced in England and Wales, the Sports Council considered that there were insufficient sponsorship opportunities in Northern Ireland to ensure the success of the scheme. The Council will, however, be reviewing the matter and other potential avenues for private sector funding.

Sportsmatch

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment can he make in relation to 'Sportsmatch' funding available to sports clubs in England and Wales. [R] (AQW 3100/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I have not carried out such an assessment. I understand, however, that since 1992 when the scheme was introduced, Sportsmatch has distributed some £28m to over 3,400 projects in 72 sports throughout England. The projects which attract sponsorship include one of the following elements:

- increased participation at grass roots and/or improved skills;
- new activities or extended/enhanced existing activities;
- links to the local community;
- long term benefits.

MAGNI Report

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he has taken in respect of Museums in the Foyle constituency following the MAGNI Report; and to make a statement. (AQW 3149/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am unaware of the existence of any report called the MAGNI Report, but I assume that you are referring to the Wilson Report, which led to the establishment of MAGNI. The Wilson Report was completed under Direct Rule, and it has no direct relevance for museums in the Foyle constituency as it deals in the main with Northern Ireland's national collections.

However, the Wilson Report recommended a review of local authority museum provision, and this was taken forward through the Local Museum and Heritage Review. My Department has now completed a first draft of a response to the Review, which has to be agreed by the DOE before discussion with key stakeholders. The document will then be published for consultation.

Safe Sports Grounds Scheme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) the amount of grant received by each of the 20 Senior Irish League Clubs through the

Safe Sports Grounds Programme in each of the last 4 years; and (b) his assessment of the current safety standard in sports grounds. (AQW 3186/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Safe Sports Grounds Scheme has been in existence for two years and details of the funding awarded to football, rugby and Gaelic games are attached. The Scheme will continue for a further year and while there is still a long way to go before all the major sports grounds are up to a satisfactory standard, I am pleased to report that all venues requiring immediate and urgent works have now been dealt with.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of grant received by (a) rugby stadiums; and (b) Gaelic grounds, in each of the last 4 years, through the Safe Sports Grounds Programme. (AQW 3209/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Safe Sports Grounds Scheme has been in existence for two years and details of the funding awarded to football, rugby and Gaelic games are attached. The Scheme will continue for a further year and while there is still a long way to go before all the major sports grounds are up to a satisfactory standard, I am pleased to report that all venues requiring immediate and urgent works have now been dealt with.

Board	Sector	2000/01
BELB	Controlled	£2,272
	Maintained	£1,964
	Integrated	£2,128
NEELB	Controlled	£1,993
	Maintained	£2,121
	Integrated	£2,328
SEELB	Controlled	£2,296
	Maintained	£2,231
	Integrated	£2,346
SELB	Controlled	£2,167
	Maintained	£2,087
	Integrated	£2,108
WELB	Controlled	£2,291
	Maintained	£2,058
	Integrated	£2,132

The figures include –

Amounts made available under LMS Formulae

Centre funds held by Boards and the Department and 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.

Integrated figures include both controlled integrated and grant maintained integrated schools

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.

EDUCATION

Parent Governors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what procedures are there for the removal of a Board of Governors Parent Representative, should they withdraw their child or children from the school. (AQW 3106/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Parent governors are not required by law to resign from a Board of Governors when their child ceases to attend the school. They may serve out the remainder of their term of office and no procedures have therefore been established for the removal of parent governors in these circumstances.

Cost of Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what is the cost, per pupil, to provide education in each Board area for primary schools in the (a) controlled sector; (b) maintained sector; and (c) integrated sector. (AQW 3107/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The following figures set out the net expenditure per primary school pupil for 2000/01 and have been taken from the latest available out-turn statements.

Teaching Assistants

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education how many teaching assistants are employed in schools in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3135/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have been advised that there were 4, 843 classroom assistants employed in schools in Northern Ireland in 2001/02.

Grammar Schools: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the future of grammar schools in West Tyrone. (AQW 3136/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The future of controlled grammar schools in the Western Education and Library Board area is a matter in the first instance for that Board. However, my Department is aware that the Board is actively considering the future of Strabane Grammar School. Discussions with school representatives are, however, at a very early stage. The Board is not, therefore, in a position at present to make any proposals for the future of the school to my Department.

Board	1997/98		1998/99		1999/2000		2000/2001		2001/2002	
	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld
Belfast	2	0	3	0	2	0	1	0	6	2
Western	3	2	4	0	1	0	8	1	0	0
North-Eastern	7	5	11	9	6	5	16	9	34	9
South-Eastern	6	0	5	1	4	0	0	0	3	0
Southern	2	1	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Total	20	8	26	10	13	5	27	10	43	11

Cost of Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what is the cost, per pupil, to provide education in each Board area for secondary schools in the (a) controlled sector; (b) maintained sector; and (c) integrated sector.

(AQW 3138/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The figures below set out the net expenditure per secondary school pupil for 2000/01 and have been taken from the latest available out-turn statements.

Board	Sector	2000/01
BELB	Controlled	£3,620
	Maintained	£3,224
	Integrated	£3,805
NEELB	Controlled	£3,090
	Maintained	£3,389
	Integrated	£3,801
SEELB	Controlled	£3,209
	Maintained	£3,149
	Integrated	£3,412
SELB	Controlled	£3,186
	Maintained	£3,066
	Integrated	£3,445
WELB	Controlled	£3,230
	Maintained	£3,254
	Integrated	£3,482

The figures include –

Amounts made available under LMS Formulae

Centre funds held by Boards and the Department and 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.

Integrated figures include both controlled integrated and grant maintained integrated schools

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.

Appeals Against Primary School Admissions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of appeals against Primary School admissions in each Education Board in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3187/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The above table sets out the number of appeals and the number of successful appeals against primary school admissions in each Education and Library Board area over the past 5 years.

Claims Lodged: School Trips

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of claims lodged (a) against the Department; and (b) against the Boards, resulting from school trips undertaken by pupils.

(AQW 3188/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There have been no claims lodged against the Department resulting from school trips undertaken by pupils. I understand that the number of claims lodged against the Boards is as follows.

Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of teachers employed in the controlled and maintained primary sector; (b) the number of male primary school teachers employed in each of the last 10 years; and (c) any plans he has to increase the number of male primary school teachers employed.

(AQW 3189/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- The number of teachers employed in controlled and maintained primary schools is currently 8,416.
- The number of male teachers employed in the primary sector, as indicated by the numbers paid in October of each of the past 10 years, is as follows:

2001	1456
2000	1473
1999	1526
1998	1570
1997	1633
1996	1659
1995	1669
1994	1680
1993	1697
1992	1706

(c) I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 2164/01.

Classroom Assistants

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the various categories in which classroom assistants are employed; (b) the number of full-time and part-time classroom assistants employed in each Board area for each of the last 3 years; and (c) the cost of providing classroom assistants in each of the various categories for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3190/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have been advised that the information requested is as follows:

(a) The categories are -

- General Classroom Assistants;
- Classroom Assistants employed as a result of the Department's 'Making a Good Start P1 Initiative';
- Special Needs Classroom Assistants.

(b) Number of classroom assistants in each Board area:

	BELB		NEELB		SEELB		SELB		WELB	
	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT
1999/00	138	156	146	728	165	838	221	724	166	407
2000/01	153	198	148	769	177	905	242	769	177	385
2001/02	162	202	154	889	201	1037	263	886	299	750

FT - Full Time, PT - Part Time.

Board	1997/98		1998/99		1999/2000		2000/2001		2001/2002	
	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld	Number of Appeals	Number of Appeals Upheld
Belfast	2	0	3	0	2	0	1	0	6	2
Western	3	2	4	0	1	0	8	1	0	0
North-Eastern	7	5	11	9	6	5	16	9	34	9
South-Eastern	6	0	5	1	4	0	0	0	3	0
Southern	2	1	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Total	20	8	26	10	13	5	27	10	43	11

(c) Cost by category:

£ 000s	General £	P1 Initiative £	Special £
1999/00	2,913	6,825	17,064
2000/01	3,616	7,162	19,813
2001/02	4,768	7,463	24,009

Model Primary School, Newtownards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for the completion of capital works at the Model Primary School, Newtownards. (AQW 3195/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A draft of an economic appraisal prepared by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board which examines various options for improving the accommodation at Newtownards Model Primary School has just been received in my Department. When this document has been examined and agreed with the Board, a scheme will be planned and considered, along with others, for inclusion in a future school capital programme. However, given the number of schemes competing for a place in the programme and the limited available financial resources, it is not possible to state when the school will be included in any future capital funding announcement.

Appeals Against Primary School Admissions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of successful appeals against primary school admissions over the last 5 years in each Education Board. (AQW 3211/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The following table sets out the number of appeals and the number of successful appeals against primary school admissions in each Education and Library Board area over the past 5 years.

Drinking During Pregnancy

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education what opportunities his Department provides for children and young people to learn about the harm caused to the unborn child by drinking during pregnancy. (AQW 3221/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There is a statutory requirement for all school authorities to provide drugs (including alcohol) 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 is also being explored in approximately half of the School Age Mothers (SAMs) projects running this school year. Within the Personal and Social Education element of the SAMs programme, the current emphasis is on the effects of alcohol and smoking during the antenatal stage.

Consultancy Firms

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1954/01, to detail the level of expenditure, in each of the last three years, on consultancy firms/consultants that are based in (a) Northern Ireland (b) the Republic of Ireland (c) the rest of the UK and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3271/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Education's expenditure on external consultancy firms/consultants within these categories was as follows:

Based in/Year	1999/2000*	2000/01	2001/02
a. Northern Ireland	122,705	190,813	126,893
b. Republic of Ireland	Nil	Nil	Nil
c. Rest of UK	58,946	686,361	52,841
d. Outside British Isles	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total (3)	181,651	877,174	179,734

* Period 2 December 1999-31 March 2000.

Dyspraxia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many primary school pupils have dyspraxia-related symptoms. (AQW 3295/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils in P1-P7 with dyspraxia in their statement of special educational needs is 29.

Transport

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the arrangements he has made for his Ministerial

transport over the past 2 years, in terms of (a) if he used the in-house chauffeur service or a contracted-in service; (b) if he used a contracted-in service, which firms or individuals were employed; (c) how much this contracted-in service cost; (d) if the hire of this contracted-in service was conducted under the public tendering process; and (e) what is the comparative cost of the in-house Ministerial chauffeur service. (AQW 3362/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I do not use either the DFP Centralised Transport Unit or a contracted-out Service. My Department provides me with a car for Ministerial use. It does not have an in-house chauffeur service nor does it contract-out this service.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Dundonald Adult Education Centre

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) her strategy for community education; and (b) how this can benefit the Dundonald Adult Education Centre. (AQW 2998/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): Widening community access to all forms of adult education is at the heart of my Department's lifelong learning policies, including the development of the learndirect network, the Access and Partnership initiatives in the further education sector and new arrangements for Individual Learning Accounts to be announced later this year.

Decisions regarding the Dundonald Adult Outreach Centre are entirely a matter for the Governing Body of Castlereagh College. The College has retained an extensive outreach programme in Dundonald, including activities with groups such as Tullycarnet Family Project, Torbank Special School, the Dundonald Family Centre and the Ballybeen Women's Centre.

Student Drop-Out

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of students who have left higher and further education institutions over the last 3 years before completing their course; and (b) the number who left because of (i) lack of finance; and/or (ii) inability to pay tuition fees. (AQW 3089/01)

Ms Hanna: I refer the member to AQW/1195/01 previously placed by Mr Mark Robinson MLA.

It is not possible to say why individual students leave before completing their course; it can be for a variety of reasons.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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 3110/01)

Ms Hanna: In line with its Equality Scheme commitments, this Department consults all those listed on its approved list of consultees. The consultation list was, itself, consulted upon as part of the public consultation on the Department's draft Equality Scheme.

A recent review exercise indicated that the majority of our consultees wish to continue to be consulted as our Equality Impact Assessment programme progresses.

Job Centres

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she has any plans to address the quality of service offered at jobcentres.

(AQW 3116/01)

Ms Hanna: At present thirty-two out of the thirty-five offices in the JobCentre Network hold the Charter Mark Award, which is a national standard that acknowledges the current quality of the services that JobCentres offer to the public. It is intended that the remaining three JobCentres will apply for the Award this year.

New Deal

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of those people leaving the New Deal scheme have entered full employment.

(AQW 3142/01)

Ms Hanna: Since New Deal began in April 1998 a total of 60,365 participants had completed the programme by November 2001. Of those whose destination is known 36% found work. It is not possible to distinguish between those who found full-time employment and those who found part-time employment, therefore this figure includes both.

Percentage of New Deal participants who found work within 92 days of leaving the programme.

New Deal Programme	No. of Leavers ¹	Percentage Found Work ²
New Deal 18-24	26,307	49%
New Deal 25+	33,429	27%
New Deal 50+	629	55%
Total	60,365	36%

- Figures given relate to the number of participants leaving the programme rather than the number of people who have left the programme. The reason for this is explained in the glossary of terms attached.
- The percentages given are based on the total number of known destinations. Total known destinations includes all those who found

work, those who returned to unemployment, those who returned to other benefits other than JSA, those who went into education or training, those who left the area and those who are economically inactive.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED FOR NEW DEAL STATISTICAL PURPOSES

- A participant is defined for statistical purposes as an individual on a single episode of New Deal. This is the preferred way of counting individuals on New Deal. This is because one person may have more than one episode and so to count outcomes it is necessary to count each episode separately. For example, if an individual has been on two episodes of New Deal and gained employment as a result of only one, it is a more accurate reflection of the programme to record this as two participants of whom one has found work.
- The start of a New Deal episode is defined as when an individual has either joined New Deal for the first time or re-joined after a gap of at least thirteen weeks since the end of their last New Deal activity.
- The end of an episode of New Deal is counted as when an individual has left a New Deal activity and not entered another New Deal activity within 13 weeks. Where an individual re-joins New Deal after a gap of less than thirteen weeks they are considered to have re-joined the previous episode.
- Post New Deal employment is defined as where an individual finds employment within thirteen weeks of leaving an episode of New Deal.
- Where an individual has had more than one spell of employment following a New Deal episode only the latest one up to the thirteen week point will be counted. (i.e. no participant can have more than one 'found work' attached to a New Deal episode).

Age Discrimination

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she has taken to address discrimination towards older people in seeking employment opportunities.

(AQW 3143/01)

Ms Hanna: At present there is no legislation which specifically outlaws discrimination against older people seeking employment. A European Directive outlawing age discrimination is required to be implemented by 2006, and this is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

However, the former Department of Economic Development in June 1999 issued a non-statutory voluntary Code of Practice aimed at promoting good practice in the employment cycle in Northern Ireland. This Code sets the standard for non-ageist approaches in employment in relation to recruitment, selection, promotion, training, redundancy and retirement.

My Department is responsible for New Deal 50 plus which aims to help older people update their skills and equip themselves for a return to work. But it makes good business sense to base employment decisions on skills and abilities, rather than on preconceived ideas about age. Older workers often have talents and abilities that are in short supply, and employers who ignore them deprive themselves of a valuable resource.

Peace II

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the cost of consultants employed to carry out economic appraisals on applications for Peace II Programmes; and (b) the number of applications which scored over the 65% quality threshold and were subsequently rejected for approval. (AQW 3154/01)

Ms Hanna:

- (a) The Department has not commissioned any economic appraisals of applications under the PEACE II programme.
- (b) The Department is not responsible for selecting projects under the PEACE II Programme except for Measure 1.4. The selection process for this Measure has not yet been undertaken. So no projects have scored over the 65% quality threshold and been rejected by the Department for PEACE II.

Union Learning Fund

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when she will introduce a Union Learning Fund for Northern Ireland. (AQW 3427/01)

Ms Hanna: In keeping with the Executive's Programme for Government, I am creating a new Union Learning Fund for Northern Ireland, and am making £250,000 available for it in this financial year.

The Fund will support and expand the role of the trade union movement in Northern Ireland in workplace lifelong learning. It will increase the capacity of trade unions to promote learning among their members and, with partners, to develop innovative projects to attract into learning those who are difficult to reach by traditional provision.

Electronic Engineering: Graduates

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make of the current output of technicians and graduates in electronic engineering considering the potential demands. (AQO 1269/01)

Ms Hanna: Recent research indicates that, in spite of the recent downturn in the sector, there is a possibility of

a shortage of electronic engineers, particularly at the graduate and technician level. My Department is addressing this issue by:

- increasing the number of higher and further education places;
- establishing centres of excellence in computing and electronics; and
- establishing a reskilling programme for existing engineers funded by Executive Programme Funds

Student Loans

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail arrangements she has in place to encourage a higher uptake of funds from the budget for student loans. (AQO 1292/01)

Ms Hanna: Students are advised in writing of their statutory maximum loan entitlement determined in accordance with the Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland). It is a matter of personal choice for students to decide how much of a loan they need to borrow. It would not be appropriate for my Department to seek to influence them.

Skills Audit

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what further action has been taken in respect of the completion of the Skills Audit for the Down area. (AQO 1266/01)

Ms Hanna: The study consists of two stages. Stage one is a detailed examination of the source of recruits to two large Belfast based IT companies and Stage two examines recruitment to a number of IT companies throughout the rest of Northern Ireland. I understand that data collection for the first stage has now been completed and that an interim report will be available within the next few weeks once the analysis is complete.

GCSEs

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in respect of Further Education Colleges and Institutes to outline (a) any decrease in the number of GCSEs studied in each of the last three years; and (b) any steps being taken to ensure GCSEs continue to be taught as an important second opportunity for school leavers to enhance their grades. (AQO 1272/01)

Ms Hanna: In the 1998-99 academic year there were 9,225 enrolments on GCSE courses at NI Further Colleges. This total decreased to 8,635 in 1999-00 and again dropped to 6,901 in 2000-01.

GCSEs are available in all Further Education Colleges, however my Department does not encourage GCSEs for students who have taken them already at school. Research by the Education and Training Inspectorate shows that there is no significant improvement in GCSE results when repeated. Consequently, Further Education Colleges offer a wide range of vocational qualifications including GNVQs at intermediate level and NVQs which are more appropriate for progression. Further Education Colleges will however, offer the new vocational GCSEs when introduced from September 2002.

Community Relations

Dr Adamson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what funds have been made available to Universities to promote community relations on the campus. (AQO 1263/01)

Ms Hanna: The NI universities are autonomous bodies with a statutory obligation, under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to promote equality of opportunity and good community relations. My Department has set aside additional funding of £155,000 in 2001/02 to assist the universities in meeting these statutory obligations.

Community Relations

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps are being taken to encourage good community relations in the Further and Higher Education sectors. (AQO 1285/01)

Ms Hanna: A Working Group set up by my Department is to produce a good practice guide for Further Education Colleges, which addresses issues of cultural diversity, and make recommendations on the development of the further education curriculum to promote community relations.

Universities, Further Education Colleges and University Colleges have a statutory obligation, under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to promote equality of opportunity and good community relations.

Research Assessment Exercise Scores

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial response she will be making to the high RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) scores achieved by NI Universities. (AQO 1283/01)

Ms Hanna: I can give no commitment to increase overall provision for research and development for 2002/03 in light of the improved RAE scores as the Budget has already been set. As to 2003/04 and beyond, my Department will be bidding for additional resources in Spending Review 2002 and university research will be a priority.

Student Debt

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures she is taking to address student debt to enable funds reserved for student loans to be reduced; and to make a statement. (AQO 1290/01)

Ms Hanna: While student loans offer students a method of funding their living costs, with very favourable repayment terms, I recognise that some students experience financial difficulties. With this in mind, my Department is introducing means tested non-repayable bursaries of up to £1,500 per year from 2002/03. This will reduce the amount of loans students will claim and ultimately reduce the Departments loans budget.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Northern Ireland Tourist Board: Tourist Visitors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the NI Tourist Board have set a target of 1% increase in the share of all tourist visitors. (AQW 3140/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Forecasts for 2001 indicate that Northern Ireland attracted 19% of all overseas (including GB residents) visitors to the island of Ireland. Tourism Ireland, in consultation with NITB and Bord Failte, have set three year targets for growths of 5% and 8% per annum in overseas visitors to the island of Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively. Achieving these targets would grow Northern Ireland's share by around 1percentage point per annum.

Le Winters Hotel, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what Tourist Board grants have been made available to Le Winters Hotel in Newtownards in each of the last 2 years. (AQW 3169/01)

Sir Reg Empey: No financial assistance has been made available to Le Winters (Strangford Arms) Hotel in the last two years by the NITB.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board: Visitor Attractions Survey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to the NI Tourist Board Visitor

Attractions Survey in 2000, how many responses were received and was he satisfied with the response rate.

(AQW 3170/01)

Sir Reg Empey: 234 Northern Ireland attractions were invited to participate in the 2000 survey by means of a self-completion questionnaire. A response rate of 70% was achieved, with 164 completed forms being returned. This is a high response rate for this type of postal survey and compares favourably with the 59% response rate achieved for the UK as a whole in 2000.

Down Business Park

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQO 660/01, what efforts have been made to locate inward investment projects in the Down Business Park. (AQO 1260/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Considerable efforts are being put into promoting Down Business Park as an investment location and the decision by the Korean company ADT to locate there, promoting 70 new jobs is a welcome outcome of these efforts. Invest Northern Ireland will continue to promote the Park as an attractive location for inward investors.

Visits to USA: Expenditure

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the expenditure for visits to the United States of America to promote and attract inward investment. (AQO 1255/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The global travel and subsistence budget for IDB's Inward Investment Group over the three-year period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2002 totalled some £455,000. Approximately 70% of this was attributable to the United States market based on project activity.

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the current review of the Export Credits Guarantee Department, what input he has made in order to protect competitiveness for the UK's aerospace industry. (AQO 1301/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There has been widespread consultation by Export Credit Guarantee Department (ECGD) with industry and other representative bodies in relation to its current review, which is aimed at strengthening its risk management systems and evaluating its contribution to the competitiveness of the UK economy. I will continue to, as I did on behalf of Bombardier Aerospace in the aftermath of the events of September 11, make representations to ECGD where I believe it would

produce benefits for the UK Aerospace industry and in particular for the Northern Ireland aerospace sector.

Harland & Wolff

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the amount of financial aid given to Harland and Wolff since its privatisation in 1992; and (b) the total cost of privatisation to public funds. (AQO 1256/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Harland and Wolff was privatised in September 1989.

- (a) Offers of financial assistance provided by my Department since that time amount in total to some £105m. This is mainly comprised of contract related intervention aid grant in respect of merchant ship-building projects carried out at the shipyard.
- (b) The net cost of the privatisation in 1989 amounted to some £625m of which £422.5m represented write-off of loans advanced by government during the period when the company was in public ownership.

Promoting Exports: Expenditure

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the expenditure in promoting exports to (a) the Republic of Ireland; (b) GB; and (c) USA. (AQO 1261/01)

Sir Reg Empey: GB, ROI and the USA are the largest markets for exports from Northern Ireland. Support for companies participating in trade missions and exhibitions are the primary means used by my Department's agencies in promoting sales and exports from Northern Ireland to these markets. In the year ending 31 March 2002, the expenditure incurred in such activities in

- (a) the Republic of Ireland was £211,000;
- (b) GB £763,000, and
- (c) USA £304,000.

Science Park

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made in developing a Science Park at Titanic Quarter, Belfast.

(AQO 1257/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Structures have been established under the Northern Ireland Science Park Foundation to progress the project. Outline Planning Permission has been obtained for the site at Queen's Island and detailed planning and funding arrangements have been approved for

Phase 1 which includes an Innovation Centre at Queen's Island. Work on the Innovation Centre is expected to begin soon.

Fatalities and Injuries: Building Sites

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of fatalities and injuries on building sites in each of the last 3 years.
(AQO 1295/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In the financial year 1999/2000 there were 6 fatal accidents, 61 major injury accidents and 171 over 3 day accidents.

In the financial year 2000/2001 there were 3 fatal accidents, 60 major injury accidents and 144 over 3 day accidents.

The provisional figures in the financial year 2001/02 indicate that there were 4 fatal accidents, 50 major injury accidents and 150 over 3 day accidents.

Gas Pipeline

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQO 696/01, to outline the current position regarding the North-South/East-West gas pipeline.
(AQO 1300/01)

Sir Reg Empey: OFREG issued a gas conveyance licence to Bord Gais for the North West and South-North gas pipelines on 12 February 2002.

On 5 April 2002 OFREG invited expressions of interest from companies interested in gas distribution and/or supply projects to potential customers outside the Greater Belfast area. These expressions of interest should be submitted before 17 May 2002.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ulster Way

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what is his policy on the retention and enhancement of the Ulster Way.
(AQW 3139/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): The Ulster Way was largely brought about through the efforts of the late Wilfred Capper and the support that he received in the 1980s from the Sports Council.

The Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 gave my Department the power to grant aid District Councils to create and manage those parts of the route passing through their area.

However, the route has never been fully implemented to a uniform standard and, with the ending of Sports Council support in the early 1990s, there have been increasing questions about its management and overall viability. A report prepared for the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department, the Sports Council and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) in 1994 proposed the creation of a number of shorter routes. With the support of European and EHS funding, a range of such routes, marketed as Waymarked Ways and spread widely across Northern Ireland, has been established.

There is no single body with over-riding responsibility for the Ulster Way. However the establishment of the Northern Ireland Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) provides an opportunity to address these issues.

CAAN has now established a widely representative Working Group to look at the future of the Ulster Way. The Group has met on a number of occasions and hosted public meetings. CAAN is to produce a report on the Group's work by the end of this calendar year. This will contain recommendations to EHS, NITB and the Sports Council, in particular, on the future of the route.

I will want to consider that report and take the views of my statutory advisers, the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, before I make any further statement on the future of the Ulster Way.

Preservation of Mature Trees

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his policy on the preservation of mature trees in urban areas, and if he regards these measures as sufficient.
(AQW 3182/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department's policy in relation to trees and woodlands is contained in Planning Policy Statement 2 "Planning and Nature Conservation" and applies to both urban and rural areas. This policy emphasises the importance of the protection of trees both as habitats and in terms of their contribution to the amenity of a particular locality.

Where any proposed development has the potential to impact upon trees, landowners and developers will be encouraged to retain existing trees, and plant additional trees wherever possible. Trees, woodlands and important hedgerows will be protected by the imposition of conditions on the grant of any planning permission. Additionally, where opportunities arise, the Department will seek to secure new tree planting in development schemes. Where development includes the loss of trees, permission will normally be conditional on a replanting scheme with trees of appropriate numbers, species and size.

Recent Area Plans have also contained policies to protect specific woodlands and groups of trees.

The Department also has a discretionary legislative power under Article 65 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 to make Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) where it is considered expedient, in the interests of amenity, to do so. The function of a TPO is to bring the trees under the Department's control and the Department's consent is normally required to top, lop or fell trees unless they are considered dead, dying or dangerous. When considering the making of a TPO, the Department will not only have regard to the amenity of the trees considered for protection, but also to the possible financial implications for the Department if a claim for compensation is subsequently made.

While I am satisfied that the measures contained within PPS2, are sufficient in policy terms to ensure the preservation of significant trees, it has become apparent, as planning matters and policy has evolved over the years, that the current legislation needs to be strengthened in order to meet today's requirements. That is why I propose to introduce new measures contained in the forthcoming Planning (Amendment) Bill which will simplify, streamline and strengthen the Department's existing enforcement powers in relation to breaches of tree related planning conditions and TPOs. I also propose to extend enforcement powers to apply to trees not protected by a TPO but within a Conservation Area.

Planning Service: Carrickfergus Borough Council Area

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the work undertaken by consultants on behalf of the Planning Service in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area in the last 2 years; and (b) the cost of this work. (AQW 3193/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The work undertaken by consultants in the last 2 years on behalf of the Planning Service, in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, related to planning applications for development in the Carrickfergus and Whitehead Conservation Areas.

The total costs of the projects were £171,344.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the timescale for the publication of the Ards and Down Area Plan; (b) the reason for its delay; and to make a statement. (AQW 3196/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) I anticipate that the draft plan will be published during August 2002.
- (b) The Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 is the first to be prepared in the context of the Regional Develop-

ment Strategy (RDS), which was formulated in September 2001.

The Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 requires the Plan to be "consistent with" the RDS. 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.

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) is currently consulting on changes to the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 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. Clearance on 'consistency' will require consultations with the Department for Regional Development on the completed draft prior to publication. As a result of these considerations Planning Service now expects to publish the draft plan in August 2002.

Biodegradable Waste

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what reduction there has been in the amount of biodegradable waste going to landfill sites in each year since 1995, broken down by local authority.

(AQW 3205/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The information requested is not available. District Councils have not undertaken comprehensive monitoring or measurement of biodegradable waste going to landfill sites over this period.

However draft Waste Management Plans will be submitted to my Department by the end of June 2002 by the three District Council Waste Management Partnerships.

Article 23 of the Waste & Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997 requires District Councils to include in their Plans the types and quantities of controlled waste which they expect to collect, recover, treat or dispose of during the period of the Plans.

The Department will provide guidance to District Councils to ensure a consistent approach and to establish the format for reporting.

Results will be used to monitor progress in meeting the primary target of the Waste Management Strategy to reduce the quantities of biodegradable municipal waste being landfilled to 75% of 1995 baseline levels by 2010, 50% by 2013 and 35% by 2020.

Until the draft Plans have been submitted, and the information they contain agreed, no figures will be available to my Department on the amounts of biodegradable waste going to landfill.

Water Management Unit

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the number of (a) reports of river pollution; and (b) reports which have resulted in a prosecution in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3213/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The table below shows the total number of pollution incidents reported to the Water Management Unit of my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), the number substantiated, and the severity of those incidents, by year, from 1996 to 2000. Statistics for 2001 have not been fully validated by EHS and are therefore not included.

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Total Incidents Reported	2881	2681	2506	2411	2582
*Substantiated Incidents	2055	1823	1641	1506	1701
High Severity	75	73	54	38	51
Medium Severity	368	401	413	328	336
Low Severity	1612	1349	1174	1140	1314

*Incidents where pollution is confirmed on investigation.

The criteria applied by EHS when assessing the category of severity to be attributed to a pollution incident are set out in an annual EHS publication entitled 'Water Pollution Incident and Prosecution Statistics'. A copy of this report for 2000 has been placed in the Assembly Library.

(b) The table below shows the number of pollution incidents which have resulted in prosecution and also the number of warning letters issued in lieu of prosecution, by year, according to the year in which the pollution incidents occurred.

All high and medium severity incidents are investigated with a view to prosecution, provided the necessary evidence can be obtained. The final decision on prosecution rests with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. Warning letters may be issued where there is insufficient evidence for a prosecution or where there is no negligence involved.

Final statistics for 2001 are not yet available as a number of recommendations for prosecution are still pending in respect of incidents which occurred that year.

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Prosecutions	121	86	93	71	78
Warning Letters	42	22	15	16	32

Disposable Nappies

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration has he given to the environmental impact of disposable nappies in the development of local waste strategies. (AQW 3214/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am aware that disposable nappies make up approximately 4% of the household waste stream with around 200,000 used nappies disposed to landfill each day in Northern Ireland.

Arrangements for handling disposable nappy waste are the same as those for general household waste. At present facilities do not exist for fully recycling disposable nappies and they can only be managed through disposal or incineration.

As a requirement of the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy, published by my Department, the three District Council Partnership Groups are preparing Waste Management Plans for their areas. Draft Plans have been out to public consultation, up to 7 May, and the Groups will submit final draft Plans to my Department by the end of June.

The Plans will detail the arrangements to be made by the Councils to recover, treat or dispose of household waste in order to meet the targets for the diversion of biodegradable waste from landfill set out in the Waste Management Strategy.

As part of the current public awareness campaign, my Department is preparing information leaflets, including one on this subject. The leaflet will outline the different arguments for and against reusable nappies to help parents reach an informed choice for the benefit of their children and the environment.

Disposable Nappies

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps is he taking to encourage the use of reusable nappies in order to reduce the volume of disposable nappies sent to landfill sites in household waste. (AQW 3215/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am aware that disposable nappies make up approximately 4% of the household waste stream with around 200,000 used nappies disposed to landfill each day in Northern Ireland.

Arrangements for handling disposable nappy waste are the same as those for general household waste. At present facilities do not exist for fully recycling disposable nappies and they can only be managed through disposal or incineration.

As a requirement of the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy, published by my Department, the three District Council Partnership Groups are preparing Waste Management Plans for their areas. Draft Plans

have been out to public consultation, up to 7 May, and the Groups will submit final draft Plans to my Department by the end of June.

The Plans will detail the arrangements to be made by the Councils to recover, treat or dispose of household waste in order to meet the targets for the diversion of biodegradable waste from landfill set out in the Waste Management Strategy.

As part of the current public awareness campaign, my Department is preparing information leaflets, including one on this subject. The leaflet will outline the different arguments for and against reusable nappies to help parents reach an informed choice for the benefit of their children and the environment.

Illegal Dumping: Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus/Newtownabbey

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in preventing illegal dumping at Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus/Newtownabbey. (AQW 3216/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Further to Mr Foster's previous replies, I can confirm that Enforcement Notices were served on 5th March 2002 on the owners of land adjacent to 56 Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus, under Article 68 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

The enforcement notices required:

- (1) that the use of the land for the depositing of waste materials cease within one day of the date on which the notices took effect,
- (2) that all waste materials are removed from the land within 28 days of the date on which the notices took effect,
- (3) that the land be regraded to an even contour within 56 days of the date on which the notices took effect, and
- (4) that the site be covered with topsoil and sown in grass within 56 days of the date on which the notices took effect.

The notices took effect on 5th April 2002 and no appeal has been submitted to the Planning Appeals Commission.

The time periods referred to in (1) and (2) above have passed without the required works having been carried out.

Proceedings are now being brought against the land-owners under Article 72 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 for non-compliance with the enforcement notices. Instructions are currently being prepared for the Departmental Solicitors Office.

Unapproved Developments

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of unapproved developments identified in Fermanagh/South Tyrone during the past 3 years; (b) the number of these developments which were granted retrospective planning approval; and (c) the number of enforcements actioned by his Department. (AQW 3225/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Whilst my Department cannot identify the number of unapproved developments on a constituency basis, I can provide details of such cases dealt with in the Fermanagh District Council area and in the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area.

- (a) The number of unapproved developments identified in Fermanagh & Dungannon Districts over the past three years ending on 31st December 2001 was 355.
- (b) The number of these developments which were granted retrospective planning approval over the last three years was 63.
- (c) The number of enforcements actioned by the Department for the period 1st January 1999 to 31st December 2001 was:

Cases under investigation	251
Breach remedied/ceased	39
Court action	2

Green Belt

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment can he make of the designated 'Green Belt' in the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area. (AQW 3226/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The need for, and extent of, a green belt for the Dungannon and South Tyrone Council area was assessed recently during the preparation of the new development plan for the area, the South Tyrone Area Plan 2010 Draft Plan, which was published in May 2000.

This assessment concluded that a green belt covering the Dungannon and Coalisland areas was appropriate and necessary to maintain strict planning control in those areas of countryside where development pressure is likely to be greatest.

The Department invited objections/representations to all draft plan proposals during the statutory six week period which ran between 25 May and 6 July 2000. At the conclusion of this period, and following clarification of some objections, it was established that there were no objections to the principle of a green belt or in general to the spatial extent of the designation. Four site specific objections were received requesting amendments to the outer edge of the proposed green belt. These objections

will be considered at the Public Inquiry into the Draft Plan which will be held before the independent Planning Appeals Commission. A date for the inquiry has yet to be set.

In view of the above, there are no plans to make any further assessment of the green belt around Dungannon and Coalisland.

Unapproved Development

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to increase the powers of the Enforcement Department to deal with unapproved development. (AQW 3227/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The forthcoming Planning (Amendment) Bill, which I propose introducing to the Assembly before the summer recess, will include a number of measures aimed at strengthening the Department's powers to take enforcement action against breaches of planning control, including unauthorised development.

In addition, my Department has commissioned research into further strengthening the Department's planning enforcement powers in respect of unapproved development, which I expect to be available in early June.

Omagh Divisional Planning Office

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment can he make of the number of Planning Enforcement Officers currently employed in the Omagh Planning Office in relation to the volume of work anticipated over the calendar year 2002-03; and to make a statement. (AQW 3228/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The enforcement team in Omagh Divisional Planning Office is staffed at its full complement of 1 Higher Professional and Technology Officer and 2 Professional and Technology Officers who report to the Principal Planning Officer in the Development Control Section. In addition, each of the 4 Senior Planning Officers has an important role in contributing to the enforcement of planning control in the 5 District Council Areas covered by Omagh division.

The current workload totals 466 cases. Details of new cases received during the last four years are as follows: 1998 - 122, 1999 - 232, 2000 - 454, 2001 - 282 and 2002, to date, 128.

While it is not possible to predict the actual volume of enforcement work in the Division in the period 2002/2003, it is anticipated this is likely to be similar to previous years. Planning Service will continue to monitor the situation in relation to workload and staff resources in line with the Agency's Human Resources Strategy, particularly any increase in workload arising from changes in Enforcement legislation as a result of

the Planning (Amendment) Bill which I propose introducing to the Assembly before the summer recess.

National Trust

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 2536/01, how has this funding been allocated by the National Trust. (AQW 3254/01)

Mr Nesbitt: It is not possible within the time available to provide details of how the Department's funding to the National Trust over the last five years has been allocated.

My officials are working on this and, when the information is available, I will write to the Member

External Consultancy

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1956/01, to detail the level of expenditure, in each of the last three years, on consultancy firms/consultants that are based in (a) Northern Ireland (b) the Republic of Ireland (c) the rest of the UK and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3273/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The breakdown of expenditure by the Department on external consultancy in each of the last three years is as follows:

	NI (£000s)	ROI (£000s)	GB (£000s)	Outside the British Isles
(Dec) 1999/00	229.5*	-	82*	-
2000/01	1,089.4	-	288.2	-
2001/02	820.5	35.5	319	-
Total	2139.4	35.5	689.2	0

*The figures provided previously in answer to AQW 1956/01 did not reflect the correct period during 99/00 and have been amended accordingly.

Deer Park Area of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the proposed declaration of Deer Park, Newtownstewart, West Tyrone, as an area of special scientific interest, to detail (a) the consultation process involved (b) the list of consultees (c) those identified by the department as directly affected and (d) any meetings held with those directly affected. (AQW 3283/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Deer Park Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) was declared by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) on 28 March 2002.

Prior to declaration, as many as possible of the known owners and occupiers of land within the site were visited by EHS and informed about the ASSI proposal. These and other interested parties have now been formally notified

and given until 31 July 2002 to lodge objections or to make other representations, before the site is confirmed, with or without modifications, or rescinded. As well as all known owners and occupiers, the following parties have received declaration papers to date:

Royal Society of the Protection of Birds
 Ulster Wildlife Trust
 Friends of the Earth
 Rural Development Council
 British Association for Shooting and Conservation
 NI Agricultural Producers Association
 NI Birdwatchers Association
 Ulster Museum
 Ulster Farmers Union
 Conservation Volunteers NI
 Strabane District Council
 British Telecom
 Northern Ireland Electricity

Those directly affected by the declaration are primarily the owners and occupiers of land within the designated site. It is not EHS practice to, make publicly available information which it holds on ownership or other interests in land. In the case of registered land, such information can be obtained from the Land Registry offices. To date there have been no meetings with interested parties in connection with this ASSI, apart from visits by EHS officials to individual owners and occupiers.

The site was identified for EHS through research undertaken by the University of Ulster into key glacial landform complexes throughout Northern Ireland. The site was subsequently surveyed in detail by EHS in accordance with established criteria for the selection and delineation of such sites. The key factor in determining the boundaries of an ASSI is the need to protect the special scientific interest of the site. As part of this process, the Department's statutory conservation adviser, the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, was consulted.

Deer Park Area of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment how Deer Park at Newtownstewart in West Tyrone was identified for Area of Special Scientific Interest declaration by the Environment and Heritage Service.

(AQW 3299/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Deer Park Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) was declared by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) on 28 March 2002.

Prior to declaration, as many as possible of the known owners and occupiers of land within the site were visited

by EHS and informed about the ASSI proposal. These and other interested parties have now been formally notified and given until 31 July 2002 to lodge objections or to make other representations, before the site is confirmed, with or without modifications, or rescinded. As well as all known owners and occupiers, the following parties have received declaration papers to date:

Royal Society of the Protection of Birds
 Ulster Wildlife Trust
 Friends of the Earth
 Rural Development Council
 British Association for Shooting and Conservation
 NI Agricultural Producers Association
 NI Birdwatchers Association
 Ulster Museum
 Ulster Farmers Union
 Conservation Volunteers NI
 Strabane District Council
 British Telecom
 Northern Ireland Electricity

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Deer Park Area of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment how the boundaries were established in regard to the proposed declaration of Deer Park, Newtownstewart in West Tyrone as an Area of Special Scientific Interest.

(AQW 3300/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Deer Park Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) was declared by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) on 28 March 2002.

Prior to declaration, as many as possible of the known owners and occupiers of land within the site were visited by EHS and informed about the ASSI proposal. These and other interested parties have now been formally notified and given until 31 July 2002 to lodge objections or to make other representations, before the site is confirmed, with or without modifications, or rescinded. As well as all known owners and occupiers, the following parties have received declaration papers to date:

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Acting Chief Constable

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what discussions he has had with the Acting Chief Constable in relation to road safety policy and how any reduction in PSNI Traffic Branch would impact on this policy. (AQW 3318/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have not had discussions with the Acting Chief Constable in relation to road safety policy. However, I have met Superintendent Ian Hamill, Head of Road Policing Development Branch, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on 12 April 2002, to discuss the partnership between the Department and the Police Service to deliver road safety improvements.

There is a long established constructive working relationship among the organisations primarily involved in road safety – which includes my Department, the PSNI and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service. I am keen to see this co-operation developed further within the framework of the Road Safety Strategy to 2012, which I expect to publish in the Summer, in order to maximise the contribution to reducing deaths and serious injuries on Northern Ireland's roads.

The PSNI makes a vital and significant contribution to road safety through the education of road users and enforcement of road traffic legislation. The presence of police officers on the roads also has a beneficial deterrent effect which assists greatly in reducing the number and severity of road casualties.

The deployment of Traffic Branch officers is an operational matter for the Acting Chief Constable. I have been assured that reducing road traffic collisions and deaths and injuries on our roads continues to be a high priority for the Police Service.

Road safety is a responsibility of all PSNI officers. Traffic Branch officers and police officers in all 29 policing districts of Northern Ireland will continue to enforce road traffic legislation, with particular emphasis on the major causes of road casualties – excessive speed, drinking and driving, failure to wear seatbelts and general carelessness.

I was pleased to join with the Police Service recently in launching new advanced digital camera technology which I am confident will enhance the ability of the police to make the roads of Northern Ireland safer for everyone to use. I look forward to continuing close co-operation with the Police Service, within the context of the new Road Safety Strategy.

Air Quality Monitoring

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) those areas where air quality monitoring has taken place over the last 2 years, either by his Department or Council Environmental Health Departments; (b) the results of such monitoring; and (c) to make a statement. (AQW 3319/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The most recent comprehensive information on air quality monitoring in Northern Ireland is available in the attached report "Air Quality Monitoring in Northern Ireland - 1999". This report, which was produced

by the District Council Chief Environmental Health Officers Pollution Sub-Group (CEHOPSG), provides details, by site, of the results from all District Council and Departmental air quality monitoring sites for 1999.

Other information on air quality in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere in the UK, is available on the National Air Quality Archive web site
<http://www.aeat.co.uk/netcen/airqual/>.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service, has now agreed to fund, in partnership with CEHOPSG, a report on air quality in Northern Ireland during 2000/01, which it is planned to publish by March 2003. This report will draw together all air quality monitoring results and will include trend analysis and discussion in relation to EU limit values and National Air Quality Objectives.

A similar report will thereafter be published annually and will eventually include the data from the new District Council sites, which my Department is funding through its local air quality grant scheme. Copies of the 2000/01 and subsequent reports will be placed in the Assembly Library.

Air quality in Northern Ireland is generally good, however, there are short-lived instances, where from time to time in certain areas, a combination of cold Winter weather and local topography can trap pollutants in natural basins like that created by Belfast hills. Under these conditions, levels of pollutants, such as particulates (smoke and PM10) and sulphur dioxide (SO₂), can rise significantly.

I expect to introduce in this Assembly session a Local Air Quality Management Bill which will give District Councils powers to draw up action plans to remedy local air quality problems. In advance of this legislation, all twenty-six District Councils are undertaking air quality reviews and assessments.

I am pleased that my Department has been able to provide grant-aid to District Councils to assist in this work. Almost £1m was paid out for 2001/02 and a further £1.025m is available for this financial year.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest: West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to list current and proposed ASSI designated areas in West Tyrone. (AQW 3320/01)

Mr Nesbitt: ASSIs which have been declared in West Tyrone are as follows:

Corbylin Wood

Silverbrook Wood

Owenkillev River

Owenkillev and Glenelly Wood

Black Bog

Strabane Glen

McKean's Moss

McKean's Moss Part 2

Deer Park

Grange Wood

Drumlea and Mullan Wood

Essan Burn and Mullyfamore

Moneygal Bog

Moneygal Bog Part 2

Fairy Water Bogs

Straduff

Tonnagh Beg Bog

Cranny Bogs

Deroran Bog

Tully Bog

Upper Ballinderry River

ASSIs which have been surveyed in West Tyrone for future possible designation are as follows:

Glenelly River

Boorin Wood and Heath

Gortnasool Glebe and Meenadoan

Sloughen Glen

Lough Corr

Lough Lee

Croagh

Foyle River

Murrins

Dooraa River

Dunnaree Hill

Lisdoo

Any proposals for further designations will be the subject of consultations with all interested landowners and occupiers.

Regional Strategic Plan

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what proportion of the 9,000 houses designated for the BMAP rural area within the Regional Strategic Plan will be built on brownfield sites. (AQO 1333/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) allocates 9000 houses to the rural areas of the 6 District Council areas comprising the BMAP area. BMAP will allocate this total housing growth to locations, taking account of the Strategic Planning Guidelines in the RDS specifically

- the identification of 3 towns in the BMAP rural area for significant growth – Carryduff, Moira and Ballyclare; and
- the ability of the other smaller towns and settlements in the rural area to accommodate
- additional housing will also be assessed.

The Regional Development Strategy sets a target that 60% of urban housing growth must be provided on ‘brownfield’ sites. This target applies to towns of 5000 population and above. In the BMAP rural area it will apply to Carryduff, Moira and Ballyclare – specific sites will be identified through urban capacity studies.

The Regional Development Strategy does not set a ‘brownfield’ target for settlements below 5000 population. Possible sites in the smaller settlements can be considered during the preparation of the BMA Plan. However, it is not possible to state at this stage what the overall proportion of dwellings within the rural area will be.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 2356/01, to list those properties controlled by the NI Civil Service that are not currently using Water Service ‘Hippo Bags’.

(AQW 2814/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): [holding answer 23 April 2002]: On the basis of returns from Departments, I have placed a list of all properties controlled by the NI Civil Service that are not currently using Water Service ‘Hippo Bags’ in the Assembly Library. The use of ‘Hippo Bags’ is being promoted by DRD Water Service, which has pointed out that toilets fitted with modern cisterns do not need ‘Hippo Bags’.

Department’s Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail those parts of his Department’s estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

(AQW 3024/01)

Dr Farren: The Department of Finance and Personnel has a number of specialised buildings for its direct use and within my Department, Office Accommodation

Branch provides and maintains accommodation on behalf of Northern Ireland Departments and Agencies for the conduct of their business.

Address	Occupier
Omagh SSO, Mountjoy Road	Inland Revenue
Marlborough House, Craigavon	Inland Revenue & NIHE
Dundonald House	NIO Prison Service
Dundonald House, Annexe A	NIO Prison Service
Dundonald House, Annexe C	Assembly Commission
Castle Buildings	NIO General & NICSSA
Rosepark House	NIO General
Corporation Street SSO	Inland Revenue
Brookmount Buildings	Ofreg
Lancashire House	Inland Revenue & NI Court Service
Craigtlet Buildings	NIO General
Massey House	NIO General
Castle Buildings, Annexe 6	NICSSA
Hillview Buildings, Stormont Estate	NIO General
Floors 6-12, Windsor House, Bedford Street	NIO General
County Hall, Ballymena	NHSSB & NEELB
County Hall, Coleraine	NEELB, Causeway Trust
42 King Street, Magherafelt	Homefirst
14 Asylum Road, CB Londonderry	PSNI
90 Castle Street, CB Antrim	Inland Revenue
Tomb Street (Car Park)	Inland Revenue

Within the Office Estate there are at present 21 properties which are shared with other public sector bodies including the Assembly, NIO, NIHE, Inland Revenue, Courts Service, Education and Library Boards and Health and Social Service Boards, which pay for the occupation and use of the premises. Those properties are:

We have 3 additional properties which are vacant, including Armagh House and Prince of Wales Gate Lodge which are due for refurbishment and Massey Avenue Gate Lodge which is being considered for new occupants.

Private Healthcare for Staff

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) the number of NI Civil Service staff receiving private health insurance benefits; and (b) the cost of such provision.

(AQW 3145/01)

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Civil Service makes no corporate provision for private health care insurance for staff.

Staff are, of course, free to take out private health insurance cover. However, the nature and cost of such insurance is a matter for the individual member.

Civil Servants: Press Statements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether civil servants are restricted by their contract of employment from making statements to the press. (AQW 3171/01)

Dr Farren: All members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) are required to comply with the NICS Pay and Conditions of Service Code. The Code stipulates that a civil servant who wishes to take part in any activity involving the disclosure of official information or the use of official experience must obtain prior authority from their Department. Such activities might include, publication of books or articles, contacts with the press, broadcasts, speeches or lectures and participation in outside conferences.

Civil servants should not make public statements or remarks in terms which their employing Department could find objectionable, about individuals (whether officials, Ministers or private persons) or organisations. In addition, they must not take part in activities, including discussion of matters of current or political controversy, which conflict with the interests of the Department; bring the name of the Department, or the Northern Ireland Civil Service into disrepute; or bring into question the impartiality of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Marriage Law

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) the timescale for introducing new legislation to amend the Marriage Law; and (b) if special consideration will be given in any new legislation to address the concerns and views of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Ireland. (AQW 3203/01)

Dr Farren:

- (a) A draft Marriage Bill is being prepared and it is expected to be introduced in the Assembly during June 2002. If agreed and passed by the Assembly it is estimated that it will receive Royal Assent before the end of the year. When it comes into operation will be dependent on the making of regulations by the Department of Finance and Personnel, but it is envisaged that the new system will take effect during the first half of 2003.
- (b) The Marriage Law proposals have been the subject of extensive consultation and views have been received from a number of bodies including the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland. The views

received from all consultees have been given consideration in the framing of the new legislation. The General Register Office has also written to the Society of Friends in Ireland responding to points made by them and offering to provide further assistance if requested. The provisions in the new legislation will detail the civil requirements relating to marriage. The requirements of individual Churches for a marriage to proceed according to their particular rites and ceremonies will be in addition to these and will be a matter for the individual Churches concerned.

Life Expectancy Rates

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are the birth, mortality and life expectancy rates for (i) males; and (ii) females in each year from 1995 to 2001. (AQW 3207/01)

Dr Farren: The table below shows the birth, death and life expectancy rates for (i) males; and (ii) females in each year from 1995 to 2000.

Males	Crude Birth Rate*	Crude Death Rate*
1995	15.2	9.3
1996	15.2	9.1
1997	15.0	8.8
1998	14.6	8.8
1999	14.4	9.0
2000	13.4	8.6

Males	Life Expectancy
1993-1995	73.1
1994-1996	73.5
1995-1997	73.8
1996-1998	74.2
1997-1999	74.3
1998-2000	74.5

Females	Crude Birth Rate*	Crude Death Rate*
1995	13.5	9.3
1996	14.1	9.1
1997	13.7	9.0
1998	13.5	8.9
1999	12.8	9.5
2000	12.0	9.0

Females	Life Expectancy
1993-1995	78.6
1994-1996	78.9
1995-1997	79.2
1996-1998	79.5
1997-1999	79.5
1998-2000	79.6

Persons	Crude Birth Rate*	Crude Death Rate*	General Fertility Rate*
1995	14.3	9.3	68.2
1996	14.6	9.1	67.3
1997	14.3	8.9	66.8
1998	14.0	8.9	66.3
1999	13.6	9.3	64.7
2000	12.7	8.8	62.2

* Per 1,000 population

Coding of deaths registered in 2001 will not be finalised until May 2002.

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what performance targets have been set for the NI Statistics and Research Agency in 2002/03.

(AQW 3256/01)

Dr Farren: For 2002/03 the following key performance targets have been set for the Agency:

- To have at least 95% of customers say they are satisfied with the service and products, with at least 55% reporting they are very satisfied.
- To have at least 25% of customers who received NISRA services in 2001/02 report an improvement in 2002/03.
- To produce no fewer than 70 statistical and 16 research publications during 2002/03.
- To process 98% of postal and personal applications for GRO certificates within 8 and 3 working days respectively.
- To produce key statistics from the 2001 Census by December 2002 and Standard Tables by early 2003.
- To achieve a minimum 3% efficiency saving.
- To maintain expenditure within cash limits and approved budgetary plans.

Copies of the Agency's Corporate and Business Plan will be placed in the Assembly Library at the end of June.

Business Development Service

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what performance targets have been set for Business Development Service (BDS) in 2002-2003.

(AQW 3400/01)

Dr Farren: The Business Development Service (BDS) is an Executive Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. I have set the following key performance targets for the Agency to achieve by April 2003:

- 95% of customers to be satisfied with the services they receive;
- 95% of customers to be satisfied with the way in which services are provided;
- people development to be consistent with the principles of Investors in People (IIP);
- secure on a notional basis and within the context of Service Level Agreements (where they apply), 90% recovery of the cost of its operation from its customers; and
- demonstrate an efficiency saving of 3%.

Copies of the Agency's Strategic Plan 2002-2005 and Business Plan 2002-2003 will be placed in the Assembly Library when they become available.

Peace II

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to urgently investigate a Peace II assumption that core funding is already in place to support the work of victims' groups, which may not be the case, and could result in such groups being unable to continue to retain core outreach workers after 30 April 2002; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3443/01)

Dr Farren: PEACE II makes no assumptions about the existing funding arrangements of its applicants. When submitting applications groups are asked to identify all costs related to their project and assistance can be provided towards all that are eligible under the Measure for which they are applying. The Intermediary Funding Bodies have a role to advise groups on eligible costs under each Measure and to offer advice on project proposals to help ensure that they are presented in a way that best meets that Measures' objectives and eligibility criteria. The 30 April deadline relates to what was the end date for Gap Funding and I have now agreed to extend these arrangements until a decision is taken on Gap funded projects' formal application to the PEACE Programme.

Peace II

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the implementation of the Peace II Programme, including the position on Gap Funding.

(AQW 3481/01)

Dr Farren: The SEUPB has made significant progress in recent months to implement the PEACE II Programme. All Intermediary Funding Bodies have now been appointed and, following calls for projects, the process to select those that best meet the relevant criteria is currently ongoing. All 26 Local Strategy Partnerships were established by the 31 December 2001 target date and most have recently developed and agreed an Integrated Local Area Strategy for their area.

Gap funding arrangements were due to finish on 30 April but, as the SEUPB has now informed me that all of the necessary decisions have not yet been taken, I have agreed that the Gap funding arrangements can continue on the following basis:

- (i) extensions can be offered to projects who have made an early application to the Programme;
- (ii) with the exception of Priority 3 and Measures 2.3 and 2.11, Implementing Bodies will be pressed to take most decisions by 30 June 2002 and to complete their work by 30 September 2002. For the excepted Measures, a target date of 31 December 2002 will apply;
- (iii) extensions can apply only until the date that the relevant Implementing Body informs a project of its decision on their application. Implementing Bodies will inform projects immediately after their decision;
- (iv) where Measures are open and where there is no closing date for applications, projects who have not made an application by 30 April will be advised by the Departments responsible that they are in breach of the condition to make an early application to the Programme. Gap Funding will terminate from that date unless, exceptionally, the reasons for an application not having been made are considered sufficiently strong to merit further consideration;
- (v) where projects have not made an application to open Measures with closing dates after 30 April 2002 the same arrangements as at (iv) will apply. Where closing dates have passed then Gap Funding should have ceased from the closing date for applications;
- (vi) where a project has applied under a different Measure to that for which it received Gap Funding this can be considered as meeting the condition of having made an early application if the project can demonstrate that the objectives of the project application and gap project are substantially similar.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Disability Learning Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the Disability Learning Budget in each Board Area. (AQW 2284/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Resources are allocated to Health and Social Services Boards on a capitation formula basis and it is then a matter for Boards to decide, on the basis of local priorities, how these resources should be allocated

to the various Programme of Cares for the populations in their areas. However, expenditure on the learning disability programme of care, by Board populations, for 2000-01, the most recent financial year for which audited figures are available, was as follows:

Board	£m
NHSSB	22.5
EHSSB	43.2
SHSSB	19.8
WHSSB	13.9

Leithdháiltear acmhainní ar na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ar bhonn fhoirmle caipitlíochta agus ansin is faoi na Boird a bhíonn sé cinneadh a dhéanamh, ar bhonn tosaíochtaí áitiúla, mar ba chóir na hacmhainní sin a leithdháileadh chuig na Cláir éagsúla Cúraim do na pobail ina gceantair. Is mar seo a leanas, áfach, a bhí an caiteachas ar an gclár cúraim maidir le míchumas foghlama, ag pobail Boird, do 2000-01, an bhliain airgeadais is déanaí a bhfuil figiúirí iniúchta ar fáil ina leith:

Bord	£m
NHSSB	22.5
EHSSB	43.2
SHSSB	19.8
WHSSB	13.9

Learning and Disability Services: Funding

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding allocation for 2001-2002, by Board area, for learning and disability services. (AQW 2484/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 2284/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 2284/01.

Learning Disabilities: Funding

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) her assessment in relation to the level of funding available for learning disability services in the Southern Board area; and (b) any action she proposes to take increase funding to these services. (AQW 2544/01)

Ms de Brún: During 2000-01, the most recent financial year for which audited figures are available, the Southern Health and Social Services Board spent some £19.8m on services for people with learning disabilities. The learning disability programme will benefit from the additional resources made available this year for community and residential care. In addition, my Department

will be logging substantial bids in the 2002 Spending review process to fund the implementation of the Learning Disability Strategy which is designed to provide 150 additional community and 150 day care places in the next three years for people in long-stay hospitals, as well as multi-disciplinary community support teams to sustain those resettled and to provide an urgent response when crises occur.

I rith 2000-01, an bhliain is déanaí dá bhfuil figiúirí iniúchta ar fáil ina leith, chaith Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt £19.8m ar sheirbhísí do dhaoine faoi mhíchumais foghlama. Bainfidh an clár míchumais foghlama sochar as an acmhainn bhreise a cuireadh ar fáil i mbliana do chúram pobail agus cónaithe. Chomh maith leis sin, beidh mo Roinnse ag tuairisciú tairiscintí substaintiúla sa phróiseas athbhreithnithe Caiteachais 2002 chun maoiniú a dhéanamh ar fheidhmiú Straitéise Míchumais Foghlama atá deartha chun 150 áit bhreise pobail agus 150 áit chúraim lae a sholáthar sna chéad trí bliana eile amach romhainn do dhaoine in ospidéal fad-fhanachta chomh maith le foirne tacaíochta pobail ildisciplíneach chun iadsan atá athlonnaithe a chothú agus chun freagairt phráinneach a sholáthar nuair a tharlaíonn géarchéim.

Sub-Fertility Service

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much funding she makes available annually for counselling of couples with fertility problems. (AQW 2704/01)

Ms de Brún: As part of the interim arrangements for regional sub-fertility services, I have made available £900,000 annually. This money is to provide a comprehensive sub-fertility service, of which counselling is an integral part. No specific allocation has been made for counselling services in this area.

Mar chuid de na comhshocruithe eatramhacha do sheirbhísí réigiúnacha fo-thorthúlachta, tá £900,000 curtha ar fáil agam go bliantúil. Is ann don airgead sin chun seirbhís chuimsitheach fo-thorthúlachta a sholáthar, a mbeidh comhchomhairliú mar chuid lárnach de. Níl aon leithdháileadh sainiúil déanta do sheirbhísí comhchomhairlithe sa réimse sin.

Sure Start

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the procedures in place to ensure the accountability of Sure Start to the Assembly. (AQW 2760/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department allocates Sure Start funding to each Childcare Partnership through its respective HSS Board. Boards, in turn, make allocations to individual Sure Start projects through one of the project partners designated as the accountable body for the overall project.

Annual progress reports and audited accounts will also be required from each project and reports must identify how resources have been used and set out the outcomes that have been achieved. These reports will be submitted to the relevant Childcare Partnership and my Department within three months of the end of the year to which they relate.

Leithdháileann mo Roinnse maoiniú Sure Start do gach Comhpháirtíocht Chúram Leanaí trína Bord HSS faoi seach. Déanann Boird, ina seal, leithdháiltí chuig tionscadail aonair Sure Start trí cheann de na comhpháirtithe ainmnithe tionscadail a bhíonn mar an foras cuntasach don tionscadal foriomlán.

Éileofar tuarascálacha bliantúla dhul chun cinn agus cuntais iniúchta chomh maith ó gach tionscadal agus caithfidh na tuarascálacha a shainaithint mar a úsáideadh acmhainní agus leagan amach a dhéanamh na cinní a cuireadh i ngníomh. Cuirfear na tuarascálacha seo faoi bhráid na Comhpháirtíochta Chúram Leanaí ábharthaí agus faoi bhráid mo Roinne laistigh de thrí mhí de dheireadh na bliana lena mbaineann siad.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide digital hearing aids throughout the Health Service. (AQW 2771/01)

Ms de Brún: Given the limited budget available to health and social services, and the continuing pressures across the whole spectrum of services, it is not possible to provide the funding required to introduce DHAs locally at this time.

Ag glacadh san áireamh an bhuiséid teoranta atá ar fáil do sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta, agus an brú leanúnach fud fad speictream iomlán na seirbhísí, ní féidir an maoiniú atá de dhíth le hÁiseanna Digiteacha Éisteachta (ÁDéanna) a thabhairt isteach go háitiúil ag an am seo.

Out-Of-Hours GP Services

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money each Health Board received to support the development of out-of-hours GP services in each of the last 4 years. (AQW 3016/01)

Ms de Brún: The amount of money allocated by the Department to each of the four Health and Social Services Boards to support the development of out-of-hours GP services in each of the last four financial years is shown in the table below.

Year	1998-1999 £	1999-2000 £	2000-2001 £	2001-2002 £
Eastern	614,000	675,000	692,000	766,000

Year	1998-1999 £	1999-2000 £	2000-2001 £	2001-2002 £
Northern	355,000	391,000	401,000	444,000
Southern	282,000	310,000	318,000	352,000
Western	265,000	291,000	298,000	330,000
Total	1,516,000	1,667,000	1,709,000	1,892,000

Léirítear an méid airgid a leithdháil an Roinn chuig gach ceann de na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta chun tacú le forbairt eisuaire sheirbhísí Gnáthdhochtúra i ngach ceann de na ceithre bliana airgeadais seo caite sa tábla thíos.

Bliain	1998-1999 £	1999-2000 £	2000-2001 £	2001-2002 £
An Toirtheart	614,000	675,000	692,000	766,000
An Tuaisceart	355,000	391,000	401,000	444,000
An Deisceart	282,000	310,000	318,000	352,000
An Tiarthar	265,000	291,000	298,000	330,000
Iomlán	1,516,000	1,667,000	1,709,000	1,892,000

Eating Disorders

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what information is made available to education authorities to assist in the identification of eating disorders in girls in the 11-18 age group. (AQW 3039/01)

Ms de Brún: In 2000, the Health Promotion Agency produced a series of fact sheets, (Nutrition Factfile: Factsheets on Diet and Health), which was distributed to Heads of Home Economics Departments and Health Education Co-ordinators in all post-primary schools here. This publication included a fact sheet on eating disorders.

Sa bhliain 2000, chuir an Ghníomhaireacht um Chothú Sláinte sraith de bhileoga firici ar fáil, (Nutrition Factfile: Factsheets on Diet and Health), a scaipeadh ar Cheannairí na Ranna Eacnamaíochta Baile agus ar Chomhordaitheoirí Oideachas Sláinte i ngach scoil iarbhuñoideachais anseo. Áirítear san fhoilseachán sin bileog eolais ar neamhoird itheacháin.

Fire Brigade: Posts

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the establishment figure in the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade for (a) full-time posts; and (b) part-time posts. (AQW 3056/01)

Ms de Brún: The establishment figures at 31st March 2002 for full time and part time posts in the Fire Authority are as follows:

Wholtime Firefighters	919
Retained Firefighters	980

Volunteer Firefighters (Rathlin Island)	12
Control Room Staff	59

Seo a leanas na figiúirí bunaíochta an 31ú Márta 2002 do phoist lánaimseartha agus páirtaimseartha san Údarás Dóiteáin:

Lucht Dóiteáin Lánaimsire	919
Lucht Dóiteáin Coimeádta	980
Lucht Dóiteáin Deonacha (Reachlainn)	12
Foireann Seomra Stiúrtha	59

Fire Brigade: Staffing Level

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current staffing level of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade in both full-time and part-time posts. (AQW 3057/01)

Ms de Brún: The staffing levels in the Fire Brigade at 31st March 2002 were;

Wholtime Firefighters	869
Retained Firefighters	910 (811 Wholtime equivalent)
Volunteer Firefighters (Rathlin Island)	8
Control Room Staff	55

Ba iad leibhéil foirnithe sa Bhriogáid Dóiteáin an 31ú Márta 2002 ná:

Lucht Dóiteáin Lánaimsire	869
Lucht Dóiteáin Coimeádta	910 (811 Comhionann Lánaimsire)
Lucht Dóiteáin Deonacha (Reachlainn)	8
Foireann Seomra Stiúrtha	55

Fire Authority Employees: Temporary Promotions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by rank, the number of current employees in the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade who are of temporary rank in (a) full-time posts; and (b) part-time posts. (AQW 3058/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of Fire Authority employees temporarily promoted to the following posts at 31st March 2002 is as follows:

	Uniformed by Rank	Number
Wholtime	Senior Divisional Officer	3
	Divisional Officer	8
	Asst. Divisional Officer	11
	Station Officer	19
	Sub Officer	42

Wholetime	Leading Firefighter	77
	Group Fire Control Officer	2
	Fire Control Officer	2
	Senior Fire Control Operator	4
	Leading Fire Control Operator	10
Part Time	Retained Sub Officer	24
	Retained Leading Fire fighter	78

	Non Uniformed by Rank	Number
Full Time	Temp. Brigade Engineer	1
	Scale 5 (APT&C)	1
	Scale 3 (APT&C)	1

Is mar seo a leanas an líon fostaithe Údaráis Dóiteáin a fuair ardú céime go sealadach chuig na poist seo a leanas ag an 31ú Márta 2002:

	Faoi Éide de réir Céime	Líon
Lánaimsire	Oifigeach Rannáin Sinsearach	3
	Oifigeach Rannáin	8
	Oifigeach Rannáin Cúnta	11
	Oifigeach Stáisiúin	19
	Fo-Oifigeach	42
	Príomhduine Dóiteáin	77
	Oifigeach Rialaithe Dóiteáin Grúpa	2
	Oifigeach Rialaithe Dóiteáin	2
	Oibrítheoir Rialaithe Dóiteáin Sinsearach	4
	Príomh-Oibrítheoir Rialaithe Dóiteáin	10
Páirtaimseartha	Fo-Oifigeach Coimeádta	24
	Ceannaire an Lucht Dóiteáin Coimeádta	78

	Gan a bheith Faoi Éide de réir Céime	Líon
Lánaimseartha	Innealtóir Briogáide Sealadach	1
	Scála 5 (APT&C)	1
	Scála 3 (APT&C)	1

Fire Authority: Navigator Blue

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number, date and value of each credit note issued by Navigator Blue to the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland in the financial years (i) 1998-1999; (ii) 1999-2000; (iii) 2000-2001; and (iv) 2001-2002; and (b) the value of any credit notes issued by Navigator Blue and retained by the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland at 31/03/02. (AQW 3063/01)

Ms de Brún: The details of credit notes issued by Navigator Blue to the Fire Authority during the financial years 1998-99, 1999-00, 2000-01 and 2001-02 are as follows;

Financial Year	Credit Note Number	Date	Value (£'s)
1998-99	409123	11/01/99	1,058.40
1999-00	409635	25/05/99	337.52
	501051	31/12/99	8,018.20
	410455	31/01/00	9,996.00
	308318	30/06/99	222.78
	501079	29/02/00	1,175.00
2000-01	Nil		

Financial Year	Credit Note Number	Date	Value (£'s)
2001/02	309696	30/04/01	8,025.25
	309683	30/04/01	22,372.00
	309718	28/03/01	10,416.38
	600015	31/08/01	27.82
	600016	30/09/01	1.35
	600021	31/10/01	2.30
	309876	30/04/01	209.15
	309845	30/04/01	433.13
	412379	31/10/01	1,822.80
	309844	30/04/01	215.00
	309932	31/05/01	400.00
	600018	31/10/01	20,000.00
	412624	31/01/02	3,525.00
	600018A	27/03/02	3,500.00

Credit notes issued by Navigator Blue and retained by the Fire Authority at 31 March 2002 are:

Financial Year	Credit Note Number	Date	Value (£'s)
2001-02	501426	31/03/02	11,045.00

Is mar seo a leanas mionsonraí na nótaí creidmheasa a d'eisigh Navigator Blue chuig an Údarás Dóiteáin i rith na mblianta airgeadais 1998-99, 1999-00, 2000-01 agus 2001-02;

Bliain Airgeadais	Uimhir Nóta Creidmheasa	Dáta	Luach (£)
1998-99	409123	11/01/99	1,058.40
1999-00	409635	25/05/99	337.52
	501051	31/12/99	8,018.20
	410455	31/01/00	9,996.00
	308318	30/06/99	222.78
	501079	29/02/00	1,175.00
2000-01	Nialas		

Bliain Airgeadais	Uimhir Nóta Creidmheasa	Dáta	Luach (£)
2001/02	309696	30/04/01	8,025.25
	309683	30/04/01	22,372.00
	309718	28/03/01	10,416.38
	600015	31/08/01	27.82
	600016	30/09/01	1.35
	600021	31/10/01	2.30
	309876	30/04/01	209.15
	309845	30/04/01	433.13
	412379	31/10/01	1,822.80
	309844	30/04/01	215.00
	309932	31/05/01	400.00
	600018	31/10/01	20,000.00
	412624	31/01/02	3,525.00
	600018A	27/03/02	3,500.00

Is iad na nótaí creidmheasa eisithe ag Navigator Blue agus coimeáda ag an Údarás Dóiteáin ag an 31 Márta 2002:

Bliain Airgeadais	Uimhir Nóta Creidmheasa	Dáta	Luach (£)
2001-02	501426	31/03/02	11,045.00

Fire Authority: Navigator Blue

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland currently has a contract with Navigator Blue; and, if so, to detail its terms and conditions. (AQW 3064/01)

Ms de Brún: The Fire Authority's current contract with Navigator Blue ends on 31st May 2002. Under the contract, Navigator Blue provides the Authority with media services and acts as an advertising agency. For placing advertisements Navigator Blue does not levy a charge on the Authority but receives a 15% commission from the company with whom they place the advertising. For the sourcing of products and other services, Navigator Blue receives a flat rate commission of 26.5%. There are no additional charges made for their attendance at meetings or in sourcing sponsorship agreements for the Brigade.

Críochnaíonn conradh reatha an Údaráis Dóiteáin le Navigator Blue an 31^ú Bealtaine 2002. Faoín gconradh, soláthraíonn Navigator Blue seirbhísí meáin don Údarás agus gníomhaíonn sé mar ghníomhaireacht fógraíochta. Chun fógraíocht a dhéanamh ní thobhíonn Navigator Blue muirear ar an Údarás ach faigheann sé coimisiún 15% ón gcuideachta lena ndéanann sé an fhógraíocht. D'fhoinsiú táirgí agus seirbhísí eile, faigheann Navigator Blue coimisiún ag ráta cothrom de 26.5%. Ní dhéantar aon mhuirir bhreise dóibh a bheith i láthair ag cruinnithe nó i bhfoinsiú comhshocruithe urraíochta don Bhriogáid.

Departments Policies: Equality Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if all her Department's policies, interim or otherwise, have been screened for equality of opportunity. (AQW 3080/01)

Ms de Brún: All my Department's existing policies, interim or otherwise have been screened for equality of opportunity. In addition, my Department in its Equality Scheme has stated that it will assess the equality implications of all new policies as they are being developed.

My Department currently has one interim policy, which is the provision of sub-fertility services. A consultation document on the sub-fertility service is currently being prepared. The consultation process will inform the provision of a permanent service and in particular the eligibility criteria and equality issues.

Tá gach ceann de pholasaithe mo Roinne, bídis eatramhach nó a mhalairt scagtha do chomhionannas deiseanna. Chomh maith leis sin, luaigh mo Roinn ina Scéim Comhionannais go ndéanfaidh sé measúnú ar impleachtaí comhionannais gach polasaí nua de réir mar a fhorbraítear iad.

I láthair na huaire tá polasaí eatramhach ag mo Roinnse, ar sholáthar seirbhísí fo-thorthúlachtaá ullmhú. Tabharfaidh an próiseas comhchomhairle faisnéis ar sholáthar seirbhíse buaine agus go háirithe na critéir incháilitheachta agus ceisteanna comhionannais.

Fire Authority: Investors in People

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) if the mark 'Investors in People' has been awarded to the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland; and (b) if any form of staff appraisal/ performance related pay has been introduced by the Authority. (AQW 3091/01)

Ms de Brún: The Fire Authority has not applied for "Investors in People" accreditation.

The Fire Authority operates under the National Joint Council for Local Authorities Fire Brigades Scheme of Conditions of Service, which does not include a requirement for any form of performance related pay.

Níor chuir an tÚdarás Dóiteáin isteach ar an gcreidiúnú "Infheisteoirí i nDaoine".

Feidhmíonn an tÚdarás Dóiteáin faoin gComhairle Náisiúnta i gComhar do Choinníollacha Seirbhíse Scéim Bhriogáid Dóiteáin na nÚdarás Áitiúla, nach gcuireann riachtanas d'aon chineál pá de réir feidhmíochta san áireamh.

Fire Authority: Overtime Payments

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost of overtime payments made to personnel in the Control Room of the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland from 1 November 2001 to date; and (b) the number of personnel in the Control Room of the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland who have worked more than 50 hours' overtime in any given 4-week period during the financial year 2001-02.

(AQW 3093/01)

Ms de Brún: The cost of overtime time payments to the Fire Authority's Control Room staff for the period 1st November 2001 to 31st March 2002 was £ 40,495.20.

During the financial year 2001-2002 there were 11 occasions when eight members of Control Room staff exceeded 50 hours overtime in any period of one month.

Is £40,495.20 an costas íocaíochtaí ragoibre d'fhoireann Sheomra Rialaithe an Údaráis Dóiteáin don tréimhse ón 1^ú Samhain 2001 go dtí an 31^ú Márta 2002.

I rith na bliana airgeadais 2001-2002 bhí 11 ócáid ann nuair a rinne ocht gcomhalta d'fhoireann an tSeomra Rialaithe níos mó ná 50 uair an chloig ragoibre i dtréimhse aon mhí amháin.

Foetal Death

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what research has been undertaken on the link between nutrients and foetal death.

(AQW 3094/01)

Ms de Brún: There have been a number of studies into specific aspects of diet and the relationship with foetal death. These include a study in the US on the relationship between vitamin A and foetal death and a Swedish study on the intake of fish contaminated with organochlorides and stillbirth rates.

Tá roinnt staidéir déanta ar ghnéithe sainiúla d'aiste bia agus an ghaolmhaireacht le bás féatach. Áirítear orthu sin staidéar sna Stáit Aontaithe ar an ngaolmhaireacht idir vitimín A agus bás féatach chomh maith le staidéar Sualannach ar ionghabháil éisc éillithe le horgánaclóirídí agus rátaí marbh-bhreitheanna.

Pregnant Women: Benefits of Eating Fish

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she has taken to inform pregnant women of the benefits for their unborn child of eating fish in early pregnancy - as reported in the British Medical Journal, 23 February 2002.

(AQW 3095/01)

Ms de Brún: The general health benefits of eating fish as part of a balanced diet are well established and this advice is given to all first time expectant mothers in "The Pregnancy Book". However, it would be premature of my Department to issue specific advice on the low consumption of seafood in early pregnancy as a risk factor for pre-term delivery and low birth weight, based solely on the findings of this Danish study.

Tá sochair ghinearálta sláinte maidir le hiasc a ithe mar chuid d'aiste chothromaithe bia seanbhunaithe agus tugtar an chomhairle sin do gach máthair a bhíonn ag súil don chéad uair in "The Pregnancy Book". Bheadh sé roimh am ag mo Roinnse, áfach, comhairle shainiúil a eisiúint ar chaitheamh íseal bia mara i dtóircheas luath mar fhachtóir riosca do shaolú agus do mheáchan íseal breithe, bunaithe go huile agus go hiomlán ar an staidéar sin ón Danmhairg.

Maternal Diet

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what advice is given to pregnant women on the effect of the maternal diet on the unborn child.

(AQW 3096/01)

Ms de Brún: All first time expectant mothers are given a copy of "The Pregnancy Book", which is produced in collaboration with the Health Promotion Agency and distributed by Health Boards. The Book contains a wealth of information about pregnancy, including advice on healthy eating.

Tugtar cóip den "The Pregnancy Book" do gach máthair a bhíonn ag súil don chéad uair, agus táirgtear an leabhar i gcomhoibriú leis an nGníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte agus dailtear é ar na Boird Sláinte. Tá flúirse eolais sa Leabhar faoi thoircheas, lena n-áirítear comhairle ar ithe sláintiúil.

Parentcraft Classes

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of hospitals that provide parentcraft classes to pregnant women; and (b) the average number who benefit from these classes each year.

(AQW 3097/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently 11 Health and Social Services Trusts provide parentcraft classes in a number of different locations, including hospitals, Health Centres and other community settings. Information on the average number who benefit from such classes is not available.

I láthair na huaire soláthraíonn 11 Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ranganna i gceird na tuismitheoireachta i roinnt suíomh difriúil, lena n-áirítear ospidéal, Ionaid Sláinte agus suímh phobail eile. Níl

eolas ar an meánlíon a bhaineann sochar as ranganna den sórt sin le fáil.

Pregnant Women: Vitamin A

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what advice is given to pregnant women about the consumption of Vitamin A.

(AQW 3098/01)

Ms de Brún: “The Pregnancy Book”, which is distributed to all first time expectant mothers, contains advice on vitamin A consumption.

Tá comhairle ar vitimín A sa leabhar “The Pregnancy Book” a dháiltear ar gach máthair a bhíonn ag súil don chéad uair.

Low Birth Weight

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what research is currently being undertaken in Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster on the long-term impact of low birth weight on childhood and adult health.

(AQW 3108/01)

Ms de Brún: There is currently one project funded by the Research and Development Office for the HPSS in the general area of low birth weight and health. The study is entitled “Quality of life and health outcomes for those born with low birth weight: a 50 year follow-up study” and is connected with Queen’s University. I am not aware of any other research in this topic area in the two universities at this time.

I láthair na huaire tá tionscadal amháin maoinithe ag an Oifig Taighde agus Forbartha do na SSSP i réimse ginearálta an mheáchain íseal ag am breithe agus sláinte. Is é an teideal atá ar an staidéar ná “Quality of life and health outcomes for those born with low birth weight: a 50 year follow-up study” agus tá sé ceangailte le hOllscoil na Ríona. Ní heol dom faoi aon thaighde eile sa réimse topaice sin sa dá ollscoil ag an tráth seo.

Effects of the Maternal Diet on the Foetus

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what research is currently being undertaken in Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster on the effects of the maternal diet on the foetus.

(AQW 3109/01)

Ms de Brún: The Research and Development Office for the HPSS is not currently funding any research specifically into the effects of maternal diet on the foetus. One study entitled “Diabetes, obesity, intrauterine growth and atherosclerosis: the fetal origins hypothesis” is

being funded through the Endocrinology and Diabetes Recognised Research Group. The host institution for this research is the Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust. I am not aware of any other research in this topic area in the two universities at this time.

Níl an Oifig Taighde agus Forbartha do SSSP ag maoiniú aon taighde sainiúil ar éifeachtaí aiste bia na máthar ar an bhféatas i láthair na huaire. Tá staidéar amháin dar teideal “Diabetes, obesity, intrauterin growth and atherosclerosis: the fetal origins hypothesis” á mhaoiniú tríd an nGrúpa Aitheanta Taighde Inchréolaíochta agus Diaibeitis. Is é Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOspidéal an institiúid óstach don taighde sin. Ní heol dom faoi aon thaighde eile sa réimse topaice sin sa dá ollscoil ag an tráth seo.

Ultrasound

Mr O’Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the assessment she has made of the evaluation carried out on the long-term safety of ultrasound exposure on the foetus and new-born; and (b) the studies on which she has based her conclusion.

(AQW 3128/01)

Ms de Brún: Ultrasound imaging has been used as an effective diagnostic tool for over 30 years. It enables assessment of gestational age and detection of multiple pregnancies and fetal abnormalities. I have been advised that there is no verified documented evidence of adverse effects on patients caused by exposure to diagnostic ultrasound.

Research on the use, benefits and risks of ultrasound is conducted at a number of centres worldwide. Results of current and future research will continue to inform clinicians and patients of the benefits and risks of ultrasound examinations.

Tá úsáid á bhaint as íomháu ultrafhuaime mar uirlis éifeachtach fáthmheasa le os cionn 30 bliain. Cumasaíonn sé measúnú a dhéanamh ar aois gine sa tréimhse iompair mar aon le hilthoirchis agus ainriochtaí féatacha a bhrath. Comhairlítear dom nach ann d’aon fhianaise deimhnithe cáipéisithe d’iarmhairtí dochracha ar othair arna chúisiú ag nochtadh chuig ultrafhuaime fáthmheasa.

Déantar stiúradh ar thaighde ar úsáid, sochair agus rioscaí ultrafhuaime ag roinnt lárionad ar fud an domhain. Leanfaidh torthaí ó thaighde reatha agus taighde amach anseo de bheith ag tabhairt faisnéise do chliniceoirí agus d’othair ar na sochair agus na rioscaí a bhaineann le himscrúduithe ultrafhuaime.

Low Birth Weight

Mr O’Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can she

make of the factors resulting in low birth weight of children born to mothers resident in bed and breakfast accommodation and in receipt of income support.

(AQW 3131/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Foetal Drug Syndrome

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of babies born with Foetal Drug Syndrome in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 3132/01)

Ms de Brún: As Foetal Drug Syndrome is not a recognised medical term or diagnosis, it is not possible to provide this information.

De bhrí nach fáthmheas ná téarma aitheanta liachta é Siondróm Druga Féataigh, ní féidir an t-eolas sin a sholáthar.

Private Health Care Insurance for Staff

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of staff within her Department receiving a private health insurance benefit; and (b) the cost of such provision.

(AQW 3146/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety makes no provision for private health care insurance for staff.

Staff are, of course, free to take out private health insurance cover as private citizens. However, the nature and cost of such insurance is a matter for the individual member.

Ní dhéanann an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí aon fhoráil d'árachas príobháideach chúram sláinte don fhoireann.

Tá cead a gcinn ag an bhfoireann, ar ndóigh, clúdach árachas príobháideach sláinte a ghlacadh mar shaoránaigh phríobháideacha. Is ceist don duine aonair féin, áfach, cineál agus costas árachais den sórt sin.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many beds each year are taken up with treating patients who have hospital-acquired infections (HAIs).

(AQW 3155/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have died in NI hospitals over the past 5 years due to HAIs (hospital acquired infections).

(AQW 3156/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of hospital-acquired infections have been recorded in (a) the last 5 years; and (b) the first 4 months of 2002.

(AQW 3157/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the comparison of lost 'bed days' due to (a) cases of delayed discharge; and (b) cases of hospital-acquired infections.

(AQW 3160/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas iarrtha ar fáil.

MRSA

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) any plans currently in place to deal with cases of hospital acquired infections, such as MRSA; and (b) any research being carried out to ascertain the seriousness of these infections upon patients.

(AQW 3161/01)

Ms de Brún: Arrangements for the management and control of infection in hospitals have been in place on foot of my Department's circular, HSS 9/2000. These include enhanced surveillance of hospital-acquired infections such as MRSA bacteraemias and surgical site infection. All acute Trusts and other healthcare facilities, including private nursing homes, have plans in place for the management of both MRSA infections and the colonisation of patients with MRSA. My Department has funded the new Healthcare-Associated Infection Surveillance Centre, based at the Royal Victoria Hospital, and provided additional funding to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre. Data is currently being collected on MRSA bacteraemias at Trust level, which will allow us to adequately quantify the problem and identify further approaches towards addressing it.

Reducing the related problem of antimicrobial resistance is one of my key priorities. In January 2002 I launched my Department's *Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan*, which contains recommendations for action by Health Boards, Trusts, and others, to reduce health care acquired infections. All Trusts have participated in a recent survey of their infection control procedures. In addition we are looking at ways to improve hospital cleanliness

and have recently earmarked £300,000 to that end. No specific research into the effect of such infections on patients is currently being funded by my Department.

Is ann do shocrúithe do bhainistiú agus do rialú infhabhtú in ospidéal de bhua chiorclán mo Roinne, HSS 9/2000. Áirítear orthu sin faire mhéadaithe ar infhabhtuithe ospidéalfhaighte mar *bacteraemias* MRSA agus infhabhtú ag láthair máinliachta. Tá pleananna i mbun ag gach Iontaobhas géarliachta agus ag saoráidí chúram sláinte eile, lena n-áirítear tithe altranais príobháideacha, do bhainistiú infhabhtuithe MRSA agus agus coilíniú othar ag MRSA. Mhaoinigh mo Roinnse Lárionad nua Faire Infhabhtuithe Bainteach le Cúram Sláinte, atá bunaithe ag Ospidéal Ríoga Victoria, agus sholáthair sí maoiniú breise don Lárionad Faire ar Ghalair Theagmhálacha. Tá sonraí á dtiomsú faoi láthair ar *bacteraemias* MRSA ag leibhéal Iontaobhais, a chuirfidh ar ár gcumas cainníochtú dóthanach a dhéanamh ar an bhfadhb agus cur chuig breise a aithint i dtreo aghaidh a thabhairt air.

Tá laghdú a dhéanamh ar fhadhb bhainteach na frithsheasmhachta antaimhiocróbaí ar cheann de na tosaíochtaí tábhachtacha atá agam. I mí Eanáir 2002 sheol mo Roinnse an *Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan*, ina bhfuil moltaí do ghníomh ag Boird Sláinte, Iontaobhais agus dreamanna eile chun ionghabhaithe a fhaightear ó chúram sláinte a laghdú. Bhí na hIontaobhais ar fad rannphairteach i suirbhé le déanaí ar nósanna imeachta rialaithe infhabhtuithe. Chomh maith leis sin táimid ag iniúchadh bealaí le feabhas a chur ar ghlaineacht ospidéal agus tá £300,000 leagtha amach chun na críche sin. Níl aon taighde sainiúil ar éifeacht ionfhabhtuithe den sórt sin ar othair á mhaoiniú faoi láthair ag mo Roinnse.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps Trusts have taken to implement the circular for a new band structure for Speech and Language Therapists. (AQW 3172/01)

Ms de Brún: Fourteen of the nineteen Health and Social Services Trusts employ Speech and Language Therapists. Two of these Trusts have implemented the new band structures for this group of staff and seven Trusts are at various stages of discussion with staff representatives. The remaining five Trusts have yet to make formal offers to staff but would hope to be in a position to do so in the near future.

Fostaíonn ceithre Iontaobhas Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta déag as naoi gcinn déag Teiripeoirí Urlabhra agus Teanga. Chuir dhá cheann de na hIontaobhais seo na bannastruchtúir nua i bhfeidhm don mheitheal oibre seo agus tá seacht n-Iontaobhas ag céimeanna éagsúla de chaibidlí le hionadaithe na n-oibrithe. Tá na cúig Iontaobhas eile chun tairiscintí foirmiúla a thabhairt go fóill do na hoibrithe ach tá siad ag súil go mbeidh siad réidh leis seo a dhéanamh gan mhoill.

MMR Vaccine

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what help and assistance is available for parents of (a) autistic children; and (b) children with learning disabilities, to receive the single MMR vaccine instead of the triple vaccine.

(AQW 3197/01)

Ms de Brún: The MMR vaccine is the safest and best option to protect children against measles, mumps and rubella. There is absolutely no evidence to support the use of separate measles, mumps and rubella vaccines and my Department does not recommend them. Neither Autism or learning disabilities are regarded as contraindications to immunisation with the MMR vaccine. Any parent who is concerned about these issues should speak to their GP or Health Visitor.

The single component vaccines currently being used by a few doctors and clinics are unlicensed products and no sound information is available on batch testing results for either purity or potency. Separating out these vaccines leaves children unprotected against serious infections.

Is í an vacsaín MMR an dóigh is sábháilte agus is fearr le páistí a chosaint ar an bhrúitíneach, an leicneach agus ar an bhrúitíneach dhearg. Níl cruthú ar bith ann le tacú le húsáid vacsaíní ar leith na brúitíní, na leicní agus na brúitíní deirge agus níl mo Roinn a moladh. Ní féidir féachaint ar Uathachas nó ar mhíchumais fhoghlama mar sheachthorthaí de thoradh imdhíonadh leis an vacsaín MMR. Ba chóir do thuismitheoir ar bith atá buartha faoi na ceisteanna seo labhairt lena nGnáthdhochtúir nó lena gCúairteoir Sláinte.

Is táirgí neamhcheadúnaithe iad na vacsaíní comhábhair shingil atá á n-úsáid ag beagán dochtúirí agus clinici faoi láthair agus níl eolas cruinn ar fáil ar thorthaí tástála baisece ar a n-ionacht nó ar a láidreacht. Fágann scaradh na vacsaíní seo páistí gan chosaint ar ghalruithe tromchúiseacha.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the range of hospital acquired infections; (b) the number of patients and others who have been affected in each of the last five years; (c) if any targets are in place for yearly reductions; and (d) if these targets have been met.

(AQW 3218/01)

Ms de Brún: There is a large range of infections, both bacterial and viral, that a patient in hospital might contract such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections, skin or wound infections, ventilator assisted respiratory infection, MRSA and other bacteraemias. Some of these are a consequence of medical instrumentation while some are secondary to infection from organisms within the individual. In the past winter some patients in hospital acquired viral gastroenteritis, which had been introduced

to the hospital by patients and others from the community. However it is often unclear where the infection is sourced. In the case of MRSA, for example, some 30% of people outside hospitals are, usually harmlessly, colonised by it.

Information on the numbers of hospital patients so affected in the last five years is not available and consequently targets would be inappropriate. Enhanced hospital surveillance of MRSA bacteraemias is ongoing and the first annual figures for this infection, by Trust, will be published mid-year by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre.

Is ann do raon mór infhabhtuithe, idir bhaictéarach agus víreasach, a d'fhéadfadh othar in ospidéal a tholghadh ar nós níúmóine, ionfhabhtuithe na conaire úiríní, ionfhabhtuithe craicinn nó cneá, MRSA agus *bacteraemia* eile. Tarlaíonn cuid acu sin mar thoradh ar ionstraimiú liachta agus bíonn cuid acu tánaisteach d'ionfhabhtú ó orgánaigh laistigh den duine aonair. Sa gheimhreadh seo caite tholgh roinnt othar in ospidéal gaistreintríteas víreasach, a thug othair agus daoine eile ón bpobal isteach san ospidéal. Ní léir, áfach, cén foinse a bhí ag an ionfhabhtú. I gcás MRSA, mar shampla, bíonn 30% de dhaoine lasmuigh d'ospidéil coilínithe aige, ach de ghnáth ní bhíonn aon dochar ann.

Níl fáil ar eolas ar an líon othar ospidéil a raibh tionchar dá leithéid orthu sna cúig bliana seo caite agus dá thoradh sin bheadh spriocanna mí-oiriúnacha. Tá faire mhéadaithe ospidéil ar *bacteraemia* MRSA ar siúl go leanúnach agus foilseoidh an Lárionad Faire Ghalair Theagmhálacha na chéad figiúirí bliantúla, de réir lontaobhais, don ionfhabhtú sin faoi lár na bliana.

Single Vaccine

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps has she taken to make a single vaccine available for children with learning disabilities for (a) mumps; (b) measles; and (c) rubella.

(AQW 3306/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 3197/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3197/01.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bypass: Enniskillen

Mr Foster asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) when he will provide funding for a Southern By-pass for the town of Enniskillen; and (b) the timescale for commencing such a by-pass. (AQW 2821/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): You will be aware that my Department's Roads Service is preparing a 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule of major road schemes, which it is expected could be started within the 10-year period of the Department's Regional Transportation Strategy. A Southern Bypass of Enniskillen is one of many schemes being considered for inclusion in this Schedule. Clearly I will not be able to accommodate all of the schemes that have been suggested, but I hope to publish details of the Schedule later this year. In the meantime I am obviously not in a position to comment on the funding or the timescale for construction of specific schemes which may be included in the schedule.

Specialised Buildings

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail those parts of his Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes.

(AQW 3028/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can only respond in relation to 'Specialised Buildings' within my Department, that is to say those buildings and assets that have a specialised purpose (for example Roads Service Depots). The control of the remainder of the 'General Office Estate' is the responsibility of the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

My Department has a number of properties that fall within the category of 'Specialised Buildings'. Of these properties, Water Service has identified 68 sites covering 150 acres, which have been declared surplus to requirements as Water Service continues to rationalize the delivery of its services. These surplus sites are being disposed of in accordance with established procedures.

The Department's Roads Service has identified nine properties which fall within the category of specialised buildings and which are now classed as surplus to requirements. The properties are not currently being used for Departmental purposes and largely consist of surplus depots.

The details of those properties are as follows: -

- 2 Clonmakate Road, Craigavon (Birches Depot) - Disused Roads Service Depot – Sale Agreed.
- Maddens Road, Drumnacanver, Craigavon - Disused Roads Service Depot – Sale Agreed.
- Loughgall Road, Armagh - Disused Roads Service Depot – For sale on open market.
- 22 Drumcrew Road, Newtownbutler - Surplus Building – Sale agreed.
- 237 Victoria Road, Sollus, Bready, Strabane - Disused Roads Service Depot – With the Valuation and Lands Agency to place on open market.
- 8 Ballymagowan Road, Crossowen, Clougher – Disused Roads Service Depot – Sale Agreed.

- Arvalee Depot, Omagh – Disused Roads Service Depot – to be place on open market in near future.
- 62 Lackaboy Road, Enniskillen - unused building and yard – In the process of being declared surplus.
- 80 Galbally Road, Drumskinney, Dromore, Co Tyrone Disused Roads Service Depot – On open market since January 2002. No sale agreed as yet.

Equality Commission Guidelines

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria is used to determine which groups or individuals are consulted as part of the equality impact assessment of any new proposals. (AQW 3082/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department carries out consultation in accordance the Department's approved Equality Scheme which requires the Department to consult with those listed in the Scheme's consultation list. This is in accordance with Equality Commission Guidelines.

Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a pedestrian crossing on the Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus giving safe access to the retail/commercial complex at Clipperstown. (AQW 3103/01)

Mr P Robinson: As you know, following a request from Carrickfergus Borough Council for the provision of a pedestrian crossing on Woodburn Road, my Department's Roads Service carried out a pedestrian/ vehicular survey at the location in question. The survey showed that the number of pedestrians crossing the road was too low to warrant the provision of such a facility. Furthermore, officials conducting the survey observed that there was sufficient gaps in the traffic flow to permit pedestrians to cross the road safely using the pedestrian refuge islands that have already been provided.

In the circumstances, there are no plans to provide a controlled pedestrian crossing at this location. Roads Service does, however, propose to upgrade the lighting units on the refuge islands during the current financial year and are currently assessing the carriageway markings and signing in the area to see if further improvements can be made.

Traffic Speeding Levels: Hilltown, Newry

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made towards implementing the programme aimed at reducing traffic speeding levels through the village of Hilltown, Newry. (AQW 3104/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, following a comprehensive consultation exercise involving local groups, Councillors and other

individuals, a scheme to provide traffic calming measures in Hilltown was completed in March 2001. The scheme was aimed at reducing traffic speeds through the village and so reduce the likelihood of road accidents. The measures included the provision of entry gateways (red textured surfacing and signage on yellow backing boards), central hatching, kerb build-outs and pedestrian refuge islands.

Roads Service will continue to monitor the success of this scheme and, if necessary, will implement any further measures that are considered to be appropriate.

Comber Bypass

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the timescale for the start and completion of the Comber By-pass. (AQW 3175/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am pleased to advise that the Comber Bypass scheme is making good progress. The objection to the vesting order has been withdrawn, thus avoiding a public inquiry and the associated delay. This means that all statutory procedures are now complete.

Further ground testing has been undertaken and the design and tender documents are being adjusted in accordance with the findings.

My Department's Roads Service has commenced the tender process and a list of tenderers has been compiled. The exact date for each stage of the tender programme have yet to be finalised, but I will be making an announcement in due course.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Estate Wardens: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of estate wardens working in the NIHE District Office at Carrickfergus; and (b) the estates for which they have responsibility. (AQW 3118/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): There are no Estate Wardens working for the Housing Executive in the Carrickfergus Borough Council Area. There are no immediate plans to recruit any Estate Wardens for Carrickfergus, although the need for wardens is kept constantly under review.

Pensioners: Housing Benefit

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps is he taking to ensure pensioners receive their full entitlement to housing benefit. (AQW 3127/01)

Mr Dodds: The Social Security Agency is working in close partnership with groups who represent pensioners on a range of measures to ensure that all pensioners claim and receive all the help they are entitled to.

The Housing Executive use a number of means to advertise Housing Benefit and to encourage its uptake among elderly people. At the beginning of each tenancy and on an ongoing basis, staff in District Offices provide advice to all tenants, including elderly people, on entitlement to Housing Benefit. Each year an advertising campaign is undertaken in all local papers promoting uptake of Housing Benefit. An advisory leaflet specifically aimed at pensioners has recently been produced and distributed to all the District Offices and will be distributed more widely in due course.

Housing Benefit Fraud

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to further combat housing benefit fraud. (AQW 3147/01)

Mr Dodds: As part of its strategy for combating Housing Benefit fraud the Housing Executive will continue to develop systems to prevent fraud, and to ensure that if it does occur it will be dealt with appropriately.

In addition to its existing preventative and investigative controls the Housing Executive will introduce the following:

- an extension of its data matching programme to identify instances in which information provided for Housing Benefit purposes differs from that held on other systems;
- improved arrangements for the referral of suspected fraud cases to the Social Security Agency for investigation; and
- a series of exercises aimed at targeting high risk categories of claims.

In addition the Housing Executive in conjunction with the Social Security Agency will ensure that full use is made of the powers available to it under the provisions of the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001.

Recruitment Drive: Social Security Agency

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the results of the recruitment drive for Administrative Officers in the Social Security Agency circa November 2001; and (b) any mechanism for internal promotion from Administrative Assistant to Administrative Officer during the same period. (AQW 3180/01)

Mr Dodds: There was no specific recruitment drive for Administrative Officers in the Social Security Agency in November 2001. The Social Security Agency fills Administrative Officer vacancies on a continuous

basis from the list of suitable applicants held by the NICs Recruitment Service. Twenty-nine Administrative Officers were recruited in November 2001.

The Social Security Agency has established mechanisms for the internal promotion of staff from Administrative Assistant to Administrative Officer. These mechanisms involve the holding of promotion boards which result in successful Administrative Assistants being listed in merit order. Individual officers are then posted to vacancies in accordance with the Social Security Agency's staff placement policy. During November 2001, there were no internal promotions from Administrative Assistant to Administrative Officer.

Incapacity Benefits: Retention of Documents

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) how long documents relating to incapacity benefit are kept; and (b) what measures are in place to prevent misplaced or lost documents. (AQW 3181/01)

Mr Dodds: Documents relating to Incapacity Benefits are normally retained by the Department for 14 months. However, when documents are required in connection with compensation recoveries or overpayments, they will be kept until the situation is rectified, regardless of time. Each individual Incapacity Benefit file is kept alphabetically and examined as part of the normal checking regime to ensure that documents are not lost or misplaced.

Code of Conduct

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 2839/01, to identify the process by which he determines that all requests for meetings are dealt with in accordance to both the Ministerial Pledge of Office and the Code of Conduct with regard to equality of treatment, impartiality and preventing discrimination. (AQW 3194/01)

Mr Dodds: I take all my decisions in accordance with the Ministerial Pledge of Office and the Code of Conduct, as I undertook to do when taking up Ministerial office.

Housing Bill

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development if legislation to transfer responsibility for traveller sites from local councils to the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) includes the provision of facilities other than straight-forward dwellings, eg work areas, animal paddock etc. (AQW 3199/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Bill includes provisions which will transfer responsibility for the provision of Traveller sites from District Councils to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. It also includes provisions which will allow the Housing Executive to acquire existing

sites from District Councils. Decisions as to which facilities should be incorporated into sites will be made on an individual basis in accordance with need and in line with obligations under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, and the policies and practices outlined in the New Policy on Traveller Accommodation document.

Housing Bill

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development if legislation to transfer responsibility for traveller sites from local councils to the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) includes responsibility for the provision of transit or halting sites. (AQW 3201/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Bill includes provisions which will transfer responsibility for the provision of Traveller sites from District Councils to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. It also includes provisions which will allow the Housing Executive to acquire existing sites from District Councils. The definition of Traveller sites will permit the inclusion of transit or halting sites should the Department agree to the transfer of this specific responsibility to the Housing Executive.

Traveller Sites

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development if legislation to transfer responsibility for traveller sites from local councils to the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) will exonerate management, whether NIHE or a Housing Association, from accusations of discrimination under the race relations 1997 order in the allocation of accommodation to travellers. (AQW 3202/01)

Mr Dodds: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Housing Associations will exercise their responsibilities as regards allocation of accommodation to Travellers in accordance with all appropriate legislation and policies.

Grants: Criteria for Voluntary Organisations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the criteria set for awarding grants to voluntary organisations/charities; and (b) if the criteria changes from year to year. (AQW 3224/01)

Mr Dodds: Good Practice Guidance on Funding from all Northern Ireland Departments was published for consultation within Partners for Change, Government's Strategy for Support of the Voluntary and Community Sector. A final version of that Guidance which takes account of consultation responses will be published by my Department in the near future. The overall criteria for receipt of funding from this Department towards costs incurred by voluntary and community sector organisations are in line with the draft Good Practice Guidance.

Specific criteria for funding are set individually in relation to the business objectives which that funding is intended to achieve, taking account of various factors, including the scale and scope of the funding itself, the number of voluntary and community sector organisations involved and a range of issues put forward from consultations or discussions, internal and external evaluations or other examples of best practice. Given the broad range of funding programmes operated within this Department and the very considerable number of separate criteria which have been established and agreed to take forward these funding programme, it would be a disproportionately large exercise to compile all of that detailed material into one response.

The process of developing and refining criteria is ongoing and can therefore respond to changes in circumstances during the funding programme including revised Audit Office guidelines or new legal requirements.

Housing Bill

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) progress on legislation to transfer responsibility for traveller sites from local councils to the NI Housing Executive; and (b) when he will introduce the Bill in the Assembly. [R] (AQW 3230/01)

Mr Dodds: The consultation period for the Housing Bill ended on 30 April 2002. It is proposed that the Bill will be introduced in the Assembly before the summer recess.

Housing Bill

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the proposals contained in the Housing Bill in respect of the housing needs of travellers, to explain why is there a need to continue with those provisions contained in Part IV of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 1985 that relate to the provision of travellers sites. (AQW 3238/01)

Mr Dodds: Following consultation on the Housing Bill it is proposed to repeal the provisions contained in Part IV of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 1985 that relate to the provision of travellers sites.

Applications for Home Improvements

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the length of time it takes for the Housing Executive to process a standard application for home improvement. (AQO 1299/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive sets targets and monitors performance on a number of grants management

issues over which it has control. The main results for the end of March 2002, show that against a target of 90%, 87% of all Schedules of Grant Aided Works were issued within twelve weeks of inspection. Additionally, against a target of 100%, 97% of formal approvals were issued within 6 months of completed documentation being received. In respect of payments, against a target of 90%, 86% were issued within 6 weeks of the request for the final inspection to be carried out. Lastly, in 99% of cases, properties were inspected within 20 weeks of a preliminary enquiry being received.

Fuel Poverty

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development what further action he is taking to eliminate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1270/01)

Mr Dodds: Northern Ireland is benefiting from one of the most comprehensive programmes in the UK to tackle the scourge of fuel poverty.

My target is to take 20,000 homes, many occupied by elderly people, out of the fuel poverty trap by the end of 2004. The main plank of our attack on this problem is the Warm Homes scheme. This scheme began in July last year and by the end of March 2002, over 4,300 households had benefited from the scheme.

In addition to the Warm Homes Scheme, we have a raft of other measures in place to ensure that new social housing is built to the highest standards of heating and insulation, to provide grants for people to improve their homes and a replacement programme to put more efficient heating into Housing Executive homes. Winter fuel payments of £200 also help the 60's and over with their heating costs.

To build on the substantial work that is already underway I have commissioned work to start on a Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland.

I trust you will agree that these measures are a clear demonstration of my Department's commitment to do everything possible to remove the blight of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Protection of Private Properties at Interfaces (POPPI)

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development if the guidelines that apply to the Housing Executive to cover their properties per house through the new POPPI Scheme also apply to Housing Associations.

(AQO 1302/01)

Mr Dodds: The Protection Of Private Properties at Interfaces (POPPI) scheme is administered by the Housing Executive, but it is aimed at providing security measures for private properties only. It does not apply to Housing

Executive dwellings, which are covered by a separate scheme.

The POPPI scheme is intended provide the same security enhancements necessary for private homeowners as that currently provided for tenants in social housing. The works content will therefore be broadly equivalent to those measures that the Housing Executive undertakes for its own properties.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) the number of credit cards it has issued; and (b) the spend on each card in the financial year ended 31 March 2002. (AQW 3159/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Dr O'Hagan):

- (a) To date the Assembly Commission has issued a total of 45 HM Government Procurement Cards. This figure includes replacement cards for existing users, for example where cardholders have change duties, and cards which have subsequently been cancelled and not re-issued due to holders leaving office.

HM Procurement cards should be distinguished from personal credit cards in that they provide for greater control such as single transaction limits, monthly transaction limits and blocks on specified merchant categories and on cash withdrawals

- (b) The spend on each card in the financial year ended 31 March 2002 is detailed in the table below:

Stationery and Reprographic Office	£160,730.19
Travel Desk	£29868.41
Head of Administration	£473.46
Research and Information (IT)	£586.02
Assembly Commission Office (2 cards)	£3105.33
Office of the Speaker	£2537.60
Finance and Personnel	£2468.85
Bill Office	£449.65
Business Office	£399.10
Overseas Office	£32.25
Office of the Official Report (Hansard)	£187.15
Office of the Keeper	£27.75
Head of Procurement	Nil
Library	Nil
Committee for Regional Development	£8363.92
Committee of the Centre (3 cards)	£6453.78

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure	£6023.48
Committee for Social Development	£260.47
Committee for Health Social Services & Public Safety (2 cards)	£1743.30
Ad Hoc Committees	£534.20
Committee for Finance and Personnel (2 cards)	£701.14
Committee on Procedures	£765.34
Committee for Agriculture & Rural Development	£153.37
Committee for Education	£70.10
Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment	£3172.85
Committee for Employment and Learning	Nil
Public Accounts Committee	Nil
Environment Committee	Nil
Committee on Standards and Privileges	£694.70
Total Spend	229,802.41

Northern Ireland Assembly: Staff

Mr S Wilson asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) the number of staff employed by the NI Assembly; (b) the number employed who have (i) impaired sight; (ii) impaired hearing; and (c) the number who are listed as disabled. (AQW 3208/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter): To date the current number of staff employed by the NI Assembly Commission is 326. This number includes seconded staff and those who have been directly recruited to the NI Assembly.

Of the 326 staff employed, one has declared a visual impairment, three have declared that they have impaired hearing and in total eight have declared themselves as having a disability as defined under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 17 May 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Children's Commissioner

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when it plans to introduce legislation to establish a Children's Commissioner; and to make a statement. (AQW 2868/01)

Reply: Work on the drafting of legislation to establish a Children's Commissioner is well advanced and we intend to introduce the Bill to the Assembly this month. This is later than intended, but it was necessary to take sufficient time to ensure that this important and significant piece of legislation fulfils our objective of putting Northern Ireland at the leading edge of best practice.

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the number of credit cards in use in (i) its Department; (ii) Executive Agencies of its Department; (iii) NDPBs of its Department; and (iv) any other bodies funded by its Department; and (b) how much has been spent on each card in the financial year ended 31 March 2002. (AQW 2981/01)

Reply: There are no credit cards currently in use within our department. However, during the financial year ended 31 March 2002 a Government Procurement Card was used and the total amount spent was £2,687.48.

Four credit cards are currently in use within our Department's non-departmental public bodies or bodies funded by a grant in aid. The Development Office of the Northern Ireland Economic Council has one credit card and the amount spent using this card in the financial year ended 31 March 2002 was £268.04. The Equality Commission has three credit cards and the amount spent on each in the financial year ended 31 March 2002 was £7,260, £4,432 and £1,483 respectively.

The Community Relations Council currently has no credit cards in use but did previously have two cards. The amount spent on each in the financial year ended 31 March 2002 was £3,507.92 and £564.50 respectively.

'Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve'

Mr Berry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how much it cost to publish the victims' strategy document 'Reshape, Rebuild and Achieve'. (AQW 2993/01)

Reply: The cost of design, printing, and distribution of "Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve", the Key Contacts List for Government Departments and Agencies, and the posters and leaflets which accompanied those documents, will amount to approximately £42,000, although some invoices are still outstanding. This figure includes the costs associated with the official launch of the documents and the distribution of some 220,000 leaflets through the three main newspapers in order to reach as many individual victims as possible throughout Northern Ireland.

Staffing Levels

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1811/01, to outline (a) if the staffing figures represent the final staffing complement; (b) if not, when do they expect to reach full staffing complement; and (c) the expected final staffing complement. (AQW 3069/01)

Reply:

STAFFING LEVELS FOR NORTH SOUTH IMPLEMENTATION BODIES

Bodies	(a) Final staffing complement	(b) Date for reaching final complement	(c) Expected final staffing complement
Waterways Ireland	Not final	End of 2002	381
North-South Language Body	Not final	End of 2002/ early in 2003	65
-Foras na Gaeilge		End of 2002/ early in 2003	
-Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch	Not final		12
Special Eu Programmes Body	Not final	End of May 2002	31
InterTradeIreland (ITI)	Not final	End of 2002	42
Food Safety Promotion Body	Not final	On - going	Not yet approved
Foyle Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC)	Not final	On - going	Not yet approved

Age Discrimination

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 835/01, what targets have been set to tackle age discrimination.

(AQW 3133/01)

Reply: We intend to issue our proposals for legislation to address age discrimination early next year. We will ensure that this legislation is in operation before the 2006 deadline imposed by the European Employment Framework Directive.

Department for Regional Development: Ombudsman Complaints

Mr M Murphy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many complaints the Ombudsman has received in relation to the Department for Regional Development.

(AQW 3163/01)

Reply: The Assembly Ombudsman is independent of the Assembly and of government departments. The inquiry should be addressed to the Assembly Ombudsman, 33 Wellington Place, Belfast BT1 6HN.

Economic Policy Unit

Mr Byrne asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on the progress of the Economic Policy Unit in devising an economic development strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1320/01)

Reply: The Assembly endorsed the Executive's second Programme for Government for the 2002/03 financial year and beyond in December 2001. The Economic Policy Unit worked with all departments to co-ordinate the work for the Programme.

The Programme sets out two priorities- "Securing a Competitive Economy" and "Investing in Education and Skills" which will contribute to achieving our economic development goals. Within these two priorities, the Programme proposes a wide range of actions which will contribute to the achievement of a modern, high-skilled, knowledge-based economy. These include actions on infrastructure; attracting inward investment; promoting enterprise and innovation; regenerating the rural economy; and improving the education and training of our young people. This approach builds on the proposals in the first Programme for Government, published in March 2001, focusing on the right conditions for economic growth and involves actions across a range of departments.

There is a major role for government in ensuring that the essential infrastructure necessary for economy growth is in place. The new borrowing powers which will be available to the Executive, as part of the Reinvestment

and Reform Initiative, should help to ensure that we can make major improvements in our infrastructure.

Women's Advice Centres: Funding

Ms E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the funding of Women's Advice Centres.

(AQO 1319/01)

Reply: Women's Centres can obtain funds from a range of sources. Particularly important among these sources are Government Departments, European Funds, and the National Lotteries Charities Board. This mix of funding sources is a reflection of the broad range of services which these centres provide to their local communities.

Departments make funding available through specific programmes which have particular aims and objectives in line with Departmental priorities. To access these funds, voluntary and community organisations, which includes the women's centres, are invited to bid, on a competitive basis, against set criteria

World Summit: Sustainable Development

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in light of the recent press reports on climate change and its effect on Northern Ireland, what steps are being taken to ensure Northern Ireland is represented at the World Summit on Sustainable Development later this year.

(AQO 1308/01)

Reply: Since we last answered questions on this matter, the UK Government has indicated that places will be available within its delegation for each of the devolved administrations. In view of this we are presently considering this administration's representation.

Programme for Government

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans the Executive has to stimulate private equity to fund key elements of the Programme for Government.

(AQO 1360/01)

Reply: As stated in the Programme for Government, we initiated last spring the Working Group Review on the opportunities for Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiative (PPP/PFI) in all major public service programmes. The report is to be published later this month to enable us to consult on "financing our future". This will include consideration of and comment on the full range of possible sources of funding and help in the development of a future policy framework on PPPs that takes account of our local context.

The Executive is actively encouraging investment by the private sector to strengthen the economy and generate new employment. The Reinvestment and Reform Initiative,

announced on 2 May, provides an opportunity for a substantial infrastructure investment programme, beginning with £200 million of investment in the next two years. Using this package in conjunction with other sources of finance will enable the renewal of essential assets.

As part of the Initiative we intend to establish a new strategic investment body which would be able to take and use the mix of sources of financing – be it from the new borrowing power, from traditional public sector finance or from PPPs. It would link this to the best procurement methods, whether involving the public or private sectors or a combination. By using the new body the Executive hopes to provide the best possible opportunities to promote the effective use of all the various means available.

The Executive's current approach to stimulating private equity to contribute to our broader economic goals is to leverage increased venture capital provision in the market place where there is clear evident of market failure via venture capital funds financed by a combination of public and private sector finance.

In conclusion, we need to look at all possible sources of funding to help improve our public services and bring together contributions from all sectors including the private sector.

Executive: IRA Activities in Colombia

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the Executive has discussed the alleged activities of the IRA in Colombia.
(AQO 1361/01)

Reply: Business transacted at Executive meetings is confidential and is only made public as and when agreed by the Executive.

Statutory Economic Advice

Mrs Courtney asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans it has to review the statutory economic advice it receives.
(AQO 1313/01)

Reply: In September 2000 the Executive Committee initiated a 'Review of the Northern Ireland Economic Council and the Provision of Economic Advice and Research'. A Steering Group, comprised of academics, researchers and departmental representatives, was set up to carry out the task. The review looked at both the demand for and supply of economic advice. .

Following completion of the review the Executive has agreed that it should propose to set up a single research body to replace the Northern Ireland Economic Council and Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre and we will be consulting on this proposal with the

NIEC and NIERC, with the Committee of the Centre, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Finance and Personnel Committees.

Meetings with the Prime Minister

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any recent meetings with the Prime Minister.
(AQO 1305/01)

Reply: The First Minister and Deputy First Minister met the Prime Minister on 2 occasions in the last 6 months. In addition, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister met with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Odyssey Arena on 2 May when the Reinvestment Reform Initiative was announced. Both the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have each had 2 separate meetings with the Prime Minister during this period.

Discrimination: Disabled People

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on any plans to further extend protection against discrimination for disabled people.
(AQO 1311/01)

Reply: I refer the member to the response provided to AQO 1233/01 on 29 April.

Convention on the Future of the EU

Dr Birnie asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what arrangements are in place to ensure a Northern Ireland input to the current convention on the Future of the EU.
(AQO 1321/01)

Reply: Measures are being put in place to raise the profile of the Future of Europe debate in Northern Ireland, including a conference to be held in June or early July 2002. The conference will include representatives of all major sectors and organizations which have involvement in European issues. The Convention will take account of the views expressed by the wider community through the conference and other measures. Meanwhile we are keeping in touch with the development of the debate at the Convention.

Women's Organisations: Funding

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the inter-departmental group that has been formed to

explore issues related to the funding of women's organisations; including when it will report. (AQO 1307/01)

Reply: Mr Haughey along with Ministers de Brun and Farren met with representatives of Women's Centres. As a result of this meeting Ministers considered that the best way to begin the process of looking at this was for officials to look at the issue in a general way and initially report back to them.

Our officials convened interdepartmental meetings with departmental representatives and undertook research to explore issues relating to core funding for the women's voluntary organisations.

It is important that the funding difficulties of the Women's Centres be resolved in a strategic context as their problems are not unique within the Voluntary and Community Sector. This was recognised in a recent review (The Harbison Review) led by the Department for Social Development who have responsibility for funding the sector as a whole.

Officials are presently finalising a position paper on the funding of women's organizations generally. They are also liaising with officials in the Department for Social Development with a view to identifying how these funding problems can be most effectively addressed. The position paper will be sent to Ministers for their consideration within the next few weeks.

Community Relations Policy

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the review of Community Relations policy. (AQO 1318/01)

Reply: The Community Relations Policy Review Report has been completed and submitted to us for consideration. It is a lengthy and comprehensive document which offers a number of options as to the form of and approach to be adopted in a new community relations strategy. We want to give those serious and detailed consideration before reaching any conclusion in relation to this crucial area.

Executive Programme Funds

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will consult with the Committee of the Centre before submitting any bids for funding from the Executive Programme Funds. (AQO 1316/01)

Reply: We recognise the importance of consultation between departments and their committees in respect of Executive Programme Fund bids and confirm that we will consult with the Committee of the Centre on potential executive Programme Fund bids before they are lodged.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Brucellosis

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of cases of brucellosis in cattle recorded in each of the last 5 years; (b) the number of cases in the months of January and February 2002; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2763/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The number of cases of Brucellosis in cattle recorded in each of the last 5 years was

1997	91 reactors
1998	357 reactors
1999	607 reactors
2000	587 reactors
2001	726 reactors

(b) The number of cases in the month of January 2002 was 44 reactors and the number of reactors in February was 111.

Brucellosis continues to be a serious problem in Northern Ireland with some 284 herds currently being restricted. As the figures demonstrate there has been a significant increase over the last five years in the number of reactors detected and of course the situation was exacerbated by the FMD outbreak last year which resulted in the diversion of resources and the suspension of Brucellosis testing.

That said we have taken steps to deal with the problem through moving from biennial to annual blood testing in the high incidence Divisions of Enniskillen, Newry and Armagh as well as introducing cull cow blood sampling in both of the OTMS slaughter plants and a bulk milk sampling scheme for dairy herds both of which are helping to pick up infection at an early stage.

I have also arranged for more veterinary manpower to be made available for Brucellosis as the remaining FMD controls are further relaxed.

Apart from these ongoing measures a formal review conducted by my officials looking at options for dealing with Brucellosis is nearing completion and in due course I will be considering their recommendations and consulting with industry on the way ahead.

Northern Ireland Potato Sector: Policy Review

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when will the Report into the Potato Industry, which was compiled by a consultant and

forwarded to the Department in November 2001, be published and placed in the public domain.

(AQW 3164/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Consultancy Report on a Policy Review of the Northern Ireland Potato Sector was commissioned by me to enable me to consider future support arrangements for the Northern Ireland Seed Potato sector in particular. I intend to put out for public consultation the Recommendations arising from the Report, so that I can take account of the industry's views on the range of options identified. I would have done this at an earlier stage but felt it prudent to await decisions by the present promotional body, Seed Potato Promotions Ltd (SPP), on its own future, given the recent and continuing difficult situation facing that Company.

As you may be aware, SPP decided, at an Extraordinary General Meeting on Monday 22 April, that it would cease to trade from the end of June 2002. In light of that decision, the way is now clear to begin the consultation phase. I shall be writing shortly to the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee to begin the consultancy process. I would hope to be able to make final decisions on the way forward in August or September following consultations.

Honeybees: Varroa Mite

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) if the Varroa Mite has been discovered amongst bees in Northern Ireland, (b) can this infection be controlled, (c) if this will have an impact on pollination in apple orchards; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3266/01)

Ms Rodgers: I can confirm that the parasitic mite Varroa has been discovered in Honey-bee hives in eight locations in north County Down. Infestations are presently under chemical treatment to control the mite populations on site at each of the apiaries. Bee Inspectors will monitor this treatment to the end of the exposure period. This treatment does not guarantee 100% elimination of the mites but reduces numbers to below a manageable threshold over the summer months. Treatment is applied in autumn if monitoring dictates necessity. Standstill Notices are in operation until the Department is satisfied that the risk of spread is negligible.

Infestations can be effectively treated, but once the mite becomes widespread, there is little doubt that there will be re-occurrences. You are probably aware that, up to now, Northern Ireland has been the only area of the British Isles considered free from this mite, and its presence has obvious implications for bee keepers in leading to loss of honey production and fruit pollination. However, it is of no great surprise that infestation has now occurred here since it is widespread in Great Britain and infestations have been increasingly detected

in the Irish Republic, gradually moving north, with two border counties affected in recent years. The extent of the infestations in Northern Ireland will only be known when the annual Spring Survey of hives, which is currently underway, is complete.

Freedom from the mite has enabled Northern Ireland to maintain Protected Zone (PZ) Status within the EU, enabling us to control imports of Queen Bees and bee semen, and contingency arrangements have been put in place to deal with this outbreak. Notices have been served on the hive owners with regard to the isolation, treatment, and if necessary, destruction of the affected hives, and restrictions have been imposed at all bee-keeping locations within a 5km radius of each of the sites. Furthermore, my officials had earlier arranged for wide distribution of a comprehensive booklet dealing with the detection, management and treatment of Varroa.

My officials are currently considering, in consultation with the industry, whether or not PZ status is sustainable. A decision on this issue will also influence whether the present outbreaks will require destruction of the hives or whether measures can be confined to simply treating the bees.

There is no restriction on beekeepers providing pollination services as long as they are not served with a Standstill Notice.

Rural Development Programme: Financial Assistance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers have applied for financial assistance under the Rural Development Programme.

(AQW 3287/01)

Ms Rodgers: The measures currently open under the Rural Development Programme do not apply to individual applications. However, groups or collectives of farmers may bring forward projects for consideration. The measures open are under the Northern Ireland Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity (BSP) and the Peace II Programme.

To date, 87% of the applications under the "for profit" element of the BSP Programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives. Only 5% of the applications under the "not for profit" element of that Programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives. Likewise, 5% of applications under the Peace II Programme have come from farmers' groups or collectives.

Individual farmers may bring forward projects under the LEADER + Programme. It is expected that LEADER + Action Groups will be in a position to call for project applications around August / September 2002.

Fishing Vessels

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of registered fishing vessels in each of the last 10 years; and (b) the number which have been decommissioned in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3292/01)

Ms Rodgers: (a) Registration of fishing vessels is the responsibility of the Registry of Shipping and Seamen at Cardiff. My Department does not retain information on the number of vessels whose registration denotes a port in Northern Ireland. However, the information available on the number of vessels locally licensed by my Department, is as follows:

NORTHERN IRELAND LICENSED FLEET FROM 1991

At December	10m & Under	Over 10m
1991	225*	264
1992	227*	264
1993	139*	238
1994	154	215
1995	161	206
1996	166	184
1997	158	187
1998	161	190
1999	164	181
2000	166	179
2001	172	177

*Records of FCU vessel numbers may not be complete for these years. Licensing was not extended to 10m and under vessels until 1 May 1993

- (b) During the last ten years, there have been five Decommissioning schemes and a total of 84 vessels have been permanently removed from the Northern Ireland fishing fleet as a result of these schemes. 15 vessels were decommissioned in 1994, 13 in 1995, 20 in 1996, 5 in 1997 and 31 in the 2001 scheme.

Burns Report

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail the contact her officials have had with the Department of Education to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the Burns Report. (AQW 3358/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Burns Report is not a set of policy proposals. DARD officials have not been involved in consideration of the Report. DARD officials will however be consulted, as appropriate when later this year the Department of Education is drafting policy proposals for post-primary education and, if necessary, will assist in the Rural Proofing of those proposals.

Hayes Review

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail the contact her officials have had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the Hayes Review. (AQW 3359/01)

Ms Rodgers: Consultation on the issues surrounding the Acute Hospitals Review Group Report will start in the coming weeks. DARD officials will be consulted, as appropriate when DHSSPS is drafting proposals for changes to existing policies and, if necessary, will assist in the Rural Proofing of those proposals.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail the contact her officials have had with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 3360/01)

Ms Rodgers: Even though this Review is in its early stages DARD officials have already been involved in consideration of the draft Terms of Reference for the Review. The Office of the First and Deputy First Minister has already identified the need to apply Rural Proofing to Service Delivery. DARD officials will be consulted, as appropriate when OFMDFM is drafting policy proposals for Public Administration and, if necessary, will assist in the Rural Proofing of those proposals.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail the contact her officials have had with the Department for Regional Development to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the Regional Development Strategy. (AQW 3361/01)

Ms Rodgers: DARD officials, at many levels and in all key work areas, have been closely involved with their colleagues in the Department of Regional Development in the development of the Regional Development Strategy. The contribution from DARD is evident from the extent to which rural issues are reflected in the Strategy Document. The Section on Rural Northern Ireland is comprehensive, and rural issues are reflected in all the other key sections of the document.

DARD officials are members of the Inter-departmental Steering Group set up to monitor the implementation of the Strategy. This will ensure that rural issues continue to be fully considered in the future development of policies that support the Strategy.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 1911/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3367/01)

Ms Rodgers: In response to AQW 1911/01, DARD expenditure on external consultancy and consultancy reports in the period since devolution was confirmed as follows:

Financial Year	Cost	
1999/00 (wef 2/12/99)	£158,346	
2000/01	£538,171	
2001/02 (to 18/1/02)	£632,499	
This expenditure can be apportioned as follows:		
Financial Year	Base	Cost
1999/00 (wef 2/12/99)	Northern Ireland	£133,186
	Rest of UK	£25,160
2000/01	Northern Ireland	£422,227
	Rest of UK	£51,169
	Outside British Isles	£64,775
2001/02 (to 18/1/02)	Northern Ireland	£540,787
	Republic of Ireland	£24,667
	Rest of UK	£60,720
	Outside British Isles	£6,325

Accommodation Review

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail the contact her officials have had with the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the Accommodation Review. (AQW 3371/01)

Ms Rodgers: This Review is in its early stages. DARD officials have been involved in consideration of papers including an Interim Report from consultants identifying strategic issues relating to the Review. DARD officials will be consulted, as appropriate when DFP is drafting proposals for the Review and, if necessary, will assist in the Rural Proofing of those proposals.

Integrated Administration and Control System

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the proposed timetable for the distribution of Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) 2002 Aid application forms; and (b) any

contingency plans in place for applicants that fail to meet the final date due to the delay in receiving the forms from her Department. (AQW 3395/01)

Ms Rodgers: In Northern Ireland the annual information packs for Area Aid applications under the Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) are issued in mid-March each year for return on or before 15 May. In 2002 some 25,000 IACS application packs were issued on 18 March 2002 to all producers who submitted an Area Aid application 2001. Blank application forms and information packs have also been available at all County Agriculture Offices since that date for producers entering the scheme in 2002 for the first time.

The issue and ongoing return of 2002 declarations is consistent with previous years. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is not aware of any problems in Northern Ireland relating to either the distribution or receipt of IACS application packs and the closing date for receipt of applications (without penalty) remains 15 May 2002. Under normal rules late applications, which will be subject to penalty, can be accepted until 9 June 2002.

Flooding

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) those areas that are prone to flooding; (b) the assessment which has been made of such areas; (c) any steps being taken in regard to flood prevention; and (d) the financial cost of such. (AQW 3407/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of concerns about flooding in the light of recent reports of studies on climate change. I regret however that it is not possible to provide a simple and definitive response to the first part of your question. My Department's Rivers Agency has historic records of individual flood events over many years and can provide localised information if requested. However these records do not indicate the frequency or significance of the event. In particular in urban areas flooding may result from blockages of pipes or grilles and is unpredictable.

I can assure you however that Rivers Agency has a robust system for analysing flooding events to identify the causes and scope for remedial action, whether in the form of removal of a simple blockage in a culvert system, or a full scale study of the financial viability of a capital works scheme to provide or upgrade flood defences.

Many households in Northern Ireland currently benefit from major flood alleviation schemes undertaken in towns across the Province and a major scheme to address flooding in Newry is nearing completion. Rivers Agency has a full programme of capital works to alleviate flooding risk where such works are financially viable.

The Agency also has a scheduled maintenance regime for open watercourses, urban culverts and grilles to minimise the risk of flooding.

Additionally Rivers Agency has a vital advisory role in its liaison with DOE Planning Service in seeking to avoid inappropriate development eg development in floodplains.

The annual Rivers Agency budget is in the order of £20 million which includes capital works, maintenance and enforcement.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease: Expenditure

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total expenditure during the Foot-and-Mouth outbreak to (a) farmers; (b) veterinary surgeons; and (c) valuers. (AQW 3454/01)

Ms Rodgers: The total expenditure to

- (a) Farmers - £7.4 million
- (b) Veterinary Surgeons - £1.5 million
- (b) There was no expenditure in respect of external valuers as Departmental Valuation Officers carried out all valuations. As there were no disputes at the time of valuation, it was not necessary to employ independent valuers.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the uptake of grants available for the celebration of the Queen's Golden Jubilee. (AQW 3178/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure released notification of two rounds of non-Lottery funding for the Golden Jubilee celebrations in November last. This information was circulated to community groups, schools, churches and network organisations, offering a small grant of £500 to £5,000 to groups organising events to celebrate the Golden Jubilee.

The first round had a closing date of November, and the second a closing date of February. Over 600 application forms were requested for both rounds, with a total of 274 returned. The total amount of funding which was granted through the Golden Jubilee Non-Lottery Scheme was £366, 834.80, spread over 199 groups.

These figures only relate to the Golden Jubilee Non-Lottery Scheme operated through the Department.

Funding for Jubilee events is still available through Awards for All, the Lottery distributors' small grants scheme and through some district councils.

The important feature of this occasion, as I stated in the Assembly on 19 February, is that it is not about money. People want to celebrate, whether they get a grant or not and they will do so. The Jubilee is about small events, people coming together and celebrating, and a sense of community. The grants scheme in itself will not be an indicator of how many events take place. Ultimately there will be far more events than awards, because of the enthusiasm that exists in the province.

Salmon Fishing: River Bush

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the number of salmon caught on the special stretch of the River Bush last season; (b) the number of daily permits issued last season; and (c) how do those figures compare with the previous 5 years. (AQW 3234/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Special stretch of the River Bush is a common term used for three individual stretches of water namely the Leap, New and Town stretches.

The statistics requested in respect of the above stretches are as follows:

The number of salmon caught on the Special stretch in 2001 was 174 (116 Town, 34 New and 24 Leap).

The number of salmon daily permits issued in 2001 was 392 (212 Town, 103 New and 77 Leap).

The figures for the previous five years were:

NUMBER OF SALMON CAUGHT

	Town	New	Leap	Total
2000	82	23	17	122
1999	125	26	34	185
1998	195	56	88	339
1997	106	59	42	207
1996	80	35	17	132

NUMBER OF DAILY PERMITS

	Town	New	Leap	Total
2000	289	127	55	471
1999	401	144	173	718
1998	392	150	420	962
1997	276	139	187	602
1996	286	132	134	552

Both the number of salmon caught and day tickets issued in 2001 were below the six-year average but this can be attributed largely to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, which curtailed angling.

Two and Four Wheel Motorsport

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of responses received by the Sports Council NI during the public consultation exercise on the draft Strategic Plan for 2 & 4 wheel motorsport 2002-07. (AQW 3268/01)

Mr McGimpsey: A total of seven responses were received as follows:

- Marketing Solutions
- Antrim Borough Council
- Lisburn Borough Council
- Fermanagh District Council

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1940/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3293/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The figures on the attached table include actual expenditure by my core Department, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI) and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) for each of the last three years, and a breakdown of where the consultants and consultancy firms used are located.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE ARTS AND LEISURE – USE OF CONSULTANTS

Financial Year	Total Cost	Spend in relation to location of consultant/consultancy firm			
		NI	RoI	UK	Outside of British Isles
1999/2000	£8,000 (Core Department)	£8,000	Nil	Nil	Nil
	£25,670.40 (OSNI)	£25,670	Nil	Nil	Nil
	£52,871.00 (PRONI)	£42,177	Nil	£10,694	Nil
2000/2001	£388,339.61 (Core Department)	£383,409.81	£2,214.42	£1,730.12	£985.26
	£19,430 (OSNI)	£19,430	Nil	Nil	Nil
	£21,370 (PRONI)	£21,370	Nil	Nil	Nil
2001/2002	£574,646.19 (Core Department)	£569,415.29	£2,348.50	£2,882.40	Nil
	£61,280 (OSNI)	£44,556	Nil	£16,724	Nil
	£21,980 (PRONI)	£21,230	Nil	£750	Nil

- Down District Council
- Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, Northern Ireland Assembly
- Rev Dr William McCrea, MLA

Irish Language: NICS

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans for the promotion of the Irish language within the NI Civil Service. (AQW 3316/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department will continue to provide policy advice, support and guidance to Ministers, officials in the Northern Ireland Civil Service and others on linguistic diversity, which includes Irish. DCAL chairs the Interdepartmental Charter Group which was set up to advise on implementing and reporting on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. My Department, on behalf of the Charter Group, has drawn up draft policy guidance on meeting UK Government commitments in respect of Irish in the European Charter. DCAL is currently considering the issue of language training and awareness seminars and will put proposals to the Charter Group for consideration in due course. My Department is also leading a project to put in place a central translation service for Irish and has set up an expert advisory group to develop a house style for use in public sector Irish translations in Northern Ireland.

Two and Four Wheel Motorsport: Development Officer

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) any finances which have been made available to facilitate the appointment of a 2 & 4 wheel motorsports development officer and (b) when such an appointment is likely to be announced. (AQW 3269/01)

Mr McGimpsey: No decisions on the appointment of a development officer for two and four-wheel motor sports have yet been made. The strategic plan for the sport is still under consideration following the recently completed consultation exercise. I expect, however, to receive the final version shortly when the way forward will be considered in consultation with the governing bodies of the sport.

Rugby League

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the funding made available by his Department to develop Rugby League in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3384/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has statutory responsibility for the development of sport within Northern Ireland, and this includes the allocation of funding. Funding is allocated through the appropriate governing body for each sport.

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland does not provide financial support to rugby league as there is no formal rugby league structure or governing body in Northern Ireland. A number of approaches have been made to the Sports Council in recent years but there is no formal pattern emerging to suggest the imminent emergence of a robust and active governing body for rugby league in Northern Ireland.

Orange and Institutional Halls

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he, in consultation with his Ministerial colleagues, would consider designating Orange and Loyal Institution Halls as community centres for the purpose of fostering the culture and heritage of the Unionist tradition in the community so that areas where no separate community halls exist were not disadvantaged in this regard. (AQW 3402/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has no powers to designate halls as community centres in the manner that you suggest, nor does it have the resources to fund their development in this way.

There is, however, nothing to prevent the Orange Order taking action on its own to make its halls available for cultural activities. Indeed, it is for the Order alone to determine the usage of its halls.

Community Amateur Sports Clubs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken to provide charitable status to community amateur sports clubs to bring Northern Ireland into line with legislation on the mainland. (AQW 3423/01)

Mr McGimpsey: It is not a matter for me to provide charitable status to community amateur sports clubs. Clubs seeking charitable status must make application through the Inland Revenue, which, in turn, bases its decisions on charity law. I understand that, in making decisions on the charitable status of an organisation, the Inland Revenue refers to the guidelines of the Charity Commission and the decisions of the courts in England.

Killyleagh FC

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consider (a) to publicly recognise the achievements of Killyleagh FC, who, as a junior football team, reached the semi-finals of this year's Irish Cup; and (b) presenting the team with some type of memento from his Department in recognition of their commitment and determination in their field. (AQW 3424/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I fully recognise Killyleagh Youth Club's outstanding achievement in reaching the semi-final of this year's Irish Cup, and I would be grateful if you would convey my warmest congratulations to the club. I am sure you will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to provide a memento to mark this success. This would be a matter for the Irish Football Association as the governing body for football.

EDUCATION

Exemption from Fair Employment Legislation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education why are employees within State Controlled, Catholic Maintained and Integrated Sectors of Education exempt from fair employment legislation. (AQW 3241/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Teaching has been an excepted employment since 1976, first under the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act, and now under the current legislation, Article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. The exemption derives from the largely denominationally segregated types of education here, and a recognition that the majority of parents wish their children to be taught in schools where full regard is given to their religious denomination. It does not apply to non-teaching employees. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, which has powers to re-examine the position, now has a review of the teaching exemption underway.

Northern Ireland Task Group on Autism

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) his policy on the scheme provided by Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) for individuals with autism; and (b) to make a statement on the number of cost-benefit analyses which exist in the UK and the USA. (AQW 3251/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Member may be aware that the report of the Northern Ireland Task Group on

Autism was launched on 7 May 2002. A copy has been sent to all Assembly Members.

The report makes recommendations on educational provision for young people with autism. Chapter 3 examines a range of therapies available, including ABA. The report does not find a preference for any single approach and emphasises that intervention programmes should address the unique needs of the child. I understand that, where it has been the wish of the parents that children with autism remain at home and undergo an ABA programme, the ELBs have, on occasion, made a contribution to the cost.

I will wish to consider the recommendations of the Task Group carefully, in order to determine the most effective educational interventions, which can be made to support the needs of these pupils. To assist this, the report will be circulated widely and I shall convene a conference in the autumn to discuss the way forward.

I do not propose, at this time, to make any statement on the number of cost benefit analyses undertaken in the UK and USA.

Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Centre of Excellence

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the tenders placed in the public domain regarding the siting of the Centre of Excellence for Autistic Spectrum Disorders; (b) other centres that were considered for the location of the Centre of Excellence for Autistic Spectrum Disorders; (c) the criteria used to locate the Centre of Excellence for Autistic Spectrum Disorders at St Joseph's Adolescent Training Centre in Middletown and (d) the total cost of this project to the Department.

(AQW 3282/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A full economic appraisal, which presented a range of options, accompanied the proposal made to the Executive Programme Funds for the establishment of the Centre on a North-South basis. The favoured option was for the purchase of the former St Joseph's Adolescent Centre, Middletown, in line with a valuation provided by the Valuation and Lands Agency. The economic appraisal was scrutinised and endorsed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. This did not identify any other existing premises as an option. Since the Centre will be acquired by the purchase of existing premises, a tendering process was not appropriate.

The criteria used to locate the Centre were that:

- the services provided should be cost effective;
- it should be situated within a reasonable distance of both jurisdictions, North and South;
- it should be accessible to the main centres of population in the area;

- it should be able to provide a mix of residential, non-residential, long term and short term placements for children with ASD; and
- it should enable the development of professional expertise in the area of ASD among educationalists.

The cost of purchasing the centre to my Department is £1.5M which is, of course, subject to contract. Details of the full running costs of the centre are in the process of development.

Dyspraxia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what is the current policy/guidelines for primary schools regarding the detection of pupils with symptoms of dyspraxia. (AQW 3294/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All schools, having concern about any type of special educational need which a pupil may have, operate the five stage approach as outlined in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs. At Stage 3 the school may seek external support from the appropriate Education and Library Board's Educational Psychology Service which, if dyspraxic tendencies are suspected, will make a referral to the Community Paediatrician and may also involve an Occupational Therapist. The various professionals involved with a pupil would then give the school advice and guidelines on how best to support the pupil.

In addition all Boards offer school training on dyspraxia and refer to the excellent publications and websites on dyspraxia.

Post-Primary Review

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to make it his policy that whatever Post-Primary Education Review recommendations are adopted, they will not be implemented until their financial viability has been ascertained. (AQW 3331/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I want post-primary arrangements which will achieve equality, access, choice and excellence for all pupils. I will carefully consider the financial implications of any new arrangements before final decisions are taken.

Post-Primary Review

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to make it his policy that whatever Post-Primary Education Review recommendations are adopted, pilot schemes will be used to ascertain their workability before implementing the recommendations Province wide. (AQW 3332/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have invited comments on the Burns proposals; suggestions for modifications or for

alternative arrangements. Decisions on new arrangements will not be taken until I have considered the responses. I cannot comment about piloting any new arrangements before decisions are taken on the form they will take.

Child Protection

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what mechanisms are in place to ensure that schools have a policy on child protection. (AQW 3335/01)

Mr McGuinness: All of my Department's Circulars on child protection have made it quite clear to schools that they should have a child protection policy. A survey of schools in 1997 asked if they had a policy and those schools which did not or failed to reply were followed up to ensure compliance. The inspection of pastoral care arrangements in schools provides a further monitoring mechanism, as does the annual updating of designated child protection personnel in schools by the Education and Library Boards.

Counselling Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what measures are in place to improve counselling services for young people in schools. (AQW 3336/01)

Mr McGuinness: The Education and Training Inspectorate is currently undertaking a review of the counselling support which is available to pupils. The report will be published in late Autumn and will inform a strategy for the improvement and expansion of provision as resources permit. A limited expansion of provision, under the aegis of the Education and Library Boards, will take place over the next two years with resources which have been made available from the Executive Programme Children's Fund.

Pupils: Peanut Allergy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what education programmes are available to teachers to identify cases of peanut allergy in pupils. (AQW 3337/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Peanut allergy is a medical condition and as such teachers are dependant on medical professionals for identification and diagnosis.

Once a school has been made aware of a pupil with this condition, the school's medical support team is contacted and medical staff give training for individual teachers where it is deemed appropriate.

In addition the Education and Library Boards and Health and Social Services Trusts circulate advice and guidance to schools.

Early in the next school year, the Department of Education will be issuing guidance to schools on how to support pupils with medical needs

Pupils: Epileptic Attacks

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Education what training is provided for (a) teachers; and (b) other school staff, to assist children who may suffer an epileptic attack at school. (AQW 3365/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Epilepsy is a medical condition and as such teachers are dependent on medical professionals for identification and diagnosis.

Once a school has been made aware of a pupil with this condition, the school's medical support team is contacted and medical staff give training for individual teachers, where it is deemed appropriate. This will include training in the monitoring and administration of medication to control the condition and the steps to take, should an attack occur.

In addition the Education and Library Boards and Health and Social Services Trusts circulate advice and guidance to schools.

Early in the next school year, the Department of Education will be issuing guidance to schools on how to support pupils with medical needs

School Visits

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to list all the schools he has visited since taking Office. (AQW 3373/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Since taking office I have visited the following schools in response to invitations which they have extended to me:

St Eugene's Primary School
Derry

Templemore Secondary School
Derry

St Peter's Primary School
Cookstown

Cranmore Integrated Primary School
Belfast

Methodist College
Belfast

St Mary's Primary School
Belfast

Dominican College
Belfast

Galliagh Nursery School
Derry

St Eithne's Primary School Derry	Clifton Special School Bangor
Bunscoil an Iuir Newry	St Maria Goretti Nursery School Belfast
Rathfriland Hill Special School Newry	St Paul's Primary School Derry
Derrylatinee Primary School Dungannon	St Joseph's Primary School Coalisland
St Mary's Primary School Altinure	St Breacan's High School Derry
Holy Child Primary School Derry	Belmont House School Derry
St John's Primary School Derry	Scoil an Drochaid Belfast
St Malachy's High School Castlewellan	Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain Belfast
St Columba's Primary School Kilrea	Holy Trinity College Cookstown
St Joseph's Primary School Belfast	Bunscoil Ui Neill Coalisland
St Lawrence's Nursery & Primary School Fintona	Holy Child Nursery School Belfast
St Mary's College Derry	All Children's Integrated Primary School Newcastle
Gaelscoil Eadhain Mhor Derry	St John's Primary School Portadown
Naiscoil na Rinne Derry	Naiscoil na Gaslainne Derry
St Cecilia's College Derry	St Patrick's Primary School Derry
St Colman's High School Strabane	St Patrick's Grammar School Downpatrick
St Patrick's Primary School Donaghmore	Glenann Primary School Cushendall
Lindsay Special School Belfast	Hollybush Primary & Nursery School Derry
St Kieran's Primary School Belfast	Rainey Endowed School Magherafelt
St Joseph's Secondary School Derry	Kilronan Special School Magherafelt
Dromintee Primary School Derry	St Patrick's College Bearnageeha Belfast
St Paul's High School Newry	Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School Belfast
Lisanally Special School Armagh	Meanscoil Feirste Belfast
St Patrick's High School Dungiven	Hazelwood College Newtownabbey
	St Lukes Primary School Belfast

St Eugene's College
 Roslea
 Lagan College
 Belfast
 St Patrick's High School
 Dungiven
 Anahorish Primary School
 Toomebridge
 St Therese Nursery School
 Belfast
 Rathmore Grammar School
 Belfast
 Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh
 Strabane
 Our Lady of Mercy High School
 Strabane
 Drumragh College
 Omagh
 St Joseph's High School
 Plumbridge
 St Patrick's Primary School & Gaelscoil Naomh Padraig
 Gortin
 St Dallan's Primary School
 Warrenpoint
 St Joseph's Primary School
 Newry
 St Peter's High School
 Derry
 St Anne's Primary School
 Strabane
 St Patrick's Primary School
 Derry
 Naiscoil na Fuisgeoige
 Belfast
 St John's Primary School
 Middletown
 St John's Primary School
 Coalisland
 St Paul's Nursery School
 Belfast
 St Patrick's College
 Dungannon
 St Catherine's College
 Armagh
 St Rose's High School
 Belfast
 St John's Primary School
 Belfast

St Colm's High School
 Draperstown
 St Brigid's High School
 Armagh
 Bunscoil An Tsleibhe Dhuibh
 Belfast
 Assumption Grammar School
 Ballynahinch
 Gaelscoil Na Mona
 Belfast
 Corpus Christi College
 Belfast
 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School
 Main Street, Toome
 Millquarter Primary School
 Toome
 St Mary's Primary School
 Bellaghy
 Mercy Primary School
 Belfast
 St Colman's Primary School
 Newry
 Drumcree College
 Portadown
 St Mary's Primary School
 Maghera
 Vere Foster Primary School
 Belfast
 La Salle Boys' School
 Belfast
 St Fanchea's College
 Enniskillen
 Holy Trinity Primary School
 Enniskillen
 Thornfield House School
 Newtownabbey
 St Genevieve's High School
 Belfast
 Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh
 Strabane

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the funding allocated to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) for each year since 1999; and (b) the number of staff employed by NICIE both full-time and part-time. (AQW 3396/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The funding allocated to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) by the Department of Education since 1999 is as follows:

Year	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
Amount Allocated	412,550	414,361	429,500	431,000

NICIE has 23 staff of which 6 are part-time. The Department of Education provides funding for 11.5 full time equivalent posts in the current financial year.

Irish Medium Schools: Grant Aid

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the number of Irish Medium (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools which receive 100% grant aid; (b) the number of Irish Medium (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools registered with the Department but do not qualify for grant aid; (c) the number of pupils attending Irish Medium (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools; and (d) the percentage that attend Irish Medium schools who receive 100% grant aid. (AQW 3397/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) Irish-medium schools may either receive grant aid for both recurrent and capital costs or recurrent costs alone. The number of Irish-medium schools receiving 100% grant aid is as follows:

	Primary	Secondary
Both Capital and Recurrent	12	2
Recurrent Only	3	-

- (b) There are currently 9 Irish-medium primary schools registered with the Department that do not receive funding.
- (c) There are at present 2,223 pupils being educated in the Irish-medium of which 1,828 attend primary and 395 secondary schools.
- (d) 92% are educated in schools that are receiving 100% grant aid for at least recurrent costs.

Schools: Grant Aid

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the number of integrated (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools which receive 100% grant aid; (b) the number of integrated (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools registered with the Department that do not qualify for grant aid; (c) the number of pupils attending integrated (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools; and (d) the percentage that attend integrated schools who receive 100% grant. (AQW 3398/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) Integrated schools may receive either grant aid for both recurrent and capital costs or recurrent costs alone. The number of Integrated schools receiving 100% grant aid is as follows:

	Primary	Secondary
Both Capital and Recurrent	26	15
Recurrent Only	3	2

- (b) All Integrated schools are receiving grant-aid.
- (c) There are at present 14,626 pupils being educated in Integrated schools of which 5,379 attend primary and 9,247 secondary schools.
- (d) 100% are educated in schools that are receiving 100% grant aid for at least recurrent costs.

Irish Medium Promotional Body

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the funding allocated to the promotional body for Irish/Gaelic medium education for years 1999-00, 2000-01, 2001-02; (b) the number of staff the promotional body employs both full and part-time; (c) the number of students studying Irish in English medium schools; and (d) the cost of such. (AQW 3409/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) The Irish-medium Promotional Body was established in August 2000 and has received funding as follows:

Year	Funding Allocated £
1999/2000	Nil
2000/2001	123,604
2001/2002	210,000

- (b) The Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta currently employs five full-time members of staff.
- (c) Irish is offered in all secondary schools under Catholic management and also at some integrated schools. The number of pupils studying Irish is not available. In 2000/01 some 2,407 Year 12 pupils in English medium schools entered for GCSE Irish.
- (d) It is not possible to provide a breakdown of expenditure associated with a single subject area.

Pupils: Behaviour

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the number of incidences of (i) violent behaviour; and (ii) abusive behaviour by pupils against teachers in each of the last 10 years; (b) any representation that has been made to his Department on this issue; and (c) the

number of teachers on sick leave due to violent or abusive behaviour by pupils. (AQW 3410/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) The Department does collect information about suspensions notified to the ELBs and about expulsions. To date this information has been about the numbers of pupils involved, not about the reasons. However, a set of standard definitions for reasons for suspensions has recently been agreed with ELBs and CCMs and work is in hand to encourage schools to use them from the beginning of the 2002/03 school year.

Information about any representation, by letter or in meetings, over the last 10 years, on this issue could only be provided at a disproportionate cost, as it would involve a physical search of all Departmental records relating to that period.

Data on the number of teachers on sick leave due to violent or abusive behaviour by pupils is not available as the Department records sick leave according to the nature of the illness rather than the cause.

Burns Report

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to detail which of the recommendations of the Burns Report (a) require primary legislation for their implementation; (b) can be introduced by means of Statutory Rules; and (c) can be implemented by a policy change within his Department. (AQW 3411/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have invited comments on the Burns proposals, suggestions for modifications or for alternative arrangements. Decisions on new arrangements will not be taken until I have considered the responses. I cannot comment on the detailed implications of introducing any new arrangements before decisions are taken on the form they will take.

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) any plans he has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures he has put in place to ensure staff from his Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3493/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Events to celebrate the Golden Jubilee are being promoted by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I have no plans to initiate any other activities. The staff of the Department of Education, in common with Civil Servants in other Departments, are receiving one additional day's holiday on 4 June to mark the occasion.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Exchanges

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance is available for student exchanges between Northern Ireland and USA. (AQW 3105/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): A Northern Ireland student on an exchange to the USA can be considered, in certain circumstances, for support in respect of fees, supplementary allowances and loans under the Student Support Regulations.

Support is also available through the Business Education Initiative for travel, living costs, books, insurance and personal allowances for a number of Northern Ireland students studying in US colleges.

Queen's University, Belfast: Students' Union Bar

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the financial turnover in the Students' Union Bar at Queen's University, Belfast for the financial year 2000-01. (AQW 3152/01)

Ms Hanna: Queen's University, like all UK Universities, is a legally independent body with a large degree of autonomy in managing its own affairs including interfacing with its student body. I have no information on the financial turnover in the Students' Union Bar at Queen's University for the financial year 2000/01. During this time, the bar licence was held by the Queen's Union Club; the bar finances were separate from those of the University.

Queen's University, Belfast: Land & Property

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all land and property owned and registered to Queen's University, Belfast and the total value of this property. (AQW 3165/01)

Ms Hanna: Queen's University, like all other UK Universities, is a legally independent body with a large degree of autonomy to manage its affairs. As regards estates it is obliged to comply with certain prescribed procedures but these do not require notifying the Department of individual asset values. However the total value of the University's assets is reflected in its Annual Accounts a copy of which may be obtained from the University.

Queen's University, Belfast: Register of Addresses

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if Queen's University, Belfast maintains a

register of addresses where all students are living during term-time. (AQW 3166/01)

Ms Hanna: Queen's University, like all other UK Universities, is a legally independent body with a large degree of autonomy in managing its affairs including contact details relating to students. I have therefore no locus in this matter which is internal to the University.

Queen's University, Belfast: Accommodation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of places available in University-owned/controlled accommodation to undergraduate students at Queen's University, Belfast. (AQW 3167/01)

Ms Hanna: Queen's University, like all other UK Universities, is a legally independent body with a large degree of autonomy to manage its affairs including the provision of student accommodation. I have therefore no locus in this matter which is internal to the University.

Queen's University, Belfast: Attendance

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) if Queen's University, Belfast take a roll-call at lectures; and (b) to list the attendance at lectures of undergraduate students by (i) year groups; and (ii) Faculty. (AQW 3168/01)

Ms Hanna: Queen's University, like all other UK Universities, is a legally independent body with a large degree of autonomy in managing its affairs including student attendance. I have therefore no locus in this matter which is internal to the University.

Catering Colleges

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) the number of students enrolled in each of the catering colleges in each of the last 5 years; (b) what representations have been made to the Department in relation to the future of these colleges and the courses they offer; (c) her assessment in relation to the future of these colleges; (d) the geographical spread of students who enrolled in each college in the last 5 years; and (e) where students have gained employment in the last 5 years. (AQW 3191/01)

Ms Hanna: The Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College (NIHCC) is the only college which specialises specifically in hospitality and catering. The remaining 16 colleges offer a range of full-time and part-time courses in hospitality and catering as part of their provision.

I have arranged for tables detailing enrolments in hospitality and catering across the FE sector, the country of domicile for students and the destination of students leaving hospitality and catering, for the last 5 years, to be placed in the Assembly library. Figures relating to the academic year 2001/2002 are provisional.

My Department has recently consulted on a proposal to merge the NIHCC with the University of Ulster (UU) and representations have been made by a number of interested parties; these representations are currently being considered.

New Deal: Self-employment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the self-employment route available through New Deal; (b) the numbers who have availed of that route; and (c) how many have returned to claiming benefit since inception of the programme. (AQW 3210/01)

Ms Hanna:

- (a) The self-employment route available within New Deal provides initial awareness training in self-employment issues and the opportunity to try out a business idea for up to 26 weeks while in receipt of a training allowance.
- (b) Since its introduction (April 1998) by the end of March 2002 a total of 980 participants started the self-employment option - of whom 217 were still participating at that time.
- (c) To date 367 participants have returned to benefits after completing the self-employment option. The destination of participants is counted as the last known destination within 3 months of leaving the programme.

Adult Literacy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress is being made to reduce the number of adults lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills. (AQW 3278/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department published a Framework and Consultation Paper on Adult Literacy entitled 'Essential Skills for Living' on 17 April 2002. This paper is out for public consultation until the 21 June 2002. After the consultation period my officials will analyse all responses received and produce by September 2002 an action plan to tackle the problems of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy.

Adult Literacy: Curriculum

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the Northern Ireland Curriculum for teaching adults basic literacy and numeracy skills.

(AQW 3279/01)

Ms Hanna: There is at present no agreed curriculum to guide the work in Essential Skills in Northern Ireland. The Department is currently piloting a number of projects to test how the Adult Core Curriculum can best be applied in Northern Ireland. The aim will be to develop a curriculum, which is sufficiently flexible to meet the different learning styles, the different prior achievements and the different goals of learners. Northern Ireland will have a regional curriculum in place for Essential Skills at Entry Level by September 2002 and for all levels by September 2003.

Further Education: Funding

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what recent representations she has received in respect of funding for universities and further education colleges.

(AQW 3280/01)

Ms Hanna: In respect of further education, there have been a number of recent representations received from MPs and MLAs. These include: requests about progress on proposals for major capital works at specific further education colleges; details of financial support available for students; details of colleges which are facing financial difficulties; and the use of further education funding vis-à-vis match funding for European Social Fund projects.

As regards higher education, the issue of funding has been raised at recent meetings with the Vice-Chancellors of Queen's University, Belfast and University of Ulster, the Assembly Committee and the Association of University Teachers.

Further Education: Funding

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has for increasing funding to further education colleges; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3281/01)

Ms Hanna: Total funding of £154 million has been made available, in the 2002/2003 financial year, for the Further Education Sector. The majority of this funding is in support of further education colleges and is provided to colleges through their main recurrent block grant and through various earmarked funding initiatives.

Lecturers: Workload

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to tackle the excess workload placed on lecturers.

(AQW 3284/01)

Ms Hanna: The terms and conditions of service of Further Education lecturers are a matter for governing bodies of Colleges, after consultation with teacher unions. Duties in excess of contractual hours are voluntary. Likewise, Higher Education institutions are responsible for their own employment policies and practices.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 1934/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles.

(AQW 3296/01)

Ms Hanna: The details requested are as follows:

Financial Year	NI	Other UK	ROI	Outside UK/ROI
1999/00	£626,058	£81,673	0	0
2000/01	£550,730	£15,099	0	0
2001/02	£527,477	£8,058	0	0

The 2001/02 figures represent spending for the year to March 2002.

The Northern Ireland figures included contracts with large international companies with offices in Northern Ireland.

Meetings with Lecturers' Unions

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what recent meetings she has had with lecturers' unions to discuss excess administration placed on lecturers.

(AQW 3338/01)

Ms Hanna: I met with a delegation from the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education on 26 March 2002 to discuss a range of issues including Further Education lecturers' pay and conditions. Regarding the workloads of FE lecturers, I would refer you to my response to your question AQW/3284/01 on the same topic.

University Applications: Lower Socio-Economic Groups

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to encourage university applications from pupils from lower socio-economic groups.

(AQW 3339/01)

Ms Hanna: Following a review of Student Support arrangements in NI a £65m package was introduced to

encourage participation in Higher Education, particularly from students from low income families. My Department is funding special projects that aim to stimulate demand for HE from underrepresented groups by raising aspirations, improving student attainments and thereby increasing progression rates into HE. Further, my Department provides a funding premium to the universities to assist with retention of students from these groups.

Apprenticeships

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to increase the numbers participating in apprenticeships. (AQW 3399/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department is actively publicising the benefits of Modern Apprenticeships, and raising awareness of apprenticeships generally, amongst careers advisers, young people, parents, employers, employer representative bodies and training organisations.

As part of this campaign, the Department, in conjunction with the NI Training Councils Association, is currently promoting a competition to select the NI "Modern Apprentice of the Year".

Non-European Labour

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any plans she has to assist employers with the importation of non-European labour, to help meet the needs of local industry within the short-term, particularly in the (i) food manufacturing; and (ii) processing sectors; and to make a statement. (AQW 3412/01)

Ms Hanna: Employers may be permitted to fill vacancies with non-European nationals if they can demonstrate that recruitment within EEA countries has been unsuccessful. Under the Immigration Act 1971 potential employees must possess the skills, qualifications and experience necessary for the job. Work permits are not issued for low-level or unskilled jobs.

European Union Labour

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any plans she has to assist employers with the importation of European Union labour to help secure the production capacity of the food manufacturing; and (ii) processing sectors; and to make a statement. (AQW 3413/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has, as part of its JobCentre network, a European Employment Service and has been working successfully with a number of employers in the food production and processing sector to recruit labour from the European Union.

Funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the arrangements made to enable staff at (i) Queen's University; and (ii) University of Ulster, to mark the funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother. (AQW 3414/01)

Ms Hanna: The Northern Ireland universities, like all other UK Universities, are legally independent bodies with a large degree of autonomy in managing their affairs. I have therefore no locus in this matter which is internal to the universities.

Fair Employment Tribunals: Chairpersons

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many additional Chairpersons have been appointed to Fair Employment Tribunals and Industrial Tribunals in the last 2 years. (AQW 3549/01)

Ms Hanna: There were no new Chairpersons appointed to the Fair Employment Tribunals and Industrial Tribunals between May 2000 and May 2002.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

National Insurance

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment can he make in relation to the proposed 1% increase in national insurance and its impact on (a) the level of employment (b) the economy; and to make a statement. (AQW 3235/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The thresholds and rates for National Insurance contributions are a reserved matter for which Her Majesty's Treasury is responsible across the UK. The increase in the amount of employers' NI contributions was one of a number of measures affecting business including, for example, a reduction in small companies' corporation tax rate and an R&D tax credit for larger companies. The combined impact on the level of employment and the economy in general of all these measures is uncertain and depends on decisions made by individual firms.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 1952/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy

firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3297/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It would not be possible to supply this information except at disproportionate cost to the Department.

Viasystems EMS, Antrim Road, Ballynahinch

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps he is taking to protect jobs at Viasystems EMS, Antrim Road, Ballynahinch. (AQW 3298/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest NI maintains a close working relationship with management at Ballynahinch and has recently completed a "competitiveness assessment" of the company. As a result Invest NI has agreed a programme of business improvement activity, to take place over the next few months.

Whilst the Telecoms market remains depressed, in the short-term, the company will continue to monitor business conditions closely and react to the situation in matching its workload and employment levels to market demand. Invest NI will continue to liaise closely with the company

Regulatory Burden on Business

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to reduce the regulatory burden on business. (AQW 3374/01)

Sir Reg Empey: On 10 December 2001 I received the agreement of my Executive colleagues to a number of proposals to help reduce regulatory burdens on business. The proposals, which are being implemented by Northern Ireland Departments, include the introduction of revised Regulatory Impact Assessment requirements for new legislation, prior notification periods for all new legislation affecting business and the formal introduction of an Enforcement Concordat for Departments, agencies and local authorities.

Tourism Facilities: Lough Neagh

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to encourage tourism facilities in and around Lough Neagh in the Upper Bann area. (AQW 3390/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is currently administering a further funding programme under the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 2000-2004. Under Priority 4 of this initiative grant assistance will be made available to marketing projects that will assist Northern Ireland to position

itself in the global marketplace and on infrastructure-type projects that will promote and develop, in a sustainable manner, the region's natural and cultural attributes. Grant applications under the International Fund for Ireland's (IFI) Visitor Attraction Scheme will also be available from June 2002. This scheme is aimed at the improvement of facilities at existing visitor centres and amenities.

Applications for assistance under the EU and IFI initiatives, as well as NITB's ongoing Tourism Development Scheme, will be welcome from the Lough Neagh area of Upper Bann.

In addition all existing tourist accommodation businesses located in the area which have been certified by the NITB are eligible to apply to Invest Northern Ireland for Selective Financial Assistance grants.

Ulster Way

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his commitment to securing the future of the Ulster Way. (AQW 3415/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), on behalf of the DoE's Environment and Heritage Service, the Northern Ireland Sports Council and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) are currently undertaking a review of this long distance walking route. CAAN's final report, which is due to be available towards the end of this year, will include recommendations and an action programme for the future of the Ulster Way. NITB (and the other bodies involved) will take on board the contents of this final report in considering the future of the Ulster Way.

NITB recognises walking as a key product area. It annually produces a dedicated information guide to "Walking in Northern Ireland" and both chairs and co-ordinates a Walking Product Marketing Group that discusses both the development and marketing of walking routes throughout Northern Ireland.

UK Coal Industry

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the European Commission granting €6.5 million to the UK coal industry to cover operating losses in 2001, to outline if NI businesses could fulfil the same criteria and thus benefit from similar central government intervention (IP/02/616).

(AQW 3495/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Trade and Industry announced on 24 April 2002 that four coalmines in England and Wales were to receive over £4m of Government aid under the UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme, following European Commission approval. The grant applies to UK coal produced between 17 April 2000

and 23 July 2002 and is designed to allow UK coal mines with a viable future to overcome short term market problems. As there is no coalmining industry in Northern Ireland, no businesses in Northern Ireland are eligible to apply for aid under the Scheme.

ENVIRONMENT

Consultants: Environment and Heritage Service

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the work undertaken by consultants on behalf of Environmental Heritage Service in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area in the last 2 years; and (b) the cost of this work. (AQW 3192/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): The work undertaken by consultants in the last 2 years on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), relevant to the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, dealt with the management and promotion of EHS properties throughout Northern Ireland. This work involved three projects: a review of the exhibitions at EHS's properties; a review of the management and maintenance of six of EHS's major properties; and a review of charging and commercialisation at EHS properties.

None of the work related specifically to the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. However, Carrickfergus Castle, one of EHS's most important sites, was included in all three projects.

The total costs of the projects were £67,850.

Drinking Water Pipe-Work: Lead Solder

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment can he make regarding the use of lead solder in drinking water pipe-work in domestic residences. (AQW 3212/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Water Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1991, which were made under The Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 and came into operation on 25 March 1991, prohibited the use of contaminating material, which includes solder containing lead, in the installation of fittings conveying or receiving water supplied for domestic purposes.

No comprehensive assessment has been carried out of the use of lead solder in the water pipework of domestic residences. However, inspections of domestic plumbing, carried out by Water Service, indicate that the use of solder containing lead is not a significant problem. Although solder containing lead is still available in the market place, plumbing contractors and suppliers are

aware that it must not be used in the installation of drinking water pipework.

A new European Union Drinking Water Directive, which imposes higher standards for a number of drinking water parameters including lead, comes into force at the end of 2003. Action being taken by Water Service to ensure compliance with the Directive includes the introduction of orthophosphate treatment to reduce the amount of lead in drinking water. In consultation with the Department of the Environment's Drinking Water Inspectorate, Water Service has prioritised sites throughout Northern Ireland for the introduction of orthophosphate treatment. Construction of the treatment facilities started in March of this year and are due to be completed in March 2003.

Apartments: Shore Road, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment can he make in relation to the growth in apartment type accommodation on the Shore Road, Carrickfergus. (AQW 3217/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am aware of the concerns expressed on the growth of apartments in this area.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the demand for small unit housing, including apartments.

All applications for apartment development are assessed under the current Area Plan, Planning Policies and Guidance and due regard is paid to the impact the proposal will have on the character of the area to which the member refers, and to normal planning considerations.

Current policy for housing is set out in Planning Policy Statement 7 - Quality Residential Environments. This requires developers to provide high quality housing proposals which are sympathetic to the existing character of an area, in order to avoid a level of intensification which can adversely affect local townscape character and identity. 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 considered.

In addition, Development Control Advice Note 8, Small Unit Housing, which the Department expects to publish in final form shortly, will provide specific guidance on proposals for small unit housing within existing urban areas. While it does not set policy, it gives guidance on the physical form of housing development, including apartments, and on the relationship with surrounding properties.

I can assure you that all proposed developments will be considered against prevailing planning policies and the concerns expressed by elected representatives and the public will be fully taken into account.

Devaluation of Property

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to compensate those whose property has been devalued by unapproved development; and to make a statement. (AQW 3229/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There is no provision in planning legislation to pay compensation to third parties for alleged devaluation of property arising either from development which has received planning permission or from unauthorised development, and I have no plans to introduce such compensation.

My Department's procedure when it becomes aware of unauthorised development is to have the matter investigated and to form a judgement of whether the development is acceptable or unacceptable in planning terms. An important factor in this consideration is the effect of the development on the amenity of the adjoining residents, and whether this is acceptable in planning terms. The Department will then initiate appropriate action to remedy the breach of planning control.

Where unauthorised development is likely to be acceptable in planning terms, my Department will advise the person responsible to submit an application without delay. Applications will then be processed taking into account any views expressed by members of the public, the comments of consultees and the views of the District Council. A retrospective application is dealt with in the same way as a 'normal' planning application and approval will only be granted where normal planning policies and considerations are met.

Where unauthorised development is unacceptable in planning terms, my Department will attempt initially to resolve the matter by negotiation; if this is unsuccessful, then formal enforcement action will normally follow to remedy the situation and any harm or adverse effects on adjoining property.

I recognise that enforcement is a key element in providing a credible approach to the application of planning policy and my officials pursue enforcement action against unauthorised development as actively as possible within the current powers and resources available, particularly where harm and adverse impact on public amenity has occurred. As the Member will be aware, I propose to bring a Bill before the Assembly soon which, among other things, will considerably broaden and strengthen the enforcement powers available to the Department. My Department is also in the process of recruiting additional staff to bolster the development control and enforcement functions in the Planning Service.

Wetlands: Protection

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline steps he is taking to protect wetlands from damage by infilling. (AQW 3245/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Where Planning Service becomes aware of unauthorised infilling of wetland areas or receives a complaint about such activity, investigations are carried out to establish the nature, and extent of the operations carried out.

Advice is also sought from the Environment and Heritage Service (Natural Heritage) on whether any protective status applies to a particular site or whether the integrity of the wetland site is at risk. EHS would also provide advice on any remedial activity required to restore a site.

Planning Service would initially seek to secure the restoration of the site by agreement with the landowner.

In the absence of an agreed resolution, Planning Service would, where it considers it expedient to do so having regard to the provisions of the development plan and to any other material considerations, issue an enforcement notice requiring the breach of planning control to be remedied under Article 68 of Part VI of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

Planning Service is presently taking these steps in relation to a number of sites within the area lying to the south of Lough Neagh.

The Environment and Heritage Service has no statutory power to take action in respect of unauthorised dumping unless it affects designated lands, for example Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), or if there is good reason to believe that it may cause a water pollution incident.

Under the Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978, district councils have powers to prosecute landowners and waste carriers involved in the unauthorised dumping of waste. The Council can also issue a notice requiring the landowner to remove the waste. If the landowner fails to comply with the notice, the council can do the work and recoup the cost from the landowner.

In 1999 the Department issued a Code of Practice to assist councils in dealing with fly-tipping incidents.

Within all wetland ASSIs, infilling or dumping would be a notifiable operation. This means that landowners must seek prior consent from EHS before carrying out this activity within the designated site. It is most unlikely that EHS would give consent to infilling and would seek to negotiate a management agreement with the owner.

Apartments: Development

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment has he any plans to introduce controls on the development of apartments type accommodation resulting in significant change of character of the area. (AQW 3264/01)

Mr Nesbitt: In recent years there has been a significant increase in the demand for small unit housing, including apartments. My Department has been seeking clarification on the planning policy context for dealing with these proposals.

The Member will be aware that the Regional Development Strategy provides a new strategic context which encourages more housing, including apartments, within existing urban areas by a process of densification which can be delivered without cramming or spoiling the environment. The Strategy also requires the promotion of more housing in urban areas, however, this should not be allowed to result in damage to areas of distinctive townscape character. In established residential areas an overriding objective will be to avoid any significant erosion of the local character and the environmental quality, amenity and privacy enjoyed by existing residents.

Current policy for housing is set out in Planning Policy Statement 7 Quality Residential Environments.

This requires developers to provide high quality housing proposals which are sympathetic to the existing character of an area, in order to avoid a level of intensification which can adversely affect local townscape character and identity. 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 considered.

In the primarily residential parts of Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape Character, proposals involving intensification of site usage or site coverage will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. In other established residential areas, proposals for housing development will not be permitted where they would result in unacceptable damage to the local character, environmental quality or residential amenity of these areas.

My Department has also issued in draft Supplementary Planning Guidance in the form of Development Control Advice Note 8 - Housing in Existing Urban Areas – 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. While it does not set policy, it gives guidance to developers on the physical form of housing development, including apartments, and on the relationship with surrounding properties.

Apartments: Shore Road, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment can be made of the planning policy and the increase in apartment applications on the Shore Road, Carrickfergus and Jordantown area of Newtownabbey.
(AQW 3265/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am aware of the concerns expressed on the growth of apartments in this area.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the demand for small unit housing, including apartments.

All applications for apartment development are assessed under the current Area Plan, Planning Policies and Guidance and due regard is paid to the impact the proposal will have on the character of the area to which the member refers, and to normal planning considerations.

Current policy for housing is set out in Planning Policy Statement 7 - Quality Residential Environments. This requires developers to provide high quality housing proposals which are sympathetic to the existing character of an area, in order to avoid a level of intensification which can adversely affect local townscape character and identity. 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 considered.

In addition, Development Control Advice Note 8, Small Unit Housing, which the Department expects to publish in final form shortly, will provide specific guidance on proposals for small unit housing within existing urban areas. While it does not set policy, it gives guidance on the physical form of housing development, including apartments, and on the relationship with surrounding properties.

I can assure you that all proposed developments will be considered against prevailing planning policies and the concerns expressed by elected representatives and the public will be fully taken into account.

Planning Applications: Objections

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the average response time to letters of objection from residents regarding planning applications and (b) if there are any plans to speed up the process.
(AQW 3288/01)

Mr Nesbitt: On average, all letters of objection are acknowledged within 4 days. The acknowledgement confirms that the objections are taken into account as part of the decision making process.

In addition, all objectors are informed in writing about the decision, which includes an explanation of the reasons for that decision. The timescale depends on the complexity of the application and the relevant issues raised.

There are plans to speed up the process and ensure that objectors are better informed, as part of the Modernising Planning Processes consultation paper.

Fly-Tipping in the Countryside

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the legislation that prevents ‘dumping’ in the countryside and along road sides; and (b) penalties which could be introduced to stop this unseemly practice.

(AQW 3317/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) Under Article 5 of the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 it is an offence to deposit controlled waste or cause or knowingly permit controlled waste to be deposited on any land other than in accordance with the terms of a waste disposal licence. Enforcement against anyone suspected of committing such an offence (generally referred to as fly-tipping) is a matter for district councils. Anyone found guilty of fly-tipping is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £5000 or on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years or to an unlimited fine or both. The fines and jail term may be increased where the waste in question is of a hazardous nature.

District councils also have powers under Article 16 of the 1978 Order to serve a notice requiring the occupier of land on which waste has been unlawfully deposited to remove the waste from the land and to take any necessary remedial action. Failure to comply with such a notice is an offence punishable on summary conviction by a fine not exceeding £2500. Continued failure after conviction to comply with the terms of a notice is deemed to be a further offence punishable on summary conviction by a further fine of £1000 for each day that the offence continues.

The 1978 Order also provides district councils with powers to remove waste illegally dumped and to seek to recover its costs from the occupier or from the person responsible for the illegal dumping, if known.

- (b) The provisions of the 1978 Order are to be replaced by similar provisions in the Waste and Contaminated Land Order (NI) 1997. These latter provisions will come into operation with the introduction of a new waste management licensing system, under Waste Management Regulations, expected to be made in autumn 2003. The penalties for fly-tipping under the 1997 Order are in some respects more severe than under the 1978 Order. For example, the maximum fine penalty on summary conviction under the 1997 Order is £20,000 compared with £5000 for a similar offence under the 1978 Order.

While I expect these harsher penalties to act as a greater deterrent to fly-tipping, the problem which remains is how to make those responsible for this

activity, which is by its nature furtive, amenable to the enforcement powers of District Councils.

Pollution: Rivers & Lakes

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) his present and proposed financial commitment for measures aimed at reducing pollution in rivers and lakes and (b) the nature of such measures.

(AQW 3327/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is responsible, under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, for the regulation of effluent discharges to waterways and underground strata and also for the investigation of pollution and the instigation of enforcement action, where necessary.

The resources allocated to this work are as follows:

Year	Expenditure	Staff in Post
1998/1999	£2.37 m	36 *
1999/2000	£2.80 m	39 **
2000/2001	£2.85 m	48 **
2001/2002	£2.88 m	56 **

* August 1999

** at the end of the financial year

In addition, I have also put forward bids in my Department's Position Report of £3.5m, £3.5m and £3.7m for 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 respectively to implement relevant EC Directives, including the Water Framework Directive and the Nitrates Directive.

EHS plays a major role in the implementation of legislation related to the protection of surface and ground waters. The key Primary Legislation and Regulations transposing the relevant European Directives into Northern Ireland law are shown at Annex A. Additional legislation proposed, for which consultation papers have been issued, includes:

Regulations on Anti-Pollution Works Notices,

The Silage, Slurry and Fuel Oil Storage Regulations, and

The Water Framework Directive.

Planning Application: X/2002/0423/F

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, with reference to planning application X/2002/0423/F (formerly X/2000/0226/RO), to outline (a) if the new planning application must progress through planning procedure from step one of Outline Planning Permission; and (b) if the previous planning application pertaining to the same proposed development will play no part in the processing of the new planning application.

(AQW 3375/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Application X/2002/0423/F was received by Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office on 12 April 2002. The application seeks planning permission for a change of house type to Site Nos 1-6 and alterations to previously approved access road at 39 – 41 Main Road, Cloughey. Previous approval had been granted on appeal on 16 November 2001 for the approval of reserved matters for housing development at No 41 Main Road and to the rear of Nos 33-55 Main Street Cloughey (X/2000/0266).

Comparison of the new application with the approved drawings indicated that there are no changes in the house type previously approved. The application is therefore purely for a change to the previously approved layout. The application is to be re-advertised on 16 May 2002 as “Alterations to layout on Sites Nos 1-6 and alterations to previously approved access road.” Neighbours and objectors will be renotified.

The new application will have to go through the full planning process, including consultation with the public, consultees within Government and the public sector, and consultation with the District Council. The previous planning approval, for an access road and a layout for the 6 houses remains valid. As the current application is for “alterations”, the previous approval will be taken account by Planning Service in the determination of the current application.

Planning Application: X/2002/0423/F

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) any impact the recently assigned ASSI on the eastern board of the Ards Peninsula has upon the planning applications for the area; and (b) any implications for planning application X/2002/0423/F which was submitted since the creation of this ASSI.

(AQW 3376/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Planning applications for development which may affect the Outer Ards Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), the proposed Special Protection Area and Ramsar site, will be referred to my Department’s Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) for assessment and expert advice. In assessing individual applications the Department will be guided by advice received from EHS and by the policies outlined in its Planning Policy Statement 6, Planning and Nature Conservation.

Should the Special Protection Area Status for the Outer Ards Area be confirmed, my Department will be obliged to ensure that its qualifying features, i.e. its breeding and overwintering bird populations, will not be adversely affected by any development.

With regard to planning application X/2002/0423, this is a current application received on 12 April 2002 for a change of house type to Site Nos 1-6 and alterations to previously approved access road on a site at 41 Main Road, Cloughey. EHS has been consulted and the presence

of the ASSI and proposed SPA will be a material consideration in the determination of this application.

Access for the Disabled

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the progress of ensuring that offices in his Department are accessible to the disabled.

(AQW 3377/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There is a rolling programme of work in place to bring DOE’s general office accommodation up to the necessary standard. Approximately 75% of all offices have been visited and inspected and the necessary work has commenced.

As well as this, two of the department’s agencies have “specialised buildings”.

The Environment and Heritage Service’s Country Park and Countryside Centres have been constructed quite recently and most have been adapted to provide full access for people with disabilities. Historic Monuments present difficulties, but EHS endeavours to provide as much access for people with disabilities as is reasonable. For example Carrickfergus Castle is to have a lift installed to facilitate access to the exhibitions in the castle’s keep.

The Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency has commissioned Accessibility Audits at all of its centres. An implementation plan is currently being drawn up with a view to having all centres compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act by October 2004.

Enforcement Officers

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the number of enforcement officers employed in each of the Divisional Planning Offices; and (b) the number of enforcement officers employed in areas with equivalent populations to Northern Ireland in the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 3378/01)

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 have an additional PTO to enable them to cover the Divisional Sub-Offices. In addition, a proportion of senior management time in each Division is devoted to enforcement work.

With regard to the number of enforcement officers employed in areas with equivalent populations to Northern Ireland in the rest of the United Kingdom, the information

requested is not readily available, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to the Department.

Ulster Way: Future

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his Department's commitment to securing the future of the Ulster Way. (AQW 3416/01)

Mr Nesbitt: No one body has overall responsibility for the Ulster Way. The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department has a statutory function in approving 'long distance routes'. It also grant-aids Councils and the National Trust in the provision of access routes. Individual stretches are the responsibility of the relevant District Council. EHS has commissioned the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), to review the future of the Ulster Way. To assist with this, CAAN has established an Ulster Way Working Group which is representative of a wide range of user bodies, statutory agencies and farmers and landowners. The review is due to be completed towards the end of this year. Its findings will be considered by the three relevant government bodies, the Environment and Heritage Service, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, with a view to agreeing the way forward.

I will want to consider CAAN's report and take the views of my statutory advisors, the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, before I make a fuller statement on the future of the Ulster Way.

PFI Contracts

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) any plans he has to introduce legislation to enable District Councils to enter into public/private finance contracts; and (b) when he intends to introduce this legislation. (AQW 3417/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Local Government (Contracts) Act 1997 allows local authorities in Great Britain (GB) to enter into Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts. This Act does not extend to Northern Ireland. The nature of contracts targeted by GB local authorities would tend to come within the responsibilities of central government here. No immediate plans are in place to introduce legislation equivalent to that in GB. A number of district councils has, however, indicated that there is sufficient scope for PFI, to develop some of their major capital projects. These proposals will be considered, with a view to introducing suitable legislation as soon as possible thereafter.

Planning Permission

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to clarify in the case where outline and detailed

planning permission have been granted, and where environmental factors have prevented development, will new plans including land outside of the original planning application be subject to the full planning procedure. (AQW 3429/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Where outline planning permission and approval for all the reserved matters have been granted on a site, effectively full planning permission has been granted for the development to proceed. If unforeseen environmental factors prevent the development going ahead as approved, and a revised scheme materially different from that given permission is required, then a fresh application, either for outline permission, followed by a reserved matters submission, or for full planning permission, is needed.

Road Haulage: Revoked Licences

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of road haulage operator licences revoked in each year since 1998. (AQW 3446/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department has revoked no road haulage operator licences during the period from 1998 to date.

Prior to revocation or suspension of an operator's licence, the Department issues warning letters to licensed operators who, in any 12 month period, have accumulated four convictions for minor road traffic offences. Warning letters have been issued as follows:

1998	14
1999	10
2000	7
2001	10
2002 (to date)	6

Road Haulage: Licences

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any plans to (a) bring forward proposals to govern and control alleged malpractice within the local haulage industry; and (b) tighten up the conditions under which a Road Haulage Operators' Licence is awarded. (AQW 3448/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department issues road freight operator licences under the Transport Act (NI) 1967 in line with EC requirements. To qualify for an operator licence to carry goods for hire and reward an applicant must satisfy standards of repute, professional competence and financial standing. Convictions for serious offences and repeated road traffic offences are used to determine repute and can lead to the refusal, suspension or revocation of a licence.

I have no plans currently to revise the requirements for the issue of a Road Freight Operator Licence. When

priorities and resources permit I would intend to review the proposals issued for consultation in 1998 by the former Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland on the regulation of the road haulage industry in Northern Ireland. These included proposals to extend regulation to the own account sector.

Planning Permission: Downpatrick

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) if the Environment and Heritage Service has issued a directive to the Planning Service that no further planning permissions of any nature, individual or multiple, will be granted in Downpatrick because of the capacity problems at Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works; and (b) what urgent action is being taken to correct this situation. (AQW 3548/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has not issued a Directive to Planning Service but has recommended that no more development be connected to the Downpatrick sewerage system until operational problems at the inlet to the town's sewage treatment works are resolved.

These problems have led to unauthorised discharge of sewage to a downstream waterway, with subsequent water pollution.

- (b) EHS is prepared to consider proposals by developers and/or the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for alternative means of servicing development in order to allow building to proceed.

These matters will be discussed between DOE and DRD officials, including what measures DRD can take in the short and long term to address the situation. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of DRD Water Service to determine what action needs to be considered in relation to the operational problems at the inlet to the town's sewage treatment works.

Road Safety Strategy

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the road safety strategy, to detail (a) the targets he has developed for the reduction in road deaths and serious injuries, and (b) the measures that are being put in place to ensure that those targets are achieved. (AQO 1358/01)

Mr Nesbitt: One of the key elements in the development of the new Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy is the establishment of long-term targets for road casualty reductions to be agreed with the principal agencies involved in road safety – the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service.

I am writing this week to the Acting Chief Constable and to the Minister for Regional Development seeking their views on the proposed targets prior to finalisation of the draft strategy which is imminent. When the targets are agreed with the Police Service and the Roads Service, I will announce them in the context of the publication of the strategy.

In relation to the second part of the question, the Road Safety Strategy will describe the actions to be taken by the road safety agencies, to deliver the strategic objectives set out in the consultation document, published by my Department in May 2001. This document detailed the education, enforcement and engineering measures being taken and proposed by the road safety agencies to reduce road deaths and injuries. It also identified three specific initiatives which together have the potential to make a significant contribution to reducing road deaths and serious casualties.

These initiatives, which will be taken forward within the new Road Safety Strategy, are

- to increase the wearing of seatbelts,
- to extend to Northern Ireland, the scheme to use income from fixed penalties to fund increased deployment of safety cameras, which is currently operating very effectively in areas of Great Britain, and
- to provide further traffic calming measures.

While government and its agencies have a vital part to play in improving road safety, I would emphasise that the achievement of significant reductions in road deaths and serious injuries depends largely on all road users behaving responsibly on our roads.

Taxi Drivers: Diabetes

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment what action is taken by his Department when a taxi driver is diagnosed with diabetes. (AQO 1355/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Under the Motor Vehicles (Taxi Drivers' Licences) Regulations 1991, new applicants for taxi driver licences, and existing taxi drivers over 45 years of age applying for renewal, are required to provide my Department with a medical report. Should the medical report confirm that the applicant suffers from insulin dependent diabetes, the application will be refused, unless the applicant held a taxi driver licence when the legislation changed on 21 October 1991, and the Department knew of the disability before 1 January 1991. If the diabetes is managed by means other than insulin, the medical report will be sent to the Occupational Health Service which, as the Department's medical advisors, will make a recommendation as to the individual's suitability to hold a taxi driver licence. Similar procedures are followed if diabetes develops during the currency of a licence. It is a condition of the

taxi driver licence that any change in the holder's medical circumstances must be brought to the Department's attention.

Waste Management Strategy

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment to detail anticipated capital and recurrent costs associated with the implementation of the Waste Management Strategy. (AQO 1351/01)

Mr Nesbitt: It is not possible to put a precise cost on the implementation of the Waste Management Strategy. The Strategy has implications for all those who produce, manage or treat waste. It has a long-term planning horizon. Capital and recurrent costs of implementing the strategy will depend on how much waste is produced over time, and on decisions to be made about treatment and related facilities. There will be economic benefits, to offset the costs, from the re-use, recycling and recovery of waste, depending on the levels achieved and the markets available.

The principal costs of implementing the Waste Management Strategy will lie in the establishment of an integrated network of waste management facilities across Northern Ireland. The main vehicle for decisions on the nature and location of these facilities will be District Council Waste Management Plans. However, final decisions will depend on consideration of the outcome of the recently ended public consultation on the draft Waste Management Plans, which were published by the 3 District Council Partnership Groups in February.

Final draft Plans are to be submitted to my Department by 28 June. These are to include detailed implementation action plans which will contain details of the capital and recurrent costs involved. At that stage the cost of developing and operating the network of facilities, of establishing reprocessing capacity, and of creating markets for recycling that will deliver the objectives of the Waste Management Strategy, will become clearer.

In addition to an indicative baseline of £8.5m for waste management, I have also put forward bids in my Department's Position Report of £5.1m, £4.8m and £4.5m for 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 respectively, to assist District Councils and others in the implementation of the Waste Management Strategy.

Pollution: Landfill Sites

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the risk of pollution to rivers from landfill sites; and (b) any measures and safeguards in place to reduce any such risk. (AQO 1343/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Landfill sites can pose a pollution risk if they are not properly engineered and managed. The

Environment and Heritage Service of my Department is responsible for investigating reports of pollution incidents from any sources which affect, or may affect, ground or surface waters.

Records show that, in the 4 year period from 1 January 1998 to 31 December 2001, EHS received 200 reports alleging that the source of pollution was a landfill site. Of the 200 reports received, six were subsequently categorised as serious pollution incidents.

In relation to the second part of the Question, EHS is consulted by the Planning Service about all planning applications for landfill sites. In all cases, EHS advises that construction and operation should be carried out in accordance with the guidelines contained in Waste Management Paper 26B. This requires a full hydro-geological survey and risk assessment to be carried out in relation to the site.

In addition, any direct discharge of treated leachate to a waterway from a landfill site is subject to discharge consent control under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. Consent from EHS is necessary for both the discharge of treated leachate and for the disposal of materials on the site. Discharge consent is granted only where EHS is satisfied that there will be no resulting pollution of surface or ground waters.

EHS also undertakes surveys of landfill sites. These surveys include monitoring of groundwater boreholes around the site, leachate monitoring and surface water monitoring.

EU Directives

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment what are the implications of current infraction proceedings initiated by the EU with regard to the implementation of EU Directives. (AQO 1345/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The main instrument available to the European Commission to enforce Member State compliance with Directives is through instigation of infraction proceedings in the European Court of Justice. If the ECJ finds against the Member State, and depending on the action taken by the Member State to achieve compliance, the Commission may seek the imposition of a fine.

Recently the Commission has taken steps to speed up the infraction process and a much more vigorous enforcement approach is now evident.

Currently there are several infraction cases being brought by the Commission against the UK, including Northern Ireland, in relation to failure to transpose into domestic legislation, or otherwise to implement, the requirements of environmental Directives. For the main part, these are the result of a backlog of untransposed Directives inherited from the period of Direct Rule.

Apart from the fact that these legal proceedings undermine Northern Ireland's environmental standing in Europe, there is also a risk that some of these cases will proceed to the stage where fines are imposed against the UK. Any fines are likely to be substantial and, where the fines result in whole or in part from lack of compliance by Northern Ireland, the Treasury may seek for some or all to be paid by the Northern Ireland Administration

Because of these financial risks to Northern Ireland, both my predecessor and I have sought to secure the additional staff needed to expedite the transposition and implementation of EU environmental Directives. My Department received extra resources for 2001/02 and 2002/03 for this purpose and I am seeking a further increase for 2002/03. This will be reflected in an increased flow of infraction-related primary and subordinate legislation which will come before the Assembly in the remainder of this session and next. I am working closely with the Environment Committee and look forward to its co-operation in the urgent processing of the relevant legislation. However, even more needs to be done if we are to clear the backlog and move to a position of being able to transpose and implement environmental Directives in a timely way. This is reflected in further the bids for 2003/04 onwards which I have included in my Department's Position Report for the 2002 Spending Review.

Planning Permission: Landfill Sites

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of landfill sites which have been refused planning permission in the last 2 years.
(AQO 1354/01)

Mr Nesbitt: A total of 16 landfill planning applications have been determined in the last two years. Of these, 3 applications have been refused and 13 applications approved.

Ulster Way: Future

Mr Davis asked the Minister of the Environment if a working group has been established to review the future of the Ulster Way.
(AQO 1342/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Countryside Access and Activities Network has been commissioned by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department to undertake a study of the future of the Ulster Way, on behalf of all the interested parties. These include the many District Councils through whose areas the route passes, as well as the Sports Council and Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

The Network has established an Ulster Way Working Group. The Group is representative of a wide range of user bodies, statutory agencies and farmers and landowners.

I understand that the Group has held several meetings, including two public consultation meetings.

The study is due to be completed towards the end of this year. Its findings will be considered by all the relevant parties, with a view to seeking agreement on the way forward.

Climate Changes

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment what contingency plans are in place to deal with climate changes particularly in coastal areas; and to make a statement.
(AQO 1349/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Responsibility for coastal matters falls to several Departments, including the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department for Regional Development and my own Department.

The Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research recently published a study, commissioned by my Department, entitled "Implications of Climate Change for Northern Ireland: Informing Strategy Development". The objectives of the study were to investigate, in broad terms, the likely impacts of climate change on the environment, economy and natural resources of Northern Ireland. A copy of the study report is available in the Assembly Library.

Although the study's conclusions demonstrate that the impact of climate change on Northern Ireland is likely to be considerably less dramatic than some recent media headlines suggest, the report nevertheless outlines possible impacts across a number of sectors. These include sectors relevant to the coastal area, such as coastal and flood defence and fisheries. In these sectors climate change could have implications for intertidal areas, for dune coasts and for fish productivity, possibly affecting catch size and composition.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this was a scoping study outlining a range of possible outcomes in a number of different scenarios. While it represents an important first step towards developing a Northern Ireland strategy for climate change, a more detailed programme of research will need to be undertaken, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders, in order to determine more precisely the adaptation measures that will need to be put in place for the coastal area and other sectors.

Review of Local Government

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the Review of Local Government.
(AQO 1359/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There is no separate review of local government. However, the administration of local public services will be examined within the context of the

Review of Public Administration, which is due to be launched in the coming weeks. Responsibility for taking forward that review rests with the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister.

Planning Permission: Policy

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to make it his policy that planning permission should not be granted to any substantial housing, commercial or industrial development where the local infrastructure, be it roads or sewerage, is deemed to fall short of an acceptable standard. (AQO 1344/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Planning Policy Statement 1-General Principles (PPS 1) makes it clear that the availability of infrastructure is an important material consideration in the determination of a planning application.

Planning Service consults Water Service of the Department for Regional Development, the Water Management Unit of Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment and Roads Service of the Department for Regional Development, as necessary, on proposals for commercial, residential and industrial development for advice on the adequacy of existing water, sewerage and roads infrastructure. Where consultees advise that the requisite infrastructure is not in place to facilitate the proposed development, it is the policy of the Department normally to refuse planning permission as being premature.

Where proposals exceed the capacity of existing infrastructure, developers may offer to provide the necessary infrastructure to service their proposals or to make a contribution towards its provision. In such circumstances Planning Service may grant planning permission subject to a negative condition relating to the progress of the development and to the provision of the works to facilitate it, such as road widening or other infrastructural improvements.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to give an update on the publication of a Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQO 1352/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am pleased to say that a discussion paper on proposals for a Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy has now been agreed by Executive Ministers. I plan to publish the document and begin the consultation process later this month.

My Department will oversee the consultation process. However, the Sustainable Northern Ireland Programme, an organisation part-funded by the voluntary and local government sectors and by my Department, has been asked to organise a number of seminars across Northern Ireland. These are intended to provide an opportunity

for a more participative approach to gathering views and comments. The outcome of these seminars will be fed into the consultation process.

It is intended that the consultation period will run to 30 September 2002. The responses will help form the basis for drawing up a Sustainable Development Strategy which, depending on other priorities and pressures that may arise, I hope to publish by the end of this year.

Planning Service: Enforcement Officers

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of Enforcement Officers currently in employment in the Planning Service, Belfast office; and (b) the number of cases currently waiting to be assessed for enforcement orders by the Belfast office. (AQO 1347/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There are currently 3 full-time Enforcement Officers in the Belfast Planning Office – 1 Higher Professional Technical Officer (HPTO) and 2 Professional Technical Officers (PTOs). In addition, a proportion of senior officers' time, at Senior Professional Technical Officer (SPTO), Principal Professional Technical Officer (PPTO) and Divisional Planning Manager level, is devoted to enforcement work. I have recently moved to strengthen the management of the development control and enforcement sections within the Belfast Division and other Divisions, and that should have a positive impact on the Belfast Division's ability to deal with enforcement casework.

The Enforcement Section in the Belfast Divisional Planning Office is currently investigating 777 cases any or all of which could end up in formal enforcement action being taken.

The Planning Service approach to enforcement is set out in Planning Policy Statement 9 – The Enforcement of Planning Control. The Planning Service generally seeks in the first instance to remedy any breach of planning control through co-operation. In considering whether formal enforcement action is the best remedy for unauthorised development, the Department takes into account whether the breach would be contrary to planning policy or unacceptably affect public amenity; the extent of the breach; the willingness of the offender(s) to remedy the breach voluntarily, and the statutory time limits for enforcement action.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Strategy Partnership Boards: Selection Procedure

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the selection procedure for the

community sector to have representation on the local Strategy Partnership Boards. (AQW 3301/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

Participation on the Local Strategy Partnerships is made on the basis of an equal partnership between two strands, Local Government and the main Statutory Agencies operating at local level; and the four pillars of Social Partners: private sector, community sector, voluntary sector and agricultural and rural development sector.

In accordance with this guidance Local Strategy Partnerships in each district council area were required to configure to represent the balance of local interests and the principles enshrined in the Peace II Programme.' Guidance on the formation of and operation of Local Strategy Partnerships was issued by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) in its capacity as Managing Authority for the PEACE II Programme.

In accordance with the guidance, the SEUPB consulted with the Northern Ireland Regional Sectoral Partners Group (Concordia) and agreed with Concordia a formula applied at local level and protecting the principle of local selection while simultaneously ensuring regional endorsement as follows:

Local selections and nominations for each of the social partners (business, trade unions, agriculture and voluntary and community sector) to be made in consultation with and endorsed by the regional sector.

Dependant upon the size and nature of Partnership arrangements ensure that an acceptable number of places are equally apportioned to each of the social partners for endorsement.

Additional places to be allocated by local social partners.

Concordia group members would oversee and guarantee the process ensuring that where possible selections were made locally by their constituent members.

To ensure continuity in the transition process 50% of the social partner representation was drawn from existing Partnership members and would be endorsed by their own sectors.

In order to ensure renewal of representatives over the lifetime of the programme, a transparent and periodic process of renewal will also be agreed.

Government Buildings: Fire Protection

Mr B Bell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel will his department require companies who install passive fire protection equipment into government buildings to have third party accreditation, in order to ensure compliance with BS 476, as will be required in England and Wales. (AQW 3325/01)

Dr Farren: There are no proposals at present to require companies who install passive fire protection equipment into Government buildings to have third party accreditation, in order to ensure compliance with BS 476.

I understand that this issue is currently under review in England and Wales. When the outcome is known consideration will be given to its impact for Northern Ireland.

Consultancy Firms: Expenditure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 1939/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3368/01)

Dr Farren: The level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the United Kingdom and (d) outside the British Isles is as follows:

	Northern Ireland	Republic of Ireland	Rest of the United Kingdom	Outside the British Isles	Total
1999/ 2000	1,068,955.00	124,849.00	296,998.00	0	1,490,802.00
2000/ 2001	1,642,191.00	48,179.00	378,110.00	0	2,068,480.00
2001/ 2002	2,184,175.40	17,997.00	665,605.40	0	2,867,777.80

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Family and Child Care: Expenditure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the large disparity in the percentage of personal social services budget spent on family and childcare services between the Trusts in Northern Ireland, as listed in the Social Services Inspectorate's Personal Social Services and Related Statistics 2001; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2344/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Differences in the percentage of Trusts' expenditure on family and child care are caused by several factors. The particular age profile of a Trust area will account for some of the difference, with a

younger population requiring a greater funding commitment. There will also be differences in the level of relative need and this, too, will ultimately be reflected in budget deployment.

Bíonn roinnt fachtóirí mar chúis le difríochtaí i gcéatadán caiteachais na nOntaobhas ar chúram teaghlaigh agus leanaí. Tugann próifíl aoise ar leithligh limistéar Iontaobhais míniú ar chuid den difríocht, mar go dteastaíonn tiomantas maoinithe níos mó ó phobal níos óige. Beidh difríochtaí chomh maith i leibhéal an riachtanais ábharthaigh agus léireofar sin, chomh maith, i ndeireadh thiar i leithdháileadh buiséid.

Learning Disability: Expenditure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the large disparity in per capita expenditure on people with a learning disability, aged 18-64 between the Trusts in Northern Ireland, as listed in the Social Services Inspectorate's Personal Social Services and Related Statistics 2001; and to make a statement. (AQW 2345/01)

Ms de Brún: Differences in expenditure levels are explained by a number of factors. The age profile of the relevant population will differ across Trusts, as will levels of need. The cost of delivering a service can also vary as between urban and rural areas. A fourth significant reason for variance is that some Trusts not only serve their own areas but supply regional services to people living outside their boundaries.

Tugann roinnt fachtóirí míniú ar dhifríochtaí i leibhéil chaiteachais. Beidh próifíl aoise an phobail ábharthaigh difriúil ar fud na nOntaobhas, faoi mar a bheidh leibhéil na riachtanas. Is féidir leis an gcostas a bhaineann le seirbhís a thabhairt i gcrích athrú chomh maith idir limistéir uirbeacha agus limistéir thuaithe. Ní amháin go ndéanann roinnt Iontaobhas freastal ar a limistéir féin ach soláthraíonn siad seirbhísí réigiúnacha do dhaoine a chónaíonn lasmuigh dá dteorannacha, agus bheadh sin ar cheathrú cúis shuntasach d'éagsúlacht.

Sure Start

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Sure Start Initiative has the support of the Executive; and to make a statement. (AQW 2761/01)

Ms de Brún: My colleagues and I within the Executive share a vision to have happier, healthier children who are better equipped to grow into confident adults who feel that they have a real stake in society and an ability to influence its future.

The investment in Sure Start outlined in the *Programme for Government 2001-2004* is one example of our commitment to translate that vision into reality by helping to take steps to break the cycle of deprivation through early, sustained measures to promote healthy social and emotional development.

Tá an aisling chéanna ag mo chomhghleacaithe agus agam féin laistigh den Fheidhmeannas go mbeadh leanaí níos sona agus níos sláintiúla agus iad a bheith feistithe níos fearr le fás agus forbairt ina ndaoine fásta a bhíonn muiníneach agus a mhothaíonn go bhfuil leas ceart acu sa sochaí agus cumas tionchar a bheith acu ar an todhchaí.

Is sampla amháin den infheistíocht in Sure Start a dtugtar imlíne air sa *Chlár do Rialtas 2001-2004* dár dtiomantas leis an aisling sin a fhíorú trí chabhrú le céimeanna a ghlacadh chun an timthriall díothachta a bhriseadh trí bhearta luaithe, inbhuanaithe chun forbairt shláintiúil shóisialta agus mhothaitheach a chothú.

Acute Care: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding has she made available for acute care in each of the Health Board areas, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2883/01)

Ms de Brún: I allocate resources to each Board on a capitation formula basis and it is then for the Boards themselves to make detailed funding allocations. In the years 1998-99 to 2000-01, Boards made available the following amounts for expenditure on the acute Programme of Care:

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
NHSSB	109,079,121	120,952,919	137,887,258
SHSSB	81,264,859	88,805,288	101,427,437
EHSSB	172,025,085	190,794,784	225,980,879
WHSSB	74,363,509	79,329,629	87,787,186
Total	436,732,574	479,882,620	553,082,760

Dáilim acmhainní ar gach Bord ar bhonn foirmle chaipitíochta agus ansin tá sé faoi na Boird iad féin na dálaí miona airgid a dhéanamh. Sna blianta 1998-99 go 2000-01, chuir na Boird na suimeanna seo a leanas ar fáil le caitheamh ar an Ghéarchlár Cúraim:

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSST	109,079,121	120,952,919	137,887,258
BSSSD	81,264,859	88,805,288	101,427,437
BSSSO	172,025,085	190,794,784	225,980,879
BSSSI	74,363,509	79,329,629	87,787,186
Iomlán	436,732,574	479,882,620	553,082,760

Acute Care: Patients

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline, by Health Board, the number of acute care patients in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2912/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of inpatients in the Acute Programme of Care in each Board for the last three financial years is detailed in the table below. This information is also published in the annual Hospital Statistics publication, which is available in the Assembly Library and on my Department's website.

INPATIENTS⁽¹⁾ IN THE ACUTE PROGRAMME OF CARE BY BOARD, 1998/99 - 2000/01

Board	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	215,515	224,244	225,302
NHSSB	52,649	51,240	53,242
SHSSB	48,829	48,664	49,241
WHSSB	53,033	49,731	52,735
Total	370,026	373,879	380,520

⁽¹⁾ Including day cases

Tá mionsonraí ar an eolas ar an líon othar cónaitheach sa Chlár Géarchúraim i ngach Bord do na trí bliana airgeadais seo caite sa tábla thíos. Tá an t-eolas seo foilsithe chomh maith san fhoilseachán bliantúil Hospital Statistics, a bhfuil fáil air i Leabharlann an Chomhthionóil agus ar láithreán gréasáin mo Roinne.

OTHAIR CHÓNAITHEACHA⁽¹⁾ SA CHLÁR GÉARCHÚRAIM DE RÉIR BOIRD, 1998/99 - 2000/01

Bord	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	215,515	224,244	225,302
NHSSB	52,649	51,240	53,242
SHSSB	48,829	48,664	49,241
WHSSB	53,033	49,731	52,735
Iomlán	370,026	373,879	380,520

⁽¹⁾ Cásanna lae san áireamh

Acute Care: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding has she made available for acute care in the EHSSB area. (AQW 2913/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 2883/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 2883/01.

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 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 2957/01)

Ms de Brún: The figures in the table below represent the number of credit cards in use by HPSS Boards, HSS Trusts, Agencies, NDPBs, and the total expenditure on those cards in the financial year ended 31 March 2002.

Body	No of Credit Cards	Expenditure on Credit Cards £
DHSSPS	-	-
HPSS Boards	-	-
HSS Trusts	12	£15,763.10
HSS Agencies	2	£1,872.80
NDPBs	6	£27,356.10
Totals	20	£44,992.00

The above excludes purchase cards which are used for the procurement of certain supplies. For example, the government procurement card is a method of payment for goods and services without credit or cash facilities and is available to all Departments and Agencies.

Léiríonn na figiúirí sa tábla thíos an líon cártaí creidmheasa in úsáid ag Boird an SSSP, ag Iontaobhais SSS, ag Gníomhaireachtaí, ag NDPBanna, agus taispeántear an caiteachas iomlán ar na cártaí sin sa bhliain airgeadais dár críoch an aonú lá is tríocha de Mhárta 2002.

Foras	Líon Cártaí Creidmheasa	Caiteachas ar Chártaí Creidmheasa £
DHSSPS	-	-
Boird HPSS	-	-
Iontaobhais HSS	12	£15,763.10
Gníomhaireachtaí HSS	2	£1,872.80
NDPBanna	6	£27,356.10
Iomlán	20	£44,992.00

Níl cártaí ceannaigh a bhíonn in úsáid chun soláthairtí áirithe a sholáthar san áireamh thuas. Mar shampla, is modh íocaíochta d'earraí agus do sheirbhísí gan aon saoráidí creidmheasa ná airgid tirim é cárta soláthair an rialtais agus tá sé ar fáil do gach Roinn agus Gníomhaireacht.

Breast Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are being

taken to address the increase in the level of breast cancer. (AQW 3017/01)

Ms de Brún: While figures show that breast cancer is on the increase, there is a decrease in the mortality rates for this disease. The successful Breast Screening programme can identify cancer at an early stage, which means earlier treatment, which in turn improves the outcome, therefore leading to a reduction in the mortality rates.

In line with the Campbell Report, a large number of the features of a good breast cancer service are in place, including one-stop clinics, timely admission for surgery, multi-disciplinary team working, specialist breast care nurse team and close links to Oncology. The recent appointments of a plastic surgeon and a surgeon skilled in breast reconstruction have enabled an important addition to the service at Belfast City Hospital. The surgical team has been further strengthened by the inclusion of a breast surgeon at Lagan Valley Hospital.

Cé go léiríonn na figiúirí go bhfuil ailse chíce ag méadú, tá laghdú ar rátaí mortlaíochta i dtaca leis an ghalair seo. Is féidir leis an chlár Scagtha Cíche bhfuil ag éirí go maith leis, ailse a aimsiú ag céim luath, a bhfuil coireál luath mar thoradh air, a fheabhsaíonn an toradh dá bharr, ina a mbeidh mar sin laghdú ann sna rátaí mortlaíochta.

Ag cloí le tuairisc Campbell tá líon mór de shainghnéithe seirbhís mhaith ailse chíce i bhfeidhm, clinicí aon aonaid, iontraíl thráthúil mháinliachta, foireann ildisciplíneach ag obair, sainfhoireann altraí cúram ailse agus dhlúthnaisc d'Oinceolaíocht. Chuir na ceapacháin le gairid máinlia plaisteach agus máinlia oile in atógáil chíce deis ar fáil daoine breise don tseirbhís a shaoradh ag Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste. Cuireadh leis an fhoireann mháinliachta arís trí mháinliachta cíche a thabhairt isteach ag Otharlann Ghleann an Lagáin.

Fire Brigade: Substantive Promotion

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current background of substantive promotion in the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade for (a) full-time; and (b) part-time posts. (AQW 3054/01)

Ms de Brún: Substantive promotions for uniformed staff in the Fire Brigade here are governed by the agreements reached by the National Joint Council for Local Authorities Fire Brigades.

Promotion opportunities for non-uniformed staff are filled through open competition. This procedure is followed by the Fire Authority to comply with Fair Employment legislation and to address any imbalance in the make up of the work force.

Is comhshocruithe a dtagtar orthu ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta i gComhar do Bhriogáid Dóiteáin na nÚdarás

Áitiúil a rialaíonn arduithe céime substaintiúla don fhoireann faoi éide sa Bhriogáid Dóiteáin.

Líontar deiseanna arduithe céime don fhoireann nach mbíonn faoi éide trí chomórtas oscailte. Leanann an tÚdarás Dóiteáin an nós imeachta sin chun an reachtaíocht um Fhostú Cothrom a chomhlíonadh agus chun aghaidh a thabhairt ar aon mhíchothromas i gcomhdhéanamh an fhórsa saothair.

Fire Brigade: Substantive Posts

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the operational impact if all substantive full-time and part-time posts were filled in the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade. (AQW 3055/01)

Ms de Brún: Filling the current vacancies would enhance the operational effectiveness of the Fire Brigade, as it would allow for improvements in its managerial and operational efficiency through the consistency resulting from being fully staffed. The Fire Authority is actively recruiting and training new staff to fill these vacancies.

Chuirfeadh líonadh na bhfolúntas reatha go mór le héifeachtacht feidhme an Bhriogáid Dóiteáin, mar go gceadódh sé d'fheabhsúcháin ina éifeachtacht bhainistíochta agus feidhmíochta tríd an gcomhleanúnacht a bhíonn mar thoradh ar lánfhoirmiú. Tá an tÚdarás Dóiteáin go gníomhach ag earcú agus ag oiliúint foirne nua chun na follúntais sin a líonadh.

Royal Victoria Children's Hospital: Funding

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of nurses required; and (b) the total funding needed to fully operate all intensive care beds in the Royal Victoria Children's Hospital. (AQW 3074/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of paediatric intensive care beds, at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, which are open each day is dependent on clinical requirements and staffing levels.

If all 7 Paediatric Intensive Care Unit and 4 High Dependency Unit beds are open, then the nursing staff requirement would equate to 63.40 (whole time equivalent) nurses. The total funding needed to provide nursing staff for these beds is £1.7 million, which has been made available.

There are also significant costs associated with the Consultant Anaesthetic Service and support costs, however, to quantify these would prove disproportionate to cost.

Braitheann an líon leapacha dianchúraim péidiatraiceacha, ag Ospidéal Ríoga Bhéal Feirste do

Leanaí Breoite, a bhíonn ar oscailt gach lá ar riachtanais chliniciúla agus ar leibhéil foirne.

Dá mbeadh gach ceann den 7 leaba san Aonad Dianchúraim Péidiatraiceach agus den 4 leaba san Aonad Ard-Spleácha ar oscailt, ansin bheadh an riachtanas foirne altranais comhionann le 63.40 (comhionann lánaimsire) altraí. Is é an maoiniú iomlán atá riachtanach chun foireann altranais a sholáthar do na leapacha sin ná £1.7 milliún, suim atá curtha ar fáil.

Baineann costais shuntasacha chomh maith leis an tSeirbhís Chomhchomhairle Ainéisteach agus bheadh costais tacaíochta, ar scor ar bith, chun iad sin a chainníochtú diréireach le costais.

Fire Brigade: Temporary Promotion

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of uniformed and non-uniformed employees in the Fire Brigade who are currently on temporary promotion; (b) the length of time each employee has been on temporary promotion; and (c) if these promotions were carried out within the parameters designated by the Codes of Practice as espoused by the Equality Commission.

(AQW 3092/01)

Ms de Brún: The numbers of staff at 31 March 2002 on temporary promotion within the Fire Brigade were 280 uniformed and 3 non-uniformed.

The attached table indicates the length of time the personnel have been in temporary promotion.

TEMPORARY PROMOTIONS AT 31.03.02

Uniformed	Rank	Months											
		Under 3	3 - 6	6 - 9	9 - 12	12 - 15	15 - 18	18 - 21	21 - 24	Over 24	Over 36	Over 48	Over 60
Wholetime	Senior Divisional Officer	2	1										
	Divisional Officer	5	2	1									
	Asst. Divisional Officer	8	2	1									
	Station Officer	13	6										
	Sub Officer	28	10							2		1	1
	Leading Firefighter	55	18			1			3				
	Group Fire Control Officer												2
	Fire Control Officer			1							1		
	Senior Fire Control Operator	3		1									
	Leading Fire Control Operator	7		3									
Retained	Sub Officer	14	3	2	1			1		1	1		1
(Part Time)	Leading Firefighter	19	9	6	3	6	6	3	3	3	8	7	5
Non Uniform													
Fulltime	Temp. Brigade Engineer									1			
	Scale 5 (APT&C)									1			
	Scale 3 (APT&C)												1

Temporary promotions are carried out in accordance with the Fire Authority's "Code of Procedures on Recruitment and Selection" which are within the parameters designated by the Codes of Practice of the Equality Commission.

Is é an líon foirne ag an 31 Márta 2002 ar ardú céime sealadach laistigh den Bhriogáid Dóiteáin ná 280 faoi éide agus 3 gan a bheith faoi éide.

Léiríonn an tábla a ghabhann leis seo an tréimhse ama a chaith an pearsanra in ardú céime sealadach.

Déantar ardú céime sealadach de réir "Cód Nósanna Imeachta ar Earcú agus Roghnú" an Údaráis Dóiteáin atá laistigh de na paraiméadair a ainmníonn Cóid Chleachtais an Choimisiúin Chomhionannais.

Ulster Hospital A&E Unit: Clerical Officers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can she make in relation to clerical officers working in the Ulster Hospital A&E Unit being recruited at a grade lower than their counterparts in the City Hospital, who have similar responsibilities and duties.

(AQW 3111/01)

Ms de Brún: The appointment and grading of staff is a matter for local management in both of these Trusts. Whilst clerical officers may have similar responsibilities, their range of duties may vary considerably and, therefore, impact on the grade attributed to the post.

ARDUITHE CÉIME SEALADACH AG 31.03.02

Faoi Éide	Céim	Faoi 3 Mhí	3-6 Mí	6-9 Mí	9-12 Mí	12-15 Mí	15-18 Mí	18-21 Mí	21-24 Mí	Os cionn 24 Mí	Os cionn 36 Mí	Os cionn 48 Mí	Os cionn 60 Mí
Lánama	Oifigeach Sinsearach Rannáin	2	1										
	Oifigeach Rannáin	5	2	1									
	Oifigeach Rannáin Cúnta	8	2	1									
	Oifigeach Stáisiúin	13	6										
	Fo-Oifigeach	28	10							2		1	1
	Píomhdhuine Dóiteáin	55	18			1			3				
	Oifigeach Rialaithe Dóiteáin Grúpa												2
	Oifigeach Rialaithe Dóiteáin			1							1		
	Oibritheoir Rialaithe Dóiteáin Sinsearach	3		1									
	Príomh-Oibritheoir Rialaithe Dóiteáin	7		3									
Coimeádta	Fo-Oifigeach	14	3	2	1			1		1	1		1
(Páirtaíms eartha)	Píomhdhuine Dóiteáin	19	9	6	3	6	6	3	3	3	8	7	5
Gan Éide													
Lánaimsire	Innealtóir Briogáide Sealadach									1			
	Scála 5 (APT&C)									1			
	Scála 3 (APT&C)												1

Is ábhar don bhainistíocht áitiúil sa dá iontaobhas sin ceapadh agus grádú foirne. Cé go bhféadfadh freagrachtaí cosúla a bheith ag oifigigh cléireacha, d'fhéadfadh a raon dualgas athrú go mór agus, dá bhrí sin, tionchar a bheith aige ar an ngrád a luaitear leis an bpost.

Sub-Fertility Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will the Eq1A on Sub-Fertility Services begin. (AQW 3112/01)

Ms de Brún: The Equality Impact Assessment will be circulated for public comments at the same time as the consultation document on sub-fertility, which is expected in the summer.

Scaipfear an Measúnú Tionchar Comhionannais chun tuairimí poiblí a fháil ag an am céanna leis an gcáipéis chomhchomhairlithe ar fho-thorthúlacht, a bhfuil súil leis sa samhradh.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any plans she has to

stop the flow of newly-qualified Speech and Language Therapists to GB. (AQW 3173/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware that some newly qualified speech & language therapists from the University of Ulster take up employment in England, Scotland or Wales. Details of the numbers involved are set out below:

Year	Number of Graduates to England/Scotland/Wales
1998	2
1999	0
2000	3

(Information on 2001 Graduates is not yet available).

My Department has undertaken a comprehensive review of the speech and language therapy workforce; this includes an assessment of recruitment issues such as the effect of graduates not taking up immediate employment here and also the balancing effect of recruitment from other places. This report is being finalised and its findings and recommendations will inform decisions on any further recruitment initiatives.

Tá a fhios agam go nglacann roinnt teiripeoirí nuacháilithe urlabhra agus teanga ó Ollscoil Uladh le postanna i Sasana, in Albain nó sa Bhreatain Bheag. Tá sonraí ar líon na dteiripeoirí i gceist leagtha amach sa tábla thíos:

Bliain	Líon na gCéimithe i Sasana/in Albain/sa Bhreatain Bheag
1998	2
1999	0
2000	3

(Níl eolas ar Chéimithe sa bhliain 2001 ar fáil go fóill).

Thosaigh mo Roinn ar athbhreithniú cuimsitheach a dhéanamh ar an mheitheal urlabhra agus teanga; cuimsíonn sé seo measúnú ar cheisteanna earcaíochta chomh maith, amhail tionchar drogall na gcéimithe le postanna a ghlacadh anseo láithreach agus tionchar cothrom na hearcaíochta ó áiteanna eile fosta. Tá an dlaoi mhullaigh á cur ar an tuairisc seo agus tabharfaidh a torthaí agus a moltaí eolas ar bhearta faoi thuilleadh scéimeanna earcaíochta eile.

Voluntary Hospital and Community Carers: Support Groups

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she has taken, or proposes to take, to promote the growth of voluntary hospital and community care support groups.

(AQO 1274/01)

Ms de Brún: Partnership initiatives in accordance with the Strategy for Support of the Voluntary and Community Sector, as detailed in Partners for Change, are already well established between statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations in the health and social services. My Department provides grant aid to regional voluntary and community organisations, as well as financial assistance through the Social Services Inspectorate's Training Support Programme for voluntary organisations in the social services. Information and advice is also available to organisations from the Department's policy units and the Social Services Inspectorate. Boards and Trusts have developed comprehensive volunteering policies and effective partnerships have been established with voluntary organisations in the provision of services, and in other joint initiatives.

Tá tionscnaimh chomhpháirtíochta de réir Straitéis do Thacaíocht na hEarnála Deonai agus Pobail, mar a mhionsonraítear in Comhpháirtithe don Athrú, bunaithe go maith cheana féin idir gníomhaireachtaí reachtúla agus eagraíochtaí deonacha agus pobail sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Soláthraíonn mo Roinnse cabhair deontais chuig eagraíochtaí deonacha agus pobail, chomh maith le cúnamh airgeadais trí Chlár Tacaíochta Oiliúna Chigireacht na Seirbhísí Sóisialta d'eagraíochtaí deonacha sna seirbhísí sóisialta. Tá eolas agus comhairle ar fáil chomh maith d'eagraíochtaí ó aonaid pholasaí na Roinne agus ó Chigireacht na Seirbhísí Sóisialta. Tá polasaithe cuimsitheacha deonaithe forbartha ag Boird agus ag Iontaobhais agus tá comhpháirtíochtaí éifeachtacha bunaithe le heagraíochtaí deonacha i soláthar seirbhísí agus i gcomhthionscnaimh eile.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of babies born with foetal alcohol syndrome in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3222/01)

Ms de Brún: There have been no recorded instances of babies born with foetal alcohol syndrome here in the last five years.

Ní raibh aon chás taifeadta de naíonáin a rugadh le siondróm alcóil féataigh anseo sna cúig bliana seo caite.

Anti-Tumour Necrosis Factor Drugs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of funding anti-TNF drugs for arthritis through the health service.

(AQW 3237/01)

Ms de Brún: During the financial year 2001/02, Boards allocated over £900,000 towards anti-TNF drugs for arthritis sufferers.

Le linn na bliana airgeadais 2001/02, dháil Boird breis agus £900,000 ar dhrugaí frith-TNF dóibh siúd a bhfuil airtríteas orthu.

Wheelchairs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) wheelchairs and (b) electrically powered (i) indoor and (ii) outdoor chairs provided by the health service in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 3249/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is not available in the form requested. The Regional Disability Service advises that in each of the last three years the numbers of non-powered and powered wheelchairs issued was as follows:

Year	Non-Powered Chairs	Powered Chairs
1998 / 1999	1651	955
1999 / 2000	2730	576
2000 / 2001	1523	252

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil sa dóigh ar iarradh é. Cuireann an tSeirbhís Míchumais Réigiúnach in iúl gur eisíodh cathaoir rotha cumhachta agus neamhchumhachta gach bliain le trí bliana anuas mar a leanas:

Bliain	Cathaoireacha Rotha Neamhchumhachta	Cathaoireacha Rotha Cumhachta
1998 / 1999	1651	955
1999 / 2000	2730	576
2000 / 2001	1523	252

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) adolescents waiting a mental health assessment (b) assessments carried out last year and (c) those diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). (AQW 3250/01)

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 díreireach.

Osteoarthritis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of (i) males and (ii) females diagnosed with osteoarthritis and (b) the number who have used a health service facility for osteoarthritis. (AQW 3259/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) This information is not available.
- (b) In the financial year 2000/01, there were 1,871 inpatient admissions to local hospitals for a diagnosis of osteoarthritis. Of these, 381 were male and 1,490 were female.
- (a) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.
- (b) Sa bhliain airgeadais 2000/01, bhí iontráil de 1,871 othar cónaitheach chuig otharlanna áitiúla le haghaidh diagnóisithe d'oistéairíteas. Astu seo, bhí 381 fear agus 1,490 bean.

Osteoporosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of (i) males and (ii) females diagnosed with osteoporosis and (b) the number who have used a health service facility for osteoporosis. (AQW 3260/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) This information is not available.
- (b) In the financial year 2000/01, there were 5,340 inpatient admissions to local hospitals for a diagnosis of osteoporosis. Of these, 1,783 were male and 3,557 were female.
- (a) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.
- (b) Sa bhliain airgeadais 2000/01, bhí iontráil de 5,340 othar cónaitheach chuig otharlanna áitiúla le haghaidh diagnóisithe d'oistéapóróis. Astu seo, bhí 1,783 fear agus 3,557 bean.

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) people diagnosed with diabetes and the various categories and (b) people who have visited a health service facility for diabetes in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3261/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) This information is not available.
- (b) Information is available on numbers of inpatient admissions to local hospitals for diagnoses of diabetes, and is detailed in the table below.

Year	Admissions
1998/99	10,836
1999/00	12,904
2000/01	14,954

- (a) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.
- (b) Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon n-iontrálacha chuig otharlanna áitiúla le haghaidh diagnóisithe de dhiabéiteas, agus léirítear seo sa tábla thíos.

Bliain	Iontrála
1998/99	10,836
1999/00	12,904
2000/01	14,954

CoaguChek

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration she has given to the test strips used in portable machines such as the coaguChek system by cardiac patients being admitted to the drug tariff; and to make a statement. (AQW 3276/01)

Ms de Brún: CoaguChek reagent test strips were added to the Drug Tariff here with effect from 1 May 2002 and are now available on prescription.

Cuireadh na stiallacha teist imoibrí CoaguChek ar an Taraif Drugaí anseo ó bhí 1 Bealtaine 2002 ann agus tá siad anois ar fáil ar oideas.

CoaguChek

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cardiac patients in each board area in possession of a coaguChek self-monitoring system. (AQW 3277/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Dyspraxia: Detection

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) any means of detection available to identify pre-school age children suffering from dyspraxia; and (b) any forms of detection planned for the future. (AQW 3302/01)

Ms de Brún: The Child Health Surveillance Programme is the primary means of detecting physical and developmental abnormalities in children at an early stage, including Dyspraxia.

The content and timing of the Child Health Surveillance programme is currently under review by the National Screening Committee and my officials will consider the findings of the review when these become available.

Is é an Clár Faire Sláinte Leanaí an bealach príomhúil chun mínormáltachtaí forbartha agus fisiceacha a bhrath i leanaí ag staid luath. Áirítear Diospraicse orthu sin.

Tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh faoi láthair ar ábhar agus amú an chlár Faire Sláinte Leanaí ag an gCoiste Scagthástála Náisiúnta agus breithneoidh m'oifigigh cinní an athbhreithnithe sin nuair a bheidh fáil orthu.

Dyspraxia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children are currently receiving treatment for symptoms of dyspraxia. (AQW 3303/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Dyspraxia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of people currently receiving treatment for symptoms of dyspraxia; and (b) of those how many are severely affected by the condition. (AQW 3304/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Ulster Hospital: Trolley Waits

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of trolley waits at the Ulster Hospital for the period 14-23 April 2002 inclusive. (AQW 3305/01)

Ms de Brún: Over the period 14-23 April 2002 inclusive, there were 118 trolley waits at the Ulster Hospital.

These figures refer to the total number of patients waiting for inpatient admission at 9.00 a.m. each morning.

Le linn na tréimhse 14-23 Aibreán 2002 uile san áireamh, bhí 118 fanacht ar thralaí ag Otharlann Uladh. Tagraíonn na figiúirí seo d'uimhir iomlán na n-othar a bhí ag fanacht le hiontráil othar cónaitheach ar 9.00 a.m. gach maidin.

Health Promotion Agency Campaign on Smoking and Health

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the cost of the Health Promotion Agency campaign on Smoking and Health for each of the last 3 years; and (b) to make a statement on the effectiveness of this initiative.

(AQW 3308/01)

Ms de Brún: Expenditure by the Health Promotion Agency on the public information campaign on smoking in each of the last 3 years was as follows:

1999/2000	£283k
2000/01	£137k
2001/02	£432k

These figures exclude salary costs.

The 1999/2000 and 2000/01 campaigns focused on young people aged up to 16 years. Research found that the campaigns had been successful in helping to reduce the number of current and experimental smokers.

The 2001/02 campaign, which targeted adult smokers, ended in March and is currently being evaluated.

Is é mar a leanas caiteachas na Gníomhaíochta um Chothú Sláinte ar fheachtas eolais phoiblí ar chaitheamh tobac gach bliain le trí bliana anuas.

1999/2000	£283k
2000/01	£137k
2001/02	£432k

Níl costais na dtuarastal curtha san áireamh leis na figiúirí seo.

Dhíriú na feachtais 1999/2000 agus 2000/01 ar ógánaigh suas go dtí 16 bliain d'aois. De réir torthaí taighde d'éirigh leis na feachtais cuidiú le líon na gcaiteoirí láithreacha agus turgnamhacha a laghdú.

Chríochnaigh an feachtas, a dhíriú isteach ar chaiteoirí aosacha, i Márta agus táthar á mheastóireacht faoi láthair.

South Tyrone Hospital: Operating Theatres

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) has the South Tyrone Hospital two state-of-the-art operating theatres;

and (b) if one of the operating theatres has laminar flow facilities designed by orthopaedic work. (AQW 3321/01)

Ms de Brún: South Tyrone Hospital has two modern theatres opened in 1994 and one of the theatres is equipped with a Laminar Flow air conditioning system.

Tá dhá obrádlann nua-aimseartha ag Ospidéal Dheisceart Thír Eoghain a osclaíodh i 1994 agus tá ceann de na hobraídlanna sin feistithe le córas aerchóirithe sreafa lannaigh.

South Tyrone Hospital: Routine Surgery

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail if any consideration has been given to (a) reinstating routine surgery to South Tyrone Hospital; and (b) creating South Tyrone Hospital as a 'Centre of Excellence' for routine surgery.

(AQW 3322/01)

Ms de Brún: The future range of services to be provided at South Tyrone Hospital will be determined in the context of the decisions to be made on overall acute hospital provision here.

Cinnfear an raon seirbhísí a chuirfear ar fáil amach anseo ag Ospidéal Dheisceart Thír Eoghain i gcomhthéacs na gcinní atá le déanamh ar sholáthar foriomlán na n-ospidéal géarliachta anseo.

Eastern Multifund

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2927/01, to outline (a) any action being taken to redeploy staff employed solely by the Eastern Multifund; and (b) the options used by the Staff Redeployment Unit to serve notice of redeployment opportunities to HPSS staff.

(AQW 3342/01)

Ms de Brún: Staff employed solely by the Eastern Multifund have been given the same opportunity as all other fundholding staff to register with the Health and Personal Social Services Redeployment Unit.

The Staff Redeployment Unit does not serve notice of redeployment opportunities to HPSS staff. Individuals provide their personal details to the Redeployment Unit and the unit provides the opportunity for employers, on a voluntary basis, to match the skills and experience of registrants with vacancies they may have. Employers may use the personal details of matched registrants for short listing and interview purposes, or ask the Redeployment Unit to bring the vacancies to the attention of the registrant who would then be expected to complete the relevant application forms and take part in the normal recruitment process.

Tugadh an deis chéanna don fhoireann atá fostaithe ag Ilchiste an Oirthir amháin agus a tugadh do gach duine eile den fhoireann chisteshealbhaithé clárú le hAonad Athleagan Amach na Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta agus Sláinte.

Ní sheirbheálann an tAonad Athleagan Amach Foirne fógra dheiseanna athleagan amach don fhoireann SSSP. Cuireann daoine aonair a mionsonraí pearsanta ar fáil don Aonad Athleagan Amach agus soláthraíonn an t-aonad an deis d'fhóistoirí, ar bhonn deonach, scileanna agus taithí na gcláraithe a mheaitseáil le folúntais a d'fhéadfadh a bheith acu. Is féidir le fostóirí úsáid a bhaint as mionsonraí pearsanta chláráithe meaitseáil chun críocha gearrliostaithe nó agallaimh, nó iarradh ar an Aonad Athleagan Amach na follúntais a thabhairt ar aird an chláraí a mbeifí ag súil go comhlánódh sé/sí na foirmeacha iarratais cuí agus go nglacfaidh sé/sí páirt sa ghnáthphróiseas earcaíochta.

Car Lease Schemes

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by year and Trust area, the cost of HPSS Senior Executive car leases and car allowances, since the establishment of Trusts.

(AQW 3379/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department commissioned an evaluation of car lease schemes available to Senior Executives in HSS Trusts for the period April 1997 to March 2001. A copy of the evaluation report will shortly be made available to the Public Accounts Committee and will be placed in the library.

Choimisiúnaigh mo Roinn measúnú ar na scéimeanna léasa chairr ar fáil d'Fheidhmeannaigh Shinsearacha in Iontaobhais SSS don tréimhse Aibreán 1997 go Márta 2001. Cuirfear cóip de thuairisc an mheasúnaithe ar fáil don Choiste Cuntas Poiblí ar ball agus cuirfear sa leabharlann í.

Car Lease Schemes

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the guidelines of the HPSS Senior Executive car lease and car allowances schemes.

(AQW 3380/01)

Ms de Brún: There are a number of car leasing arrangements in operation for HPSS Senior Executives. The details of these schemes will shortly be made available in the evaluation report commissioned by my Department. A copy of this report will be placed in the library.

Tá roinnt scéimeanna léasa chairr i bhfeidhm d'Fheidhmeannaigh Shinsearacha na SSSP. Cuirfear sonraí na scéimeanna seo ar fáil ar ball i dtuairisc an mheasúnaithe coimisiúnaithe ag mo Roinn. Cuirfear cóip den tuairisc seo sa leabharlann.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Visits: Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2126/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): No money was spent on Ministerial visits outside NI during my first period in office from 1 December 1999 to 12 February 2000.

During my second period in office from 25 October 2001 up to 4 March 2002, the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside NI was £722.37.

This information has been calculated for periods of devolution. The "total amount spent" covers the costs of all officials who accompanied the Minister. It does not include salary costs.

New Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional 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 2929/01)

Mr P Robinson: New TSN does not have a separate budget and the information is not available in the form requested.

My Department's New TSN Action Plan for the period April 2001 to March 2003 illustrates progress at 31 March 2001 and revises and updates the objectives for the period to 2003. A copy of the plan has been placed in the Assembly library and can be accessed on my Department's website www.drdni.gov.uk. An evaluation of the implementation and impact of New TSN will commence shortly and this will help inform future consideration of the policy.

Road Damage: Ballylumford Power Station

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of damage caused to roads and adjacent properties in the Islandmagee area in Larne by the transportation of heavy loads and excess traffic going to the projects at Ballylumford Power Station.

(AQW 3125/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has worked closely with the Ballylumford Power Station

staff to keep disruption and damage to roads to a minimum during the ongoing major development works at the site. Inevitably, however, the works have led to a significant increase in vehicle movements, particularly heavy and abnormal loads, along the B90 route through Islandmagee.

An agreed haulage route for construction traffic was therefore put in place by Roads Service along the B90 route using Lough Road, Low Road, Brown's Bay Road and Ferris Bay Road. With regard to abnormal loads, I should explain that Roads Service can authorise the carriage of abnormal heavy or wide loads (over 40 tonnes or 4.3 metres wide respectively) on the public road by way of a permit, provided it is satisfied that the proposed route to be taken by the haulier is capable of accommodating the load in question. Abnormal loads travelling to the Power Station are required by their permits to turn off Browns Bay Road onto Hollow Road, because of the road alignment at this crossroads, and then use the B90 Ballylumford Road to the works.

Officials have also advised that investigations are ongoing into 5 incidents of damage caused by the road verge subsiding into adjacent land along the B90 route. Two of these were attributed to abnormal loads, one directly to a delivery of construction materials to the site and two to the general volume of traffic using the roads. Where damage to the public road can be attributed to third parties, Roads Service will seek to recover the cost. I also understand that my Department's Central Claims Unit is currently investigating 2 claims for structural damage to properties along Hollow Road.

As to the general wear and tear on the B90 route, it would be impossible to distinguish between construction traffic, abnormal loads or traffic normally using the roads. However, there has been a noticeable increase in maintenance costs to the B90 over the last 3 years from £4,177 in 1999/2000 to £23,498 in 2001/2002. I understand that, according to the Power Station staff, a major reduction in lorries supplying the plant is expected from this July onwards and by November 2002, the work at the plant should be completed. In the meantime, Roads Service will continue to carry out regular inspections of the B90 route to ensure any detected defects to the road surface or structure are quickly repaired.

Water Meters: Installation Costs

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the cost of installing water meters for all households in Northern Ireland; and (b) the timescale to implement such an exercise. (AQW 3150/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service estimates that it would cost in the region of £120 million and take at least some 5 to 10 years to install water meters in all domestic properties.

These estimates are provided for information only. I have no intention of introducing water metering for domestic customers.

Adshel

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline, in respect of Adshel's contract with the Roads Service Agency, (a) the number of advertising shelters currently agreed for each District Council area in the next 9 years; (b) the criteria for allocating an advertising shelter; (c) the number of non-advertising shelters currently agreed for each District Council area; (d) the criteria for allocating a non-advertising shelter; and (e) the criteria for future shelter site identification.

(AQW 3198/01)

Mr P Robinson: In January 2001, my Department's Roads Service and 23 of the country's district councils entered into a 15-year contract with the bus shelter provider, Adshel, for the provision of approximately 1500 bus shelters throughout the council areas at no cost to the Department or the councils.

The contract provides that Adshel have to replace their existing advertising shelters within each council area and provide a number of advertising shelters. An estimate of the minimum number of advertising shelters is included in the attached table (ie, the total of columns (ii) and (iii)). The contract also provides that, in addition to the number of new advertising shelters included in the table, Adshel may erect others at locations where there is a public need and Adshel feel there are advertising opportunities.

Whilst the contract is quite complex, in broad terms it requires Adshel to erect one new non-advertising shelter for every existing advertising shelters to be replaced or new advertising shelter to be provided. The number of new non-advertising shelters to be provided in each council area is shown in column (1V) of the attached table.

In liaison with Translink and the councils, Roads Service will identify, on the basis of public need, the most suitable locations for new shelters. Details of these locations will be forwarded to Adshel to decide if they represent advertising opportunities. Where they do not, Roads Service can request that non-advertising shelters are erected.

Translink: Securing Property

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what action has been taken by Translink to secure their property and thus prevent easy access to those who are carrying out attacks on residents and property in the Dillon's Court/Avenue Area of Whiteabbey.

(AQW 3219/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it was aware of the recent upsurge in the number of trespass incidents which have culminated in attacks around the Dillons Court area of Whiteabbey. As a result the Company conducted a detailed inspection of its fencing, which revealed a breach that was immediately sealed and strengthened, and it is also currently examining the possibility of raising the fencing behind Dillons Court.

Translink has also enlisted the help of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and six people have now been arrested for trespass.

Translink has advised that perimeter fencing is checked on a continual basis using overseers from Northern Ireland Railways. District Managers also check fencing from outside Railway property where possible and any breaches found are repaired. Translink's main priority in doing so is to keep trespassers off the railway line because of the risk they cause to both NIR passengers and themselves.

Roads Maintenance

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the net revenue expenditure on roads maintenance; and (b) the gross capital expenditure on roads maintenance in each constituency for each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3220/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of expenditure on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, the tables attached show the expenditure incurred by Roads Service on maintenance activities and on capital (major and minor) road improvement schemes in each District Council area during the 5 year period 1996/97 to 2000/01. All expenditure on roads is stated as gross rather than net revenue.

In providing this information, I should make it clear that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital and maintenance expenditure across district council areas. In particular, major road improvements are prioritised on a country-wide basis, not on a 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 council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council area or constituency in which they are located.

The resources available for minor capital schemes are allocated to the 4 Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

Similarly the resources available for each maintenance activity (e.g., resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc) are apportioned to district council areas using appropriate indicators of need.

Motor Scooters: Public Service Vehicle Accessibility

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development has he any plans to allow those with disabilities to take their mobility scooters on public transport similar to prams and cycles. (AQW 3262/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations, which took effect on 2 July 2001, require all new trains to be capable of carrying wheelchairs up to a specified reference size. The Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations which are due to be made by the Department of the Environment later this year will require all new buses to be capable of carrying wheelchairs of the same reference size.

Translink has advised that currently most wheelchairs can be carried on all trains and all low floor buses (which comprise 14.4% of its total bus fleet). However mobility scooters, which are larger than reference sized wheelchairs, cannot be carried on either trains or buses. Unfortunately it would be impractical to carry such oversized equipment on public transport vehicles.

Water Efficiency Measures

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) any water efficiency measures which have been introduced; and (b) his assessment on their impact. (AQW 3353/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service's Water Efficiency Plan, which was published in April 2000, aims to reduce water demand by the actions of Water Service and its customers. The main elements of the plan include education and awareness, the issue of water saving devices known as Hippo bags, leakage reduction, water audits, and extended metering of commercial properties.

During 2000 and 2001 water efficiency leaflets were issued to every property in Northern Ireland. These explained how to use water wisely and the steps that can be taken by individuals to save water, both in the home and in the garden. The use of Hippo bags has also been promoted in customer information leaflets including 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 operates a specially equipped and decorated bus "The Water Bus". This visits schools to enhance the awareness of pupils about water and wastewater services, and emphasises the importance of water efficiency. 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. Exhibitions at agricultural shows, garden festivals and the Ideal Home Exhibition have also been used to raise public awareness and promote the water efficiency message.

Over 37,000 Hippo bags have been issued since 1997. Hippo bags are currently being issued to all government buildings. Water Service will continue to examine opportunities to further promote their use. A leaflet, which provides advice on dealing with bogus callers and using water wisely, has recently been distributed to every property in Northern Ireland.

The water industry in general, and the water regulators, acknowledge that assessing the impact of water efficiency measures on demand for water, is extremely difficult. Reductions in water demand as a result of education and awareness programmes will inevitably only become manifest in the longer term. There are, however, a number of indicators, which suggest that the water efficiency measures taken by Water Service are proving to be successful. Examples of these are a reduction in leakage since the freeze/thaw in January 2001, the results of Water Service's latest customer survey which indicates that there is an increasing awareness of water efficiency, and the demand from customers for Hippo bags. The extension of metering to additional business and commercial customers will encourage them to use water efficiently and monitor its use.

While the gains made to date are encouraging, Water Service recognizes that there is a need to continue to actively promote the efficient use of this precious resource.

Water Efficiency Measures

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what economic assessment can he make of enhanced water efficiency measures against capital investment in new supply sources; and to make a statement. (AQW 3354/01)

Mr P Robinson: As part of its Water Resource Strategy, which will be published for consultation next month, Water Service has taken account of demand management measures. Based on an economic assessment, Water Service intends to reduce leakage, which is the key element of demand management, to the economic level by 2006. This will involve an investment of £25 million over the next 4 years, in addition to the £22 million invested in leakage reduction over the past 4 years. Water Service will also continue to promote the benefits to customers of water efficiency measures.

In seeking to meet the demand for water by all customers in the future, Water Service has adopted a twin track approach of seeking to reduce demand through a wide range of water efficiency measures, while at the same time planning for the timely implementation of additional supplies. This approach ensures best value for money, without compromising the security of the supply of water, either now or in the future.

Water Smart Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) what assessment can he make of the 'Water Smart' programme; and (b) if he is considering introducing it to Northern Ireland to promote greater water efficiency. (AQW 3355/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Watersmart programme is being promoted by Eaga-Services Ltd. It involves an audit of water consumption within selected domestic premises and the provision of water savings measures such as replacement of showerheads, plumbing repairs, rain water containers and trigger hoses. Information on water efficiency is also provided to each household.

Water Service officials have met representatives of Eaga-Services Ltd and are aware that the programme has been piloted by the Essex and Suffolk Water Company. The results indicate that the costs of the programme are likely to be more than 10 times the cost of comparable leakage reduction measures currently being undertaken by Water Service and would not, therefore, represent good value for money. However, Eaga-Services Ltd has agreed to provide more information on the economic benefits of the programme. This additional information will be carefully considered by Water Service.

Water Efficiency Measures

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any discussions he or his officials have had with the Department for Social Development in respect of generating greater value through combining water efficiency measures with energy efficiency measures, especially on domestic premises; and to make a statement. [R] (AQW 3356/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service officials have had discussions with representatives of Eaga-Services Ltd about the Watersmart programme. The initial indications are that the cost of introducing the programme, in Northern Ireland, would not represent good value for money.

Water Service is aware however, that the company is assisting the Department for Social Development in an energy efficiency scheme. My officials will consult with their colleagues in the Department for Social Development to establish whether or not combining the energy efficiency and Watersmart programme would reduce costs to a more economic level.

Kilclean Road

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service have undertaken an assessment of the adequacy of provision for surface water dispersal on the Kilclean Road from the Donegal border into Castlederg;

and, if so, what conclusions were reached on water incursion on to this road. (AQW 3369/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service recently carried out improvements, costing some £65,000, to the structure and surface of approximately half the 4km rural section of the Kilclean Road. The works included resurfacing and drainage improvements, involving the cleaning of outlets and the provision of gullies at the southern end of the road.

Roads Service considers that the 500m urban section of Kilclean Road is also in need of improvement and proposes to resurface it in conjunction with drainage and footway works which are the responsibility of the developer of adjoining land. Officials are in contact with the developer regarding the timing of these works and it is hoped that a satisfactory solution can soon be reached.

Roads Service is not aware of any other significant problems on this road but if the member provides me with details of any specific location where water incursion is causing concern, I will gladly have the matter investigated.

Planning Applications: Downpatrick

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQO 1142/01, if he is aware that the processing of planning applications for planning permissions for single and multiple dwellings in the area served by the Downpatrick Water Treatment Works has been stopped. (AQW 3472/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of reports in the media about the processing of planning applications in the area served by Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment works, and concerns about this matter were raised in writing by the Department of the Environment with my Department last week.

The Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works is not overloaded. There is spare treatment capacity within the Works and the effluent discharged consistently complies with regulatory discharge standards set by the Environment and Heritage Service.

Aside from routine problems such as sewer blockages, Water Service has, in general, had no concerns about the operation of the local sewerage infrastructure. However, the Environment and Heritage Service has indicated recently that it has concerns about the inlet to the Treatment Works. Water Service is seeking further details about these concerns and will take appropriate action in conjunction with Environment and Heritage Service.

Sewage Works: Downpatrick

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQO 1142/01, to ensure that immediate action is taken to install the new inlet screening

equipment at the Sewerage Works in Downpatrick in order that conditional planning approvals for developments in the town can be permitted. (AQW 3508/01)

Mr P Robinson: Preliminary work has already commenced on the installation of the new screening equipment at the inlet to the Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works. It is expected that the work will be completed within the next 4 to 5 weeks. The work will improve the reliability and efficiency of the treatment process by more effectively removing rags and other debris which have led to occasional blockages in the past.

The Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works is not overloaded. There is spare treatment capacity within the Works and the effluent discharged consistently complies with regulatory discharge standards set by Environment and Heritage Service.

Aside from routine problems such as sewer blockages, Water Service has, in general, had no concerns about the operation of the local sewerage infrastructure. However, the Environment and Heritage Service has indicated recently that it has concerns about the inlet to the Treatment Works. Water Service is seeking further details about these concerns and will take appropriate action in conjunction with Environment and Heritage Service.

Congestion Charging or Road Tolling

Mr Hay asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce congestion charging or road tolling. (AQO 1341/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has no immediate plans to introduce congestion charging or road tolling on roads in Northern Ireland. In developing the 'Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland', published in February 2002, my Department considered a range of travel demand management and revenue raising mechanisms.

Studies undertaken on the introduction of road user charging in Belfast suggest that it is technically feasible, 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.

Knockmore/Sprucefield Link

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are there to complete the Knockmore/Sprucefield link in conjunction with the development being proposed at Sprucefield by Stannifer/ Snoddons. (AQO 1338/01)

Mr P Robinson: In keeping with the principle that developers should pay for the transport infrastructure needed to support their developments, this application was subject to a Transport Assessment. As a consequence, the developers of the Sprucefield Regional Centre are required to provide a road link from the A1 Hillsborough Road to the M1 motorway to ensure safe and convenient access to this very significant commercial development.

My Department's Roads Service does not, however, have any current plans to continue this road link to Knockmore Road.

The benefit of the Sprucefield/Knockmore link would be to open up an area for major development and to form a section of an outer distributor road around the city of Lisburn. In keeping with the overarching objectives of my Department's Regional Development Strategy and draft Regional Transportation Strategy, the future need for this road, along with other strategic road proposals, will be subject to examination within the current Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan process which, in turn, will inform the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.

I hope that Roads Service will have published the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan by the end of the current financial year.

Water and Sewerage Systems: Belfast

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any progress on the renewal of the water and sewerage systems for Belfast; and to make a statement. (AQO 1325/01)

Mr P Robinson: Much of the sewerage system in the Greater Belfast area dates back to the turn of the Century. Upgrading of the system is, therefore, a major priority. Following a detailed study of the system, it is planned to invest some £50 million on hydraulic and structural improvements and a further £55 million on a storm management system. Work on these projects is programmed to commence in October 2004. Interim solutions have been identified to alleviate the risk of flooding at 12 areas in Belfast that are considered particularly vulnerable. Work has already been completed at 5 of the areas and is either underway or imminent at the remaining sites.

The water supply network in the Greater Belfast area contains significant lengths of old cast iron mains, which are susceptible to bursts, leakage, dirty water and inadequate water pressure. A water main rehabilitation strategy for the Belfast area has identified an investment need of around £65 million. The work will be implemented on a phased basis, commencing in 2003. Each year, around £2 million is spent on water main replacement in the Belfast area, simply to deal with urgent remedial work identified by operational staff.

Harland & Wolff Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the proposed enlarged and upgraded Clonty Clay Sewage Treatment Works at Clonmore road, Dungannon; and to make a statement. (AQO 1334/01)

Mr P Robinson: As I indicated in response to an earlier Assembly Question on 15 April 2002, my approach to the issue of the surplus Harland & Wolff land has been guided by two key principles. First, that the proposed agreement between Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Titanic Quarter Ltd for the development of the lands should be justifiable in its own right; and second to ensure that the public interest is fully safeguarded.

As a result of the negotiations which have taken place with the company and BHC I am now satisfied on both these counts, with the result that I expect to be in a position shortly to convey my departments' formal approval to BHC under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Harbour Commissioners.

This will enable BHC to conclude the proposed agreement with Titanic Quarter Ltd, and so trigger an injection of finance in to Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd by its parent company, which will be used to fund its new Business Plan.

I consider that this is a good outcome not only for the company and BHC, but also the wider public interest since it will lead to the early re-development of these lands, contribute to the regeneration for the surrounding area, and the creation of new job prospects.

Clonty Clay Sewage Treatment Works

Mr Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the proposed enlarged and upgraded Clonty Clay Sewage Treatment Works at Clonmore road, Dungannon; and to make a statement. (AQO 1324/01)

Mr P Robinson: A study has been carried out of the sewerage systems in Tamnamore, Mullenkill and Clonty Clay areas. The study has recommended the rationalisation of the sewerage systems by upgrading the Wastewater Treatment Works at Tamnamore, and pumping the wastewater from Mullenkill and Clonty Clay to Tamnamore. This will allow the Works at Mullenkill and Clonty Clay to be closed. The scheme, which is estimated to cost £775,000, is programmed to commence in late 2003, subject to the availability of finance. It will take a year to complete.

Wastewater Treatment: North Down

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on improving wastewater treatment in North Down. (AQO 1337/01)

Mr P Robinson: A substantial programme of work is underway or planned to improve wastewater treatment facilities in the North Down area to ensure compliance with regulatory standards including The Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations (NI) 1995.

I announced in the Assembly, on 26 February 2002, that the new Wastewater Treatment Works, to serve the Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle areas would be located adjacent to the Donaghadee carpet factory. The planning documentation, including the detailed environmental statement, is now complete and the planning application will be submitted this week to Planning Service. The planning approval, land acquisition and project procurement procedures will be complex and lengthy. Subject to satisfactory progress on all of these areas, it is hoped to commence work in 2005. It will take 2 years to complete the scheme at an estimated cost of £35 million.

Major improvements are underway to the sewerage system in the Crawfordsburn and Helen's Bay areas to ensure full compliance with the regulatory standards. This involves the upgrading of sewers and the construction of a new pumping station to transfer the wastewater to the existing Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works. The scheme, estimated to cost £3 million, is underway and should be completed by end 2003. The upgrading of Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works is now expected to commence in August 2003 and the latest estimated cost is £2 million.

Road Repair:

Public Accounts Committee Recommendations

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to implement the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee regarding road repairs. (AQO 1330/01)

Mr P Robinson: I presume the Member is referring to the report on 'Road Openings by Utilities', published by the Public Accounts Committee last month.

My Department's Roads Service has already responded positively to many of the issues highlighted in the associated Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the same subject, published in February 2001. Roads Service has developed an Action Plan which addresses the main issues arising from this report. This plan includes a number of performance indicators agreed with utilities, which will be monitored on a regular basis.

I was pleased that the recent Public Accounts Committee report welcomed many of the actions taken by my Department since the publication of the Audit Office report. This good progress will be reflected in the Department's Memorandum of Reply to the Public Accounts Committee.

Water Treatment and Sewerage System

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment can he make of (a) the flexibility of the water treatment and sewerage system; and (b) the capacity to deal with possible increases due to global warming. (AQO 1327/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has, over the years, developed its water source and treatment facilities through a series of strategic resource studies taking account of future demand, population growth, potential for leakage reduction and the economical use of existing and new resources. The current review of the water resource strategy, for the period up to 2030, also takes account of the flexibility between resources. The review is nearing completion and will be published for consultation before the end of the summer.

Water Service's major wastewater treatment works are designed for a 30 year life expectancy. The design incorporates a degree of over capacity, in the form of storm storage tanks, to enable the works to function effectively in periods of extended rainfall.

Climate change is an issue that will have to be addressed by the water industry nationally, when there is more certainty about its impact. In the meantime, Water Service is participating fully in the industry's approach to this issue through its membership of United Kingdom Water Industry Research Limited. Water Service is also involved in a "Climate Change Impact Study for Northern Ireland" through the Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research. Water Service will adopt any changes which will be required in best practice arising from this research.

Greyabbey Sewage Treatment Works

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development if building has commenced at Greyabbey Sewage Treatment Works prior to being granted planning permission. (AQO 1332/01)

Mr P Robinson: The capacity of the existing wastewater treatment facilities at Greyabbey is restricting development in the area and the Works will have to be upgraded to meet the requirements of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 by 31 December 2005. The Department obtained outline planning permission for the replacement of the existing Works at Greyabbey on 23 March 2001. A reserved matters planning application has been lodged with Planning Service but has not yet been approved.

A contract to upgrade both the Kircubbin and the Greyabbey Works was let earlier this year and work commenced at Kircubbin in April 2002. It was proposed to commence work at Greyabbey, on the construction of a temporary treatment Works to allow for the demolition

of the existing Works. However, concerns have been expressed by residents about the design of the proposed new Works. At a meeting with Water Service on 1 May 2002, residents and public representatives agreed that work on a temporary treatment Works could proceed, while discussions on the final appearance of the new Works continued. Water Service has confirmed that any amendments to the appearance of the new Works will be submitted to Planning Service as a revision to the reserved matters application.

Trunk Roads: Overtaking Opportunities

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans the Roads Service Agency has to improve overtaking opportunities on trunk roads. (AQO 1335/01)

Mr P Robinson: Guaranteed overtaking opportunities can be provided by dual carriageways. My Department's Roads Service has therefore a number of dual carriageway schemes in its Preparation Pool, e.g. Toome Bypass, Loughbrickland to Beech Hill, and a section of the Belfast to Larne road, and others are being considered for inclusion in the 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule. However these types of road are expensive.

Roads Service recognises that restricted overtaking opportunities on rural routes with relatively high traffic flows give rise to driver frustration. In an attempt to provide improved overtaking opportunities on those sections of road where the traffic volumes do not justify a dual carriageway standard, Roads Service is proposing the use of 2+1 layouts on single carriageway roads. These provide two lanes in one direction to allow overtaking and one lane in the opposite direction. Schemes like this have recently been constructed at Leckpatrick near Strabane, on the A26 south of Ballymoney and others are being constructed at Tattykeel near Omagh and Burntollet near Londonderry. Roads Service has identified a number of further possible locations on the key transport corridors where it would be possible to construct wide single 2+1 layouts and these are being considered for possible inclusion in the 10-year Forward Planning Schedule.

The size of the future capital works programme which would fund such schemes will be informed by the proposals for the Regional Strategic Transportation Network in the Regional Transportation Strategy.

Water and Sewerage System: Investment

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the investment backlog and future investment needs in the water and sewerage system. (AQO 1326/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service needs to make substantial investment in the water and wastewater infrastructure in

order to satisfy public health requirements, comply with European Union Directives, replace out of date infrastructure and meet increasing demands for new development. An assessment of need carried out in 1994, known as the Asset Management Plan, qualified this investment as £2.5 billion over 20 years. This included a backlog of some £460 million. Since then actual capital investment has averaged £80 million a year, compared to requirement of £125 million a year. Consequently, the backlog is now estimated to be in the region of £800 million.

The Asset Management Plan is currently being updated and is expected to be completed by the end of 2002. Present indications are that investment of almost £3 billion will be required over the next 20 years. Although this would represent an average investment of some £150 million per year, investment over the next 5-10 years will have

to be significantly higher in order to address the backlog and the requirements of the EU Directives.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Improvement and Repair Grants: Expenditure

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the expenditure by each local district council for improvement and repair grants in private sector houses in (a) 1999-2000; and (b) 2000-2001. (AQW 3223/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The information requested is set out in the tables below.

1999/2000 GRANTS TYPE EXPENDITURE BY GRANTS OFFICE

District Council	Grants Office	Renovation £	Dfg £	Replacement £	Repairs £	Mwa £	Hmo £	Total £
Belfast	Belfast N/W & S/E	4,214,305	867,103	13,129	1,057,809	393,762		6,546,108.00
Bangor	N'ards	1,069,596	620,139	134,933	170,041	139,214		2,133,923.00
Newtownards								
North Down								
Lisburn	Lisburn	974,733	273,159	912,235	185,710	118,277		2,464,114
Downpatrick								
Banbridge	Newry	1,520,535	866,573	1,321,857	165,952	84,937		3,959,854
Newry & Mourne								
Armagh	Craigavon	774,285	554,293	1,094,785	190,344	90,369		2,704,076
Craigavon								
Fermanagh	Fermanagh	756,907	300,175	3,255,305	76,041	124,421		4,512,849
Ballymena	Ballymena	1,282,960	682,914	507,300	17,097	79,326		2,569,597
Antrim								
Ballycastle								
Ballymoney								
Coleraine								
Newtownabbey	Ballyclare	831,070	471,023	161,500	33,145	81,992		1,578,730
Carrickfergus								
Larne								
Derry	Derry	2,630,383	904,573	1,229,453	43,731	244,239		5,052,379
Limavady								
Magherafelt								
Strabane								
Omagh	Omagh	1,372,803	1,079,358	1,810,001	154,064	229,292		4,645,518
Cookstown								
Dungannon	Hmo Units East & West						2,911,081	2,911,081
Totals		15,427,577	6,619,310	10,440,498	2,093,934	1,585,829	2,911,081	39,078,229

2000-01 GRANTS TYPE EXPENDITURE BY DISTRICT COUNCIL

District Council	Renovation £	Dfg £	Replacement £	Repair £	Mwa £	Hmo £	Total £
Belfast	4,169,362.08	898,944.73	36,851.92	1,358,468.21	427,275.13	2,737,255.07	9,628,157
North Down	331,692.31	371,056.59		95,104.25	40,459.82		838,313
Newtownards	298,493.99	296,390.47	86,824.69	109,507.17	75,290.28		866,507
Castlereagh	168,085.00	172,932.78	13,600.00	4,123.84	28,913.84		387,655
Lisburn	351,910.22	207,968.77	259,398.81	167,159.99	53,000.96		1,039,439
Downpatrick	563,926.19	230,117.34	591,272.40	36,193.04	33,454.35		1,454,963
Banbridge	304,854.96	131,992.83	273,267.41	26,740.32	18,121.89		754,977
Newry	943,470.28	675,127.73	1,047,913.81	121,248.08	103,464.98		2,891,225
Armagh	362,438.20	222,724.99	922,789.16	152,779.08	38,081.68		1,698,813
Craigavon	473,055.23	384,910.63	322,748.68	230,080.80	78,412.92		1,489,208
Dungannon	779,416.41	583,035.23	880,316.72	149,321.63	128,428.50	21,824.38	2,542,343
Fermanagh	825,360.67	325,906.50	3,428,566.80	71,248.43	144,454.50	8,027.19	4,803,564
Ballymena	439,176.70	220,117.29	123,915.80	5,526.32	15,231.40		803,968
Antrim	209,992.71	132,483.19	62,041.42	9,757.64	17,714.59		431,990
Newtownabbey	362,179.25	315,095.27	19,000.00	7,523.16	54,807.01		758,605
Carrickfergus	135,494.35	121,361.26	24,283.45	35,525.02	4,318.43		320,983
Larne	443,692.52	116,318.21	89,500.00	41,201.36	25,225.28		715,937
Ballycastle	291,468.94	65,181.64	183,736.17	1,991.62	20,534.25		562,913
Ballymoney	141,904.19	135,415.18	146,495.00		9,716.09	22,500.00	456,030
Coleraine	220,781.69	157,702.40		3,690.41	4,810.57	122,343.75	509,329
Derry	1,082,266.67	412,406.08	121,843.52	22,617.67	161,085.54	445,561.19	2,245,781
Limavady	308,991.51	140,858.92	153,574.04	9,328.27	34,305.42	7,296.00	654,354
Magherafelt	645,372.65	120,935.43	234,266.08	5,228.55	58,278.60		1,064,081
Strabane	513,978.80	141,017.28	338,459.65	13,499.49	63,958.60	8,002.92	1,078,917
Omagh	412,426.80	307,623.35	624,755.07	49,922.70	93,204.67		1,487,933
Cookstown	466,670.41	356,365.67	313,252.96	17,668.76	77,046.51		1,231,004
Totals	15,246,462.73	7,243,989.76	10,298,673.56	2,745,455.81	1,809,595.81	3,372,810.50	4,0716,988

Voluntary Groups: Grants Awarded

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to list (a) voluntary groups which were awarded grants in (i) 2000-01 (ii) 2001-02; (b) the amount each group was awarded; and (c) the voluntary groups which have been allocated funding for 2002-03.

(AQW 3233/01)

Mr Dodds: I have made this information available to the member and placed a copy in the Assembly Library.

**Air Quality Monitoring:
Springhill Park, Strabane**

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development what are the implications for the Housing Executive in respect of the results to date from the on going air quality monitoring at Springhill Park, Strabane by the Environmental Health Department of Strabane District Council.

(AQW 3239/01)

Mr Dodds: Strabane District Council has been monitoring the level of smoke in the atmosphere for a couple of years and the current monitoring may be as a result of European Union guidelines. The Housing Executive has not seen the results of any monitoring reports. It will consider the full findings of any environmental survey, when available, and factor this into the prioritisation of its heating replacement programme. The Housing Executive has an ongoing heating programme in progress, which will result in the phased replacement of solid fuel heating, and contribute to better air quality. However, the delivery of the programme will take several years at current funding levels. Accelerating the programme would require substantial additional funds and even if those were available, delivery within a much shorter time frame would depend very much on the capacity of the plumbing and heating industry.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 1955/01, to detail the level of expenditure, in each of the last three years, on consultancy firms/consultants that are based in (a) Northern Ireland (b) the Republic of Ireland (c) the rest of the UK and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3274/01)

Mr Dodds: The level of expenditure, in each of the last 3 years, on consultancy firms/consultants that are based in (a) Northern Ireland (b) the Republic of Ireland (c) the rest of the UK and (d) outside the British Isles is set out in the table below. The difference of £137,378 over the figures previously supplied is due to a typographical error amounting to £117,800 in respect of the figures for 2000/2001 and additional expenditure of £15,652 for 2000/2001 and £3,926 for 2001/2002, which due to an oversight, was not included in my earlier reply.

Financial Year	Northern Ireland	Republic of Ireland	Rest of the United Kingdom	Outside the British Isles
1999-2000	£1,136,628	£6,000	£1,269,474	Nil
2000-2001	£1,370,888	Nil	£1,890,254	Nil
2001-2002	£789,095	Nil	£1,304,941	Nil

DLA Claimants: Diabetes

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of DLA claimants aged over 18 which have diabetes as the main disabling condition. (AQW 3315/01)

Mr Dodds: The table below provides the information requested as at 28 February 2002.

Parliamentary Constituency	Disability Living Allowance Customers aged over 18 where the Main Disabling Condition is Diabetes
Missing Postcode (1)	33
Belfast East	55
Belfast North	120
Belfast South	60
Belfast West	148
East Antrim	65
East Londonderry	74
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	96
Foyle	111
Lagan Valley	61
Mid Ulster	119
Newry and Armagh	93
North Antrim	91
North Down	45
South Antrim	72
South Down	99
Strangford	77
Upper Bann	93
West Tyrone	120
Northern Ireland	1,632

1. The computer scan contains missing postcodes. No electoral ward can be assigned in this circumstance so these have been grouped a "missing postcode".
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.

Pollution Control: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the results of Housing Executive controlled areas inspected every 6 months in the Carrickfergus area, (b) the number of pollution control notices served by the Housing Executive in Carrickfergus and (c) the number of requests to contractors to remove rubbish. (AQW 3333/01)

Mr Dodds: The most recent controlled areas inspection in the Carrickfergus area, completed in January 2002, resulted in 49 requests to contractors to remove rubbish.

The Housing Executive does not serve Pollution Control Notices, this is a matter for the local district council.

Tenants Charter

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the 'Tenants Charter', what action is the Housing Executive taking to address the shortfall in the number of contractors available to carry out minor repairs. (AQW 3349/01)

Mr Dodds: There is no shortfall in the number of contractors currently available to carry out minor repairs for the Housing Executive. All contracts have contractors currently allocated to them. When contracts expire, contractors go out of business or are forced to cease work in particular areas because of circumstances beyond their control, the Housing Executive appoints "caretaker" contractors to cover necessary work until the situation can be resolved.

Maintenance: Response Times

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive monitors the response times for maintenance carried out by contractors on their behalf. (AQW 3350/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has a comprehensive monitoring system in place to report on the performance of all its contractors in terms of response times. The report is presented to a monthly meeting of Area Managers for appropriate action.

Maintenance Repairs: Ards Borough

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many maintenance repairs have been carried out by the Housing Executive in the Ards Borough in the last 12 months. (AQW 3351/01)

Mr Dodds: During the financial year, April 2001-March 2002, a total of 15,339 maintenance repairs were completed in the Ards Borough Council area.

Tenants Charter

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many maintenance repairs carried out by the Housing Executive were completed within the specific time allocated according to the 'Tenant's Charter'. (AQW 3352/01)

Mr Dodds: During the financial year, April 2001 - March 2002, there were 473,016 response maintenance jobs carried out by the Housing Executive. The breakdown of these jobs and the percentage completed within the published timescales are:

	No. of Jobs	Allocated timescale 'Tenants Charter'	Completed within published timescale
Emergency	100,589	Within 24 hrs	91%
Urgent	115,615	Within 4 working days	87%
Routine	231,334	Within 4 weeks	90%
Change of Tenancy	25,478	Dependant on category of repair	85%

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the uptake of the various measures under the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme; and (b) the estimated energy saving benefits achieved. (AQW 3381/01)

Mr Dodds: The Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES) ended on 30 June 2001 and in its final year some 17,000 homes had basic insulation measures installed. However, the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme did not address the problem of fuel poverty. Consequently it was replaced by the Warm Homes Scheme from July 1 2001 and from then to 31 March 2002, over 4,300 homes received substantial heating and insulation measures to lift householders out of fuel poverty.

The estimated energy savings benefits achieved will vary from household to household, depending on the condition of the dwelling and the measures installed. National Energy Action (NI) has been commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the Warm Homes Scheme, which will not only identify the energy saving benefits but also the improvement to health and quality of life.

Oil-fired Central Heating

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, (a) the number of applicants who have been assessed for oil-fired central heating and have been waiting more than 6 months; and (b) the number who have applied and are awaiting assessment. (AQW 3406/01)

Mr Dodds: The information on the number of applicants who have been assessed for oil-fired central heating and have been waiting more than 6 months is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The reason for this is because there are a number of schemes within the remit of my Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive which provide domestic central heating, but which do not differentiate between oil-fired or natural gas heating.

The numbers who have applied and are waiting for assessment are as follows: -

The Warm Homes Scheme

Information on the Warm homes Scheme is not held in the format requested. However the following table provides the data by postal code areas.

Postcode	Number of Clients
BT22	1
BT24	7
BT31	12
BT34	30
BT35	11
BT40	9
BT41	1
BT43	2
BT47	3
BT48	41
BT51	1
BT62	1
BT65	1
BT69	1
BT70	20
BT71	1
BT74	14
BT78	3
BT79	22
BT80	22
BT81	11
BT82	26
BT92	13
BT93	18
BT94	7
Total	278

The Housing Executive's Welfare Adaptations Scheme

Five hundred and fifty requests have been received and are either awaiting or undergoing assessment.

The Disabled Facilities Grants Scheme

This information is not readily available in the format requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Private Sector Grants

Central heating may also be provided under the Housing Executive's renovation/replacement grant system. However, the information requested could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development if Housing Executive discounts given under the Right to Buy Scheme are reclaimed from owners selling under the SPED Scheme. (AQW 3456/01)

Mr Dodds: Paragraph 3.7 of the SPED scheme specifically requires repayment of any discount given under the House Sales Scheme, where a Housing Executive tenant who has bought his home subsequently sells it back within 3 years of purchase.

Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (a) SPED Scheme; and (b) uptake, per constituency, over the last 3 years. (AQW 3457/01)

Mr Dodds: The purpose of the Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) is to assist owner-occupiers who are forced to leave their dwellings because of threat or intimidation. The Housing Executive has the discretion to acquire houses from owner-occupiers, where they, or any member of their household residing with them, have been threatened or intimidated. Applicants under the Scheme are required to satisfy all of the following conditions:

- The house must be owner-occupied and must be the applicant's only or principal home.
- A certificate signed by the RUC Chief Constable, or authorised signatory, must be submitted to the Housing Executive, stating clearly that it is unsafe for the applicant or a member of his/her household residing with him/her to continue to live in the house, because that person has been directly or specifically threatened or intimidated and as a result is at risk of serious injury or death.
- The applicant must qualify for Full Duty Applicant status (accepted as homeless) under the Housing Executive's Common Selection Scheme.

Application forms are available from the Housing Executive's Land & Property Section which is located in the Housing Centre, Belfast.

The numbers of those who have taken up the scheme is not available by constituency but the table below provides the information by Housing Executive District office.

SPED APPLICATIONS BY HOUSING EXECUTIVE DISTRICT OFFICE

District	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
Belfast 1	3	0	2
Belfast 2	2	1	4

District	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
Belfast 3	0	2	2
Belfast 4	16	15	46
Belfast 5	0	17	10
Belfast 6	11	5	40
Belfast 7	5	6	12
Newtownabbey 1	5	5	1
Newtownabbey 2	4	6	7
Antrim	22	13	10
Ballycastle	0	0	0
Ballymena	6	5	19
Ballymoney	2	1	1
Carrickfergus	8	14	12
Larne	7	12	21
Coleraine	2	7	3
N'Ards	6	6	4
Bangor	6	2	9
Downpatrick	0	1	1
Castlereagh	5	9	5
Lisburn	3	7	4
Dairy Farm	0	0	0
Newry	0	2	3
Armagh	7	3	7
Banbridge	1	3	3
Lurgan/Brownlow	9	2	7
Portadown	11	17	5
Dungannon	2	2	1
Fermanagh	2	1	3
L'Derry 1	0	0	0
L'Derry 2	1	4	4
L'Derry	0	0	0
Limavady	1	2	3
Magherafelt	3	1	0
Strabane	4	1	1
Omagh	2	4	0
Cookstown	2	0	0
Totals	158	176	250

Estate Wardens: Appointment

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3118/01, (a) to detail the criteria used to keep 'constantly under review the appointment of estate wardens'; and (b) who is responsible for this task.

(AQW 3506/01)

Mr Dodds: The criteria which determine whether or not the appointment of an Estate Warden might be a useful estate management measure are the volume and variety of problems, as identified by staff, tenants and other representatives. The introduction and funding of a warden is considered against other competing priorities for expenditure. The local District Manager is responsible for producing operational plans, including the need for estate wardens and, subsequently, agreeing these with the Area Manager.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 24 May 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Non-Executive Bill Unit

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what discussions have taken place with the Assembly Commission regarding the establishment of a Non-Executive Bills Unit similar to that established by the Scottish Parliament. (AQW 2781/01)

Reply: The establishment of a Non-Executive Bill Unit is a matter for the Assembly Commission and we have not discussed this with them.

‘Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve’

Mr Berry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail how much of the £3 million budget allocated to the ‘Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve’ cross-departmental strategy will be (a) spent on administration; and (b) allocated to victims’ groups across Northern Ireland. (AQW 2991/01)

Reply: To support the actions contained in “Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve” a £3 million Strategy Implementation Fund has been created with funding coming jointly from the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Office. This £3 million fund is for use by Departments and Agencies to fund projects and services of direct benefit to victims and will not be allocated directly to victims’ groups. The administrative costs of allocating and distributing this fund will be met by the Victims Unit of our department. It is anticipated that administrative costs associated with any project funded will be kept to a minimum.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what criteria is used to determine

which groups or individuals are consulted as part of the equality impact assessment of any new proposals.

(AQW 3078/01)

Reply: The criteria used to determine who is consulted is contained in the Equality Commission’s guidance on the implementation of the statutory duties which was approved by a former Secretary of State. The Equality Commission guidance states, “Consultation must be carried out with relevant interest groups as well as the Equality Commission, other public bodies, voluntary, community, trade union and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter...”

Our department’s Equality Scheme gives officials discretion to consult relevant organisations drawn from the Scheme’s consultation list. We are committed to ensuring that consultation is effective, inclusive and as meaningful as possible. . We recognise that the consultation process has given rise to some difficulties both for those consulting and those consulted and are looking at ways to improve our methods of consultation.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1941/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3290/01)

Reply: The level of expenditure spent by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on consultancy firms/consultants in each of the last three years is as follows:

Year	(a) £	(b) £	(c) £	(d) £
1999/2000	128,389.60	Nil	70,999.31	Nil
2000/2001	199,514.58	Nil	195,465.60	Nil
2001/2002	183,477.51	53,803.35	104,711.21	10,700

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr S Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) the number of non-departmental public bodies under its control; (b) the location of these bodies; (c) the number of staff employed by each body, both part-time and full-time; and (d) the budget allocated to each non-departmental public body.

(AQW 3420/01)

Reply: Our department has responsibility for four non-departmental public bodies, these are: -

- The Northern Ireland Economic Council;
- The Statute Law Committee for Northern Ireland;
- The Planning Appeals Commission; and
- The Water Appeals Commission.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is an Executive non-departmental public body of the Northern Ireland Office, however our department has responsibility for allocating its budget.

The Cabinet Office Publication “Public Bodies 2001” contains information on Non-Departmental Public Bodies including their location, the number of staff employed and their expenditure. Copies of this publication are held in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet office website www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/quangos.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Fishermen: Fishing Vessels

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of people who are employed as fishermen on registered fishing vessels in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3291/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department does not retain information on the number of people employed as fishermen on fishing vessels registered in Northern Ireland. However, the information available on the number of people employed in the fishing catching sector is as follows:

	Part Time	Full Time
1992	296	1036
1993	272	957
1994	228	938
1995	226	933
1996	148	815
1997	131	850
1998	115	892
1999	90	845
2000	74	612
2001	90	845

Third-World Meat

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 2693/01, to outline (a) how regularly the independent third party verifier carries out an audit of beef imported from Third World countries; and (b) what happens to Third World meat

which is processed by the food manufacturing sector of which beef is a constituent part. (AQW 3393/01)

Ms Rodgers:

- Under EC beef labelling rules non-compulsory labelling claims for beef, including beef imported from Third Countries, are required to be approved by my Department and are subject to verification by a Government recognised beef labelling verification body. Verification audits are carried out annually or at more regular intervals at the discretion of the verification body.
- Where beef, including beef imported from third countries is mixed with other meat the beef labelling rules apply only if the beef constitutes 50% or more of the meat. The rules do not apply to beef sold in the form of processed beef products such as sausages, ready made meals or canned beef. All meat and meat products including meat imported from other member states or third countries are required to be processed in licensed premises under the control of either the Department's Veterinary Service or Environmental Health Officers of the local District Councils as appropriate.

Area of Special Scientific Interest: Deer Park, Newtownstewart

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail the contact her officials have had with the Department of the Environment to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the proposed declaration of an ASSI at Deer Park, Newtownstewart in West Tyrone. (AQW 3422/01)

Ms Rodgers: Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), an Agency of the Department of the Environment, wrote to DARD on 12 April 2001 to advise that they were proposing to declare Deer Park as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI). In accordance with longstanding procedures between EHS and DARD in relation to ASSI designations, a map and associated documentation were enclosed with the EHS letter. DARD formally responded to EHS on 10 May 2001 to apprise them that Forest Service, an Agency within DARD, had lands within the area proposed for ASSI declaration.

EHS wrote to Forest Service on 28 March 2002 to advise that they had on that date declared Deer Park an ASSI and providing an opportunity to make any representations or objections before confirmation of the designation. On 9 May 2002 Forest Service responded to inform EHS of its plans for future timber harvesting operations.

I understand that while the main intention of the Deer Park ASSI designation is to protect glacial deposits and underground features from damage, normal agricultural activities or forestry operations are unlikely to be

affected. It is expected that communication between EHS and DARD will continue in coming weeks.

Imports of Animals: Disease Testing

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what tests for disease are currently carried out on live animal imports. (AQW 3455/01)

Ms Rodgers: Imports of animals from other Member States and Third Countries into NI must comply with the animal health conditions laid down in the respective Commission Decision or Council Directive, and be accompanied by a health certificate which conforms to the model laid down in the respective Decision or Directive, and which must be signed by an official veterinarian of the veterinary authority in the country of origin.

Furthermore, animals originating in Third countries must enter the Community via a Border Inspection Post (BIP), but since there is no approved BIP for live animals in NI, such animals may only be imported into NI via a BIP in GB or another Member State.

Although normal trade in imported animals from GB has not resumed, at the commencement of trade such animals will be required to be imported in line with EU requirements.

In most cases, provided animals meet the import conditions as laid down in the relevant Directive/ Decision, the Directives do not require the need for post import physical checks. However, all imported animals are subject to documentary and identifications checks.

The tests or treatments currently carried out for disease on live animal imports are:

The treatment with an approved warble fly preparation of bovine animals, not for immediate slaughter, imported from a region not free from warble fly;

Cattle from Canada from non Canadian Health Accredited Herds (CHAH) must be isolated for 6 months after import and tested for Enzootic Bovine Leukosis (EBL) after 2 months and again 4 months later with negative results.

Based on veterinary risk analysis, the Department may decide on occasion to conduct particular post import (physical) check eg Maedi Visna in sheep, Equine Viral Arteritis and Equine Infectious Anaemia in horses.

Northland Stream Drainage Improvement Scheme, Carrickfergus: Reinstatement Works

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 3126/01, when will reinstatement of the area be completed. (AQW 3487/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northland Stream drainage improvement scheme in Carrickfergus undertaken by my Depart-

ment's Rivers Agency, was completed by the Agency's contractor on 27 February 2002. However, it was necessary to defer reinstatement of the grassed verge owned by NIHE until the growing season. I am pleased to confirm that the reinstatement works were substantially completed on 29 April 2002.

Rivers Agency

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on her Department's policy on the attendance of Rivers Agency officials at planning site meetings organised by District Councils.

(AQW 3567/01)

Ms Rodgers: Rivers Agency, as the Drainage Authority, has a consultative role in liaison with DOE Planning Service on drainage and flood risk aspects of Areas Plans and Planning Applications referred to it. In pursuance of that role Rivers Agency is prepared to facilitate requests from Planning Service for attendance at planning site meetings to support/explain advice given by it to Planning Service. I would stress that Rivers Agency has no statutory function in determining Planning Applications and it would be inappropriate for the Agency to attend all planning liaison meetings organised by District Councils, where there may be no drainage or flood risk implications. The Rivers Agency Chief Executive has written to your District Council clarifying its position on attendance.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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 2952/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey) [*supplementary answer*]: I wish to advise that it has since been brought to my attention that there was an omission from the information supplied to you in response and I therefore include amended information as follows.

My Department currently has two credit cards in use. Two other cards previously held by the Ulster-Scots Agency had been cancelled during the early part of the financial year ending 31 March 2002. The two cards still in use are held by the Permanent Secretary, and my Private Secretary.

During the financial year ended 31 March 2002, the total amount spent on each card was as follows:

Permanent Secretary:	£ 3,231.78
Private Secretary to the Minister:	£ 7,334.23
Ulster-Scots Agency	£17,051.30
Total	£27, 617.31

There are no other public body credit cards used by my Department, including executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies, cross-border bodies, and other funded bodies.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1940/01, to detail the level of expenditure in each of the last 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants based in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Republic of Ireland; (c) the rest of the UK; and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3293/01)

Mr McGimpsey [*supplementary answer*]: The figures on the attached table include actual expenditure by my core Department, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI) and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) for each of the last three years, and a breakdown of where the consultants and consultancy firms used are located.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE ARTS AND LEISURE – USE OF CONSULTANTS

Financial Year	Total Cost	Spend in Relation to Location of Consultant/Consultancy Firm			
		NI	RoI	UK	Outside of British Isles
1999/2000	£8,000 (Core Department)	£8,000	Nil	Nil	Nil
	£25,670.40 (OSNI)	£25,670	Nil	Nil	Nil
	£52,871.00 (PRONI)	£42,177	Nil	£10,694	Nil
2000/2001	£388,339.61 (Core Department)	£383,409.81	£2,214.42	£1,730.12	£985.26
	£19,430 (OSNI)	£19,430	Nil	Nil	Nil
	£21,370 (PRONI)	£21,370	Nil	Nil	Nil
2001/2002	£574,646.19 (Core Department)	£569,415.29	£2,348.50	£2,882.40	Nil
	£61,280 (OSNI)	£44,556	Nil	£16,724	Nil
	£21,980 (PRONI)	£21,230	Nil	£750	Nil

Sport and Leisure Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to conduct an audit of sport and leisure facilities in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3579/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Cultural Forum, a group established by my Department and representative of district councils and the cultural agencies, has initiated work on a cultural facilities audit, which includes an audit of sport and leisure facilities in Northern Ireland. Work is

at a very early stage, and it will be some time before it is completed.

EDUCATION

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the annual recurrent grants to Irish Medium schools since 1998; (b) the funding allocated for the provision of new permanent accommodation for Irish Medium schools since 1998; (c) the funding allocated to the development of Irish Medium units for years 2000-01 and 2001-02; and (d) the funding allocated for Irish Medium A level syllabuses and teaching materials since 1999.

(AQW 3408/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): (a)

1998/1999	£3.2 m
1999/2000	£3.8 m
2000/2001	£4.3 m (provisional)

(b) capital funding of £4.3m has been made available for permanent accommodation in such schools since 1998;

(c) funding of £28,560 was allocated to Irish-medium units in the 2000/2001 financial year and £59,223 in the 2001/2002 financial year; capital grant of £21,138 was provided in respect of one Irish- medium unit.

(d) the Department of Education does not directly allocate funding for any examination syllabuses or teaching materials, but does so through the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations

and Assessment (CCEA), who have responsibility for funding the costs of translating A level examination papers and pupil materials in the medium of Irish. The Department has augmented CCEA's budget by £30k for each financial year from 1999/00 to 2001/02, for the development of Irish medium A level syllabuses.

Irish-Medium Dimension: Funding

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline the total expenditure allocated for projects with an Irish Medium dimension under the EU Special Support Programme (Peace I). (AQW 3425/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A total of £2,425,964.86 was approved by the Department of Education and its Intermediary Funding Bodies under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland 1995-1999 (PEACE 1) for projects with an Irish Medium dimension.

Temporary Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2308/01, to detail (a) the number of teachers on a temporary contract for each of the last 10 years by Board area; and (b) the number as a percentage of the total number of teachers employed in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3426/01)

Mr M McGuinness: (a) The number of teachers who received pay for temporary service during each of the last ten academic years, by Education and Library Board area, is as shown in column (a) and in column (b), this number is expressed as a percentage of the total number

of teachers on temporary and permanent contracts who were paid in August of each year.

Nursery School Places

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of full-time nursery school places currently available for children of working parents; and (b) the number of such places available in (i) 1999-2000; and (ii) 2000-2001. (AQW 3444/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All nursery places, both full- and part-time, are open to all children whether their parents are working or not. The admissions criteria set by the Department give priority to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who tend to experience more difficulty at school than other children, and on the 4-year olds with July and August birthdays who, if they failed to gain a pre-school place, would not have any educational experience until after their fifth birthday.

The total number of full-time nursery places is as follows:

	1999-2000	2000-2001
No. of full-time places	5,928	6,552

Formula Allocations: Grammar and Secondary Schools

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the unit of resource made available to grammar and secondary schools for all secondary age groupings by Board area. (AQW 3461/01)

Area Board	1991/92		1992/93		1993/94		1994/95		1995/96	
	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)
	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers
BELB	750	21.07%	828	22.43%	886	23.19%	915	23.55%	923	23.41%
WELB	794	20.74%	830	21.23%	920	22.79%	949	23.09%	980	23.40%
NEELB	942	20.81%	1016	21.96%	1060	22.43%	1044	22.07%	1012	21.35%
SEELB	890	22.61%	976	23.96%	1046	24.99%	1094	25.31%	1039	24.24%
SELB	951	21.05%	1057	22.44%	1179	24.27%	1184	24.07%	1200	23.79%
Total	4327	21.25%	4707	22.40%	5091	23.54%	5186	23.61%	5154	23.22%

Area Board	1996/97		1997/98		1998/99		1999/00		2000/01	
	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)
	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers	No of Temp	% Teachers
BELB	900	23.07%	854	22.37%	898	23.25%	885	22.99%	883	23.02%
WELB	950	22.54%	935	22.27%	996	24.14%	1018	24.63%	1023	24.78%
NEELB	1016	21.58%	1034	22.00%	1118	23.58%	1132	23.91%	1206	25.22%
SEELB	1054	24.62%	1084	25.66%	1092	25.74%	1094	25.48%	1081	24.78%
SELB	1111	22.45%	1165	23.37%	1204	23.91%	1183	23.53%	1219	24.09%
Total	5031	22.81%	5072	23.13%	5308	24.12%	5312	24.10%	5412	24.41%

Column (a) includes teachers substituting for permanent teachers, covering vacant posts, or with contracts of less than 12 months.

Mr M McGuinness: The figures below set out grammar and secondary school per capita allocations for each Education and Library Board based on their formula allocations. Figures are also included for Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools, although these are not directly comparable to those of controlled and maintained schools because of differences in funding responsibilities between the different types of school.

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Secondary	£2,831	£2,631	£2,595	£2,612	£2,665
Controlled Grammar	£2,697	£2,468	£2,899	£2,809	£2,530

VGS	GMI (Post-Primary)
£2,869	£2,917

Notes

The figures include amounts made available under LMS Formulae in 2001/02. (2002/03 information is not yet available) Information on preparatory departments has been excluded.

Figures obtained from the LMS Budget Statements published by the Boards in respect of controlled and maintained schools and by the Department in the case of Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.

The figures also exclude centrally retained funds provided in-year to schools for certain items of expenditure, such as substitution costs and allocations for earmarked initiatives and other centrally held resources, such as Home to School Transport, CASS, School Meals and Central Administration, as these are not costed to individual schools.

Numeracy and Literacy Strategy Reviews

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) if the Review of the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies has been completed; and (b) when the findings of the Review will be published.

(AQW 3468/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The report on the Literacy Strategy review is currently being finalised and the report on the Numeracy Strategy review is to be submitted to the Department by the end of June.

Members of the Assembly Education Committee will receive a copy of the reports once the Minister has had the opportunity to consider the recommendations made.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the obligations the UK Government's signature and ratification of the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional and Minority Languages places on his Department concerning (i) Irish Gaelic; and (ii) Ulster-Scots; and (b) how these obligations are being fulfilled.

(AQW 3474/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was signed by the UK Government on 2 March 2000 and subsequently ratified on 27 March 2001. The provisions of the Charter came into effect on 1 July 2001 and the obligations placed on the Department of Education are as follows:

- in respect of Irish, in accordance with Article 2, paragraph 2 and Article 3, paragraph 1 of the Charter the following provisions apply for the purposes of Part III of the Charter –

Article 8, paragraphs 1 (a) (iii), 1 (b) (iv), 1 (c) (iv), 1 (g) and 1 (h)

Article 10, paragraphs 1 (a) (iv), 1 (c), 2 (b), 2 (g), 3 (c), 4 (a) and 5

- in respect of Ulster-Scots, in accordance with Article 2, paragraph 1 of the Charter Ulster-Scots is recognised as meeting the definition of a regional or minority language for the purposes of Part II of the Charter in relation to Articles 2 and 3. No specific obligations arise as a consequence.

The obligations in respect of Irish are met through support for the provision of Irish-medium education and the inclusion of Irish as a named language in the 11-16 curriculum. In addition, the Department facilitates the use of written Irish and of Irish place names and family names by correspondents, and in subsequent responses. The Department would endeavour to facilitate the use of spoken Irish if requested to do so. As for Ulster-Scots, there has been no demand for the provision of teaching through this medium, nor has there been any demand to facilitate the use of Ulster-Scots in written or oral communications with the Department.

The Department has facilitated a meeting between the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to discuss the possibility of appointing a member of staff to oversee Ulster-Scots educational methods. The issue of funding such a post has still to be resolved, and will depend upon the outcome of discussions between DE and CCEA officials in the context of other funding pressures.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) if he has received a request from CCEA for the appointment of a staff member to oversee Ulster-Scots educational methods; and (b) if he has agreed to support this request.

(AQW 3475/01)

Mr M McGuinness: CCEA officers have met with the Ulster-Scots Agency to discuss the possibility of appointing a member of staff to oversee Ulster-Scots educational methods. The issue of funding such a post has still to be resolved, and will depend upon the outcome of dis-

cussions between DE and CCEA officials in the context of other funding pressures.

Catholic Teaching Certificate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the percentage of full-time and part-time teachers employed within the Catholic maintained sector who do not possess the 'Catholic Teaching Certificate'; (b) the criteria for receipt of this qualification; (c) the number of Protestants or other non-Roman Catholic teachers currently in receipt of this qualification; (d) the percentage of non-Roman Catholic teachers employed within the Catholic maintained sector; (e) the percentage of Roman Catholic teachers employed within (i) the state controlled; and (ii) the integrated sectors of education; and to make a statement. (AQW 3490/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Education does not hold such information. Provided requirements as to age and health are satisfied, the Department requires a professional teaching qualification, normally a Bachelor of Education degree or a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, for a person to be eligible to teach in any grant-aided school. It is then a matter for employing authorities, including the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, to set any specific criteria for particular posts, such as, where appropriate, the possession of the Catholic Religious Education Certificate;

As this qualification is not required for the purposes of being eligible to teach, the Department does not have any information as to the requirements for entry to the course or its content. This information is available from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools whose address is: -

160 High Street
Holywood
Co Down
BT18 9AZ

The Department of Education does not hold any information on teachers who have this qualification as it is not required for the purposes of eligibility to teach;

(d) & (e) The Department does not hold information on the religious denominations of teachers.

Statement of Special Educational Needs

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who have a statement of special educational needs in each primary and post-primary school in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone constituency. (AQW 3492/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In the following schools, five or more pupils had a statement of special educational needs:

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Castlecaulfield (2) Primary School	5
Dungannon Primary School	31
Enniskillen Model Primary School	13
Holy Trinity Primary School	6
Howard Primary School	5
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon	30

Every other primary school in the constituency had fewer than five children with a statement of special educational needs. In line with the Department's policy on release of statistical information, numbers smaller than five have been suppressed in order to avoid potential disclosure of personal information.

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Armagh/South Tyrone Integrated College	29
Aughnacloy High School	*
Convent Grammar School	*
Drumglass High School	14
Duke Of Westminster High School	8
Enniskillen Collegiate	*
Enniskillen High School	9
Erne Integrated College	9
Fivemiletown High & Community College	*
Lisnaskea High School	6
Portora Royal School	*
Royal School Dungannon	*
St Aidan's High School	7
St Ciaran's High School	27
St Comhghall's High School	10
St Eugene's College	*
St Fanchea's College	6
St Joseph's College	21
St Mary's High School	*
St Mary's Secondary School	*
St Michael's College	*
St Patrick's Academy For Boys	5
St Patrick's Academy For Girls	*
St. Joseph's Secondary School	14
St. Patrick's High School	9

* Fewer Than 5 Cases.

Relationships and Sexuality Education: Funding

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education what funding is available to statutory and voluntary organisations that contribute to relationship and sexuality education in schools. (AQW 3523/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Statutory and voluntary organisations can make a valuable contribution to the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools, however, my Department does not directly fund work of this kind. It is a matter for the Board of Governors and the Principal of each school to decide which organisations offer appropriate support for the teaching of RSE and to take due account of any financial implications.

Schools: Ancillary Staff

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education what efforts have been made to ensure that ancillary staff in schools, such as classroom assistants, will have their annual contracts of employment fully honoured and implemented; and to make a statement. (AQW 3562/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The terms and conditions of service of ancillary staff in schools are matters for their employing authorities. I am not aware of any employing authority reneging on an agreed contract of employment for such staff. However, before agreeing contracts with staff, an employing authority must satisfy itself that it can meet the cost of such contracts from within its approved resources.

Special Educational Needs

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Education to (a) list the different diagnostic categories recognised by the various Education and Library Boards for the purpose of statementing children with special educational needs; and (b) indicate how many children have been statemented in each of these categories by Education and Library Boards in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3564/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs outlines eight categories of learning difficulty or disability as follows;

1. Learning Difficulties
2. Specific Learning Difficulties e.g. Dyslexia
3. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD)
4. Physical Disabilities
5. Sensory Impairments: e.g. Visual Difficulties
6. Speech and Language Difficulties
7. Medical Conditions

The School Census data on a range of special educational needs is collected under the following headings:

8. Blind	9. Asperger's syndrome
9. Partial Sight	10. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD)
10. Deaf	11. Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD)
11. Partial Hearing	12. Severe learning difficulties (SLD)
12. Speech and Language	13. Epilepsy
13. Dyslexia	14. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
14. Physical Disability	15. Dyspraxia
15. Autism	16. Other

For the number of children in each category in the last five years I refer the member to the answer given to AQW 2410/01.

Speech and Language Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what funding is available for speech and language, per Board area, for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3580/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Boards do not separate funding for individual types of special educational need. For funding details on special educational needs in general, over the last five years, I refer the member to the answer provided to AQW 2408/01.

It is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and ultimately the Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts to provide speech and language therapy. Although the need for speech therapy is specified in some children's statements of special educational needs, this is as recommended and supplied by the Health and Social Services Trusts.

Speech and Language Assistance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many children, per Board area, have received speech and language assistance in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3581/01)

Mr M McGuinness: This information is not held in the format requested. However, statistics from the school census are held in terms of the number of children with speech and language difficulties identified in their statement of special educational needs. For the last three years these are:

Board area Year	Belfast	West-ern	North-Eastern	South-Eastern	South-ern	Total
1999/2000*	596	511	590	637	331	2665
2000/2001	660	623	747	827	623	3480

Board area Year	Belfast	West- ern	North- Eastern	South- Eastern	South- ern	Total
2001/2002	695	641	759	896	717	3708

*Data on categories of statement in respect of nursery and primary schools are not included. This data was not collected centrally in 1999/2000.

Teachers: Job Evaluation

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education, in respect of job evaluation for teachers in Education and Library Board Schools and voluntary Grammar Schools, (a) to explain the differences in job evaluation for these two sectors; (b) is he aware that there is discrimination against teachers in Grammar Schools through non-compliance with the scheme set down by the Boards; and (c) will his Department consider this issue under equality legislation. (AQW 3595/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The threshold assessment scheme is the same for teachers in all grant-aided schools irrespective of the sector in which they work. Accredited external assessors carry out the assessments and work in teams with lead assessors, who ensure a fair and consistent approach. In addition, a quality control team, which reports directly to the Regional Manager, monitors their work, including accompanied assessment visits, and each school principal is invited to complete feedback reports on their experience of the process. If the facts are put to me about non-compliance with the scheme in specific cases, I will have them looked into.

School Sports Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the potential for greater community use of school sports facilities. (AQW 3601/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Education legislation encourages schools to consider making their premises available to the community when not in use by the schools themselves. I would hope therefore that schools will, as far as they are able, be responsive to the needs of local communities for facilities, including sports facilities.

I am pleased to say that the New Opportunities for PE and Sport Programme will greatly enhance opportunities for the community use of school sports facilities. The Programme is making available a total of £33.75 million to: build new and refurbish existing sports facilities for school and community use; support the development and promotion of these facilities for community use; and build or refurbish outdoor adventure facilities.

The funding will be split between five area partnerships, led by the Education and Library Boards, who will facilitate schools in developing projects in association with the local community and sports clubs.

Civil Service Office Accommodation

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to relocate civil servants employed in Rathgael House to sites West of the River Bann. (AQW 3650/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs is currently underway. Pending the outcome of this Review, I have at this time no specific proposals for any further relocation of my Department's functions and the position of the Department of Education remains therefore as set out in Chapter 5.4 of the Interim Report of the Strategic Review.

Ministerial Car

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3362/01, to outline (a) the costs involved in acquiring a Ministerial car; (b) the costs involved in acquiring a driver; (c) the tendering process for acquiring this car and driver; (d) the number of persons tendering for both; (e) the selection criteria used for both; and (f) if the unsuccessful tenders in both cases were notified of the reasons why their tender had been unsuccessful. (AQW 3660/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- The cost to my Department in acquiring a car was £21,821.26.
- As my driver is not an employee of the Department, no expenditure was incurred in his recruitment.
- The Ministerial car was provided through formal Government Purchasing Agency (GPA) tendering procedures.
- Three companies submitted tenders.
- In acquiring the Ministerial car my Department agreed with GPA that tenders should be judged on:
 - price;
 - compliance with specification;
 - suitability of security measures; and
 - after-sales service
- GPA offered both of the unsuccessful tenderers a debriefing on the reasons why their tender had not been successful. I understand that only one took up this offer.

Teachers' Health and Well-being Survey

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3183/01, to outline (a) whether the findings of the Teachers' Health and Well-being survey have been

discussed with Teachers' Side; (b) when the discussions took place; (c) when the survey 'Teachers' Health and Well-being' will be published. (AQW 3678/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Staff Support Research Working Group is presenting its report to Management Side at the end of June. The discussions with Teachers' Side are expected to start no later than the beginning of the next school year, and the report will be published on their completion.

Primary Schools: Local Management of Schools Funding

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps he has taken to improve the budgetary position of Primary Schools under LMS funding. (AQO 1379/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department's consultation document on the common funding formula for all grant-aided schools, published last year, proposes a skewing of resources to the primary sector. The cumulative effect of the proposals is to increase primary sector funding by around £12m or 4% and the balance between funding attracted by primary schools compared to post-primary schools will rise from 65% to 67%.

Pupil Selection following the 11-Plus Exam

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) if he is aware that certain Grammar Schools use enhanced criteria in their pupil selection following the Eleven Plus Exam and (b) if this procedure has his approval. (AQO 1372/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am aware that grammar schools use such criteria. Grammar schools must admit pupils according to their grade in the Transfer Procedure test but many are oversubscribed with applications from pupils with the same grade. It is therefore necessary for them to distinguish between these pupils down to the last available place within their admissions number. The use of additional sub-criteria, for example, giving priority to those pupils with sibling relations at the school, enables a school to do this. Within the legislation these decisions are entirely a matter for the Board of Governors of each school.

Expenditure per School Pupil

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2389/01 and AQW 2390/01, to outline the variations in net expenditure per school pupil between educational sectors and education board areas. (AQO 1391/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Information supplied by Boards shows that the primary school per capita varies across the Education and Library Boards from £1,964 to £2,294.

The secondary school per capita varies from £3,066 to £3,620. There are also differences between the controlled and maintained sectors.

These variations occur not only because of different spending priorities of Boards and the make-up of their LMS formulae but also because of the differences in the profiles of schools within individual Boards, in particular, the incidence of small schools and relative levels of social deprivation. For these reasons it is difficult to obtain true like for like comparisons across Boards.

The LMS Common Formula, planned for implementation in April 2003, will ensure that schools of similar size and characteristics will receive similar levels of funding.

Governing Bodies Association: 11-Plus

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail the proposals the Governing Body Association has presented to him for matching pupils to schools when the Eleven Plus is abolished. (AQO 1406/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The GBA gave a public commitment to identify an acceptable method of matching pupils to schools but no proposals have been produced. If the GBA has been able to develop acceptable proposals I would urge the association to make its proposals available for public scrutiny and to clarify its position on academic selection before the end of the consultation period.

Post-Primary Provision

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the outcome of his meetings with key interested parties on the consultation on post primary provision. (AQO 1392/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Sixteen meetings have already taken place and others are planned for the coming weeks. The key issues emerging from the meetings are:

- Agreement that the 11 plus should be abolished;
- widespread acceptance of the adverse effects of academic selection at 11 and agreement that it should be ended;
- significant and increasing numbers of our young people are progressing to our two universities from non-grammar and non A-level routes;
- children from low income families in disadvantaged areas, particularly Protestant areas, have little prospect of obtaining a place in a grammar school;

I have also met with the Progressive Unionist Party and have offered meetings to all other political parties. So far, the Alliance, Sinn Féin, SDLP and Women's Coalition have accepted this offer.

Bus Transport Policy

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to make it his policy to intervene where the operation of a bus transport policy by an Education and Library Board results in a restriction on the rights of parental choice, to ensure that equity and equality between different children is delivered. (AQO 1380/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The existing transport arrangements were the subject of consultation with the education and library boards before being approved by my Department.

The arrangements were subject to a Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment analysis as part of the consultation exercise. The analysis revealed that the policy did not discriminate against any group or restrict the rights of parents.

It is for the boards to deliver home to school transport within the approved arrangements, and I have no plans to intervene in the operation of the service. Parents who feel that their rights may be restricted, or that they are being treated inequitably, should contact their education and library board to seek an explanation of any decision.

Salary Differentials: Principals and Vice-Principals

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what timescale will be set for the Independent Inquiry Team to produce the interim report on salary differentials for Principals and Vice-Principals. (AQO 1390/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully recognise the strength of feeling among principals and vice-principals about their salary arrangements, and the importance of resolving this issue quickly. This, therefore, will be the Inquiry's first task. While it would be premature to set a time limit at this point, I would expect the timescale to be short because the various interests, who will be submitting evidence to the Inquiry, have already undertaken a lot of groundwork.

Burns Report

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he is taking to ensure proper consultation on the Burns report, given the significance of the recommendations it contains. (AQO 1409/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is using a variety of methods to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the review of post-primary education. Today I launched a Household Response Form which will be issued this week to every household giving information about the review and seeking the views of the public on the key issues. A more detailed response

booklet was issued at the start of May to all schools, further education colleges, community groups and training organisations to facilitate consideration of the key issues and to help structure responses. The views of the public will also be gathered through a household survey and we are 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 to listen to suggestions, build consensus and stimulate discussion of the issues during the consultation period.

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 submit their comments to my Department.

Funding to Offset the Cost of Vandalism to Schools

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education what financial assistance is available to individual schools to offset the costs of vandalism. (AQO 1378/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Local Management of Schools (LMS) scheme operated by each Education and Library Board sets out the arrangements for compensating schools for the cost of work arising from vandalism. In most Boards these arrangements provide for schools to be reimbursed for costs above a certain threshold. Voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools carry their own insurance to meet the cost of repairs arising from vandalism.

Teacher/Pupil Ratio: Funding

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Education has he any plans to reorganise financing of schools bearing in mind the importance of setting the correct teacher/pupil ratio. (AQO 1373/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department's consultation document on the common funding formula for all grant-aided schools, published last year, set out proposals which will bring funding allocations to a consistent level and will ensure that schools of similar size and characteristics receive similar levels of funding.

Under Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements, schools are provided with an unhypothecated budget and individual Boards of Governors make spending decisions in light of their own policies and priorities. Decisions on the number of teachers to be employed are therefore a matter for each school to determine in light of their individual school circumstances, particularly changes in enrolment. It is important that schools

achieve the appropriate Teacher Pupil Ratio and the Department is endeavouring to support schools in their efforts to achieve this. In 2000/2001, the PTRs in all sectors (apart from Special Schools) improved. The Primary figure fell by 0.2 to 20.2 and the Secondary figure fell by 0.2 to 14.5.

However, it would run counter to present LMS policy, for the Department to exercise a direct control over teacher numbers and pupil/teacher ratios.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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 2983/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): There are currently no credit cards held by this Department.

One Government Procurement card was used by my Department in the financial year ending 31 March 2002 with a total of £10,650 having been spent.

My Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) which use credit cards and expenditure in the financial year ending 31 March 2002 are as follows;

Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs)	No. of Credit Cards	Expenditure (Financial Year ended 31 March 2002)
Labour Relations Agency (LRA)	1	£1,422.36
Ulster Supported Employment Ltd. (USEL)	13	£16,042
Enterprise Ulster (EU)	30	£42,487.66
Construction Industry Training Board (CITB)	1	£6,000

Other bodies funded by my Department which use credit cards and expenditure in the financial year ending 31 March 2002 are as follows;

Other Bodies funded by DEL	No. of Credit Cards	Expenditure (Financial Year ended 31 March 2002)
Tourism Training Trust (TTT)	1	£965
Northern Ireland Business Education Partnership (NIBEP)	1	£1,200

Other Bodies funded by DEL	No. of Credit Cards	Expenditure (Financial Year ended 31 March 2002)
FE Colleges;		
Belfast Institute	6	£5,637.72
Castlereagh	2	£2,110.00
East Antrim	1	£3,427.95
Newry & Kilkeel	1	£4,087.00
Northern Ireland Hotel Catering College	1	£2,435.35
Skill NI	2	£1,833.72
Workers Educational Association	2	£1,001.47
Queen's University Belfast	1	£4,000
Stranmillis University College	3	£37,947

Women Returning To Work

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what recent studies have been undertaken to identify obstacles facing women returning to work. (AQW 2997/01)

Ms Hanna: Women and men share many of the same barriers to employment. Evidence presented to the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment, which I chair, has identified a lack of affordable, accessible, and flexible childcare as a specific barrier for many women.

DEL, the Equality Commission and the Childcare Partnerships in NI have commissioned research on the use of, demand for and supply of childcare in Northern Ireland. It is anticipated that the final research report will be available by the end of 2002.

Applied Behaviour Analysis

Ms Morrice asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) any steps she is taking to contact local university based Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) professionals and (b) any resources she will make available to support them in setting up training courses that meet international standards as outlined by the Association for Behaviour Analysis International. (AQW 3252/01)

Ms Hanna: I have not had any contact in this context. In terms of funding for training courses, the universities here, as elsewhere in the UK, are autonomous bodies entirely responsible for their own policies and practices, including course provision. Accordingly, I am not in a position to intervene.

Information Technology Skills

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proposals she has to improve IT skills among mature students. (AQW 3340/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has a wide range of initiatives aiming to improve IT skills among mature students. In the Further Education sector these include: The Skills Fund (£2.5 m), The Access Initiative Fund (£2.3m), an additional 600 Higher Education places in areas of skills need, and a compact with the Worker Education Association. They have been introduced to widen access and increase participation in IT and other skills need areas.

During 2001/2002, 83% of courses undertaken through learndirect were ICT related. Financial support will continue to be provided through the Northern Ireland learndirect Network.

From 1999 to 2002, my Department provided 300 additional university IT places. This year, we will be providing a further 330 additional HE places, to be allocated to economically relevant areas, including IT. Eight full-time Foundation Degree pilots are currently running which focus specifically on IT. A further 50 IT Foundation Degree full-time equivalent places will be provided in 2002/2003.

Disability Awareness: Medical Undergraduates

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the training given to medical undergraduates in disability awareness; and to make a statement. (AQW 3343/01)

Ms Hanna: The training given to medical undergraduates in disability awareness is a matter for Queen's University.

Food Handling: Health and Safety Issues

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any consultations she has had with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development regarding relevant accredited training courses in Food Handling and Health and Safety issues within the (i) food manufacturing; and (ii) processing sectors; and to make a statement. (AQW 3385/01)

Ms Hanna: Whilst I meet regularly with my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, this specific subject has not been raised. My Department liaises regularly with the relevant Sector Training Council for the food manufacturing and processing sectors, the Food and Drink Training Council.

This Council includes representation from employers in the sector and all training issues are discussed.

The Government supports a wide range of courses in the sector and these include Food Handling and Health and Safety issues. These courses are provided across the province by most Further Education Colleges, by the Food and Drink Training Council, by private training providers, and by Loughry College.

“Benefit Trap”

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any consultations she has had with the Minister for Social Development regarding the adverse impact that the ‘Benefit Trap’ is having upon the ability of the (i) food manufacturing; (ii) processing sectors to attract sufficient labour to the industry; and to make a statement. (AQW 3386/01)

Ms Hanna: Whilst I meet regularly with my colleague, the Minister for Social Development, we have not discussed this specific issue. I consider that any effects of the ‘Benefit Trap’ would be the same in these sectors as in other sectors of the labour force with a similar wage structure. They are therefore a matter of wider economic policy which I will address in the context of the Employability Task Force which I chair.

Social Security System

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any consultations she has had with the Minister for Social Development regarding any abuse of the social security system by workers within the (i) food manufacturing; and (ii) processing sectors; and to make a statement. (AQW 3387/01)

Ms Hanna: I meet regularly with my colleague, the Minister for Social Development and, whilst we have not discussed this specific issue, I have no reason to believe that there is any abuse of the social security system which is related to these particular sectors. Any such abuses which were brought to light would be dealt with in the same manner regardless of sector.

Potential Loss of Industrial Investment

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any consultations she has had with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment regarding the potential loss of industrial investment in the (i) food manufacturing; and (ii) processing sectors because of the inability to secure workers; and to make a statement. (AQW 3388/01)

Ms Hanna: Whilst I meet regularly with my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, we

have not discussed this specific issue. I am not aware of any potential loss of industrial investment in these sectors because of the inability to secure workers. My Department will liaise closely with DETI to ensure the success of any such potential investment proposals and will make full use of our preparation for work programmes if required.

Special Educational Needs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on special needs teaching in Northern Ireland with reference to the number of specialist teachers available in adult education.

(AQW 3462/01)

Ms Hanna: It is a matter for the institution or organisation concerned to ensure that staff have the appropriate skills and competencies to deliver programmes to the students, including those with special needs.

It is the Department for Employment and Learning's policy to widen access and increase participation in further and higher education for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A range of initiatives have been put in place to support this policy. The Department also supports vocational training for young people with special needs through a range of organisations.

Engineering

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to promote engineering as a career; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3476/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department liaises with the Engineering Training Council to promote engineering as a career through school-based projects and skills competitions. The Department's Careers Service provides impartial guidance to young people and adults and works with the full range of professional bodies in engineering to provide timely and accurate careers information.

Further Education: Maintenance Support

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will make a statement on the system of maintenance support available for students in further education.

(AQW 3477/01)

Ms Hanna: Students undertaking full-time further education courses can apply to their local Education and Library Board for means-tested discretionary awards. An award made under these arrangements provides for the payment of tuition fees, a means-tested grant towards living costs of up to £1,633 and supplementary grants. From September 2001 a new award in the form of a means-tested bursary of up to £1,500 to cover living costs was introduced. The bursary includes remission of

tuition fees and the payment of supplementary grants. In addition, students who face financial difficulties in meeting their living costs have access to Support Funds, which are administered by the colleges.

Further Education Colleges: Inspections

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make of the results of the recent inspections of further education colleges.

(AQW 3478/01)

Ms Hanna: I receive regular reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate on the quality of teaching and learning in further education colleges, illustrating a standard which is at least satisfactory; with a significant number of lessons good or better. These reports demonstrate a high level of consistently good practice in the colleges which provide a wide range of educational programmes.

Employment Bill

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make of the impact of the Employment Bill on small businesses.

(AQW 3494/01)

Ms Hanna: The implementation cost to small businesses of the adoption, paternity and maternity proposals is estimated at £0.5m annually. This is not unreasonable. Firms eligible for small business relief may claim back 100% of leave pay, plus an element of compensation (currently 5%).

In the first year, the flexible working proposals are expected to cost employers between £10.4m and £29.6m. These costs are likely to level off to between £2.61m and £7.39m in subsequent years. The Department recognises that small businesses will need particular assistance in implementing the proposals and will address their needs through comprehensive guidance.

Employment

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) the number of new places created in 2001 under the (i) Access to Work Scheme; (ii) the Employment Support Scheme; and (iii) the Job Introduction Scheme; and (b) how this compares with the targets set in the 2001-2002 Programme for Government.

(AQW 3551/01)

Ms Hanna: In 2001/2, 362 new offers of support were given under the Access to Work (AtW) Scheme; 50 additional employment places were provided under Employment Support; and 97 work trials were approved under the Job Introduction Scheme. This compares with the targets in the Programme for Government of an

additional 400 offers under AtW; an additional 50 places under Employment Support; and 60 work trials under the Job Introduction Scheme.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Public and Employers' Liability Insurance

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the difficulties Co Fermanagh-based businesses involved in the leisure/ activity tourism services are having in obtaining public and employers' liability insurance, what advice and assistance can he give to such businesses. (AQW 3389/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I am aware that a number of businesses in Northern Ireland are having difficulty in obtaining public and employers liability insurance. As a result, I have drawn it to the attention of the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and written directly on behalf of a number of businesses to the Association of British Insurers. This includes one Fermanagh based activity business.

I have also tasked my officials to undertake research to better quantify the scope, nature and scale of the problem as a prelude to developing a strategy to seek to address the causes of high insurance costs – or even its non-availability – and to help stabilise or reduce the rate of increase in premiums.

In the meantime, I would encourage any businesses experiencing difficulty in obtaining insurance to write directly to the Association of British Insurers, 51 Gresham Street, London EC2V 7HQ to obtain details of potential sources of cover.

Employment in Belfast

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the number of people employed in each constituency in Belfast for the last 5 years; (b) the rate of unemployment in each for the last 5 years; and (c) any steps he is taking to encourage employment in East Belfast. (AQW 3511/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) Estimates of the number of employee jobs below Northern Ireland level are only available from the biennial Census of Employment and the most up to date figures relate to September 1999. Employee jobs estimates for September 1997 and September 1999 for each Parliamentary Constituency Area in Belfast can be found in Table 1.

- (b) Unemployment data at Parliamentary Constituency level are only available from the claimant count. Claimant count unemployment rates in each constituency in Belfast for the last 5 years are given in Table 2.

- (c) Invest Northern Ireland, through its local office in Belfast, is undertaking a range of enterprise awareness activities and business development programmes in East Belfast. This will encourage new business start-ups and help existing businesses to grow, thereby creating additional employment. I also welcome the recent announcement by Irish Bonding that it is investing almost £9 million at its Marshalls' Road plant, which will see employment increase from 90 to 187. I have also been working closely with the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the land proposals by Harland and Wolff, which will provide the opportunity for further economic regeneration at Queen's Island.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEE JOBS IN BELFAST EAST, BELFAST NORTH, BELFAST SOUTH AND BELFAST WEST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREAS.

Date	Belfast East	Belfast North	Belfast South	Belfast West
September 1997	37,680	59,794	64,516	22,377
September 1999	39,663	60,125	67,773	22,811

TABLE 2
CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYMENT RATES IN BELFAST EAST, BELFAST NORTH, BELFAST SOUTH AND BELFAST WEST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREAS.

Date	Belfast East	Belfast North	Belfast South	Belfast West
April 1998	5.4	5.2	4.0	16.6
April 1999	5.2	5.1	3.5	16.8
April 2000	3.7	4.2	2.8	14.6
April 2001	3.8	3.9	2.4	13.3
April 2002	3.0	3.7	2.5	13.0

Small Businesses

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) what assessment he has made regarding the provision of incubator space in East Belfast; (b) any plans he has to increase such; and (c) any meetings he intends to have with East Belfast Enterprise Ltd in relation to rising unemployment in East Belfast. (AQW 3512/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) Invest Northern Ireland in consultation with its partner organisations and the business community will continue to assess potential gaps in the market place for small businesses. This would include the provision of

workspace for businesses. Discussions are ongoing with a number of organisations in East Belfast concerning future provision.

- (b) Discussions are ongoing with a number of groups and individuals in East Belfast with regard to looking at future provision and identification of possible commercial sites. Invest Northern Ireland have also offered support to private developers for the provision of managed workspace. These units are now in existence and are actively marketed through Invest Northern Ireland and the enterprise network.
- (c) Invest Northern Ireland's Eastern Local Office is in regular contact with the Chairman and Manager of the East Belfast Enterprise Park. I am aware of the nature of the discussions and understand that further meetings are planned, where obstacles to future workspace provision will be discussed.

Business Registrations

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the number of business registrations in the last 5 years in (i) Belfast; (ii) Northern Ireland; (iii) GB; (b) his assessment of the number of business registrations in Belfast over this period; and (c) any steps he is taking to increase the number of business registrations. (AQW 3513/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) The number of business registrations recorded under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Orders 1986 and 1990 and the Companies Acts (GB) 1985 and 1989 were:

Reporting Period 1 April to 31 March Incorporated in Belfast	Total Number of Companies Incorporated in NI	Total Number of Companies Incorporated in GB	Total Number of Companies
1997/98	297	1,718	205,000
1998/99	340	1,959	218,000
1999/00	372	2,325	225,000
2000/01	366	2,240	236,000
2001/02	474	2,335	227,000
Total	1,849	10,577	1,111,000

- (b) The current Business Birth Rate in Northern Ireland is approximately 30 per 10,000 of the economically active population per annum which compares to the UK average of 40 per 10,000 of the economically active population.

Another way of expressing the current level of entrepreneurship is that 1 in 50 people are currently in the process of starting a business whereas in the UK as a whole it is 1 in 25 and in the USA it is 1 in

10. It is therefore imperative that the N. Ireland rates (including Belfast) are raised in absolute and objective terms. This is one of the main objectives of Invest NI. Specifically Invest NI will promote a more enterprising culture so as to raise the overall level and quality of new business starts.

Only firms wishing to trade as limited companies are required under the legislation to register therefore the figure of 1,849 refers only to limited companies registered over this period.

There are other companies that operate under either sole trader or partnership status. This figure does not therefore give a true reflection of the total number of new business start ups throughout Northern Ireland.

There is still however the need to increase the number of business start ups in Belfast and indeed across the whole of Northern Ireland.

- (c) Recognising the weak performance of business birth rates throughout Northern Ireland, Invest NI working with partnership organisations is developing a business birth rate strategy designed specifically to increase entrepreneurship and promote new business starts.

This will be rolled out later this current year.

Invest Northern Ireland is working with Enterprising Belfast, Belfast City Council, Princes Trust and other organisations to actively promote and increase the number of individuals in East Belfast setting up in business.

Invest NI has funded two enterprise development officer posts, one based at East Belfast Enterprise and one at East Belfast Partnership. The development officers have been involved in a number of activities to promote enterprise in the local areas, these include;

- Exhibitions
- Information days
- Leaflet drop to all householders in East Belfast
- Seminars to key influencers
- Ideas workshops

Belfast City Council along with Invest NI are launching a week of enterprise activities beginning 27th May 2002 consisting of enterprise awareness and training. East Belfast will feature prominently in all events.

Fish Processing

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to retain employment in the fish processing sector in Kilkeel following the announcement of the closure of Young's/ Bluecrest Seafood Limited. (AQW 3524/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest Northern Ireland currently has 11 client companies operating in the fish processing sector in Kilkeel. These companies employ 506 employees with a combined turnover of £31.1 million, representing 46.4% and 41% of the fish processing sector levels respectively.

Invest NI and preceding agencies have been active in this sector in developing companies and supporting applications for European funding and will continue to work with the fish processors in Kilkeel in implementing the fish sector strategy (2000-2006). This was developed in conjunction with DETI agencies, the Industry and DARD. Equally and more recently the Scampi sector review independently commissioned by LEDU and DARD.

In practice, the implementation of these strategies mean encouraging growth by investing in capability, market development, people development and product innovation. Invest NI also plans to repeat the successful export trade initiative that was carried out in April 2002 at the Brussels International Seafood Exhibition, where three companies of the six represented on the Invest NI group stand were based in Kilkeel. Many of the other Kilkeel based companies visited the exhibition and were assisted by Invest Northern Ireland to exploit this valuable European export marketing opportunity.

Northern Ireland has also recently supported three business expansion proposals from companies in the fish processing sector in Kilkeel and is currently assisting in a significant research project.

With regards to the retention of employment in Young's Bluecrest, the company has offered employment to the entire workforce, however this is impractical as it involves relocation to Scotland. Equally other Northern Ireland food processing companies, facing the difficulty of labour shortages, have offered alternative employment to part of the workforce. Again this has proven to be impractical. However there is a strong demand for skilled labour in this sector and I understand that other Kilkeel fish processing companies will be able to offer employment to approximately 35 employees of the Young's Bluecrest workforce.

Currently discussions are ongoing to endeavour to minimise the potential employment losses in Kilkeel.

Rating System

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessments have been made of the effects of charging rates to the manufacturing industry. (AQW 3552/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The cost of industrial derating, in terms of revenue foregone, is around £64 million a year. A consultation exercise on the future of the rating system will take place soon, and this will provide an opportunity

for all arguments and issues to be fully aired before any decisions are taken. Opinions vary as to what the effects of changing the current derating arrangements would be; but I will ensure that the interests of the Northern Ireland economy are kept to the fore in reaching a decision.

Broadband Access

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) those areas currently covered by broadband access; and (b) those areas expected to be accessible to broadband in the next (i) 6 months; and (ii) 12 months. (AQW 3566/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Currently a range of broadband technologies is available throughout Northern Ireland from a number of telecommunication operators. However this is often at a cost which small to medium sized companies consider to be unaffordable. To encourage SMEs to take up broadband I announced on 15 January a support programme to assist the installation and first year running costs associated with satellite broadband. Satellite broadband services, available from a range of operators, wholly cover Northern Ireland.

ENVIRONMENT

Carrickfergus Borough Council Area

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the work undertaken by consultants on behalf of the Planning Service in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area in the last 2 years; and (b) the cost of this work. (AQW 3193/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): The work undertaken by consultants in the last 2 years on behalf of the Planning Service, in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, related to planning applications for development in the Carrickfergus and Whitehead Conservation Areas.

The total costs of the projects were £171,344.

Carrickfergus Borough Council Area Planning Service: Consultants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the work undertaken by consultants on behalf of the Planning Service in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area in the last 2 years; and (b) the cost of this work. (AQW 3193/01)

Mr Nesbitt [*supplementary answer*]: Unfortunately, the information contained in my previous answer to you in relation to the total costs of the work undertaken by

consultants in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area over the period in question was incorrect.

The total costs of the projects were £2,085.50 and not £171,344 as previously stated.

I apologise for any inconvenience.

Anonymous Objections: Planning Applications

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the status accorded to anonymous objections lodged to planning applications. (AQW 3430/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Material planning matters raised in all letters of objection, including anonymous objections, are taken into account by the Planning Service in the determination process for planning applications.

The status accorded to the material issues raised by objectors is therefore similar. The material issues raised are the most important factor, not the number of objections, either identified or anonymous. However, all interested parties, including objectors, are encouraged to identify themselves in order to ensure that the proper weight is attached to the representations.

Environmental Problems: Plastic Bags

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment what policy he will pursue in relation to addressing the ongoing environmental problems caused by the extensive use of plastic bags by supermarkets. (AQW 3445/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am grateful to the Member for raising an issue in which I have taken a personal interest. I have taken particular note of the success of the recently introduced levy on plastic carrier bags in persuading consumers in the Republic of Ireland to reduce significantly their use of plastic bags.

In the UK as a whole, around ten billion plastic bags are given away each year. That constitutes a significant source of landfill and an equally significant source of litter. Unfortunately, because taxation is an excepted matter, Northern Ireland does not have the necessary legal powers to allow the introduction of a levy here independently of the rest of the UK. I am aware that Michael Meacher at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has given notice that he intends to press for the introduction of a similar levy. I can confirm that it is my intention to support DEFRA in this, and to encourage the Welsh and Scottish Devolved Administrations to do likewise. In particular, I will raise the issue at meetings of the Environment Sector of the British-Irish Council.

In the meantime I have asked my officials to explore any options which might have an equivalent effect to the

levy. They are engaging in discussions with the super-market sector, to look at the possibility of developing a voluntary scheme to encourage consumers to reduce the current profligate use of plastic bags.

As the experience of the Republic of Ireland has shown, people are willing to act with greater environmental responsibility when given appropriate encouragement. I am hopeful that we can build constructively on the heightened public awareness of waste issues brought about by my Department's recent 'Wake up to Waste' campaign.

Road Haulage Industry

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of the Environment if he has plans to appoint a Commissioner, in line with UK-wide practice, to investigate and monitor malpractice in the local haulage industry. (AQW 3447/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department of the Environment carries out equivalent functions in Northern Ireland to those of Traffic Commissioners in Great Britain. I have no plans at present to propose changes to the legislation in order to establish a Traffic Commissioner for Northern Ireland.

However, when priorities and resources permit I would intend to review the proposals issued for consultation in 1998 by the former Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland on the regulation of the road haulage industry in Northern Ireland. At that time I will consider whether there should be a Traffic Commissioner for Northern Ireland.

Area of Special Scientific Interest: Deer Park, Newtownstewart, West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the legislative process necessary to declare an area as one of Special Scientific Interest; and (b) the stage currently reached in regard to the proposed declaration of Deer Park, Newtownstewart in West Tyrone as an ASSI. (AQW 3479/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The legislative provisions relating to the declaration of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) are set out in the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985 (as amended). Article 24 of that Order requires my Department to consult with the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside on proposed ASSI declarations, and to make a declaration specifying: (i) the scientific features which make it of special interest, and (ii) potentially damaging activities.

That Article also requires my Department to give notice of this declaration to the relevant district council and to every owner/occupier affected by it. The notice sets out the terms of the declaration and the time within which representations or objections concerning the declaration

may be made, which is not less than three months from the date of the notification.

Such representations or objections must be considered by the Department within a further period of three months and the declaration either confirmed, with or without modifications to the boundaries, or rescinded. Notice of the Department's decision must be issued to the district council and the owners/occupiers.

Deer Park ASSI was declared by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service on 28 March 2002. EHS has identified 39 owners and occupiers of land within the proposed ASSI and they, together with certain other interested parties, have received notification in accordance with the legislation. All parties have been given until 31 July 2002 to make representations or submit objections.

Millmount Whitelands

Mr Ervine asked the Minister of the Environment what has the Department gained by releasing the Millmount Whitelands site at Dundonald for private development. (AQW 3497/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department is currently considering 5 planning applications for development at Millmount, Dundonald.

The principle of development of these lands was established in the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 which identified lands at the edge of the Belfast Urban Area (BUA) as a development reserve to meet anticipated housing growth beyond 1993. These lands are referred to as 'Whitelands'.

17 planning applications for housing development on the Belfast Urban Area whitelands were submitted during the latter half of 1996. These included 4 of the current Millmount applications. These applications were subject to Public Inquiry.

In a press statement issued on 7 September 1998, the then Minister, Lord Dubs, announced that he was minded to grant planning permission to fourteen applications for a total of 3700 houses in line with the recommendations of the PAC following the public inquiry.

This included approval of 1080 houses on the 4 Millmount sites. The Department subsequently wrote to the applicants on 7 September 1998 stating that it was minded to approve, in line with the recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission. Approval of the applications is subject to Article 40 agreements involving each of the landowners. That Article 40 agreement is currently being finalised with solicitors acting for each of the parties.

An application for lands which were not available at the time of the Inquiry, but which constitute the remainder of the Whiteland in the area, has been submitted and the

Department has considered this additional land as part of the overall development.

The site at Millmount has already been considered suitable for housing as part of the Public Inquiry process and the Planning Service has been working with the land owners and developers to ensure that the scheme put before the Inquiry can be implemented.

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) any plans he has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures he has put in place to ensure staff from his Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3514/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) Driver Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland (DVLNI) (an agency within my department) will provide a small exhibition of vehicle photographs and vehicle and driver documents over the last 50 years, which will tour each local office. DVLNI will also be holding one fundraising event to raise funds for nominated charities.
- (b) The NICS has awarded the additional Bank Holiday set for Monday, 3 June to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991: Article 31

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment if Article 31 of the NI Planning Order 1991 was invoked in consideration of an application to develop land known as Shane Park, Stockman's Lane, Belfast, and if not, to explain the reason why. (AQW 3515/01)

Mr Nesbitt: After careful consideration the Department decided not to declare the Shane Park applications as major applications under the provisions of Article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, as the proposals did not meet any of the statutory criteria for such designation as they:

- did not involve a substantial departure from the Development Plan for the area to which they relate. The land is zoned in the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 for Industry and Commerce and is presently disused/underused recreation space;
- would not be of significance to the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland;
- did not affect the whole of a neighbourhood. The proposals do not depart from the Development Plan and the whole neighbourhood would have been considered at Development Plan stage. Environment and Heritage Service were consulted as one of the

statutory bodies and they raised no material issues; and

- did not consist of or include the construction, formation, laying out or alteration of a means of access to a trunk road or of any other development of land within 67 metres of the middle of such a road, or of the nearest part of a special road. It was considered that the road network could accommodate the development albeit with some possible works. The main access to the retail warehousing proposed for the site was onto Boucher Road.

Taxi Drivers: Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to bring legislation in Northern Ireland in line with other parts of the UK in relation to taxi drivers who have been refused their licence due to being diabetic. (AQW 3525/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department of the Environment is responsible for taxi driver licensing in Northern Ireland. Insulin dependent diabetics are refused taxi licences. This is prescribed in Regulation 14(1)(b)(iv) of the Motor Vehicles (Taxi Drivers' Licences) Regulations (NI) 1991.

An applicant suffering from diabetes who controls the illness by diet or tablet will usually be granted a taxi drivers licence but all such cases are referred to the Department's Medical Advisors for an opinion. Any applicant refused a licence has the right of appeal to the courts.

There is no comprehensive legislation in place in Great Britain similar to that operating in Northern Ireland. Local Authorities (LAs) in Great Britain are responsible for taxi licensing and issue licences under the appropriate By-laws. My understanding is that the LAs follow the central guidelines promulgated by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) whose Medical Commission on Accident Prevention recommended that "Taxi, emergency ambulance and emergency police drivers should be required to meet Group 2 standards". In practice this means that an insulin dependent diabetic in GB would be refused a taxi licence.

In 2001, DTLR launched a research programme into individual assessments for Group 2 vehicles and this is anticipated to take the form of a 3-year multi-centre study. I will consider the recommendations from the review when it is published.

Vehicle Registration Plates

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) if he will consider vehicle registration plates having 'NI' printed on the plate as standard; and (b) if he will allow owners to have their own vehicle registration plates printed with 'NI'. (AQW 3535/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Though I am keeping this issue under review, it is outside the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly to make provision for vehicle licensing and registration including the display of vehicle registration marks (i.e. number plates). These are ancillary to the collection of Vehicle Excise Duty which is an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Regulations relating to number plates are made by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 which applies to the whole of the United Kingdom.

Current legislation provides for the optional display in Northern Ireland of the Euro-symbol – a circle of 12 stars with the United Kingdom national identification letters below on a blue background – on the left-hand side of the plate. This permits Northern Ireland motorists, who choose to use the Euro-plate, to dispense with the need for a separate national identification sticker when using their vehicles in other EU countries.

"GB" is the appropriate symbol for the United Kingdom when used for the purpose of international travel by car.

Demolition of Buildings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1986/01, why the Planning Service is unable to provide information on the number of buildings demolished as a result of enforcement action.

(AQW 3544/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Planning Service's database does not hold this specific information. To obtain the details requested would have involved the manual checking of all the Planning enforcement files since 1991. You will be aware that the cost limit for an Assembly Question is £500.

Removal of Sheep Grazing: Mournes

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on his assessment of the ecological impact of the removal of sheep grazing from the inner Mournes. (AQW 3545/01)

Mr Nesbitt: From the beginning of 2000, sheep were excluded from lands, within the Mourne Wall, belonging to Department of Regional Development's Water Service, to prevent contamination of the water supply. This area is within the Eastern Mournes Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and candidate Special Area of Conservation.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service undertook an initial assessment of this measure. It concluded that the exclusion of grazing was unlikely to have a serious adverse impact upon the condition of the habitats in the short term, and should allow some areas

damaged by a combination of erosion and grazing to recover.

During 2004, as part of my Department's monitoring programme for designated sites, the condition of the vegetation within the Eastern Mourne ASSI will again be assessed. This will provide scientific evidence of the impact of the removal of sheep from the inner Mourne and provide a pointer towards sustainable grazing levels.

Fridge/Fridge-Freezer Disposal Facility

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the commencement date for the operation of a fridge and fridge-freezer disposal facility in the United Kingdom capable of removing such substances from the insulating foam, as demanded by EC Regulation 2037/2000. (AQW 3554/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department For Environment, Food & Rural affairs have advised that two mobile units have recently commenced operations in GB, located in Northamptonshire and in the south of England at Lewes, whilst two static facilities located in south Wales and London are likely to come on-line at the end of June.

It is expected that a further 5-10 facilities will be in operation throughout GB by the end of the year.

Estimates of the numbers of waste refrigerators arising in Northern Ireland indicate a falling short of that required to make the establishment of a facility here economically viable, although the critical mass could be obtained on an all-island basis.

It is for this reason that I announced in my statement on 29 April to the Assembly on the 6th meeting of the Environment Sector of the North/South Ministerial Council that my officials are working with the councils to investigate the possibility of a contract for the disposal of waste units on an all-island basis. This would have the advantages of economies of scale and would reduce the financial burden on the local authorities. The timescale for the establishment of such a contract would be of the order of 6 to 9 months.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to extend the deadlines for submissions on the issues paper to allow the outcomes from the outreach programme to inform the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQW 3573/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Planning (Development Plans) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994 allows 14 weeks for the receipt of representations in relation to Development Plans. This period applies to the submission of representations in response to the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan Issues Paper.

I have no plans to extend the time allowed for making representations, but will continue to work closely with the 6 Councils throughout the Plan preparation process. In addition, the report on the consultation process, which has yet to be completed, will be considered in bringing forward policies and proposals for the Draft Plan.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to set up a community outreach and support programme to assist and inform community discussion on the issues involved in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan process. (AQW 3574/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The publication of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) Issues Paper on the 7 December 2001 was intended to provide a focus for consultation with community, voluntary and environmental groups, the trade and industry sector, elected representatives and members of the general public. In order to further assist the debate and facilitate response, the Department appointed, through an open tendering process, Price-waterhouse Coopers, in association with staff from Queens University School of Environment and Planning and the Urban Institute of the University of Ulster, to undertake a comprehensive and wide ranging public and community consultation on the Issues Paper. To ensure widespread community involvement in the consultation process, the Issues Paper was circulated free of charge and, in addition, a pamphlet setting out the consultation arrangements was published. To further inform the public of the consultation process and the issues that needed to be addressed, 10 information meetings were held throughout the plan area. These information meetings aimed to inform the general public of the plan preparation process and explain the format and role of the Issues Paper. All who attended received a free copy of the Issues Paper and were asked to read it prior to attending the main public consultation meetings.

In total, 37 public meetings were held and attendance was monitored. The BMAP team, in conjunction with the appointed consultants, are reviewing attendance with a view to holding additional workshops and focus groups to address parts of the BMAP area which might need additional attention.

To promote equality of opportunity in the consultation process, the consultants have also been asked to hold specific focus groups and workshops for particular groups such as youth, the elderly, ethnic groups, travellers and people with disabilities.

As well as the consultation which has taken place since the Issues Paper was published, members of the BMAP team were involved in extensive discussions and meetings with a wide variety of groups between January

2001 and the date of publication of the Issues Paper on the 7 December 2001.

I believe that the consultation being undertaken in relation to the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan is both wide ranging and comprehensive.

Development of the Metropolitan Area

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to publish a Spatial Options Paper outlining a range of planning scenarios for the development of the metropolitan area to facilitate public debate on future options.

(AQW 3575/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) will be developed within the context of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) for Northern Ireland which sets out a clear structure for the future development of the Metropolitan Area.

During the preparation of the RDS, options for the development of the Metropolitan Area have already been considered. The Department, therefore, considers that a spatial options paper outlining a range of planning scenarios is not required and its introduction would not add meaningfully to the plan preparation process. Rather it would delay the production of the Plan and hence delay the putting in place of up-to-date Plan coverage for the Metropolitan Area. An up-to-date plan is essential to ensure that there is sufficient development land to sustain the growth of the local economy. The Department therefore has no plans to publish a BMAP Options Paper but will of course continue to consult with the six Councils during the preparation of the Plan.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to make it his policy to raise the profile of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan process through a wide-ranging and multi-media approach.

(AQW 3576/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Since the then Minister of the Environment Mr Sam Foster MLA announced in January 2001 that work had commenced on the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) the Department has been promoting public awareness of the Plan preparation process and encouraging everyone to become involved in helping to shape the policies and proposals for the Draft Plan. The January 2001 launch was reported widely by the local regional and national media and the then Minister and BMAP team manager took part in live radio interviews. In addition, Press Notices inviting the public to submit their views were placed during 2 consecutive weeks in 12 local and regional newspapers.

Following the launch of the Plan a pamphlet setting out the background to BMAP and listing some of the

issues which needed to be addressed was published and widely circulated. In addition, a dedicated BMAP website was established and this has proved an effective means of communication. In December 2001 alone this website was accessed by more than 3,700 people.

The launch of the BMAP Issues Paper on the 7 December 2001 also received widespread media coverage and was accompanied by media briefings including television and radio interviews. A conference on BMAP entitled "Successful Metropolitan Areas", which was held on the 1 February 2001, was attended by almost 200 people and again received widespread media coverage. The publication of the BMAP Issues Paper provided a focus for public consultation which involved 37 public meetings throughout the plan area. In association with these public meetings a second pamphlet was produced and widely circulated. Press Notices were also placed over a 3 week period inviting the public to both attend the consultation meetings and submit their views. To-date more than 3,000 written submissions have been received.

Members of the BMAP team have also spoken at 3 major conferences, all of which were widely reported in the media.

As I hope the above demonstrates the Department is already promoting, and will continue to promote public awareness of the plan preparation process. I will continue to take every available opportunity to do so.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to publish the Consultant's report on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan consultation process as soon as it is available.

(AQW 3582/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The report on the consultation process has not yet been completed. When the report is completed by the Consortium of Consultants commissioned to undertake the consultation process.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Fire Safety: Government Buildings

Mr B Bell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) if all government buildings meet required fire safety standards as laid down in Building Regulations (NI) Fire Safety 1994 and (b) the procedures his department has in place in order to ensure that all fire certificates issued on government buildings meet prescribed standards.

(AQW 3324/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The building standards, including those relating to fire

safety, which apply to Government buildings are those which were extant at the time of construction, alteration, extension or change of use. The Building Regulations (NI) 1994 therefore only apply, in the manner prescribed in Regulation A4, Transitional Provisions, to those premises which were constructed, altered, extended or changed in use after the date on which the regulations came into operation. In 1995 a decision was made to bring all Government owned or occupied buildings, that are designated buildings, under the Fire Services Order (NI) 1984, up to modern fire certificate standard. Details of these standards are set out in the relevant Home Office publications on fire precautions in places of work, hotels and boarding houses. Some 264 premises fall into this category, of which 249 have been brought up to the certification standard and arrangements are in hand to bring the remaining premises up to the standard. Occupying Departments are responsible for ensuring that designated buildings and any change of use, occupation, structural alteration or extension of a certificated building are properly identified. This arrangement is complemented by a rolling programme of inspections, at all Government buildings, by officials from both the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Health and Safety Executive, which is the Crown certifying authority.

Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have been employed in the Department's Courier Service in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3431/01)

Dr Farren: As the Courier Service and Car Pool, for the purposes of the personnel record, are held as one branch, Centralised Transport, the information is not held in the format requested. I can, however, provide the information for Centralised Transport which I have detailed below.

The total number of staff employed in Centralised Transport during each of the last 5 years is as follows:

Year	Number of Staff
1997	11
1998	17
1999	13
2000	14
2001	22

Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the average length of training given to a new member in his Department's Courier Service.

(AQW 3432/01)

Dr Farren: After basic first day induction the Courier Service provides further on the job training to new recruits. It is estimated that new recruits would be sufficiently proficient in the work of the Courier Service within two months. However, this is largely dependent on the individual and their detailed knowledge of Belfast and Stormont Estate.

Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have left or been transferred from his Department's Courier Service in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3433/01)

Dr Farren: As the Courier Service and Car Pool, for the purposes of the personnel record, are held as one branch, Centralised Transport, the information is not held in the format requested. I can, however, provide the information for Centralised Transport which I have detailed below.

The total number of staff who have left or been transferred from Centralised Transport during each of the last 5 years is as follows:

Year	Number of Staff
1997	2
1998	6
1999	1
2000	2
2001	3

Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many vacancies have occurred in his Department's Courier Service in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3434/01)

Dr Farren: As the Courier Service and Car Pool, for the purposes of the personnel record, are held as one branch, Centralised Transport, the information is not held in the format requested. I can, however, provide the information for Centralised Transport which I have detailed below.

The following table lists the number of vacancies within the Centralised Transport during each of the last 5 years and this therefore corresponds with the number of vacancies.

Year	Number of Staff
1997	0
1998	8
1999	2
2000	2
2001	10

Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many jobs have been publicly advertised in his Department's Courier Service in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3435/01)

Dr Farren: As the Courier Service and Car Pool, for the purposes of the personnel record, are held as one branch, Centralised Transport, the information is not held in the format requested. I can, however, provide the information for Centralised Transport.

Vacancies for Messenger/Driver (Support Grade 1) in the Northern Ireland Civil Service are normally filled by redeployment of surplus staff, lateral transfer for career development purposes or by internal promotion. Should the Department of Finance and Personnel be unable to fill vacancies through internal procedures external recruitment is considered.

The Department publicly advertised for Messenger/Drivers for Centralised Transport in October 2001. However, the advertisement was not specifically for the Courier Service.

Disabled Civil Servants

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 2961/01, to detail the number of civil servants who are listed as disabled. (AQW 3436/01)

Dr Farren: Monitoring of NICS staff indicates that at January 2001, 5.4% of those who provided details about their personal circumstances, declared themselves as having a disability as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

This information, and that relating to previous years, is contained in the regular reports of the NICS Equal Opportunities Unit, the most recent of which, the Seventh Report, was published in April 2000 with supplements in November 2000 and June 2001. Copies of the report are available in the Assembly Library and on the internet at <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/>.

INTERREG III

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the source of the €44.8m of National and Regional co-financing within the Community Initiative Interreg III (IP/02/602). (AQW 3437/01)

Dr Farren: The €44.8m National and Regional co-financing is the matching funding from Ireland and Northern Ireland towards the INTERREG IIIA Community Initiative. The total value of the INTERREG IIIA

Programme (Ireland and Northern Ireland) is almost €180m for the period up to 2006. The EC Regulations designate Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland as an area in transition from Objective 1 status and as such receives a 75% EU contribution towards the Programme. The EU contribution is €53.6m for Ireland and €80.8m (£52m) for Northern Ireland with matching funding (25%) being €17.9m for Ireland and €26.9m (£17.4m) for Northern Ireland. Both matched funding elements total €44.8m.

The Executive agreed in February 2000 that the Northern Ireland contribution will, in the first instance come from Departmental baselines.

Peace II Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) the timescale for Peace II funding; (b) the current position of the Ards Local Strategy Partnership's bid; and (c) the funding allocated for the Ards Borough Council area through Peace II. (AQW 3464/01)

Dr Farren:

- (a) The PEACE II Programme runs from 2000-2004. All monies must be committed by 31 December 2004 but project expenditure can be incurred up to 31 December 2006. The Special EU Programmes Body have set a final closure date of 30 June 2006 to allow 6 months before the final Commission closure date of 31 December 2006. The PEACE II Programme consists of over 50 Measures, the majority of which are now open.
- (b) Ards Local Strategy Document has been approved and the launch of their element of the Programme is a matter for the Local Strategy Partnership. The SEUPB have informed me that they have now reached agreement in principle with Ards LSP on the terms of its contract and that a formal Letter of Offer will be issued before 31 May 2002.
- (c) The agreement that has been reached in principle with Ards Local Strategy Partnership offers funding as follows:
 - £926,000 under Measure 3.1 – Local Economic Initiatives for Developing the Social Economy (NI) (ERDF);
 - £852,000 under Measure 3.2 – Locally-based Human Resources Training and Developing Strategies (NI) ESF; and
 - £300,000 under Technical Assistance to cover administration costs of the Local Strategy Partnership.

Potential projects from the Ards area can of course apply to any Measure of the Programme.

Marriage

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he has taken to strengthen the institution of marriage since devolution. (AQW 3465/01)

Dr Farren: The most pertinent reform in this regard is the forthcoming Marriage Bill. Whilst maintaining the solemnity of the marriage ceremony, this Bill aims to afford couples a greater freedom of choice in relation to the venue in which they may get married. Evidence from other jurisdictions which have adopted similar reforms has shown an increase in the number of people subsequently choosing to get married. If the Bill is passed, those who do not choose or are unable to undergo a religious ceremony may marry in a location other than a Registry Office, and will have to undertake a less onerous system for notification. The system of notification and registration of those who may officiate at a marriage will be equalised for smaller churches and faith communities. Consultation on the matter has indicated that such changes are welcomed within both religious and secular circles in Northern Ireland.

Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people who have obtained jobs within his Department's Courier Service who were previously employed by the NI Civil Service in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3480/01)

Dr Farren: As the Courier Service and Car Pool, for the purposes of the personnel record, are held as one branch, Centralised Transport, the information is not held in the format requested. I can, however, provide the information for Centralised Transport.

24 staff have been employed in Centralised Transport over the last 5 years. All were previously employed within the NICS and appointed through redeployment of surplus staff, lateral transfer or by internal promotion.

Spending Review

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the Spending Review. (AQO 1368/01)

Dr Farren: The outcome of the national Spending Review is expected to be announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July. As regards the local process, I outlined the timetable to which we are working in my Statement to the Assembly on 4 March. Work on the first significant stage of this - the Executive's Position Report - is ongoing, with publication due in early June.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the short term funding arising from the Reform and Re-investment package will be used. (AQO 1369/01)

Dr Farren: We will be working with Departments over the coming weeks to identify suitable infrastructure projects for funding from the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative. We are planning to allocate the £125m short term borrowing from Treasury alongside the £70m that is available from our own Executive Programme Infrastructure Fund to address some immediate investment needs in accordance with our Programme for Government priorities.

Review of the Rating System

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the review of the rating system will include an examination of exemptions under specific circumstances. (AQO 1365/01)

Dr Farren: The Review of Rating Policy will consider the continuing appropriateness of reliefs and exemptions currently available. These are too numerous to mention here in detail but they range from relief for people with disabilities, through public and charitable uses, amateur sport and recreation, community halls to industrial derating. Revenue forgone on these reliefs is equivalent to about 20% of the revenue raised. Furthermore agricultural property is not rated nor valued, though this is not an option being considered.

It will examine the need for additional reliefs and exemptions. This may include consideration of issues such as the single adult discount, relief for pensioners as a group, hardship relief for the Non-Domestic sector, small business relief and relief both for disadvantaged areas and declining town centres.

Rates: Vacant Properties

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the value of rates lost as a result of vacant property in the (a) commercial sector and (b) residential sector in the last financial year. (AQO 1394/01)

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 payment of rates. Rates on vacant unoccupied properties are classed as rates foregone.

Agency records show that in the financial year ended 31 March 2002 the potential rate revenue which could have been raised from:

- (a) vacant commercial property throughout Northern Ireland was £35,841,708.15; and
- (b) vacant residential property throughout Northern Ireland was £12,296,337.59.

The Rate Collection Agency has a continuous programme of vacancy inspection to ensure that property that becomes occupied is identified and that a rate bill is issued.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Trusts: Purchase of Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Trusts purchased services outside their region in the last 12 months. (AQW 2287/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Responsibility for purchasing services rests with Health and Social Services Boards rather than the Trusts. All four Boards have purchased treatment for their residents outside the region over the last twelve months. Such cases may arise in the normal course of diagnosis and treatment protocols, where residents are referred for a specialist opinion or service not available locally, or where they have required emergency hospital admission when on a visit outside the region. In addition, patients may be referred to other centres as part of a waiting list initiative, to ensure that they are treated earlier than would otherwise be possible.

Based on past experience, approximately 1,300 patients would have been treated outside the region in the past year. Most of these would be subject to referral for specialist advice or emergency admission. As part of the special 2001-02 waiting list initiative, however, treatment was also arranged for 268 patients to undergo cardiac surgery.

Luíonn an fhreagracht do sheirbhísí ceannachta leis na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta seachas leis na hIontaobhais. Tá cóireáil ceannaithe ag gach ceann de na ceithre Bhord do chónaitheigh lasmuigh den réigiún thar na dá mhí déag seo caite. D'fhéadfadh cásanna den sórt sin tarlú i ngnáthchúrsa na fáthmheasa agus na bprótacal cóireála, áit a gcuirtear cónaitheigh ar aghaidh do thuairim speisialtóra nó do sheirbhís nach mbíonn ar fáil go háitiúil, nó áit is gá iad a ligean isteach san ospidéal ar bhonn éigeandála agus iad ar cuairt lasmuigh den réigiún. Chomh maith leis sin, is féidir othair a chur ar aghaidh chuig lárionaid eile mar chuid de thionscnamh liosta feithimh, lena chinntiú go ndéantar cóireáil orthu níos túisce ná a d'fhéadfaí sin a dhéanamh seachas sin.

Bunaithe ar an taithí ón am a caitheadh, bheadh cóireáil déanta ar isteach agus amach le 1,300 othar lasmuigh den réigiún sa bhliain seo caite. Bheadh an chuid is mó de sin faoi réir chur ar aghaidh do chomhairle speisialtóra nó do ligean isteach in ospidéal ar bhonn éigeandála. Mar chuid de thionscnamh speisialta liosta feithimh 2001-02, áfach, socraíodh cóireáil freisin do 268 othar le dul faoi mháinliacht chairdiach.

Diabetic Outpatient Clinics

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding was allocated to diabetic out-patient clinics by each Health Board in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2574/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Primary Care: Number of Nurses

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses employed in Primary Care in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2871/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently there are 680 (403.7 whole time equivalent) Treatment and Practice Room Nurses employed in Primary Care here. At December 2001 there were a total of 531 Health Visitors (447.61 whole time equivalent) and 342 District Nurses (318.37 whole time equivalent).

Tá 680 (403.7 coibhéis lánaimseartha) Altra Seomra Cóireála agus Cleachtaidh fostaithe le haghaidh Príomhchúraim anseo. Ag Mí na Nollag 2001 bhí 531 Cuairteoir Sláinte (447.61 coibhéis lánaimseartha) agus 342 Altra Dúiche (318.37 coibhéis lánaimseartha) in iomlán.

Infertility Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of couples, with children living with them who are being denied infertility treatment as a result of the new interim arrangements on fertility. (AQW 3060/01)

Ms de Brún: As of 13 May 2002, a total of 53 couples had failed to qualify for sub-fertility treatment because they have children living with them.

Ó 13 Bealtaine 2002, theip ar 53 lánúin ina n-iarratas le cóireáil fhothorthúlachta a fháil mar go raibh páistí ina gcónaí leo.

Fire Certificates

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to state the number of fire certificates issued by the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland in the six-month period 1 October 2001 to 31 March 2002.

(AQW 3065/01)

Ms de Brún: Over the six month period 1st October 2001 to 31st March 2002 the Fire Authority issued 17 Fire Certificates.

Thar an tréimhse sé mhí ó 1 Deireadh Fómhair go dtí 31 Márta 2002 d'eisigh an tÚdarás Dóiteáin 17 Teastas Dóiteáin.

Prescription Charges

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if any assessment has been made of the criteria which determines the diseases that are exempt from prescription charges; and (b) if any changes will be made to reflect the clinical needs of chronically ill patients.

(AQW 3232/01)

Ms de Brún: The list of medical conditions conferring exemption from prescription charges was introduced in 1968 after being agreed in discussion with the medical profession. These conditions are readily identifiable, permanent, life long conditions that require regular or extensive medication. The list has been reviewed on a number of occasions, most recently in 1998 by the Department of Health in England, but no clear-cut case for extending it has emerged.

I have no current plans to extend the list of medical conditions that confer exemption from prescription charges, to include any other medical condition. In 1968 only 42% of all prescription items were dispensed free of charge, whereas it is now some 90% here.

Tugadh liosta riochtaí míochaine isteach i 1968 a fuair díolúine ó mhuirir oidis i ndiaidh dóibh bheith comhaontaithe i bplé le gairm na míochaine. Is riochtaí inaimsithe go maith, buan, a mhaireann ar feadh an tsaoil iad a dteastaíonn leigheas rialta nó suntasach uathu. Athbhreithníodh an liosta ar roinnt ócáidí agus ba í an ócáid is déanaí in 1998 nuair a d'athbhreithnigh an Roinn Sláinte i Sasana é ach níor éirigh cás follasach as lena mhéadú.

Níl pleananna láithreacha agam an liosta riochtaí míochaine a mhéadú chun riocht eile míochaine a chur san áireamh a fhaigheann díolúine ó mhuirir oidis. Níor tugadh amach i 1968 ach 42% de gach mír oidis saor in aisce i gcomparáid le 90% éigin sa lá atá inniu ann anseo.

Anti-Tumour Necrosis Factor Drugs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to make anti-TNF drugs for arthritis available through the health service.

(AQW 3236/01)

Ms de Brún: Remicade has been made available here since November 1999, for a number of patients with this illness who have failed to respond to existing drug therapies.

The approach adopted here to the prescribing of these specialist drugs for the treatment of adults with severe rheumatoid arthritis and children with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, is broadly in line with the recent recommendations made by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE). While NICE endorsed the use of these drugs within clearly defined guidelines, it has identified the need for further assessment to determine their long-term clinical effectiveness.

A recent report by rheumatologists here has also concluded that while these drugs represent a major advancement in the treatment of this illness, it is essential that their use should continue to be strictly controlled and monitored, particularly in light of possible serious side effects. My Department is continuing to work with Boards and clinicians to promote a cautious approach to their introduction, within the resources available.

Cuireadh Remicade ar fáil ó Shamhain 1999 do roinnt othar a raibh an tinneas seo orthu nár éirigh leis na teiripithe drugaí dul i bhfeidhm orthu.

Cloíonn an cur chuige a tugadh isteach anseo maidir le tabhairt amach na saindrugaí seo ar mhaithe le cóir leighis a chur ar aosaigh a bhfuil géarairtríteas réamatóideach orthu agus páistí a bhfuil airtríteas ideapaiteach aosánach orthu a bheag nó a mhór le moltaí a rinne an Foras Náisiúnta d'Ardchaighdeán Feabhais Cliniciúil le gairid (FNAFC). Cé gur cheadaigh FNAFC úsáid na ndrugáí seo laistigh de threoirilnte soiléire, d'aimsigh sé an gá le haghaidh measúnaithe bhreise lena n-éifeacht fhadtéarmach chliniciúil a mheas.

Is é a toradh a bhí ar thuairisc le gairid a rinne réamaitheolaithe anseo ná cé gur dul chun cinn suntasach ar choireáil an tinnis seo na drugaí sin is éigeantach gur chóir go fóill a n-úsáid a shrianú agus a mhonatóireacht go righin, go háirithe agus an fhéidearthacht ann go mbeidh géar-sheachthorthaí ann. Tá an Roinn s'agam ag leanúint le hobair leis na Boird agus le cliniceoirí chun cur chuige faichilleach a chothú i dtaobh a dtabhairt isteach, ag obair laistigh de na hacmhainní ar fáil.

Strategy for Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the

progress of the September 2000 strategy to reduce alcohol related harm. (AQW 3242/01)

Ms de Brún: Since its launch in September 2000, my Department has worked to establish appropriate implementation structures to ensure coherent and consistent delivery of the aims of the Strategy for Reducing Alcohol Related Harm.

In April 2001, a paper entitled 'Model for the Joint Implementation of the Drug and Alcohol Strategies' was presented to the then Ministerial Group on Drugs for consideration. The Ministerial Group approved the model, and on 17 May it received endorsement from the Executive. The structures include all key interests including local communities and allows for a concerted approach.

The joint implementation of both strategies is now underway and the new model includes the formation of six working groups to cover the following areas: Treatment, Education & Prevention, Communities, Information & Research, Social Legislation and Criminal Justice. The six Working Groups have developed Regional Action Plans based on the key output areas detailed in the Joint Implementation Model. These key outputs are based on the targets contained in the Drug and Alcohol Strategies. There are over 115 activities in the Regional Action Plans and all are time-bound. The Regional Action Plans have been finalised and Working Groups are due to meet in May to begin the task of taking the activities forward.

The four local Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams have also developed Local Action Plans based on the Regional Activities. The Local Action Plans are presently being considered and will be finalised by the end of May.

All Action Plans will be published and available by early summer.

Óna lainseáil i Meán Fómhair 2000, d'oibrigh mo Roinn le struchtúir chuí fheidhmithe a chur i bhfeidhm a chinnteoidh go gcomhlíonfar aidhmeanna na Straitéise um Laghdú sa Dochar Bainteach le hAlcól go céillí agus go rialta.

In Aibreán 2001, cuireadh páipéar dar theideal 'Creatlach le hAghaidh Chomhchur i bhFeidhm na Straitéisí Drugaí agus Alcóil' faoi bhráid an iar-Ghrúpa Aireachta um Dhrugaí le haghaidh machnaimh. D'fhorbair an Grúpa Aireachta an chreatlach, agus ar 17 Bealtaine ghlac an Feidhmiúchán léi. Cuimsíonn na struchtúir na heochairpháirtithe leasmhara go léir chomh maith leis na pobail áitiúla agus cuireann siad cur chuige comhbheartaithe san áireamh.

Tá comhchur i bhfeidhm an dá straitéis faoi lánseol anois agus sa chreatlach tá bunú sé ghrúpa oibre le déileáil leis na réimsí seo a leanas: Cóireáil, Oideachas & Cosc, Pobail, Eolas & Taighde, Reachtaíocht Shóisialta agus Dlí Coiriúil. D'fhorbair na sé Ghrúpa Oibre Pleananna Réigiúnacha Gnímh bunaithe ar na réimsí príomhaschur

léirithe go mion sa Chreatlach Chomhfheidhmithe. Tá na príomhaschur seo bunaithe ar na spriocanna sna Straitéisí Drugaí agus Alcóil. Tá breis agus 115 gníomhaíocht sna Pleananna Réigiúnacha Gnímh agus tá teorainn ama orthu. Cuireadh an dlaoi mhullaigh ar na Pleananna Réigiúnacha Gnímh agus tá na Grúpaí Oibre le bualadh le chéile i mí na Bealtaine chun tús a chur le forbairt na ngníomhaíochtaí seo.

D'fhorbair na ceithre Fhoireann áitiúla Comhordaithe Drugaí agus Alcóil Pleananna Áitiúla Gnímh fosta bunaithe ar na Gníomhaíochtaí Réigiúnacha. Tá machnamh á dhéanamh ar na Pleananna Áitiúla Gnímh faoi láthair agus cuirfear an dlaoi mhullaigh orthu faoi dheireadh mhí na Bealtaine.

Foilseofar na Pleananna Gnímh go léir agus beidh siad ar fáil go luath sa samhradh.

Low Birth Weight

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what statistics her department hold on the causes of low birth weight. (AQW 3243/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not hold any statistics on the causes of low birth weight.

Níl staitisticí ag an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí ar na cúiseanna atá le meáchan íseal breithe.

Smoking During Pregnancy

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she has taken to reduce the number of women who smoke during pregnancy. (AQW 3244/01)

Ms de Brún: All pregnant women receive advice from health care professionals, including, where appropriate, advice on the effects of smoking in pregnancy. In addition, all first time expectant mothers are given a copy of "The Pregnancy Book", which is produced in collaboration with the Health Promotion Agency and distributed by Health Boards. The Book contains a wealth of information about pregnancy, including advice on the benefits of giving up smoking.

I established an inter-sectoral Working Group on Tobacco 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 in the summer.

Tugann gairmithe cúraim shláinte comhairle do gach uile bean ag iompar clainne, agus más ceart í, comhairle ar sheachthorthaí chaitheamh tobac i rith iompar clainne

fosta. Ina theannta sin, tugtar cóip den leabhar “The Pregnancy Book”, curtha amach i gcomhar leis an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte agus scaipthe ag Boird Shláinte, do mhná atá ag dúil lena gcéad pháiste. Sa leabhar tá cuid mhór eolais ar thoircheas, agus tugann sé comhairle ar na tairbhí bainteach le héirí as tobac chomh maith.

Bhunaigh mé Grúpa idir-rannógach Oibre ar Thobac i Márta an bhliain seo a chuaigh thart le cur i bhfeidhm Plean Chuimsithigh Ghnímh le tabhairt faoi chaitheamh tobac a fhorbairt agus a stiúradh. Tá an dlaoi mhullaigh á cur ar an Phlean, a aithneoidh mná ag iompar clainne mar phríomhspríocdhream, agus cuirfear amach le haghaidh comhairlithe sa samhradh é.

Foetal Abnormality Syndrome

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can she make of the research conducted world-wide into foetal abnormality syndrome and its connection with the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy. (AQW 3246/01)

Ms de Brún: Foetal alcohol syndrome is a very serious disorder that can result in growth retardation, multiple physical abnormalities and severe learning disability. Research indicates that although maternal age and health as well as specific foetal susceptibility may contribute to the outcome for an infant whose mother drinks alcohol while pregnant, the potential harm to the foetus is much stronger with large amounts of maternal alcohol consumption than with smaller amounts. Pregnant women and those planning to become pregnant are advised to stop drinking or to limit alcohol consumption to one unit or two units of alcohol once or twice a week.

Is neamhord iontach tromchúiseach é siondróm alcól an fhéatais ar féidir le moilliú i bhfás, le hilmhínormáltachtaí fisiciúla agus le míchumas géar foghlama teacht as. Léiríonn taighde cé gur féidir le haois agus le sláinte na máthar chomh maith le claonadh ar leith chun galar an fhéatais bheith ina bhfachtóirí sa todhchaí maidir le saol an naíonáin a n-ólann a m(h)áthair alcól agus í ag iompar clainne, tá an dochar ionchasach don fhéatas níos láidire má ólann an mháthair méid mór alcóil ná méid beag. Moltar do mhná ag iompar clainne nó ag iarraidh le bheith ag iompar clainne gan a bheith ag ól alcóil, nó an méid alcóil a ólann siad a theorannú go haonad amháin nó go dhá aonad d’alcól uair amháin nó dhá uair sa tseachtain.

Drug Treatment Programmes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to encourage drug users to participate in drug treatment programmes. (AQW 3248/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is currently funding 23 projects that are either health or community orientated. This includes a Needle and Syringe Exchange Scheme, which has the potential to bring drug users into contact with health professionals who are available to offer a range of advice as well as distributing clean materials. A 10-bed in-patient unit in Ballymena is also being funded and additional resources are being used to establish counselling services for young people in partnership with the Community Addiction Teams and specialist counselling agencies from the voluntary and community sector. Other projects funded aim to divert young people at risk of drug misuse into healthier pursuits and reintegrate recovering addicts into training and employment.

Cross-departmental and multi-sectoral working groups have recently developed a Regional Action Plan. The plan has a number of targets relating to treatment that will help to improve current services. Four local Action Plans, specific to Health Board areas have also been developed and will help to ensure that the targets contained in the Regional Action Plan are actioned locally.

Tá an Roinn s’agam faoi láthair ag maoiniú 23 tionscadal bunaithe ar an tsláinte nó ar an phobal. Tá Scéim Mhalartaithe Snathaide agus Steallaire, trínar féidir úsáideoirí drugaí a chur i dteagmháil le gairmithe sláinte atá ar fáil le réimse comhairle a thabhairt chomh maith le hábhair ghlana a scaipeadh. Tá aonad 10 leaba othar cónaitheach á mhaoiniú ar an Bhaile Meánach agus tá acmhainní breise á n-úsáid chun seirbhísí comhairliúcháin d’ógánaigh a bhunú i bpáirtíocht le Foirne Pobail Andúile agus sainghníomhaireachtaí comhairliúcháin ón earnáil dheonach agus pobail. Is é an aidhm atá leis na tionscadail eile ógánaigh i mbaol mí-úsáid drugaí a threorú i dtreo caitheamh aimsire níos sláintiúla agus andúiligh a bhfuil biseach orthu a mhealladh isteach sa traenáil agus san fhostaíocht arís.

D’fhorbair grúpaí oibre tras-roinne agus ilearnálacha Plean Gníomhaíochta Réigiúnach le gairid. Tá roinnt spriocanna ag an phlean a bhaineann le cóireáil a chuideodh le seirbhísí láithreacha a fheabhsú. Forbraíodh ceithre Phlean Gníomhaíochta áitiúla, a bhaineann le ceantair na mBord Sláinte áirithe agus a chuideodh le cinntiú go bhfuil na spriocanna sa Phlean Gníomhaíochta Réigiúnach curtha i ngníomh ar bhonn áitiúil.

Scoliosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why are children needing urgent surgery to rectify Scoliosis being sent to Glasgow for their treatment. (AQW 3253/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 3286/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3286/01.

HIV Infection

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people diagnosed with HIV in each of the last 3 years (b) the number of people who contracted the disease through (i) heterosexual activity (ii) homosexual activity and (iii) blood transfusion. (AQW 3258/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

FIRST DIAGNOSES OF HIV INFECTION

Route of infection	1999	2000	2001
Sex between men	6	6	11
Sex between men and women	7	9	7
Blood factor/blood or tissue transfer	0	0	0
Other	1	4	0
Total	14	19	18

Tá an t-eolas seo mionléirithe sa tábla thíos.

CÉADFHÁTHMHEAS AN GHALRAITHE HIV

Bunús an Ghalraithe	1999	2000	2001
Comhriachtain idir fir	6	6	11
Comhriachtain idir fir agus mná	7	9	7
Fachtóir fola/fuilaistriú nó aistriú fíocháin	0	0	0
Eile	1	4	0
Iomlán	14	19	18

Scoliosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why are two surgeons from Northern Ireland travelling to Scotland to operate on children with Scoliosis. (AQW 3286/01)

Ms de Brún: Scoliosis is a spinal deformity that may require very complex surgery undertaken by an expert in spinal surgery. The clinical condition of a number of children suffering from scoliosis was such that the opportunity for appropriate treatment was diminishing and the capacity to treat the number of children involved within a relatively short timescale was not available here.

While the unit in Scotland was able to provide facilities for scoliosis surgery, they were not able to provide the specialist surgical input. This necessitated the active participation of two local surgeons.

Is míchuma dromlaigh é Scolóis ina bhféadfadh go mbeadh ar shaineolaí tabhairt faoi mháinliacht chasta i máinliacht dromlaigh. Bhí an bhail chliniciúil a bhí ag dul do roinnt leanaí a raibh scolóis orthu sa chaoi is go raibh an deis a bhí ann cóireáil oiriúnach a fháil ag laghdú agus ní raibh sé ar ár gcumas anseo cóireáil a thabhairt don líon leanaí a bhí i gceist laistigh den amscála a bhí réasúnta gearr.

Fad is a bhí an t-aonad in Albain ábalta saoráidí a sholáthar do mháinliacht scolóise ní raibh siad ábalta ionchur máinliachta speisialtóireachta a chur ar fáil. Dá bharr sin bhí sé riachtanach go mbeadh beirt mháinlia áitiúla páirteach go gníomhach ann.

Smoking During Pregnancy: Effects

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proposals she has to increase awareness of the long-term effects of smoking during pregnancy. (AQW 3309/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 3244/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3244/01.

Ulster Hospital Refurbishment: Timescale

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the timescale for the new building refurbishment of the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 3310/01)

Ms de Brún: The Strategic Development Plan for the Ulster Hospital is in four Phases. Phase 1, addressing deficiencies in critical medical equipment was implemented in early 2001.

Phase 2, comprising nine projects addressing critical problems of capacity and continuity, started in mid-year 2001. Each of the projects will follow a different timescale and it is anticipated that all will be completed by September 2006.

Phases 3 and 4 will be kept under review in the light of the report of the Acute Hospitals Review Group and, following a period of public consultation, the Executive's decisions on the long-term future of acute hospital services. The projected construction periods are three years for Phase 3 and four years for Phase 4.

Tá ceithre Chéim le Plean Forbartha Straitéiseach Otharlann Uladh. Céim 1, ag tabhairt faoi easnaimh géarthrealamh míochaine rud a cuireadh i bhfeidhm go luath i 2001.

Céim 2, ina raibh naoi dtionscadal ag tabhairt faoi ghéarfhadhbanna acmhainne agus leanúnachais, ar cuireadh tús leo i lár na bliana 2001. Beidh clár ama difriúil ag gach tionscadal agus táthar ag súil go mbeidh gach ní críochnaithe faoi Mheán Fómhair 2006.

Céimeanna 3 agus 4, beidh siad coinnithe faoi athbhreithniú mar gheall ar thuairisc an Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe ar Ghéarohtarlanna agus, i ndiaidh tréimhse comhairlithe phoiblí, ag brath ar chinní an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin ar thodhchaí fadtéarmach seirbhísí

géarotharlann. Is é trí bliana an tréimhse tógála tuartha do Chéim 3 agus ceithre bliana do Chéim 4.

Hospital Appointments: Waiting Times and Waiting Lists

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the average waiting time in days for a hospital appointment, and (b) the number of people on a waiting list, per 100,000 of the population. (AQW 3328/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) Information on waiting lists and waiting times is collected on the basis of time bands. It is not possible to derive an average from this information.
- (b) In December 2001, there were 57,704 people waiting for inpatient admission to local hospitals, which equates to 3,398.8 per 100,000 of the population. At the same time, there were 131,166 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment at local hospitals, which equates to 7,725.8 per 100,000 of the population.
- (a) Bailítear eolas ar liostaí feithimh agus ar amanna feithimh de réir bandaí ama. Ní féidir an meán a áireamh ón eolas seo.
- (b) I Nollaig 2001, bhí 57,704 duine ag fanacht le dul isteach in otharlanna áitiúla mar othair chónaitheacha, is ionann sin agus 3,398.8 duine an 100,000 duine den daonra. Ag an am chéanna, bhí 131,166 duine ag fanacht ar a gcéad choinne éisothair in otharlanna áitiúla, is ionann sin agus 7,725.8 duine an 100,000 duine den daonra.

Medical Professionals

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) consultants (b) GPs and (c) nurses, per 100,000 people in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3329/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is given in the table below:

CONSULTANTS, GP'S AND NURSES PER 100,000 POPULATION
– DECEMBER 2001

	Headcount	WTE	WTE per 100,000 population ¹
Consultants	960	902.3	53.4
GP's	1068	992.5	58.7
Nurses ²	13645	11590.8	686.1

¹ Population is taken at June 2000

² Qualified Nurses, midwives and health visitors.

Tugtar an t-eolas sa tábla thíos:

LIANNA COMHAIRLEACHA, GDANNA AGUS ALTRAÍ AN
100,000 DUINE DEN DAONRA – NOLLAIG 2001

	Líon	CLA	CLAn100,000 duine den daonra ¹
Lianna Comhairleacha	960	902.3	53.4
GDanna	1068	992.5	58.7
Altraí ²	13645	11590.8	686.1

¹ An daonra ar Mheitheamh 2000.

² Altraí, mná cabhrach agus cuairteoirí sláinte cáilithe.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the research undertaken on the causes of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). (AQW 3344/01)

Ms de Brún: Neither the Research and Development Office nor the Department have funded any research into Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.

Níor thug an Oifig Taighde agus Forbartha ná an Roinn maoiniú ar aon thaighde i leith Mí-ord Easnamh Airde Hipirghníomhaíochta.

Sure Start Programme

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of current Sure Start Programmes; and (b) the number of additional Programmes which are at the planning stage. (AQW 3345/01)

Ms de Brún: There are currently 23 Sure Start programmes operating here. In July 2000, 15 Sure Start projects were approved for funding. However, as there were still some highly disadvantaged areas with no Sure Start projects, I made an additional £1.8 million available for April 2001 to allow the creation of a number of new projects. I asked the Childcare Partnerships to identify areas where they wished to see additional Sure Start projects and support applicants in those areas to submit suitable proposals. A further 8 projects were subsequently approved for funding.

The introduction of the second round of projects completed the allocation of all of the funding available for the Sure Start programme.

Faoi láthair tá 23 clár Sure Start ag obair anseo. In Iúil 2000, ceadaíodh maoiniú do 15 tionscadal Sure Start agus chuir mise £1.8 milliún breise ar fáil d'Aibreán 2001 le go mbeifí ábalta roinnt tionscadal nua a chruthú. D'iarr mé ar Chompháirtíochtaí Cúraim Leanai réimsí a aithint inár mhaith leo breis tionscadal Sure Start a fheiceáil iontu agus tacaíocht a thabhairt

d'iarratasóirí sna réimsí sin chun moltaí oiriúnacha a chur ar aghaidh. Ceadaiódh maoiniú do 8 tionscadal eile ina dhiaidh sin.

Cuireadh críoch leis an leithdháileadh ar an maoiniú ar fad a bhí ar fáil don chlár Sure Start leis an dara babhta tionscadail.

Alcohol-Related Injuries

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the progress of the September 2000 Strategy to reduce alcohol-related injuries. (AQW 3346/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 3242/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3242/01.

Bed Blocking

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of beds that are bed-blocked within the Health Service. (AQW 3357/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Speech and Language Therapy Services: Waiting List

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is she taking to address the waiting list for speech and language therapy services in the Bangor area. (AQW 3366/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department's Priorities for Action 2002/03 requires Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts to develop the range of therapy provision to reduce waiting times for children and adult services. Some of the additional funding allocated to Boards to develop community services in 2002/03 will be available for this purpose.

In addition, a current review of the health and social services workforce is being undertaken by my Department, which will identify training, recruitment and retention issues to be addressed within the various therapeutic professions.

Éilíonn Tosaíochtaí do Ghníomh 2002/03 mo Roinnse go bhforbródh Iontaobhais agus Boird Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sláinte réimse soláthar teiripí do sheirbhísí daoine fásta agus leanaí. Beidh roinnt den mhaoiniú breise a leithdháileadh do Bhoird chun seirbhísí pobail a fhorbairt i 2002/03 ar fáil dó seo.

Chomh maith leis sin, tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh faoi láthair ag mo Roinnse ar an líon lucht oibre sna seirbhísí sóisialta agus sláinte agus aithneofar ceisteanna oiliúna, earcaíochta agus coinneála nach mór a phlé laistigh de na gairmí teiripeacha.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Decompression Chamber

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her Department's plans to modernise the decompression chamber presently situated in Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 3418/01)

Ms de Brún: The Craigavon Area Hospital Trust, has recently had an independent assessment of the Hyperbaric Unit carried out and is awaiting a report on the facility. My Department, in conjunction with the Southern HSS Board and Trust, will consider the findings carefully once they are available.

Bhí measúnú neamhspleách déanta ar an Aonad Hipearbarach ag Iontaobhas Otharlainne Cheantar Craigavon agus tá sé ag fanacht ar thuairisc ar an áis. Déanfaidh an Roinn s'agam i gcomhair le Bord agus le hIontaobhas SSS an Deiscirt machnamh ar na torthaí go cúramach agus iad ar fáil.

Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the names of the current members of the PSI working group on tackling the problems of teenage parenthood. (AQW 3438/01)

Ms de Brún: The current membership of the PSI Working Group is as follows:

Ms. Linda Barclay
Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland

Ms. Mary Black
North and West Belfast Health Action Zone

Mr John Breen
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Ms. Tanya Hughes
Ballybeen Peer Education Project

Dr Caroline Hunter
Brook Belfast

Ms Ann Linstrom
Westcare Business Services

Dr Miriam McCarthy (Chair)
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Dr Carolyn Mason
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mrs. Pat Osborne
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Ms Mary Potter
Department of Education

Dr Audrey Simpson
fpaNI (formerly known as the Family Planning Association,
Northern Ireland)

Seo a leanas baill reatha an Ghrúpa Oibre PSI:

An Iníon Linda Barclay
An Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte i
dTuaisceart Éireann

An Iníon Mary Black
Crios Gnímh Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar ar
Shláinte

An tUasal John Breen
An Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta
Poiblí

An Iníon Tanya Hughes
Scéim Chomhghleacaithe Oideachais Bhaile Bín

An Dr. Caroline Hunter
Brook Bhéal Feirste

An Iníon Ann Linstrom
Seirbhísí Gnó Westcare

An Dr. Miriam McCarthy (Cathaoirleach)
An Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta
Poiblí

An Dr. Carolyn Mason
An Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta
Poiblí

Pat Bean Osborne
An Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta
Poiblí

An Iníon Mary Potter
An Roinn Oideachais

An Dr. Audrey Simpson
cptTÉ (Cumann Pleanála Teaghlaigh, Tuaisceart Éireann
mar a tugadh air)

Child Therapists

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of professional child therapists employed by the Health Boards; and (b) the average waiting time for a consultation with a therapist in each Board area. (AQW 3441/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Infertility Treatment

Dr Adamson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the eligibility criteria applied to the provision of infertility treatment in Northern Ireland under the recently announced interim arrangements.

(AQW 3442/01)

Ms de Brún: Eligibility criteria for the provision of sub-fertility treatment, under the interim arrangements that I announced in October 2001, are as follows:

- Couples should have no children living with them;
- Couples should have had fewer than four previous unsuccessful treatment cycles;
- The woman should be under 38 years of age; and
- There must be a medical reason for the sub-fertility, lasting for over three years.

Seo a leanas na critéir intofachta do sholáthar cóireála fothorthúlachta, faoi na socrúithe idirthréimhsiúla a d'fhógair mé i nDeireadh Fómhair 2001.

- Níor chóir do lánúineacha páistí bheith ina gcónaí leo;
- Ba chóir do lánúineacha níos lú ná ceithre shraith mírathúla cóireála bheith déanta acu roimh ré;
- Ba chóir don bhean bheith níos óige ná 38 bliain d'aois; agus
- Ní mór cúis mhíochaine bheith ann don chóireáil fhothorthúlachta, a mhaireann níos mó ná trí bliana.

Anti-Depressant Prescriptions

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if there has been an increase since 1997 in the number of anti-depressant prescriptions; and, if so, (b) what this increase has been.

(AQW 3449/01)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that the number of anti-depressant drugs items dispensed on Health Service prescriptions increased from 706,451 in the calendar year 1997, to 1,096,255 in 2001.

Tig liom dearbhú gur mhéadaigh líon na bhfrithdhúlagraín dáilte mar oidis na Seirbhíse Sláinte ó 706,451 sa bhliain 1997, go 1,096,255 sa bhliain 2001.

Long-term Care for the Elderly: Criteria

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what criteria are currently set in the Health Service for assessing entitlement and access to long-term care for the elderly. (AQW 3450/01)

Ms de Brún: Care and services in the community are provided to older people on the basis of an individual

assessment of need. Proper assessment of need and good case management are the cornerstones of high quality care.

HSS Trusts are required, under assessment and care management arrangements, to undertake individual needs-based assessments for community care services.

Boards and Trusts are expected to set criteria which will reflect local priorities and available resources. Where the Trust has assessed a 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.

The assessment procedure should reflect the nature of the individuals needs so that people with complex health and social care needs, including the need for residential or nursing home care, will require a comprehensive, usually multidisciplinary assessment, whereas others may only require a prompt response to an immediate practical need. This assessment of need should take place before any decisions are taken about services.

Individuals and their carers should be involved fully in the assessment and account must be taken of their own assessment of their needs and the type of support they would prefer to receive. However, while preferences will be taken into account, it is perhaps inevitable that in some instances some people will not receive exactly the type and level of service they might wish.

Cuirtear cúram agus seirbhísí sa phobal ar fáil do dhaoine níos sine bunaithe ar mheasúnú indibhidiúil riachtanas. Is iad measúnú ceart riachtanas agus bainistiú maith cáis dúshraith cúraim d'ardchaighdeán.

Ní foláir d'Iontaobhais SSS, faoi shocruithe measúnaithe agus bainistithe cúraim, tabhairt faoi mheasúnuithe indibhidiúla bunaithe ar riachtanais do sheirbhísí cúram pobail. Táthar ag súil go leagfaidh Boird agus Iontaobhais critéir síos a bheidh ag teacht le tosaíochtaí áitiúla agus le háiseanna atá ar fáil. Nuair a bhíonn measúnú déanta ag an Iontaobhas ar riachtanais duine pléifidh siad na roghanna atá ann, d'fhéadfadh cúram teach cónaithe nó cúram teach altranais bheith i gceist ansin, nó cúram baile le cur ar chumas an duine aonair fanacht ina lóistín féin nó ina mhacasamhail de thionacht.

Ba chóir don phróiseas measúnaithe bheith ag fóirtean do chineál riachtanas an duine aonair sa dóigh go mbeidh measúnú cuimsitheach, de ghnáth measúnú ildhisciplíneach, de dhíth ar dhaoine a bhfuil riachtanais chasta sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta orthu, lena n-áirítear an gá le cúram cónaithe nó cúram teach altranais, cé nach mbeidh de dhíth ar dhaoine eile ach aisfhreagairt ghasta ar riachtanas láithreach praiticiúil. Ba chóir don mheasúnú riachtanais seo tarlú sula ndéantar socruithe ar bith faoi sheirbhísí.

Ba chóir go mbeadh aonáin agus a gcúramóirí iomlán páirteach sa mheasúnú agus ní mór a measúnú féin ar a

riachtanais agus an cineál tacaíochta a b'fhearr leo a fháil a chur san áireamh. Cé go gcuirfear roghanna san áireamh, áfach, féadtar go dtarlóidh sé i gcásanna áirithe nach bhfaighidh roinnt daoine go díreach cineál agus leibhéal na seirbhíse a bhfuil siad ag dúil leo.

Diabetes

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the current statistics on the number of people suffering from diabetes; and (b) the percentage increase this represents over the last 10 years. (AQW 3470/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Autism

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will she be instituting a training programme for the early detection of autism for (a) health professionals; (b) teachers; and (c) all those in contact with young children. (AQW 3471/01)

Ms de Brún: A training programme will be developed in partnership with the Department of Education. This will also take account of the recommendations in the report of the Task Group on the Education of Children and Young People with Autism, launched by the Minister for Education on 7 May. The Department for Education has issued the report for consultation, the aim being to hold a conference for policy makers and service providers in the Autumn on implementing its recommendations.

Meanwhile, my Department is co-operating in a Department of Education project to produce an Autism awareness raising video for parents and a CDROM for teachers.

Forbrófar clár traenála i gcomhar leis an Roinn Oideachais. Cuirfidh sé san áireamh na moltaí i dtuairisc an Tascghrúpa ar Oideachas Páistí agus Ogánaigh le hUathachas, a sheol an tAire Oideachais ar an 7 Bealtaine. D'eisigh an Roinn Oideachais an Tuairisc le haghaidh comhairlithe, agus tá sé mar aidhm aici comhdháil a réachtáil do dhéantóirí polasaithe agus soláthróirí seirbhíse san Fhómhar ar a moltaí a chur i bhfeidhm.

Idir an dá linn, tá mo Roinn ag comhoibriú i dtionscadal an Bhoird Oideachais le fiseán a ardaíonn feasacht Uathachais a sholáthar do thuismitheoirí agus CD ROM do mhúinteoirí.

Smoking-Related Illness: Deaths

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many deaths have occurred in the

past three years, in each Health Board Area, as a result of smoking related illness or disease. (AQO 1387/01)

Ms de Brún: Estimated numbers of deaths attributable to smoking related illnesses for the years 1998, 1999 and 2000 (the latest year for which information is available) are detailed in the table below.

DEATHS ATTRIBUTABLE TO SMOKING RELATED ILLNESSES BY BOARD, 1998 - 2000

Board	1998	1999	2000
EHSSB	1,184	1,304	1,200
NHSSB	654	657	639
SHSSB	469	482	456
WHSSB	391	395	400
Total	2,698	2,838	2,695

Léirítear sa tábla thíos na huimhreacha measta básanna mar gheall ar ghalair bainte le caitheamh tobac sna blianta 1998, 1999 agus 2000 (an bhliain is déanaí a bhfuil an t-eolas ar fáil di).

BÁSANNA MAR GHEALL AR GHALAIR BAINTE LE CAITHEAMH TOBAC DE RÉIR BOIRD

Bord	1998	1999	2000
BSSSO	1,184	1,304	1,200
BSSST	654	657	639
BSSSD	469	482	456
BSSSI	391	395	400
Iomlán	2,698	2,838	2,695

Hospices

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the level of financial support provided per bed to hospices; and (b) the estimated cost to her Department of providing the same level of care under the Health Service. (AQW 3482/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the costs of providing hospice services is not collected by my Department, as these services are provided on a voluntary basis by a number of different organisations. My Department provides funding towards the central administration costs of the NI Hospice. A grant of £109,930 has been allocated in the current financial year.

Ní bhailíonn mo Roinn eolas ar na costais a bhaineann le soláthar seirbhísí ospáise, mar go soláthraíonn roinnt eagrás éagsúil na seirbhísí seo go deonach. Tugann mo Roinn maoiniú le haghaidh costais lárnacha riaracháin Ospís TÉ. Dáileadh deontas £109,930 uirthi sa bhliain reatha airgeadais.

Hospices

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proportion of the costs of running

hospices is met by (a) grants from her Department; and (b) charitable donations. (AQW 3485/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 3482/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3482/01.

Complaints

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of complaints currently being investigated relating to the Southern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 3498/01)

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.

Complaints Procedures

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources are currently made available to each Board area to service existing complaints procedures. (AQW 3499/01)

Ms de Brún: Each Board area is allocated resources to cover general administration. The amount which should be used to service the existing complaints procedures, is not specified. Under current Directions and Guidelines however, Boards are required to make the necessary arrangements to provide for the complaints procedures. This includes the appointment of complaints officers to administer the procedures and Non-Executive Directors to act as convenors at the review stage.

Dáiltear acmhainní ar gach Bordcheantar le riarachán ginearálta a chlúdach. Ní thugtar mionchuntas ar an méid a ba chóir a úsáid leis na gnáthaimh láithreacha ghearán a fheidhmiú. Faoi Threoracha agus Threoirilínte i láthair na huaire áfach, tá ar Bhoird na socrúithe riachtanacha a dhéanamh leis na gnáthaimh ghearán a fheidhmiú. Cuimsíonn siad seo ceapadh oifigeach gearán leis an gnáthaimh a riar agus ceapadh Stiúrthóirí Neamh-Fheidhmeannacha le hoibriú mar thionólaithe ag an chéim athbhreithnithe.

Occupational Therapy

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of outstanding assessments the Occupational Therapy Department at Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry currently have on

their waiting list; and (b) the earliest referral date relating to a case on the outstanding list. (AQW 3501/01)

Ms de Brún: There are 149 people currently on the occupational therapy general community waiting list at Daisy Hill Hospital. Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust has indicated that the earliest referral date on the waiting list is 7 March 2002.

Tá 149 duine ar liosta feithimh teiripe saothair an phobail ghinearálta ag Otharlann Daisy Hill faoi láthair. Thug Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir agus Mhúrn le fios gurb é 7 Márta 2002 an dáta atreoirithe is luaithe ar an liosta feithimh.

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with diabetes in each of the last 5 years per age group (i) 10-20 years; (ii) 20-40 years; and (iii) 40+ years. (AQW 3502/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the number of people diagnosed with diabetes and have attended health centres, clinics and hospitals in the last year suffering from mental health problems relating to (a) stress; (b) anxiety; and (c) depression. (AQW 3503/01)

Ms de Brún: This information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Loss of Limbs: Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people who have had a limb or limbs removed after car accidents and have subsequently been diagnosed as diabetics. (AQW 3504/01)

Ms de Brún: This information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the expenditure for those diagnosed as having diabetes, who have attended

(a) health centres; (b) clinics; and (c) hospitals in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3505/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) any plans she has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures she has put in place to ensure staff from her Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3517/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) I have no plans to celebrate this event.

(b) All Departments, including DHSSPS, have been awarded the additional Bank Holiday set for Monday 3 June.

(a) Níl aon phleananna agam chun an imeacht seo a cheiliúradh.

(b) Tá an tSaoire Baine breise atá leagha amach don Luan 3 Meitheamh tugtha do gach Roinn lena n-áirítear an DHSSPS.

Counselling: Funding

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the total amount of funding currently provided for counselling services; and (b) the projects that receive such funding. (AQW 3519/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Ní chruinnítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach agus níorbh fhéidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Patients: Waiting Lists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients waiting 13 weeks or more to see a consultant on (a) 31 March 2002; and (b) 31 March 1997. (AQW 3520/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on patients waiting for first outpatient appointments is collected on the basis of 3 monthly intervals. At 31 December 2001 (the latest date for which information is currently available) there were 73,298 people waiting for first outpatient appointment for 3 months or more. At 31 March 1997, the figure was 21,801.

Bailítear eolas ar othair ag fanacht ar a gcéad choinní éisothair gach ráithe. Ar 31 Nollaig 2001 (an dáta is déanaí a bhfuil eolas ar fáil faoi láthair) bhí 73,298 duine ann ag fanacht ar a gcéad choinne éisothair ar feadh 3 mí nó níos faide. Ar 31 Márta 1997, 21,801 duine ba ea an figiúr.

Cancelled Operations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cancelled operations there were in the last calendar year. (AQW 3521/01)

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.

Children for Adoption

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the number of children under the age of one year placed for adoption for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3527/01)

Ms de Brún: There were 19 children under the age of one year placed for adoption in the financial year 2001-2002, 15 in 2000-2001, 15 in 1999-2000, 5 in 1998-1999 and 9 in 1997-1998.

Bhí 19 páiste faoi aon bhliain d'aois curtha ar an chlár le haghaidh uchtaithe sa bhliain airgeadais 2001-2002, 15 i 2000-2001, 15 i 1999-2000, 5 i 1998-1999 agus 9 i 1997-1998.

Complaints Procedure

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedure presently adopted when a complaint is received. (AQW 3532/01)

Ms de Brún: The current HPSS Complaints Procedures are set out in The Health and Personal Social Services Complaints Procedures Directions (Northern Ireland) 1996 and in "Complaints Listening...Acting...Improving: Guidance on Implementation of the HPSS Complaints Procedure March 1996 and Guidance on Handling HPSS Complaints April 2000. Under these procedures service users are encouraged to make a complaint to the staff in the Trust or GP Practice dealing directly with them. All written complaints must receive a substantive written reply from the Trust's Chief Executive within 20 days or from the GP Practice within 10 days.

If the complainant is still dissatisfied, he/she may ask for a review of the complaint by an Independent Review Panel. The Board convenor will decide if a review is

warranted and if so, an independent lay panel will be appointed to investigate the complaint. Independent clinical assessors assist panels in the investigation of clinical matters. A complainant who remains dissatisfied with the outcome of the review can take the complaint to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints (the Ombudsman).

Tá Gnáthaimh láithreacha Ghearán na SSSP leagtha amach i The Health and Personal Social Services Complaints Procedures Directions (Northern Ireland) 1996 and in "Complaints Listening...Acting...Improving: Guidance on Implementation of the HPSS Complaints Procedure March 1996 and Guidance on Handling HPSS Complaints April 2000. Faoi na gnáthaimh seo moltar d'úsáideoirí seirbhísí gearán a dhéanamh leis an fhoireann san Iontaobhas nó sa Chleachtadh GD atá ag déileáil go díreach leo. Ní mór do Phríomh-Fheidhmeannach an Iontaobhais nó don Chleachtadh GD freagra mion scríofa a thabhairt do gach uile ghearán scríofa laistigh de 20 lá, agus laistigh de 10 lá faoi seach.

Muna bhfuil an gearánaí sásta go fóill, is féidir leis/léi iarraidh go ndéanfaidh Painéal Neamhspleách Athbhreithnithe athbhreithniú ar an ggearán. Cinnfidh tionólaí an Bhoird má bhíonn athbhreithniú de dhíth agus má bhíonn, ceapfar painéal neamhspleách tuata leis an ggearán a fhiosrú. Cuidíonn measúnóirí neamhspleacha clínicíúla le painéil i bhfiosrú cúrsaí clínicíúla. Is féidir le gearánaí nach bhfuil sásta go fóill i ndiaidh toradh an athbhreithnithe an gearán a dhéanamh le Coimsinéir Thuaisceart Éireann um Ghearáin (Cosantóir an Phobail).

Complaints Investigations

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff dedicated to investigating complaints in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 3533/01)

Ms de Brún: The following staff are employed in investigating complaints. The whole time equivalent (wte)¹ is shown against each entry as some staff have other duties as well. In addition each of the Trusts listed below will have administrative and secretarial staff who, as part of their duties, will undertake tasks related to the investigation of complaints.

Southern Board
Chief Executive (approx 0.1 wte)
Complaints Manager/Equality Manger (0.5 wte)
Complaints Administrator (0.9 wte)
Administration support (0.8 wte)
2 Convenors (Non-Executive Directors input as required)
Clinical/Professional (input as required)
Armagh & Dungannon HSS Trust

Director (0.25 wte)
Senior Manager (0.75 wte)
Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust
Senior Manager (1.0 wte)
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust
Director (0.1 wte)
Complaints Administrator (0.78 wte)
Craigavon & Banbridge Community HSS Trust
Chief Executive & Director (0.05 wte)
Senior Manager (0.3 wte)

¹ 0.1 wte is equivalent to 10% of a staff member's time, 0.2wte is equivalent to 20% etc.

Seo a leanas na hoibrithe atá fostaithe le gearáin a fhiosrú. Tá an choibhéis lánaimseartha (cla)¹ a bhaineann le gach oibrí idir lúibíní mar go bhfuil dualgais eile ar roinnt oibrithe chomh maith. Ina theannta sin, beidh oibrithe riaracháin agus rúnaíochta ag gach Iontaobhas liostáilte thíos, a dhéanfaidh tascanna bainteach le fiosrú gearán mar chuid dá ndualgais oibre.

Bord an Deiscirt
Príomh-Fheidhmeannach (timpeall is 0.1 cla)
Bainisteoir Gearán/Bainisteoir Comhionannais (0.5 cla)
Riarthóir Gearán (0.9 cla)
Tacaíocht Riaracháin (0.8 cla)
2 Tionólaí (ineolas Stiúrthóirí Neamh-Fheidhmeannacha de réir an ghá)
Cliniciúil/Gairmiúil (de réir an ghá)
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn
Stiúrthóir (0.25cla)
Bainisteoir Sinsearach (0.75 cla)
Iontaobhas Ghrúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon
Bainisteoir Sinsearach (1.0 cla)
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn
Stiúrthóir (0.1 cla)
Riarthóir Gearán (0.78 cla)
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna
Príomh-Fheidhmeannach & Stiúrthóir (0.05 cla)
Bainisteoir Sinsearach (0.3 cla)

¹ Is ionann 0.1cla agus 10% d'am bhall foirne, is ionann 0.2cla agus 20% d'am bhall foirne srl.

Pay Awards: Health Service Staff

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the pay deal announcement for NHS staff in England on 9 May 2002, what plans does she have to keep salaries of Health Service staff in Northern Ireland in line with their counterparts in England. (AQW 3555/01)

Ms de Brún: Pay awards from 1 April 2002 announced for NHS staff will be awarded to similar groups of staff employed in the Health and Personal Social Services.

Bronnfar duaiseanna pá ó 1 Aibreán 2002 a fôgraíodh le haghaidh fhoireann na SSN ar ghrúpaí den chineál céanna foirne fostaithe sna Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta.

North Belfast: Injuries

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people injured in riots in North Belfast since 1 January 2002 that were treated in Hospital Accident and Emergency Departments; (b) the number who required in-patient treatment; (c) the number who required beds in High Dependency Units; (d) the number who required beds in Intensive Care Units; and (e) the financial cost of treating these patients. (AQW 3556/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Major Acute Hospitals

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the optimum population figure that is required for a major acute hospital in Northern Ireland to ensure the most efficient and effective use of staff and capital resources. (AQO 1370/01)

Ms de Brún: There is no specified population figure that can be regarded as the optimum for a major acute hospital and the Acute Hospitals Review Group did not recommend a specific catchment size. In England, some professional bodies have recommended between 450,000 and 500,000 to provide a full range of facilities and acute specialities, although they recognise that, in practice, most acute hospitals will continue to serve populations of around 200,00 – 300, 000. In planning acute services, other issues would need to be taken into account, including the needs and circumstances of rural populations.

Níl aon fhigiúr sonraithe daonra is féidir a mheas ina uasfhigiúr do mhór-ospidéal géarchúraim, agus níor mhol Grúpa Athbhreithnithe na-Ospidéal Géarchúraim méid ceantair sonrach. I Sasana, mhol roinnt foras gairimiúil daonra idir 450,000 agus 500,000 le réimse iomlán áiseanna agus speisialtóireachtaí géarchúraim a sholáthar, cé go n-aithníonn siad, dáiríre, go bhfreastalaíonn ospidéal ghéarchúraim ar dhaonraí de thart ar 200,000 agus 300,000. Agus seirbhísí géarchúraim á bpleanáil, caithfidh ceisteanna eile a chur san áireamh, lena n-áirítear riachtanais agus cúinsí daonraí tuaithe.

Timescale for Answers

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to advise on the timescale for the receipt of answers to AQW 2344/01 and AQW 2345/01 which were due for answer on 13 March 2002.

(AQW 3584/01)

Ms de Brún: The Answers to the Questions referred to were issued on Tuesday 14 May.

Eisíodh freagraí na gCeisteanna ar tagraíodh dóibh Dé Máirt 14 Bealtaine.

Residential Homes

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of beds for elderly people in residential homes in (a) May 1997; and (b) April 2002.

(AQW 3585/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the average number of places in residential homes for elderly people at 31 March 1997 and 31 March 2001 (the latest date for which information is available) and is detailed in the table below.

AVERAGE AVAILABLE PLACES IN RESIDENTIAL HOMES FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

31 Mar. 1997	31 Mar. 2001
4,965	4,579

Tá eolas ar fáil ar mheánlíon na n-áiteanna ar fáil do sheandaoine i dtithe cónaithe ar 31 Márta 1997 agus ar 31 Márta 2001 (an dáta is déanaí dá bhfuil eolas ar fáil) agus tá sé léirithe go mion sa tábla thíos.

MEÁNLIÓN NA N-ÁITEANNA DO SHEANDAOINE I DTITHE CÓNAITHE.

31 Márta. 1997	31 Márta. 2001
4,965	4,579

Laser Therapy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she is taking to promote the use of laser therapy to assist smoking cessation.

(AQW 3586/01)

Ms de Brún: None. The most recent available research found no clear evidence that laser therapy was effective as an aid to smoking cessation.

Cruthúnas ar bith. Fuair amach an taighde is déanaí atá ar fáil nach raibh cruthúnas soiléir ann go raibh teiripe léasair éifeachtach mar áis le héirí as caitheamh tobac.

Cancelled Operations

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many operations were cancelled in the last financial year.

(AQW 3588/01)

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.

Consultants

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many consultants were working in the Health Service in 1997, and what is the current figure.

(AQW 3589/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is given in the table below:

CONSULTANTS WORKING FOR HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES

Date of information	Headcount	WTE ¹
March 1997	808	757.15
March 2002	970	913.91

¹ Whole Time Equivalent

Tá an t-eolas tugtha sa tábla thíos:

LIANNA COMHAIRLEACHA AG OBAIR AG NA SEIRBHÍÍ SLÁINTE AGUS SÓISIALTA PEARSANTA

Dáta eolais	Líon daoine	CLA ¹
Márta 1997	808	757.15
Márta 2002	970	913.91

¹Coibhéis Lánaimeartha

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) adults and (b) children being treated for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME.

(AQW 3611/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Fire Brigade

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of permanent posts for the Control Room of the Fire Brigade advertised recently; (b) the number of applicants for these posts; (c)

if any additional marks are allocated to temporary staff applying for these posts. (AQW 3673/01)

Ms de Brún: The Fire Authority received 591 applications to its advertisement to fill twelve vacancies in the Control Room. Of these applications, 516 candidates were shortlisted for assessment and 156 candidates called for interview.

Candidates' suitability for the posts will be determined by the assessment of their application and at interview. No additional marks will be allocated to any of the current temporary staff applying for the posts.

Fuair an tÚdarás Dóiteáin 591 iarratas tar éis a fhógra chun dhá fholúntas déag a líonadh sa Seomra Rialaithe. As na hiarratais sin cuireadh 516 ar ghearrliosta le measúnú agus glaoth ar 156 iarrthóir chuig agallamh.

Cinnfear oiriúnacht iarrthóirí le aghaidh na bpost trí mheasúnú ar a n-iarratais agus ag agallamh. Ní leithdháilfear aon mharcanna breise chuig aon fhoireann shealadach reatha a bheidh ag déanamh iarratais ar na postanna.

Arson Awareness Dogs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if a request was made for the deployment of arson awareness dogs at a recent bonfire incident in Ballymena; and (b) if the dogs were available. (AQW 3675/01)

Ms de Brún: A request was made to the Control Room for the deployment of a Hydrocarbon Detector Dog to an incident at a bonfire in Ballymena on 11 May. Unfortunately the dog handler was unavailable due to illness.

Rinneadh iarratas chuig an Seomra Rialaithe chun Madra Aimsithe Hidreacarbóin a chur chuig eachtra tine chnámh ag an Baile Meánach an 11 Bealtaine. Ní raibh láimhseálaí an mhadra faraor ar fáil de bharr breoiteachta.

Review of Community Care

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the publication of the report of the first phase of the Review of Community Care, how does she propose to monitor the development of multi-disciplinary teams to provide community care services. (AQO 1401/01)

Ms de Brún: The 'First Report' of the Review of Community Care identified a number of innovative schemes and practices which will help Trusts to develop local solutions to the pressures they are experiencing.

My Department is now consulting with the Health and Social Services Boards on how best the recommendations can be implemented. Implementation plans will include a monitoring and reporting process which will allow my Department to satisfy itself not only that

recommendations are being taken forward but that they are achieving the required results.

D'aithin 'Chéad Tuairisc' an Athbhreithnithe ar Chúram Pobail scéimeanna agus cleachtais nuálacha a chuideoidh le hIontaobhais teacht ar réitigh áitiúla ar na brúnna a bhfuil siad fúthu.

Faoi láthair, tá mo Roinn i gcomhchomhairle leis na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta faoi conas is fearr na moltaí a chur i bhfeidhm. Ar na pleananna forfheidhmithe beidh próiseas monatóireachta agus tuairiscithe a shásóidh mo Roinn go bhfuil na moltaí á gcur i bhfeidhm agus go bhfuil siad ag baint amach na dtorthaí a theastaíonn fosta.

Attacks on Staff

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are being taken to tackle the problem of attacks upon health and social services staff. (AQO 1404/01)

Ms de Brún: The health and safety of staff employed in the HPSS is an important issue which I take very seriously. Protection of staff is a matter for individual employers and they are required by my Department to have policies in place to deal with abuse and violence.

To assist them my Department has issued a number of documents containing guidance on dealing with violence. These include the NHS Zero Tolerance Resource Pack, which was commended to all. Some HPSS employers have already put a number of security measures in place to improve safety. A working group comprising representatives from Trusts and Staff Side organisations has been established to review current guidance and consider the issue of further best practice guidance.

Is tábhachtach liom sláinte agus sábháilteacht na foirne sna Seirbhísí Sláinte Sóisialta agus Pearsanta. Tá cosaint a chuid foirne faoi chúram gach fostóir, agus éilíonn mo Roinn ar fhóistóirí polasaithe a bheith i bhfeidhm acu le déileáil le droch-íde agus le foréigean.

D'eisigh mo Roinn cáipéisí ina bhfuil treoir ar conas déileáil le foréigean le cuidiú leo, agus bunaíodh grúpa oibre ar a bhfuil ionadaithe ó Iontaobhais agus ó eagraíochtaí Foirne le treoir reatha a athbhreithniú agus le breis teorach den chleachtas is fearr a bhreithniú.

Waiting List: Heart Surgery

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients waiting for major heart surgery in both the Southern and Western Health and Social Services Board areas.

(AQO 1389/01)

Ms de Brún: As of 30 March 2002, there were 100 patients from the Southern Health and Social Services

Board and 73 patients from the Western Health and Social Services Board on the waiting list for cardiac surgery.

Ar 30 Márta 2002, bhí 100 othar ó Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt agus 73 othar ó Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair ar liosta feithimh do mháinliacht chardiach.

Waiting Lists

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many specialities are currently not accepting referrals for waiting lists.

(AQO 1386/01)

Ms de Brún: Two specialities are currently not accepting routine GP referrals for waiting lists - Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, and Rheumatology at United Hospitals Trust. These specialities are, however, continuing to accept referrals for urgent and emergency cases.

Faoi láthair, tá dhá speisialtóireacht ann nach bhfuil ag glacadh le gnáthchoinní othar ó liachleachtóirí do liostaí feithimh — Síciatracht Leanaí agus Ógánach ag Ospidéal Ríoga Bhéal Feirste do Leanaí Breoite agus Réamaiteolaíocht in Iontaobhas na n-Ospidéal Aontaithe. Tá na speisialtóireachtaí seo, áfach, ag glacadh le coinní ó Ghnáthdhochtúirí i gcásanna práinne agus éigeandála.

Diagnoses in Utero

Dr Adamson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which illnesses and disabilities can be diagnosed whilst the child is in utero.

(AQO 1377/01)

Ms de Brún: The main conditions that can be diagnosed in utero are Downs syndrome, neural tube defects and other foetal anomalies such as lesions of the heart, kidneys and abdominal wall. It is also possible to detect some conditions that have a genetic link, for example, cystic fibrosis.

Is iad na príomhriochtaí is féidir a fháthmheas sa bhroinn Siondróim Down, éalanga feadáin néaraigh agus aimhrialtachtaí eile féatais ar nós loit an chroí, an duáin agus bhalla an bhoilg. Is féidir fosta riochtaí a bhfuil nasc géiniteach ag baint leo a aimsiú, an fhiobróis chisteach mar shampla.

New Primary Care Arrangements

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made since 1 April 2002 in implementing the new primary care arrangements.

(AQO 1376/01)

Ms de Brún: The new arrangements in primary care involve the setting up of 15 Local Health and Social Care Groups. The new Groups will be run by Management Boards made up of primary care professionals, community and service users, as well as representatives from Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts. Since the 1 April 2002, a great deal of work has gone into the recruitment and selection process which has resulted in suitable candidates being identified for almost half of the 270 Management Board positions. Efforts are continuing to fill the remaining vacancies. Meantime, work is continuing to ensure that the new Groups become operational as soon as possible.

Baineann na socruithe nua sa chúram phríomhúil le bunú 15 Grúpa Áitiúil Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta. Déanfaidh Boird Bhainistíochta, ar a mbeidh gairmithe cúraim phríomhúil, úsáideoirí seirbhíse agus pobail chomh maith le hionadaithe ó na Boird agus na hIontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na grúpaí nua a bhainistiú. Ó 1 Aibreán 2002 i leith, rinneadh go leor oibre ag earcú agus ag roghnú iarrthóirí oiriúnacha do bheagnach leath den 270 post ar na Boird Bhainistíochta. Táthar ag iarraidh na folúntais eile a líonadh. Idir an dá linn, táthar ag obair ar an chúlraid lena chinntiú go mbeidh na Grúpaí nua ag feidhmiú a luaithe is féidir.

Acute Services: Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will give a commitment that acute services in the Tyrone County Hospital will not be allowed to deteriorate in advance of her decision on the recommendations of the Hayes review on acute services.

(AQO 1395/01)

Ms de Brún: No decisions have yet been taken on the way forward on the Acute Hospitals Review, including the Tyrone County Hospital. Until longer-term decisions have been made, I will expect Boards and Trusts to make every effort to maintain existing services. My officials are working closely with the Board and Trust to assist them in sustaining services in the Tyrone County Hospital and the position is being closely monitored.

Níor glacadh cinntí ar bith go fóill ar an bhealach chun tosaigh ar an Aithbhreithniú ar Ghéarospidéal, lena n-áirítear Ospidéal Chondae Thír Eoghain. Go dtí go nglacfar cinntí fadtréimhseacha, beidh mé ag súil le Boird agus le hIontaobhais a ndícheall a dhéanamh leis na seirbhísí atá ann cheana a choinneáil. Tá mo chuid feidhmeannach ag obair go dlúth leis an Bhord agus leis an Iontaobhas ag cuidiú leo seirbhísí in Ospidéal Chondae Thír Eoghain a choinneáil agus tá monatóireacht ghéar á déanamh ar chúrsaí.

Eastern Multifund

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant AQW 2927/01,

how many staff working within the Eastern Multifund have been offered new positions. (AQO 1383/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department does not have a record of the number of staff who have been offered new positions in the Health and Personal Social Services. I understand, however, that to date one member of staff previously employed within the Eastern Multifund has taken up a new position within the HPSS.

Níl taifead ag an Roinn ar an líon foirne ar tairgeadh poist nua dóibh sna Seirbhísí Sláinte, Sóisialta agus Pearsanta. Tuigim, áfach, gur ghlac ball foirne amháin, a ba ghnáth leis oibriú in Iolchiste an Oirthir, post nua sna Seirbhísí Sláinte, Sóisialta agus Pearsanta.

“Managing your Medicines” Scheme

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how is she encouraging community pharmacies to participate in the “Managing your Medicines” scheme. (AQO 1405/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department’s Chief Pharmaceutical Officer has promoted this initiative and engaged the active support of the Directors of Pharmaceutical Services in each of the four Health and Social Services Boards to develop this service for patients. I have set ‘Priorities for Action’ targets for the Boards of 20% of pharmacies delivering this service in 2001/02 and 30% in 2002/03, and these are being achieved.

Chuir Príomhoifigeach Cogaisíochta mo Roinnse an tionscnamh seo chun cinn agus bhain sé tacaíocht ghníomhach Stiúrthóirí na Seirbhísí Cogaisíochta amach i ngach ceann de na Boird Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sláinte chun an tseirbhís seo a fhorbairt d’othair. Tá spriocanna ‘Tosaíochtaí do Ghníomh’ leagtha amach agam do na boird go mbeadh 20% de chogasalanna ag soláthar na seirbhíse i 2001/02 agus 30% i 2002/03 agus tá siad sin á mbaint amach.

Measles, Mumps and Rubella Immunisation

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not there has been a significant reduction in the number of children receiving “MMR” immunisation. (AQO 1402/01)

Ms de Brún: There has not been a significant reduction in the numbers vaccinated. In 1995/96, 22,500 children received MMR vaccination by age two. In 2000/01 the number vaccinated was 21,500. However, there was a reduction of almost 1000 in the number of children eligible to receive the MMR vaccination over that period.

Níor tháinig laghdú suntasach ar an líon leanaí atá á vacsaíniú. I 1995/96, fuair 22,500 (fiche is a dó míle cúig chéad) leanbh vacsaín MMR faoi aois a dhá mbliain; i 2000/01, vacsaíníodh 21,500 (fiche is a haon

míle cúig chéad). Bhí laghdú, áfach, de bheagnach 1,000 ar an líon leanbh a bhí i dteideal an vacsaín MMR a fháil thar an tréimhse sin.

Personal Care in Nursing Homes

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of the cost per person for personal care in nursing homes. (AQO 1388/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

The Interdepartmental Group on Personal Care set up by the Executive to examine the costs and implications of introducing free personal care is working to establish a detailed breakdown of care costs and is to report to the Executive by the end of June 2002.

Níl an t-eolas a hiarradh ar fáil.

Tá an Grúpa Idir-Rannach ar Chúram Pearsanta a bhunaigh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin le scrúdú a dhéanamh ar chostas agus ar na himpleachtaí a bhaineann le cúram pearsanta saor in aisce ag obair le briseadh síos sonrach a fháil ar chostas cúraim, agus tá sé le tuairisciú don Choiste Feidhmiúcháin faoi dheireadh mhí an Mheithimh 2002.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Roads Service Depots

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the budgets and expenditure of all Roads Service Depots for (a) road repairs; and (b) road maintenance. (AQW 3204/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): My Department’s Roads Service does not retain information of expenditure on road maintenance on a depot basis. The funds available for road maintenance are allocated to the 4 Roads Service Divisions who, in turn, apportion their budgets on the basis of need across district council areas. The attached table details the expenditure incurred by Road Service on a district council basis for road repairs and total road maintenance for the 2000/2001 financial year.

Tourist Attractions: Road Signage

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development pursuant to AQW 2882/01, and in regard to road signage to tourist attractions and facilities, to detail the criteria used to reference visitor numbers and road classification. (AQW 3240/01)

Mr P Robinson: Under current policy agreed between my Department's Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board provides that tourist signs may be provided as follows:

- on motorways for attractions that draw more than 75,000 visitors per annum (up to a maximum of 20 miles from attractions);
- on primary routes (ie roads having green direction signs) for attractions that draw more than 20,000 visitors per annum up to a maximum of 20 miles from attractions;
- on nearest main roads (ie, A or B class roads) for attractions drawing less than 20,000 visitors per annum; and
- on nearest main roads (ie, A and B class roads) for tourist accommodation in rural areas (ie, on roads where the national speed limit applies) up to a maximum of 5 miles from the accommodation. Such signing is not permitted from motorways.

The current policy also provides that:

- where clear directions are given to destinations or areas by existing traffic signs, tourist signs to attractions are not necessary until the general destinations or areas are reached;
- tourist attractions and accommodation must be approved by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board; and
- signs to tourist accommodation in urban areas are not permitted.

As I indicated in my answer to your earlier Written Assembly Question a review of the policy on the provision of tourist signs is currently under way and is being led by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Metered Water

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) financial receipts from those customers who pay for water supplied by his Department; (b) such receipts; and (c) the cost of collecting such receipts. (AQW 3323/01)

Mr P Robinson: Total income from metered water customers amounts to some £35 million per annum. Unfortunately, the existing IT system used for billing metered water customers does not enable this income to be broken down by the various categories of customer, and the information could only be obtained manually at disproportionate cost. However, the upgrading of the IT system, which is to be carried out next year, will enable such information to be provided.

The cost of collecting metered water receipts in the 2000/2001 financial year was just over £2.5 million.

Water Quality: Rivers and Lakes

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) his present and proposed financial commitment for measures aimed at reducing pollution in rivers and lakes and (b) the nature of such measures. (AQW 3326/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Water Service needs to make substantial investment across a wide range of infrastructure improvements. Protecting water quality in rivers and lakes is seen as a high priority to be met as soon as practical within available resources.

While my first priority remains the provision of highest standards of public health protection by upgrading Water Treatment Works, my Department is now also able to programme significant investment in Waste Water Treatment Works upgrading to meet higher standards of effluent discharges. Over the next five years expenditure totaling over £160 million has been programmed to upgrade 180 Waste Water Treatment Works across Northern Ireland.

In the longer term improvements to sewerage networks are also planned across all areas, particularly with regard to the retention and control of storm water which presently discharges to rivers during heavy rainfall. A major investment programme totaling £100 million between 2004 and 2009 is planned to improve storm water retention and management in Belfast. This will be followed by progressive sewerage networks improvements across all areas. Expenditure of up to £40 million per year is envisaged with resourcing commitment likely from 2008 onwards. The programme of sewerage networks upgrading is seen as a priority for advancement if additional funding can be secured.

Sewage Treatment Works: Ballyclare

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development when will work designed to enhance the Ballyclare Sewage Treatment Works and the sewerage infrastructure in the Ballyclare area commence. (AQW 3334/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service proposes to construct a new Wastewater Treatment Works on the site of the existing Works at Ballyclare. Discussions with other statutory bodies on issues influencing the detailed design of the Works have taken longer than anticipated. An application for outline planning approval was submitted to Planning Service in February 2002, and initial work has commenced on the procurement procedures with the publication of a Notice in the EC Journal. Water Service will shortly be inviting applications for a Restricted List of contractors who will be invited to tender for the project later this year. Construction is now expected to commence in April 2003 and will take 18 months to complete at a cost of over £5 million. Improvements,

costing some £1 million, will be made to the sewerage system in Ballyclare at the same time.

Cost of Providing Water

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the present annual cost of delivering water to Northern Ireland customers; and (b) a breakdown of these costs. (AQW 3347/01)

Mr P Robinson: The cost of providing water to customers in the 2000/2001 financial year, on an accrual accounting basis, was £109 million. This figure excludes the cost of capital expenditure. The breakdown of these costs is as follows:

Item	£ million
Staff and related costs	31
Operating costs including power, rates, materials and consumables	39
Depreciation of assets & loan	39
Charges	109

Roads: South Down

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development when will funding be provided for the substantial improvement of the roads network in South Down; and to make a statement. (AQW 3348/01)

Mr P Robinson: In recent years, my Department's Roads Service has invested significant resources in the improvement of roads in the South Down area. Expenditure has, with the agreement of Down District Council, largely been concentrated on the improvement of main routes, particularly the A7 linking Downpatrick with Belfast, which was identified as a Link Corridor in my Department's Regional Development Strategy. Investment has also extended to the introduction of a new ferry on the Strangford to Portaferry ferry service which provides an important link in the roads network of the area.

As you will be aware, Roads Service has been engaged in consultation as part of the ongoing preparation work on the 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule of major road schemes, which it is expected could be started within the 10-year period of the Department's Regional Transportation Strategy. Until work on the Schedule is complete, I am unable to detail the potential schemes that are likely to be carried out in the South Down area. I hope, however, to be in a position to publish the Forward Planning Schedule later this year, following publication of the Regional Transportation Strategy.

Flooding

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) those areas that are prone to flooding;

(b) the assessment which has been made of such areas; (c) any steps being taken in regard to flood prevention; and (d) to state the financial cost of such. (AQW 3403/01)

Mr P Robinson: A number of factors influence whether or not particular areas are prone to flooding arising from the sewerage system. These factors include the intensity and duration of rainfall, and the capacity, condition and operational effectiveness of the sewerage system. Water Service does not have a definitive list of all areas in Northern Ireland, which are prone to flooding. It is of course aware of those areas where flooding has occurred in the past. Many of the incidents of severe flooding were directly attributable to the lack of capacity in the sewerage infrastructure arising from the under-investment over many years.

Water Service is currently carrying out detailed studies on 105 drainage areas across Northern Ireland. These studies are examining the condition and effectiveness of the current sewerage systems, and will result in recommendations for upgrading the sewerage systems to meet future capacity and environmental requirements. These improvements will considerably reduce the risk of flooding from the sewerage system in future. The studies will be completed by 2004, and the total capital investment required for the upgrading work is expected to be in excess of £300 million. Given current funding levels, it is unlikely that the entire programme of improvements will be completed this decade. However the major upgrade of the Belfast sewerage system, costing some £100 million, is programmed to commence in late 2004.

Pending the commencement of this major programme of upgrading the sewerage systems, I was able to secure £5.5 million of Executive Programme Funds for investment over a three period in interim flood prevention schemes in particular areas which been subjected to repeated flooding in the past. To date, approximately £1.2 million has been invested on these interim measures, mainly in the Greater Belfast area. Work is presently ongoing or has been completed at more than 25 locations in the Greater Belfast area. These include Brentwood Park, Carrington Street, Southview Cottages, Cooldaragh Park and Kings Avenue in Belfast; Doagh Road in Newtownabbey; Marine Parade in Whitehead; Sunnylands and Ransyven Park in Carrickfergus; and Mountpleasant and Lenamore Park in Jordanstown. At Carrington Street a pumped relief overflow was provided last year at a cost of £286,000 and work at the River Terrace Pumping Station and Balfour Avenue should be completed by November 2002. Contractors are on site, or are about to commence work, in a number of other locations in Belfast including Cavendish Street, Oldpark Road, Divismore Park, Somerton Road, Premier Drive and Camberwell Terrace. In addition there are many other locations where remedial work is planned including Cambrai Street, Barnett's Road and Woodland Grange in Belfast, and Joymount in Carrickfergus.

There are also a number of major schemes outside of the Greater Belfast area which are ongoing or have been completed. Expenditure on these schemes is additional to the Executive Programme Funds. Work in Ballycastle at Moyle Road, Fairhead View and Clare Road was completed in March 2002 at a cost of £505,000. A sewer study scheme is programmed to commence in Cookstown at a cost of £675,000. Flood alleviation schemes are planned for Aldergrove, at a cost of £115,000 and at Bushmills Road in Portrush, at an estimated cost of £105,000. Work at Moneygran Road, Kilrea, is due to commence in the summer of 2002, with further work scheduled in association with Roads Service. In the Southern and Western areas, £150,000 will be spent on flood relief schemes this year, and another 13 schemes have been identified for remedial works in the future at a cost of £450,000.

Water Charging Policy

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development how many farmers benefited as a result of the decision by the Water Service to abolish standing charges for low volume water consumers. (AQW 3404/01)

Mr P Robinson: In April 2001, my predecessor, Gregory Campbell, announced changes to the Department's metered water charging policy, which exempted certain classes of customers served by a supply pipe of 20 millimetres diameter or less from standing charges.

Some 16,400 farmers have benefited from this change in charging policy and no longer pay any charges for their metered water supply. This represents some 35% of all farmers who have a metered water supply.

Sewerage: Crawfordsburn Village

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the effectiveness of the sewerage system in Crawfordsburn Village, following the recent installation of new pipework. (AQW 3405/01)

Mr P Robinson: The replacement of the sewer through Crawfordsburn Village was completed last December. The new sewer is operating satisfactorily. Several low lying properties in the village cannot be connected to the new sewer until a small pumping station is constructed. Negotiations for the acquisition of the proposed site for the pumping station are continuing.

In the interim, Water Service is continuing to use a tanker to remove the wastewater from these properties.

Traffic Calming

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent to date in Fermanagh

District Council area on the following traffic calming measures (a) speed cushions; and (b) 20 mph zone gateways. (AQW 3644/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has invested some £370,000 in the Fermanagh District Council area over the past 5 years on traffic calming schemes at Maguiresbridge, Newtownbutler, Lisnaskea, Derrylin, Kesh and Derrygonnelly. A number of site specific traffic calming measures were provided as part of these schemes including, mini-roundabouts, central hatching, pedestrian refuges, speed cushions and gateway signs.

Only the traffic calming scheme for Kesh village, completed during the 1999/2000 year, incorporates speed cushions, which are located on the Crevenish Road. The total cost of this scheme was £101,000. The speed cushions element cost approximately £5,000.

Presently, there are no 20-mph zone gateways in the Fermanagh District Council area. However, in the current financial year, Roads Service plans to implement a 20-mph zone as one of the measures included in the proposed traffic calming scheme for the Derrin Road, Loughview Drive, and Corban Avenue area of Enniskillen. The public consultation on these proposed traffic calming measures is expected to commence by July of this year.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Properties: "Peace Lines"

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties are currently vacant along the so-called 'Peace Lines'. (AQW 3458/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): There are currently 135 vacant Housing Executive properties situated at 'Peace Lines'. Of these 127 are in Belfast and 8 in Portadown.

Housing Associations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action Housing Associations are taking to provide more housing in the Ards Borough area. (AQW 3467/01)

Mr Dodds: The published new build housing programme for the Borough is detailed in the table below. Housing associations currently have 15 new homes under construction and plan a further 57 over the 3-year period 2002/2003 to 2004/2005.

The annual review of the Housing Associations programme is due to take place in December. This will afford an opportunity to look afresh at the waiting list

information and to reprioritise the new build programme as appropriate.

PROVISION OF SOCIAL HOUSING – ARDS BOROUGH COUNCIL AREA

Year	Location	Units	Type of Housing
Currently on site	Weir Court, Comber	11	Elderly
	Mill Street, Newtownards	4	Young People at risk
2002/03	Landsowne Gardens, Newtownards	3	Learning Disabilities
	Comber/Newtownards	6	Family
2003/04	Burnbrae, Portaferry	4	Family
2004/05	Ards Area	10	Family
	Ballyhalbert	5	Family
	Ballygowan	5	Family
	Greyabbey	4	Family
	Comber	10	Family
	Donaghadee	10	Elderly

Grounds Maintenance Contractors: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3117/01, what work has been carried out by the Grounds Maintenance Contractors in the Carrickfergus area for the last 3 months.

(AQW 3507/01)

Mr Dodds: In the last 3 months, the Housing Executive's Grounds Maintenance Contractors have carried out the following work in the Carrickfergus area:

- The completion of cutting shrub beds throughout the Carrickfergus estates.
- Formal grass cutting, which started on 1 April 2002.
- Regular litter removal from grass areas, shrub beds, rough grass and the base of hedges.
- The application of pesticide to shrub beds.
- Tree removal and pruning.
- The cleaning of culverts and water-courses.

Internal Promotions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3180/01, to detail the criteria used for internal promotions including relevant service.

(AQW 3557/01)

Mr Dodds: All permanent staff in the Administrative Assistant grade who are assessed as being "fitted" or "exceptionally fitted" for promotion are eligible to apply for internal promotion to Administrative Officer. Candidates are assessed at a competence-based interview against

four job-related criteria to demonstrate the ability or competence to be effective at the Administrative Officer grade. Length of service in the NICS is not a specific criterion used in internal promotions.

Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been moved under the SPED Scheme due to the theft of documents from Castlereagh Police Station.

(AQW 3627/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is neither required by, nor available to, the Housing Executive, which operates the SPED scheme. Under the scheme, if the Chief Constable issues a certificate confirming that a threat or intimidation is real, this is sufficient for the Housing Executive to invoke the scheme, without the need for further background as to the actual incident concerned.

Sites: West of the River Bann

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) site locations West of the River Bann that have been (i) visited; and (ii) appraised for possible use by the Social Security Agency Pension Service; and (b) how such sites are identified.

(AQW 3677/01)

Mr Dodds: I can confirm that officials in the Social Security Agency are undertaking an economic appraisal on how services could be delivered to pensioners in Northern Ireland following the introduction of State Pension Credits in October 2003. The appraisal, which is being taken forward in accordance with the guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel has considered a number of suitable locations based West of the River Bann. Following advice from the Valuation and Lands Agency and Development Offices, and also taking into account of the need to have a site operational for advance claims to State Pensions Credit from April 2003, the agency initially visited 3 sites. There are a further 9 sites which are subject to detailed consideration and economic appraisal. As this has not yet been completed I am not in a position to confirm the details of locations which are being considered. No final decision on the precise location has yet been taken.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) the information that has been supplied to the Assembly Commission with regard to the use of 'Hippo

Bags' to ensure efficient use of water; and (b) the estimated volume of water and financial savings that could be made by the use of the bags throughout Parliament Buildings. (AQW 3536/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter):

- (a) No information has been supplied to the Assembly Commission with regard to the use of Hippo bags as their use is not recommended in the type of low-flush cisterns installed in Parliament Buildings;
- (b) As Hippo bags are not recommended for use in low-flush cisterns the question of water and financial savings does not arise.

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to outline the number of 'Hippo Bags' that (a) have been installed to date; and (b) could be installed, to conserve water usage within Parliament Buildings. (AQW 3537/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter):

- (a) No Hippo bags have been installed to date in Parliament Buildings.
- (b) On the basis of advice from Water Service and Construction Service, Hippo bags should not be installed in cisterns in Parliament Buildings.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 31 May 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Community Relations

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to address the deterioration in community relations.

(AQW 3162/01)

Reply: The Executive's Programme for Government contains a number of actions by various Departments aimed at improving community relations. These include the putting in place by the end of the current year a cross-departmental strategy for the promotion of community relations and to ensure an effective and co-ordinated response to sectarian and racial intimidation. Where sectarian tensions have been manifest such as in North Belfast and Larne, officials and voluntary groups have sought to work with local communities to address problems and find solutions.

North Belfast

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any progress on the Executive's initiative to bring an end to the street violence in North Belfast.

(AQW 3177/01)

Reply: We refer the Member to the reply we gave to AQO1235/01 on 30 April 2002.

Since this answer was issued we have devoted considerable time and effort to seeking a resolution of this issue. We have had two series of meetings with elected and community representatives.

Last Friday (17 May) we wrote to each of the local MLAs and the key community interests in Ardoyne and Upper Ardoyne. We proposed two programmes of work for progress on community safety and community dialogue that we expect to operate simultaneously but separately. We believe that progress on these programmes will benefit

both communities, provide assurances for all the interests involved and create mutually conducive progress.

To set the context for and to underpin the process, we also proposed that both communities at the outset should sign up to a Statement of Principles on Building Trust and Confidence.

Copies of the work programmes and the Statement of Principles are attached for the MLA and have been placed in the Assembly Library.

We have asked the MLAs and community interests to come back to us this Friday 24th May with comments and views after which we will endeavour to take into account any reasonable concerns of either community.

Disability Discrimination

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what targets have been set to tackle disability discrimination.

(AQW 3184/01)

Reply: We recognise that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was an important development in outlawing discrimination against disabled people but it fell short of providing comprehensive and enforceable civil rights. We are committed to addressing this shortfall and this will be achieved in a number of ways. The disability discrimination law will be further strengthened when the final phase of the Act's access to services provisions comes into force on 1 October 2004. We will also implement the Executive's detailed response to the recommendations made by the Disability Rights Task Force. A report on the consultation on our response is in preparation.

When we have finalised this, we will bring forward appropriate legislation to implement legislative proposals for improving disability rights.

As set out in the Programme for Government, we will establish an interdepartmental Working Group this year under the Promoting Social Inclusion element of New TSN to develop a strategy to implement the proposals in the Executive's response and any wider issues raised in the consultation.

Furthermore, we have asked the Equality Commission to consider further a range of issues raised by the Task Force.

Equality Commission

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what assessment it can make in relation to the religious and gender composition of Equality Commission staff as published in the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland Annual Report 2000-2001 (page 39) as to whether this is a fair reflection of the religious

and gender composition of the Northern Ireland workforce as at January 2001; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3421/01)

Reply: The most recently published figures for the composition of the Northern Ireland workforce were those presented in the Equality Commission's 11th Annual Monitoring Report. These showed the position at 1 January 2000. At that date, the composition of the Northern Ireland workforce was

Protestant	Roman Catholic	Non-determined	Female	Male
57.5% [60.4%]*	37.8% [39.6%]*	4.7%	47.3%	52.7%

*The percentages in square brackets exclude those in the Non-determined category.

The Equality Commission's 12th Annual Monitoring Report on monitoring figures for 2001 will be published later this year.

The composition of the Commission's workforce at 31 January 2001, and reported in its 2nd Annual Report was

Protestant	Roman Catholic	Non-determined	Female	Male
40.9% [43.4%]*	53.3% [56.6%]*	5.8%	75.2%	24.8%

*The percentages in square brackets exclude those in the Non-determined category.

These figures show that both Protestants and men are under-represented in the Commission's workforce. The Equality Commission is currently using affirmative action measures, such as welcoming statements in job advertisements to help increase the numbers of job applications from the Protestant community and from men.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's first review under Article 55 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 will be conducted later this year. This review will consider the Commission's workforce composition and identify an appropriate affirmative programme to address these issues.

The Commission will continue to use lawful affirmative action measures to address under-representation in its workforce.

Hate Crimes

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on plans to introduce legislation to tackle hate crimes.

(AQO 1425/01)

Reply: We deplore all racially motivated and sectarian attacks which have no place in a civilised society.

The responsibility for criminal justice, including criminal law on racially motivated and sectarian crime, is a reserved matter.

The Secretary of State has announced his intention to consult on the scope for strengthening the law in this area, and we await with interest the publication of his proposals.

Children's Commissioner

Mr O'Connor asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 1028/01, to make a statement on the progress of the Children's Commissioner.

(AQO 1446/01)

Reply: The Executive approved the draft Bill at its meeting on 16 May 2002.

On 24 May, we wrote to the Speaker enclosing the draft, together with the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum. A Statement on the legislative competence of the Assembly in relation to the bill will follow today.

We have proposed that the bill should be introduced to the Assembly on 5 June.

Travellers' Report

Mr C Murphy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline progress on the implementation of the PSI Working Group on Travellers Report.

(AQO 1411/01)

Reply: Work on the development of the Executive's response to the PSI Working Group Report on Travellers is at an advanced stage.

The Executive will publish its response shortly.

Executive Meetings: Venue

Mrs Nelis asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the benefits accrued from holding Executive meetings outside Stormont.

(AQO 1437/01)

Reply: The Executive is there to serve all the people in Northern Ireland. It is therefore appropriate to hold Executive meetings outside Belfast. However, the benefits of Executive meetings flow from the work that is done. By its nature and the decisions it has taken, the Executive has clearly demonstrated its inclusive nature and effectiveness in serving all the people of Northern Ireland.

European Summit

Mr A Doherty asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to ensure an input into the forthcoming European Summit.

(AQO 1431/01)

Reply: We will attend a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe) on 11 June, along with Ministers from the other devolved administrations and Whitehall Departments. UK policy positions for the European Council at Seville on 21-22 June will be discussed at this meeting.

New Irish Government: Meetings

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to indicate the schedule of NSMC meetings planned following the formation of the New Irish Government. (AQO 1432/01)

Reply: A number of North/ South Ministerial Council Meetings have been scheduled to be held following the formation of the new Irish Government. Meetings in the following Sectors have been arranged to take place before the end of June:

- Language
- Special European Programmes
- Tourism
- Food Safety/Health
- Waterways and Trade

Further meetings may also be arranged.

Racism

Mr Molloy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister the date it expects to publish its racism strategy; and to make a statement. (AQO 1438/01)

Reply: In fulfilling our Programme for Government commitment we are currently developing a strategy to tackle racial inequality with the assistance of departments, statutory agencies, and voluntary bodies through our PSI Working Group on Ethnic Minorities.

A number of recommendations made by the Group have already been introduced which include the establishment of a Race Equality Unit and the introduction of a funding scheme for Minority Ethnic Voluntary Organisations.

We are making arrangements to meet with the PSI Working Group in the very near future to discuss the draft race strategy and formulate a plan to take our work forward.

We intend to have a full and open consultation on the document, before it is finally agreed by the Executive Committee and it is anticipated that the strategy will be issued for consultation over the summer period with the final strategy published later this year.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Imported Meat

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is she aware of any illegal cash sales to retail outlets of minced beef of Third World origin or constituted from parts of the animal not normally used in the manufacture of mince. (AQW 3394/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): 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.

Controls and conditions for the production and sale of minced beef are prescribed in the Minced Meat and Meat Preparations (Hygiene) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997. These Regulations are enforced by the Department's Veterinary Service, or in certain circumstances by District Council Environmental Health Officers, on behalf of the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

Neither my Department, nor the FSA is aware of any illegal activity in relation to the production or sale of minced beef to retail outlets or to any other establishments. If any illegal activity involving the production or consignment of minced beef is known to be taking place, details should be reported to the FSA or to the appropriate enforcement authority so that appropriate legal action including prosecution can be taken.

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) any plans she has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures she has put in place to ensure staff from her Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3489/01)

Ms Rodgers: As part of the plans to celebrate the Golden Jubilee I welcomed the Queen to the DARD exhibition at the Balmoral Show where I took the

opportunity to outline the important contribution that agriculture makes to the life and economy of Northern Ireland. I also attended a Reception in Parliament Buildings, hosted by the Speaker of the Assembly, Lord Alderdice, to mark the Golden Jubilee.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service has awarded the additional Bank Holiday set for Monday, 3 June to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail any contact her officials have had with the Department for Social Development to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the NI Housing Executive's 'Places for People' rural housing policy.

(AQW 3558/01)

Ms Rodgers: DARD officials contributed to the extensive consultation exercise which was carried out as part of the rural housing policy review. Following that exercise, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive established a Rural Steering Group to oversee the implementation of the rural policy review. That Group included members representing DARD, DSD, the Rural Development Council, the Rural Community Network, and the Federation of Housing Associations. Progress made in implementing this policy was highlighted in a Report published by the NIHE as recently as 15 May at the Balmoral Show. This report acknowledges the role played by rural representatives in taking the policy forward.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail any contact her officials have had with the Department for Social Development to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the NI Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy and Services Review.

(AQW 3559/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is the Agency with statutory responsibility for homelessness. DARD officials contribute to NIHE policy development in several ways including having representation on the 'Rural Housing Estates Programme'. An NIHE Rural Homelessness Survey is planned for later this year and DARD officials will contribute as appropriate to policy considerations following on from that Survey.

Housing Bill 2002

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 1214/01, to detail any contact her officials have had with the Department

for Social Development to ensure that rural issues are taken into consideration in regard to the Housing Bill 2002.

(AQW 3560/01)

Ms Rodgers: The consultation period on the Housing Bill has just ended, 30 April 2002. DARD officials were consulted as part of that process and will be consulted again, as appropriate, when the Department of Social Development has considered the results of the consultation process.

Farmers' Early Retirement and Loan Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) names; (ii) terms of reference; and (iii) reporting date of any consultants she has appointed to look into the Farmers' Early Retirement and Loan Scheme proposed in the Assembly on 5 December 2000.

(AQW 3696/01)

Ms Rodgers: As you are aware, I commissioned a research project into Early Retirement and New Entrants Schemes last year. The research is being carried out by Queen's University, Belfast in association with University College, Dublin and the final report is to be with me by the end of July 2002. I attach a copy of the Terms of Reference for the study.

I did not appoint consultants specifically to look into the scheme proposed in the Assembly on 5 December 2000 but the researchers from Queen's University and University College, Dublin are aware of your proposal. Indeed, I understand that they discussed it at some length with you a couple of weeks ago.

I commissioned the research project (and an earlier consultancy study, the outcome of which was inconclusive) because there are issues of value for money surrounding early retirement and new entrants schemes. I have to be satisfied that there is a benefit to the economy and to the Northern Ireland taxpayer if I am to consider introducing either scheme. Such evidence is best obtained from an examination of the structural and other issues involved, and a review of experiences in some other Member States, rather than by investigating just one possible model of a scheme.

I will make the research report available to the Assembly Committee once I receive it.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken to ensure regional status regarding agri-monetary compensation.

(AQO 1445/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under EU regulations, decisions on the payment of optional agrimonetary compensation could be taken only at Member State level. There was no discretion for regions within Member States unilaterally to make

compensation payments which were not available throughout the Member State. The agrimoney compensation mechanism itself expired at the end of December 2001. The recent debate on the availability of agrimoney compensation to the livestock sector related to the 2nd and 3rd tranches of compensation which had previously been triggered. The disappointing decision by the UK Government not to avail of this compensation means that the system has now come to a complete end.

Brucellosis

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the incidents of (a) TB; (b) Brucellosis; and (c) BSE in West Tyrone in each of the last 4 years. (AQO 1414/01)

Ms Rodgers: In relation to Brucellosis and TB my Department holds the figures in Divisional Veterinary Office area rather than constituency area. The following are therefore the figures for the Omagh Divisional Veterinary Office

- (a) The following figures on TB reflect the number of reactors as a percentage of the number of animal tests.

Year	TB Incidence
1998	0.22
1999	0.19
2000	0.31
2001	0.37

- (b) Brucellosis

During 1998 there were 7 restrictions as a result of brucellosis. In 1999, 1, in 2000, none and in 2001, 1.

- (c) Information on the incidence of BSE in West Tyrone is not available. However the number of clinical cases of BSE in Co Tyrone for the last four years are 7, 2, 4 and 8 respectively, with 5 further cases to date this year. For surveillance cases, 0, 0, 13 and 12 with 9 further cases to date. This gives a total of 7, 2, 17, 20 and 14 to date.

'Investing for Health' Strategy

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how the Agricultural Colleges will contribute to the 'Investing for Health' Strategy. (AQO 1455/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department's Colleges offer full-time and part-time Further Education and Higher Education courses to students aged from 16 years in a range of land based and agri-food areas. Delivery of this education incorporates a strong focus on the promotion and

development of a healthy behaviour and environment amongst students and staff.

Examples include:

"Healthy Eating" promotions to encourage students and staff to consider their diet and nutrition.

Student Counselling Services which offer a confidential service on a wide range of physical and emotional issues affecting the health of individuals.

a robust "Pastoral Care" policy which promotes an ethos of health promotion, care and well-being.

A range of Clubs and Societies designed to improve the social networks of students.

A no-smoking policy in all but designated rooms in all the colleges.

Fully equipped and modern fitness suites and a wide range of recreational activities encourage physical activity.

regular drug and alcohol awareness seminars held in collaboration with the local Police Service.

Specific health and safety training for students and the completion of risk assessments in all areas of study.

All these activities are consistent with and complementary to the principles of the Investing for Health Strategy.

Brucellosis

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress in her efforts to eradicate Brucellosis in the South Armagh area. (AQO 1419/01)

Ms Rodgers: My concerns at the level of Brucellosis in South Armagh and elsewhere led me to announce some additional measures recently. Those measures included the allocation of additional manpower and treating Brucellosis as the highest priority thereby maximising the use of our existing resources. Additional staff have been moved into the three high incidence areas of Armagh, Newry and Enniskillen and my Department is in the process of re-organising staff at markets and abattoirs in order to provide extra resources for Brucellosis duties. In addition the use of the bulk milk sampling programme in dairy herds has allowed additional staff to be allocated to the above high incidence areas.

It will, however, take some time for the results of these extra measures to become apparent.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to re-open the

Countryside Management Scheme; and to make a statement. (AQO 1441/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Countryside Management Scheme opened for a third round of applications on 20 May 2002. This application period will close on 31 July 2002.

By 22 May 2002 a total of 883 farmers, who had made application to join the CMS in the two previous application periods, had already entered into management agreements with DARD. However, other farmers have been invited to enter into management agreements with DARD and I therefore expect that this figure will rise to over 1,000 CMS participants within the next few weeks.

I intend that the CMS will re-open to new applications on an annual basis.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Schools: Sports Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the potential for greater community use of school, college and university sports facilities. (AQW 3600/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Sports Council is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland and I am fully supportive of the Council's initiatives in this important area. These include:

- **The Play Sport Programme**, which aims to enable as many young people as possible, in areas of deprivation, to take up and obtain a quality start in sport, by creating locally available, high quality sporting opportunities on or near to primary school sites for school and community use.
- **The Sport Share Programme**, which aims to establish well-managed sports facilities for post-primary and structured community use.
- **The Sports Institute for Northern Ireland**, which is located at the University of Ulster and aims to provide world-class training and support services for talented performers. The facilities will also be available for community use.

Cultural Diversity

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to engage with the Community Relations Council in respect of cultural diversity. (AQW 3608/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has a well-established interest in promoting cultural diversity through, for example,

the Diversity 21 programme. More recently, my officials have been considering how best to develop cultural diversity policy following from the recommendations published in the vision document for arts and culture, *Face-to-Face*.

I must emphasise that this work is still at an early stage of development independent of any direct Community Relations Council input.

The Department has not at this stage taken any specific steps to engage with the Community Relations Council in respect of cultural diversity. Having said that, I do recognise that the Council is an important player in this field and would expect engagement with them in the future along with other key interests as the development of cultural diversity policy progresses.

Odyssey Arena

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of urgent works outstanding at the Odyssey Arena, what steps is he taking to address the problems within the Odyssey Trust. (AQW 3621/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The relationship between the Odyssey Trust Company (OTC) and Sheridan Millennium Ltd is that of landlord and tenant, and resolution of the outstanding works at the Odyssey Arena are to be resolved in that context. I have been advised that OTC has provided Sheridan with a report on the various construction issues. My officials have had a series of meetings with both parties and I have discussed the issue with the OTC and intend to meet with representatives from Sheridan in the near future.

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what events are being funded to celebrate the Golden Jubilee in West Tyrone. (AQO 1413/01)

Mr McGimpsey: A total of 49 applications for Golden Jubilee funding from groups within Co Tyrone has been approved by the Northern Ireland Golden Jubilee Advisory Panel. Nearly £98,000 has been allocated to Co Tyrone, representing 27% of the total funding allocation.

Approximately 30 of these groups are located in West Tyrone with a funding value of £56, 500.

Ulster Grand Prix

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total expenditure available for organising the Ulster Grand Prix in August 2002. (AQO 1417/01)

Mr McGimpsey: £160K is already available for organising the Ulster Grand Prix in August 2002. This

was raised over several months, by the organisers of the Grand Prix, the Dundrod & District Motorcycle Club.

The Dundrod & District Motorcycle Club still require a further £43K to hold the competition in August and an application for funding of £40K, to help stage this year's race, has recently been received from the Club by the Northern Ireland Events Company. It is too early to say whether or not this application will be successful, but the outcome will hopefully be known in June.

Ulster Way

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his commitment to securing the future of the Ulster Way. (AQO 1416/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I understand that the Minister for the Environment provided you with a written answer on 20 May 2002 to a similar Assembly Question (AQW3416/01) regarding his Department's commitment to securing the future of the Ulster Way.

From this answer you will have learned that the Department of Environment has commissioned the Countryside Access and Activities Network to carry out a review of the future of the Ulster Way which is due to be completed towards the end of this year. Once that review is published, the recommendations will be considered by the three relevant statutory bodies with an interest in the Ulster Way, the Environment and Heritage Service of DOE, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Sports Council.

As Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I have no direct responsibility for the Ulster Way.

EDUCATION

11-Plus

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of Education, regarding the Transfer Test in each of the last 5 years, to detail (a) the number of pupils overall who sat the test and their various grades, broken down in English-medium and Irish-medium schools, giving the numbers who sat the test through English or through Irish in each group; (b) the total number of pupils who opted out from doing the test overall, broken down in English-medium and Irish-medium schools; (c) the breakdown of grades for the 'English language' paper in the English-Medium Transfer Test; and (d) the breakdown of grades for the 'Gaeilge' paper in the Irish-Medium Transfer Test.

(AQW 3565/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Grades are only awarded for the test as a whole and not

for individual components within the papers. Accordingly, the information requested at (c) and (d) is not available. The number of pupils who sat the test by grade and the number of pupils who opted out in Irish Medium and all other grant aided schools for the last five years is detailed below.

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS 2001/02 FOR IRISH MEDIUM AND ALL OTHER GRANT AIDED SCHOOLS

	Irish Medium	Others
Total pupils achieving A	13	6570
Total pupils achieving B1 & B2*	12	2709
Total pupils achieving C1	7	1401
Total pupils achieving C2	9	1403
Total pupils achieving D	51	4755
Total pupils sitting	92	16838
Total opting out	68	8888
Number of pupils in Year 7	160	25726

* The number of pupils in these categories is too small to detail separately.

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS 2000/01 FOR IRISH MEDIUM AND ALL OTHER GRANT AIDED SCHOOLS

	Irish Medium	Others
Total pupils achieving A	25	6383
Total pupils achieving B1	5	1310
Total pupils achieving B2	5	1298
Total pupils achieving C1	7	1447
Total pupils achieving C2	7	1454
Total pupils achieving D	14	5083
Total pupils sitting	63	16975
Total opting out	57	8799
Number of pupils in Year 7	120	25774

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS 1999/2000 FOR IRISH MEDIUM AND ALL OTHER GRANT AIDED SCHOOLS

	Irish Medium	Others
Total pupils achieving A	18	6602
Total pupils achieving B1 & B2*	11	2737
Total pupils achieving C1	5	1450
Total pupils achieving C2	10	1321
Total pupils achieving D	27	5404
Total pupils sitting	71	17514
Total opting out	43	8355
Number of pupils in Year 7	114	25869

* The number of pupils in these categories is too small to detail separately.

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS 1998/99 FOR IRISH MEDIUM AND ALL OTHER GRANT AIDED SCHOOLS

	Irish Medium	Others
Total pupils achieving A	18	6656
Total pupils achieving B1 & B2*	9	2976
Total pupils achieving C1 & C2*	7	2937
Total pupils achieving D	27	5320
Total pupils sitting	61	17889
Total opting out	58	8533
Number of pupils in Year 7	119	26422

* The number of pupils in these categories is too small to detail separately.

TRANSFER PROCEDURE RESULTS 1997/98 FOR IRISH MEDIUM AND ALL OTHER GRANT AIDED SCHOOLS

	Irish Medium	Others
Total pupils achieving A	22	6938
Total pupils achieving B1	7	1477
Total pupils achieving B2	8	1358
Total pupils achieving C1 & C2*	7	2831
Total pupils achieving D	17	5539
Total pupils sitting	61	18143
Total opting out	46	8472
Number of pupils in Year 7	107	26615

* The number of pupils in these categories is too small to detail separately.

Unit of Resource

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the unit of resource available to (i) primary; (ii) secondary; (iii) grammar; (iv) special; and (v) integrated schools, across each Board area. (AQW 3647/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The figures below set out primary, secondary, grammar and integrated schools per capita allocations across each Education and Library Board area based on formula allocations. The grammar school figures include both controlled and voluntary grammar schools. The figures for the integrated sector include both the primary and secondary phase.

	Primary (excluding Controlled Integrated)	Secondary (excluding Controlled Integrated)	Grammar (including Voluntary)	Integrated (Controlled & Grant Maintained)
BELB	£1,695	£2,831	£2,655	£2,462
NEELB	£1,608	£2,631	£2,638	£2,438
SEELB	£1,618	£2,594	£2,699	£2,398
SELB	£1,689	£2,610	£2,831	£2,394
WELB	£1,689	£2,665	£2,810	£2,981

Notes

1. The figures include amounts made available under LMS Formulae in 2001/02 (information for 2002/03 is not yet available).

2. Figures for controlled and maintained schools were obtained from the LMS Budget Statements published by the Education and Library Boards and from the Department's published Budget Statements in the case of Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.
3. The figures exclude centrally retained funds provided in-year to schools for certain items of expenditure, such as substitution costs and allocations for earmarked initiatives and other centrally held resources, such as Home to School Transport, CASS, School Meals and Central Administration, as these are not costed to individual schools.

The figures below set out the per capita costs for special schools based on the Resource Allocation Plans for each Education and Library Board in 2001/02. Special schools are not funded through LMS Funding Formula and the costs are not therefore directly comparable with other types of school.

Special Schools	£000
BELB	11.3
NEELB	9.5
SEELB	11.0
SELB	13.2
WELB	12.7

Notes

1. Figures are based on the estimates of expenditure contained in each Education and Library Board's Resource Allocation Plan, (RAP), for 2001/02 and the October 2001 Department of Education School Census figures for pupils attending special schools.
2. The figures, include not only direct expenditure on special schools, but also costs associated with the administration of special education, the educational psychology service and other support services.

Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the unit of resource for all types of schools controlled by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. (AQW 3648/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The figures below set out per capita allocations for Catholic Maintained nursery, primary and secondary schools based on their LMS formula allocations.

Maintained Nursery	£2,204
Maintained Primary	£1,678
Maintained Secondary	£2,693

Notes

1. The figures include amounts made available under LMS Formulae in 2001/02. (information for 2002/03 is not yet available).
2. Figures obtained from the LMS Budget Statements published by the Boards.
3. The figures exclude centrally retained funds provided in-year to schools for certain items of expenditure, such as substitution costs and allocations for earmarked initiatives and other centrally held resources, such as Home to School Transport, CASS, School Meals and Central Administration, as these are not costed to individual schools.

11-Plus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of pupils receiving grade A at Key Stage 2 (11+) who progress to Grammar School and receive less than grade A at GCSE; and (b) this number as an absolute number and as a percentage of the total.

(AQW 3649/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not available, and could only be collected at disproportionate cost.

Nursery Places

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2805/01, to detail (a) the number of nursery places for children within North Down; and (b) the location of these schools.

(AQW 3658/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The location and number of nursery places available in North Down is set out below:

School	Location	Full-time places	Part-time places
Bangor Central Nursery School	Bangor	26	52
Hollywood Nursery School	Hollywood	-	52
Trinity Nursery School	Bangor	26	52
Donaghadee Primary School - Nursery Unit	Donaghadee	-	52
Bloomfield Road Primary School - Nursery Unit	Bangor	-	52
Kilcooley Primary School - Nursery Unit	Bangor	26	-
Towerview Primary School - Nursery Unit	Bangor	-	52
Kilmaine Primary School - Nursery Unit	Bangor	-	52
St Malachy's Primary School - Nursery Unit	Bangor	-	52
Total		78	416

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Staffing

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education what measures he proposes to safeguard employment within the North-Eastern Education and Library Board.

(AQW 3662/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is a matter for the North Eastern Education and Library Board to determine its staffing needs within the totality of its approved budget.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Finance

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education what measures he intends to take regarding the financial

difficulties being experienced by the North-Eastern Education and Library Board.

(AQW 3663/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am aware of the financial difficulties being faced by the North Eastern Education and Library Board this year and have already met with the Vice-Chairman and Chief Executive to hear of their difficulties at first hand. Following that meeting, at my request, my officials have commenced working with Board officers in a detailed examination of the Board's financial situation in order to determine whether there is room for further flexibility within its current budget, and to report their findings to me.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Finance

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action he proposes to take in respect of the current financial situation facing the North-Eastern Education and Library Board; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3664/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am aware of the financial difficulties being faced by the North Eastern Education and Library Board this year and have already met with the Vice-Chairman and Chief Executive to hear of their difficulties at first hand. Following that meeting, at my request, my officials have commenced working with Board officers in a detailed examination of the Board's financial situation in order to determine whether there is room for further flexibility within its current budget, and to report their findings to me.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Finance

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, in light of the financial situation of the North-Eastern Education and Library Board, will he ensure that no school-children will be disadvantaged by a diminished unit of resource for schools in that Board area.

(AQW 3665/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The level of resources delegated to its schools is primarily a matter for the NEELB. I am aware of the financial difficulties that have been identified by the Board in relation to its schools and my officials are currently working closely with Board Officers to examine the position in detail.

Burns Report

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to consult with groups that do not agree with the Burns proposals for restructuring secondary schools.

(AQW 3666/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I want to hear the full range of views on the Burns proposals and I have been engaged in a series of meetings with key interests. Differing views have been expressed at these meetings.

I have met with the Governing Bodies Association, which has expressed its opposition to the Burns recommendations, and a meeting is being arranged with representatives of grammar school principals. I am prepared to meet any other groups that wish to discuss the issues.

I have also invited all the political parties to discuss the review with me and I hope they will accept this invitation.

Youth Education Social Inclusion Partnership: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what projects, including constituency area, were successful in achieving funding through the Youth Education Social Inclusion Partnership for minor capital works.

(AQW 3687/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Youth Education Social Inclusion Partnership has not yet approved funding to any projects for minor capital works.

Burns Report

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to implement pilot schemes for the Burns proposals.

(AQW 3691/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have invited comments on the Burns proposals, suggestions for modifications or for alternative arrangements. Decisions on new arrangements will not be taken until I have considered the responses. I cannot comment about piloting any new arrangements before decisions are taken on the form they will take.

Burns Report

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans he has should top grammar schools decide to opt for independent status as a result of the Burns proposals.

(AQW 3692/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Decisions will not be made on the Burns proposals until I have considered all the responses to consultation. However, grant-aided schools cannot simply opt to change their status: proposals for such changes are subject to a statutory defined process.

Youth Education Social Inclusion Partnership: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail, in each of the last 3 years, (a) the funding available

through the Youth Education Social Inclusion Partnership for minor capital works; and (b) the number of applications received by YESIP for minor capital works.

(AQW 3697/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No applications were sought and no funding was made available by the Youth Education Social Partnership for minor capital works in the last three years.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

East Down Institute: Funding

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when will funding be made available for the new building at East Down Institute in Downpatrick; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2930/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): An economic appraisal which addresses the accommodation needs of the East Down Institute's Downpatrick Campus has been approved. However my Department is currently examining recently presented economic appraisals in respect of the Ballynahinch and Newcastle campuses of the Institute. Funding cannot be considered for the Downpatrick Campus until the economic appraisals for the Newcastle and Ballynahinch campuses have been cleared.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment she has made in relation to the impact New Deal has had on long-term unemployment in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3115/01)

Ms Hanna: From the introduction of New Deal in April 1998 in Northern Ireland, the total number of people in the New Deal target groups claiming Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) has fallen from 25,792 to 9,138 in March 2002, a decrease of 65%.

Over the same period the total number of long-term unemployed has fallen from 25,805 to 10,369, a decrease of 60%.

By contrast the total number of people claiming JSA in Northern Ireland (target and non-target group) has fallen from 56,749 to 37,105, a decrease of 35%.

Further Education: Funding

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) what assessment she has made of the financial support given to further and higher education;

and (b) if she intends to increase the current rate over and above inflation. (AQW 3428/01)

Ms Hanna:

Higher Education & Further Education Core Funding

In 2002/03 the universities will receive £132m and the further education sector £147m. These are considerable investments of public money. I have, nevertheless, bid for additional support in the budget 2002 process to cover inflation and to promote other developments.

Student Support

In relation to student support:

- (a) My predecessor, Dr Sean Farren, carried out a thorough review of student support measures, in 2000, which resulted in a £65m package of additional support over 3 years.
- (b) The Department for Education and Skills is currently carrying out a similar exercise in Great Britain and I will not be considering any additional modifications here in Northern Ireland until I have studied the GB proposals, which should be announced in July.

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) any plans she has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures she has put in place to ensure staff from her Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3509/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is the lead Department for Golden Jubilee Celebrations.

I am pleased to have participated in the events which took place during the Queen's recent visit to Northern Ireland to mark her Golden Jubilee. In addition, 20 staff from my Department were nominated to attend the Queen's Garden Parties and our offices will be closed on 3 June to enable staff and customers to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

Further Education Sports Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the potential for greater community use of college/university sports facilities. (AQW 3602/01)

Ms Hanna: To encourage greater community use of college sports facilities by community groups, my Department has written to all colleges of Further Education encouraging them to negotiate with outside organisations such as District Councils and youth clubs in order to promote the availability of their PE/sports facilities.

I understand, also, that the universities make their facilities available to other organisations and to the general public at a charge.

Medical Students: Training

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) how many days of child protection training do medical students receive during their studies at Queen's University, Belfast; and (b) the content of such training. (AQW 3622/01)

Ms Hanna: The duration and content of child protection training given to medical undergraduates at Queens University is a matter for the university, as an autonomous institution.

Students' Religion: Universities

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students by religion for each of the last 5 years in (a) The University of Ulster; and (b) Queen's University, Belfast. (AQW 3645/01)

Ms Hanna: The breakdown of students by religion for the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast has been placed in the Assembly library.

Degree Courses

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of applications for degrees in (a) mechanical engineering; (b) civil engineering; and (c) electrical engineering at higher education institutions in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3653/01)

Ms Hanna: Information on applications to degree courses is collected by UCAS. Information on subject of study is only available at subject group level. All requested subject areas fall under the Engineering and Technology group. Information on subject group by domicile and institution is only available for the 2000/01 and 2001/02 academic years.

NI DOMICILED APPLICATIONS TO DEGREE COURSES IN ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE UK BY REGION

		Year	
		2001/02	2000/01
Institution Region	NI	2,176	2,424
	GB	1,654	1,662
	All UK	3,830	4,086

**APPLICATIONS TO DEGREE COURSES IN ENGINEERING
AND TECHNOLOGY AT NI HIGHER EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS**

		Year	
		2001/02	2000/01
Domicile	NI	2,176	2,424
	Other	538	617
	Total	2,714	3,041

Source: UCAS

Private Sector Training

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how does she ensure that private sector training providers are given equal opportunity in the provision of training; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3668/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department's Training Programmes are, in the main, delivered by a variety of training providers, both public and private sector. Contracts for this delivery are awarded as a result of open competition, having due regard to considerations of cost, quality and effectiveness.

Construction Industry Training Board

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she satisfied that the Construction Industry Training Board has the capacity to fully meet current demand for skills training; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3669/01)

Ms Hanna: The purpose of the Construction Industry Training Board is to encourage the appropriate training of persons employed in, or intending to be employed in, the construction industry. This is achieved by direct training, using CITB facilities, by grant aiding participation in approved courses, or through work based training. Training in construction skills is also available through the Department's training programmes. I am satisfied that, overall, there is sufficient capacity to meet the demand for skills training in the industry.

Private Sector Training

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to encourage the development of the private sector training facility; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3670/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department encourages the provision of cost effective, quality training provision, from public and private sectors alike, by openly contracting for the delivery of its training programmes.

Construction Industry Training Board

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she has received the report of the Review of Services conducted by the Construction Industry Training Board; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3671/01)

Ms Hanna: I understand from the Construction Industry Training Board that no such report exists. There is an annual report published by the CITB and this is in the public domain.

Construction Industry Training Board

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of Northern Ireland skills training is provided by the Construction Industry Training Board; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3672/01)

Ms Hanna: Because of the volume of training provided "on the job", it is impossible to calculate accurately the percentage provided by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB). However, in the last full training year for which figures are available, 2000/01, a total of 3645 persons received direct training in construction skills by the CITB. This represents 57% of the total number of people whose training was either provided or grant aided by the CITB. In addition, the CITB provided health and safety training to 4630 persons in the same year. These figures do not include unemployed people undertaking construction related training courses.

Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 3120/01, to detail (a) the scores awarded as part of the economic appraisals by the consultants; and (b) the respective score awarded by the Department for each application.

(AQW 3698/01)

Ms Hanna: A table which shows the relevant projects ranked in order of their selection panel scores, along with their economic appraisal scores has been placed in the Assembly Library for your information.

Subject to a satisfactory appraisal the purpose of the selection scoring was to identify those projects which best met the policy objectives of the measure.

Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the process for handling appeals challenging the decisions made in the allocation of funding under Measure 2.3 'Promoting a Labour Market

Open to All' of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity, with particular reference to the sums set aside in the case of successful appeals and the make-up of any appeal panel. (AQW 3699/01)

Ms Hanna: Following my announcement on 21 March 2001 of the outcome of the selection process unsuccessful applicants were given until 12 April 2002 to appeal. Organisations had the right to appeal on one or both of the two grounds outlined in the detailed guidance to applicants, as follows;

- The outcome was a decision no reasonable person would make on the basis of the information provided in the application; and/or
- There was a failure in adherence to procedures or systems.

Following the initial selection the full annual allocation was awarded to projects under each Measure. Funding for any successful appeals would be sought through a bid to in-year monitoring.

The Appeal Panel consisted of two Civil Servants from this Department and a representative from the Managing Authority for the Programme. The Appeal Panel had access to the same papers as the Selection Panels and the correspondence from the appellants outlining the ground(s) on which they wished to appeal.

Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if anyone involved in the original decision for awarding funding under Measure 2.3 'Promoting a Labour Market Open to All' of the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity was involved in the appeal process. (AQW 3700/01)

Ms Hanna: None of the persons on the Appeals Panel sat on either of the two selection panels for the above Measure, or were otherwise involved in the selection process for that Measure.

Employment: Age Discrimination

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures she is taking to encourage businesses to employ older people. (AQW 3706/01)

Ms Hanna: It might be helpful if I began by setting out the legal context regarding age discrimination. At present there is no legislation specifically outlawing discrimination against older people seeking employment. A European Directive outlawing age discrimination is required to be implemented by 2006, and this is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

However, my Department encourages employers to follow guidance in the voluntary Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment, which was issued by the then Department of Economic Development in 1999. The Code sets the standard for non-ageist approaches in employment in relation to recruitment, selection, promotion, training, redundancy and retirement.

My Department is also responsible for New Deal 50+, which aims to help older people gain employment.

Finally, as I have said previously, it makes good business sense to base employment decisions on skills and abilities, rather than on preconceived ideas about age. Older workers often have talents and abilities that are in short supply, and employers who ignore them deprive themselves of a valuable resource.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) any plans he has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures he has put in place to ensure staff from his Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3510/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey):

- Whilst there have been no official plans within my Department to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee, I as Minister of Enterprise Trade & Investment, had the great honour of accompanying HRH Prince Philip to Fisher Engineering, Ballinamallard, Co Fermanagh during the Queen's Golden Jubilee Trip to Northern Ireland.
- The NICS has awarded its entire staff the additional Bank Holiday, set for Monday 3rd June 2002, to celebrate the Queens Golden Jubilee. Staff will also enjoy the normal Spring Bank Holiday, which has been moved to 4 June this year to coincide with the Jubilee celebrations.

Trade Missions

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the number of departmental supported Trade Missions for each year since 1997. (AQW 3540/01)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB's Trade International had lead departmental responsibility for trade missions and the figures below are based on these activities. While former non-departmental public bodies, which are now part of

Invest NI, may have supported other trade missions the relevant statistics are not considered to add substantially to those provided and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

The number of IDB supported trade missions for each year since 1997 are therefore:

Year	No of Trade Missions
1997/98	13
1998/99	13
1999/00	11
2000/01	16
2001/02	16

Trade Missions

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the number of departmental supported Trade Missions on which West Belfast based businesses were present for each year since 1997. (AQW 3541/01)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB's Trade International had lead departmental responsibility for trade missions and the figures below are based on these activities. While former non-departmental public bodies, which are now part of Invest NI, may have supported other trade missions the relevant statistics are not considered to add substantially to those provided and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

The number of IDB supported trade missions in which West Belfast based businesses participated from 1997/98 is therefore as follows:

Year	No of Trade Missions
1997/98	8
1998/99	5
1999/00	4
2000/01	8
2001/02	7

Trade Missions

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline, by constituency, the number of businesses which took part in departmental supported Trade Missions for each year since 1997. (AQW 3542/01)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB's Trade International had lead departmental responsibility for trade missions and while former non-departmental public bodies, which are now part of Invest NI, may have supported other trade missions the relevant statistics to answer this question could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

I would refer the Member to the answer contained in his related question 3543/01.

Trade Missions

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline, by constituency, the number of businesses which took part in IDB supported Trade Missions for each year since 1997. (AQW 3543/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The number of businesses, by constituency, that participated on IDB supported trade missions for each year since 1997 is therefore as follows:

Constituency	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/02	2001/02
East Belfast	5	5	5	7	10
North Belfast	12	10	10	13	15
South Belfast	21	16	20	17	14
West Belfast	10	6	6	11	14
East Antrim	20	10	9	9	6
East Londonderry	7	2	5	12	16
Fermanagh/ South Tyrone	11	8	5	5	12
Foyle	8	7	7	10	7
Lagan Valley	22	11	10	18	8
Mid Ulster	13	10	5	6	9
Newry & Armagh	12	7	6	7	7
North Antrim	3	2	1	7	8
South Antrim	15	13	15	17	26
North Down	14	15	7	10	13
South Down	2	2	2	2	2
Strangford	16	11	6	17	18
Upper Bann	27	21	20	19	15
West Tyrone	7	5	4	1	9

Commercial Insurance

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the effect on small courier businesses of the doubling of commercial insurance. (AQW 3592/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I am not aware of the specific problems referred to in the Honourable Member's Question.

I am aware however that a number of businesses in Northern Ireland are having difficulty in obtaining public and employers liability insurance. As a result, I have drawn it to the attention of the Economic Secretary to

the Treasury and written directly on behalf of a number of businesses to the Association of British Insurers.

I have also tasked my officials to undertake research to better quantify the scope, nature and scale of the problem as a prelude to developing a strategy to seek to address the causes of high insurance costs – or even its non-availability – and to help stabilise or reduce the rate of increase in premiums.

In the meantime, I would encourage any businesses experiencing difficulty in obtaining insurance to write directly to the Association of British Insurers, 51 Gresham Street, London EC2V 7HQ to obtain details of potential sources of cover.

Contex

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the closure of Contex and whether he believes anything else could have been done to save the company. (AQW 3593/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Competition from the Far East resulted in a sizeable cost undercutting of Contex's products and the Transpo organisation in reviewing all of its businesses worldwide has decided due to these cost advantages to source all die for diode manufacture externally.

Contex local management presented a plan to Transpo to sustain die manufacture only at the Antrim facility that would have retained a core number of jobs. This would have resulted in all die production from Contex being sent to Orlando for diode manufacture, however Transpo rejected the on going cost viability of this proposal based on the savings they had identified from moving to 3rd party supply.

Invest NI had been in discussion since late December 2001 with both the local Company and the parent regarding sustaining the Antrim operation. However Transpo's plans to move to 3rd party supply, and the reliance of Contex on its internal sales to Transpo, mean that the Antrim operation does not have a viable future.

I do not believe anything further could have been done by Invest NI to save the company.

Commercial Insurance

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will initiate a review into commercial insurance and the perceived financial difficulties imposed upon small businesses. (AQW 3596/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I would refer the honourable member to my answer to AQW No 3592/01. While the regulation of financial services, including insurance, is a reserved matter, I am keen that my department should examine the evidence of high commercial insurance costs and, if

appropriate, take the lead in developing a strategy to address its causes.

Commercial Insurance

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what incentives are available to make commercial insurance rates more appealing to small businesses. (AQW 3597/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There are no incentives available specifically for this purpose. I would however refer the Honourable Member to my answers to AQW No 3592/01 and AQW No 3596/01

Tourism

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the impact on business and tourism in Fermanagh due to the closure of St Angelo airport, Enniskillen. (AQW 3617/01)

Sir Reg Empey: We would hope that the impact of the closure of St Angelo Airport on the Tourism sector would be minimal, given that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau and City of Derry Airport have been working closely with IT Ireland Tours to secure the charter flight which the company operated into St Angelo airport each summer since 1998.

I am pleased to say that from May 2002, the charter service has been successfully re-routed to the City of Derry Airport and arrangements are in place to transfer tourists to the Fermanagh area. Negotiations are continuing to consolidate and expand the service for future years.

Therefore, businesses in the area should not suffer unduly as a result of this closure.

Tourism

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the options he is considering to help business and tourism due to the closure of St Angelo airport, Enniskillen. (AQW 3618/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I would hope that the impact of the closure of St Angelo Airport on the Tourism sector would be minimal, given that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau and City of Derry Airport have been working closely with IT Ireland Tours to secure the charter flight which the company operated into St Angelo airport each summer since 1998.

I am pleased to say that from May 2002, the charter service has been successfully re-routed to the City of Derry Airport and arrangements are in place to transfer tourists to the Fermanagh area. Negotiations are continuing to consolidate and expand the service for future years.

Therefore, businesses in the area should not suffer unduly as a result of this closure.

Invest NI provides a wide range of support to manufacturing, tradeable services and tourism businesses and works closely with the Fermanagh Local Action Group, the Fermanagh Enterprise Agency, the Fermanagh Local Strategy Partnership and the Fermanagh District Council – all of whom are key players in the development and long term success of the county.

A number of major investments within the area are currently being considered. Should these investments proceed a significant number of jobs will be secured and additional jobs created.

Enron

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the involvement of Enron in the development of renewable wind energy in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3637/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There is no record of any involvement by Enron in the development of renewable wind energy in Northern Ireland. However, a separate company called Enron Wind is involved with Airtricity in the proposed development of two wind farms in Northern Ireland. Earlier this month Enron Wind was taken over by a US company called General Electric and has been renamed GE Wind Power. This renamed company will be providing turbines to the two proposed wind farms at Binn Mountain, Co Tyrone and at Tappaghan Mountain, Co Fermanagh for which planning approval is currently being sought.

Wind Farm Developments: Lightning Strikes

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of lightning strikes attracted by wind turbines at wind farm developments in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3638/01)

Sir Reg Empey: All wind farm developments are commercially operated and there is no requirement to record or inform Government of any lightening strikes. However according to operators, there are no instances of lightening strikes on wind turbines in Northern Ireland in the past 6 years.

ENVIRONMENT

Plastic Bags

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the Republic of Ireland's decision to place a

levy on the use of plastic bags, if he has any plans to implement a similar policy. (AQW 3626/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I have taken particular note of the success of the recently introduced levy on plastic carrier bags in persuading consumers in the Republic of Ireland to reduce significantly their use of plastic bags.

In the UK as a whole, around ten billion plastic bags are given away each year. That constitutes a significant source of landfill and an equally significant source of litter. Unfortunately, because taxation is an excepted matter, Northern Ireland does not have the necessary legal powers to allow the introduction of a levy here independently of the rest of the UK. I am aware that Michael Meacher at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has given notice that he intends to press for the introduction of a similar levy. I can confirm that it is my intention to support DEFRA in this, and to encourage the Welsh and Scottish Devolved Administrations to do likewise. In particular, I will raise the issue at meetings of the Environment Sector of the British-Irish Council.

In the meantime I have asked my officials to explore any options which might have an equivalent effect to the levy. They are engaging in discussions with the supermarket sector, to look at the possibility of developing a voluntary scheme to encourage consumers to reduce the current profligate use of plastic bags.

As the experience of the Republic of Ireland has shown, people are willing to act with greater environmental responsibility when given appropriate encouragement. I am hopeful that we can build constructively on the heightened public awareness of waste issues brought about by my Department's recent 'Wake up to Waste' campaign.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Payment of Rates

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many households, per constituency, (i) pay their rates directly; and (ii) have their rates paid by social security. (AQW 3466/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): [holding answer 22 May 2002]: The Rate Collection Agency is responsible for the administration of Housing Benefit for those ratepayers who own and occupy their own homes. The Agency has no responsibility for award of Housing Benefit in the public or private rented sectors and accordingly the information provided relates only to the owner-occupier sector.

The Agency records information on Housing Benefit awards by District Council Area. A schedule showing the number of households by District Council Area, those receiving Housing Benefit and those paying rates direct is attached at Appendix 1.

The number of households in Appendix 1 excludes properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and properties that are vacant. Rates are foregone on vacant property.

APPENDIX 1
SUMMARY OF HOUSEHOLDS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA,
WHICH (I) RECEIVED HOUSING BENEFIT AND (II) PAID
THEIR RATES DIRECTLY IN THE YEAR 2001-2002

District Council	* Number of Households	Households Receiving Housing Benefit	Households Paying Rates Direct
Antrim	13798	1124	12674
Ards	24332	1231	23101
Armagh	16118	1700	14418
Ballymena	18885	964	17921
Ballymoney	7719	648	7071
Banbridge	12822	932	11990
Belfast	84909	8265	76644
Carrickfergus	12426	558	11868
Castlereagh	22402	973	21429
Coleraine	19811	1169	18642
Cookstown	6411	1153	8258
Craigavon	24613	2388	22225
Derry	27544	3539	24005
Down	19450	1443	18007
Dungannon and South Tyrone	14322	2325	11997
Fermanagh	18313	2312	16001
Larne	10765	604	10161
Limavady	8428	981	7447
Lisburn	31304	1765	29539
Magherafelt	11121	1366	9755
Moyle	5649	447	5202
Newry & Mourne	24945	4574	20371
Newtownards	25809	1519	24290
North Down	27234	1222	26012
Omagh	13551	1697	11854
Strabane	10190	1555	8635

* Excludes Vacant Properties and Northern Ireland Housing Executive Properties.

Chastisement

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made of the impact on religious liberties of the proposal to remove the defence of reasonable chastisement for the physical punishment of children by parents included in the consultation document 'Physical Punishment in the Home - Thinking about the Issues, Looking at the Evidence'. (AQW 3538/01)

Dr Farren: The removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement was one of a number of options explored in the consultation document 'Physical Punishment in the Home - Thinking about the Issues, Looking at the Evidence'. That document considered the human rights and equality context of the debate, including the issue of religious liberty. As work following the consultation moves forward, and taking into account the consultation responses received, I shall be further considering all the human rights and equality implications of the options presented, including the implications for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion under Article 9 of the ECHR, in the light of relevant judicial consideration of its scope.

Collection of Rates

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total amount of rates collected from the following categories of buildings in Northern Ireland for each of the last 3 years (a) Orange Halls; (b) Apprentice Boys Halls; and (c) Hibernian Halls. (AQW 3546/01)

Dr Farren: The Rate Collection Agency is responsible for the collection of rates in Northern Ireland.

Agency records list properties by broad description with one such description being 'Hall'. There are 3600 halls listed but it is not possible to easily or comprehensively identify these as Orange Halls, Apprentice Boys Halls or Hibernian Halls.

Therefore, I regret that I am unable to supply the information as requested.

Relationship Counselling: Funding

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) all the organisations funded by the Executive that provide the following services (i) promoting marriage; (ii) marriage counselling; (iii) provide mediation services; and (iv) research into the causes of marital breakdown; and (b) the total funding for each service in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3603/01)

Dr Farren: Relate NI and Accord are funded through the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Relate NI is a non-profitmaking, registered charity, which has been in existence for over fifty years. It provides a range of confidential services such as relationship

counselling, family mediation and education and training, aimed at helping those experiencing relationship difficulties. The organisation was awarded a grant of £170,930 in 2000/01 and £175,200 in 2001/02 and in addition received a grant of £26,260 in 2001/02 to facilitate a premises assessment. The Department has made available core funding amounting to £179,580 in 2002/03.

Accord is an agency of the Catholic Church providing a nationwide service to couples preparing for or seeking a deeper commitment within the sacrament of marriage. The Department awarded Accord core funding of £68,132 in 2000/01 (plus £4,295 slippage) and £69,840 (plus £2,600 slippage) in 2001/02 and is making available a grant of £71,586 in 2002/03.

I am aware that there is much further potential for the use of family mediation services in Northern Ireland. I intend that the forthcoming Family Law Bill will contain specific provision for the courts to refer family proceedings for mediation, and the matter of encouraging further service provision is currently the subject of inter-departmental discussions.

Northern Ireland Civil Service: Nationality Requirements

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to address the current nationality requirements within the NICS.

(AQW 3609/01)

Dr Farren: I will continue to press the Secretary of State and his colleagues for early legislative action to amend these requirements, which the Government has acknowledged are out of date.

Local Strategy Partnership: District Council

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to avoid duplication between Local Strategy Partnerships and the functions of District Councils.

(AQW 3630/01)

Dr Farren: All LSPs are required to develop and agree Integrated Local Area Strategies to give a strategic context to their work. This process should ensure the development of activities that complement the work of District Councils and avoid duplication. The make up of the Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs) also includes representatives from District Councils which together with working relationships between Councils and LSPs will avoid duplication. In addition, in the context of the delivery of Measures 3.1 and 3.2 of the PEACE Programme, they will address specific consequences of the conflict and its impact in each particular District.

Local Strategy Partnership: District Council

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what role will Local Strategy Partnerships play in respect of the statutory functions of District Councils.

(AQW 3631/01)

Dr Farren: Local Strategy Partnerships do not have a direct role in respect of the statutory functions of District Council. However, in developing a broader strategic and partnership approach, they may through their own activities complement and in this way help contribute to the wider delivery of services by local District Councils in terms of physical, economic and social regeneration in their District. It is also possible that District Councils could contract with or work in partnership with LSPs to deliver statutory services.

Peace II Programme: Funding

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to ensure Local Strategy Partnerships are sustainable after Peace II funding ceases.

(AQW 3632/01)

Dr Farren: Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs) will administer significant funds from the PEACE II Programme for the implementation of the two Programme Measures (3.1 and 3.2) for which they are responsible and for the production of Integrated Local Strategies to provide the strategic context for their work. The requirement that each LSP produce an Integrated Local Strategy is one mechanism that is intended to help them become more sustainable. This will ensure that their activities are closely linked to other statutory, private and voluntary sector activities in their areas. All LSPs are also being strongly encouraged to look beyond the implementation of the two PEACE Measures for which they are responsible to influence other PEACE II and mainstream funding decisions that relate to their area. The development of this wider role is crucial to their future sustainability. Another important feature is that each LSP has been agreed at a local level and this strong partnership approach will bring benefits that can easily be recognised and will attract future roles for them.

Rates Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the current position of the Rates Review; and whether the present business exemption for manufacturing rates relief will be retained.

(AQW 3685/01)

Dr Farren: I announced in the Assembly on 27 May 2002 the launch of the Consultation Paper on the Review of Rating Policy. The consultation period ends on 16 September 2002 and the results will be analysed before

any decisions are taken on the way forward including that on the future of Industrial Derating.

Civil Servants

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a comparison of where civil servants live and work by District Council area. (AQW 3701/01)

Dr Farren: Information on the home and work location of NICS staff in the 11 Ministerial Departments, who are living and working in N. Ireland, as at 1 January 2002 is contained in the table on the following page.

Building Regulations Advisory Committee

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) the date the Building Regulations Advisory Committee last met; (b) the date of its next meeting; and (c) its proposed programme of work. (AQW 3702/01)

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) last met on 15 October 2001.

Since that meeting, NIBRAC's 3 year term of office has expired and officials are currently seeking to appoint a new committee. I expect to be in a position to appoint a reconstituted committee in the very near future. It is anticipated that the first meeting of the new committee will take place towards the end of June.

During the next 3 years the Department will be reviewing the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, the Building (Prescribed Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 and parts C, E, F and L of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 together with their supporting technical booklets. The views of NIBRAC will be sought at both consultation and final proposals stages in all cases.

Subsequently, the Department expects to carry out reviews of parts D, G and R of the regulations.

Coronary Heart Disease

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths from coronary heart disease aged between 65-74 per 100,000 population in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3719/01)

Dr Farren: The numbers of deaths from heart disease (International Classification of Diseases, Version 9, codes 390-429), per 100,000 population for people aged 65-74, were 834, 802 and 716 in 1998, 1999 and 2000 respectively.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Business Support Unit

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2335/01, to detail (a) the recommendations by the Business Support Unit regarding the posts reviewed over the last 3 years; (b) the current position of those posts reviewed; (c) the grades of the posts reviewed; and (d) if there was any reduction in the duplication and bureaucracy due to the review of these posts. (AQW 2685/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The Business Support Unit role is to look at business needs to establish that the correct staffing numbers in terms of grading and loading are in place and to establish that the work being carried out is required to meet the business needs. It also ensures that the work is carried out in the most efficient and effective way to achieve value for money and this may identify any duplication of work and reduce bureaucracy.

Over the three year period the unit has made recommendations about the grading and loading of some 400 posts identifying where work was being carried out at too high and too low a grade. The recommendations also covered the need for additional posts and the need to increase or reduce workloads to ensure adequate job weight. Issues such as the need to cease doing work that was neither adding value nor necessary for the business and the rationalisation of work where different branches were doing similar tasks were also addressed.

The grades of posts reviewed over the last three years are as follows:

- Senior Civil Service – bands 1-9
- Administrative Assistant, Administrative Officer, Executive Officer 2 and 1,
- Staff Officer, Deputy Principal, Principal, Senior Principal
- Professional and Technical grades – Professional and Technical Officer (PTO), Higher PTO, Senior PTO, Principal PTO, Chief Clerk of Works, Clerk of Works 1 and 2, Technical Grade 1,
- Senior Pharmaceutical Officer, Pharmaceutical Officer
- Dental Officer
- Deputy Principal Accountant
- Personal Secretary
- Senior Personal Secretary
- Assistant Statistician
- Nurse Grade D

HOME AND WORK LOCATION OF NICS STAFF IN THE 11 MINISTERIAL DEPARTMENTS, WHO ARE LIVING AND WORKING IN N. IRELAND AND ARE NOT ON CAREER BREAK, AS AT 1ST JANUARY 2002

DCA of Home Address	DCA of Work Address																										Total		
	Antrim	Ard	Armagh	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Banbridge	Belfast	Carrikerfergus	Castlereagh	Coleraine	Cookstown	Craigavon	Derry	Down	Dungannon	Fermanagh	Larne	Limavady	Lisburn	Magherafelt	Moyle	Newry & Mourne	Newtownabbey	North Down	Omagh	Strabane		Outside NI or Missing Data	
Antrim	123			60			402		9	13	2	1	1				1	2		13	2			8	3	1		1	642
Ard	3	94		1			1,251		48			1		18	1	2			27				3	1	250			3	1,703
Armagh	5		209	2			3		4		3	170		12	16	1			9			27		4	5			1	641
Ballymena	77	1		347	7		327		9	53	2		2				6		7	4			2	3			1	848	
Ballymoney	11			58	39		106		1	116	3		1					1	1		3	1		1				342	
Banbridge	7		12	5		60	329		26		3	90		28	1	1			52			40	2	5	1				662
Belfast	10	9	3	15			3,659	1	113	4	2	9	4	22	1	1	3		51			9	21	62	1			6	4,006
Carrikerfergus	4			14			450	45	9		1	1					11		6			2	22	8				573	
Castlereagh	6	4	2	6			1,292		101	3	3	5	2	9			1	3		23			5	4	50			2	1,521
Coleraine	12			72	27		137		2	478	1	1	1	34				10			2	1		2	4				783
Cookstown	9		4	28			123		3	10	91	5	4		40	10			3	21		7			31				389
Craigavon	8	1	34	1		4	551		20	1	1	367	1	1	12		1		82			18	2	5	3			2	1,115
Derry	2						182		6	48	1			876		4		5			1				3	17	6	1	1,152
Down	6	12	3	3			901		61		1	12	1	337		1			39			21			15			3	1,417
Dungannon	4		45	4			148		6	3	35	65	2	1	153	28			2			7			1	37	1		543
Fermanagh	7			5			51		2	4	4	1	18	1	8	413			1			5				68	3	1	592
Larne	4			36			199	12	7	4	1			9			88		9				2	2					374
Limavady	2			2	1		84		1	83			181				1	78								5	1	1	441
Lisburn	21	4	5	2			1,075		50	3	8	34	3	23	1	1	1	1	163			5	5	19	3			1	1,428
Magherafelt	47		1	72	1		280		2	55	21		14		4	1	1	1	1	77		4	2	3	15				602
Moyle	4			46	11		44		3	54							3		5		13		1	1					185
Newry & Mourne	4		41	4		18	288		11		3	115		53	4				13			268		1	1			2	826
Newtownabbey	20		1	23			938	8	22	9	1	3		2			13		15	2			63	16	1		4	1,141	
North Down	2	32		5			1,190		43	1	1	4	1	5					7				1	445				2	1,739
Omagh	2			3			99		5	8	7	4	28	2	12	52						9			387	6	1		625
Strabane	3			3			108		8	9	1	1	236		2	32			1	1		2		3	86	108			604
Outside NI or Missing Data	8	4	20	50	5	2	728	5	43	51	8	56	87	27	15	76	2	2	25	5	5	31	5	65	37	7	7	1,376	
Total	411	161	380	867	91	89	15,112	71	615	1,010	204	945	1,496	550	270	627	135	99	555	112	23	465	141	967	703	132	39	26,270	

The Department does not, however, hold centrally a detailed analysis of the specific recommendations or the action which was taken.

Is é ról an Aonad Tacáíochta Gnó féachaint ar riachtanais ghnó chun a bhunú go bhfuil an líon ceart foirne ó thaobh grádála agus lódála socraithe agus a fháil amach go bhfuil gá leis an obair atáthar a dhéanamh chun freastal ar riachtanais ghnó. Cinntíonn sé freisin go bhfuil an obair á déanamh ar an mbealach is éifeachtaí agus is éifeachtúla chun luach an airgid a fháil agus d'fhéadfadh sé sin aon dúblú oibre a aithint agus maorlathas a laghdú.

Le linn na tréimhse trí bliana tá moltaí déanta ag an aonad faoi ghrádáil agus lódáil thart ar 400 post ag aithint obair a bheith á déanamh ag grád ró-ard nó ró-íseal. Chlúdaigh na moltaí freisin an gá atá le riachtanais bhreise agus an gá méadú nó laghdú a chur le hualach oibre le meáchan oibre leordhóthanach a aithint. Tugadh aghaidh ar cheisteanna freisin faoin ngá éirí as obair nach raibh ag cur luach breise ar fáil nó nár ghá don ghnó agus réasúnú oibre sa chás go raibh brainsí éagsúla ag déanamh tascanna cosúil le chéile.

Seo a leanas grádanna na bpost a athbhreithníodh le trí bliana anuas:

- An Státseirbhís Sinsearach - bandaí 1-9
- Cúntóir Riaracháin, Oifigeach Riaracháin, Oifigeach Feidhmiúcháin 2 agus 1, Oifigeach Foirne, Leas-Cheannasaí, Ceannasaí, Ceannasaí Sinsearach.
- Grádanna Gairmiúla agus Teicniúla
- Oifigeach Gairmiúil agus Teicniúil (PTO), Ard Oifigeach Gairmiúil agus Teicniúil, Oifigeach Gairmeach agus Teicniúil Sinsearach, Príomhoifigeach Gairmiúil agus Teicniúil, Príomh-Chléireach Oibreacha, Cléireach Oibreacha 1 agus 2, Grád Teicniúil 1.
- Oifigeach Cógaisíochta Sinsearach, Oifigeach Cógaisíochta
- Oifigeach Déidliachta
- Leas-Phríomhchuntasóir
- Rúnaí Perasanta
- Rúnaí Pearsanta Sinsearach
- Staitisteoir Cúnta
- Altra Grád D

Níl anailís mhion faoi na moltaí saineiúla ná faoin ngíomh a tógadh ag an Roinn go lárnach, áfach.

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the new diabetic drug Losartan is available through the NHS and on which occasions is it prescribed. (AQW 2879/01)

Ms de Brún: Losartan was first licensed for use in the treatment of hypertension (high blood pressure) in

1994. It is available on prescription here in different strengths and in combination with another medicine. It is not licensed for the prevention of diabetic complications. However, it may be beneficial for certain patients who have both diabetes and hypertension. The choice of medicines used in the overall management of a diabetic patient, is a clinical one taking account of the needs of the individual patient and evidence of effectiveness.

In order to prevent or delay the risk of complications, which can arise from diabetes, it is essential that there is close control of both blood sugar levels and blood pressure.

Rinneadh ceadúnú ar dtús ar Losartan chun cóireáil a dhéanamh ar hipeartheannas (ardbhrú fola) in 1994. Bhí sé ar fáil ar oideas anseo i láidreachtaí áirithe agus i gcomhar le míochaine eile. Níl sé ceadúnaithe chun castachtaí diabiatais a chosc. D'fhéadfadh leas a bheith ann áfach do roinnt othar a mbíonn diabiatas agus hipeartheannas araon ag gabháil dóibh. Is rogha clínicíúil an rogha míochaine a mbaintear leas astu do bhainistíocht iomlán othair le diabiatas a thugann aird ar riachtanais aonair an othair agus ar fhianaise a n-éifeachta.

Chun riosca castachtaí a chosc nó a mhoilliú, cinn is féidir teacht as diabia teas tá sé riachtanach go gcoinnítear dianrialú ar leibhéil siúcra san fhuil agus ar bhrú fola.

Provision of Wheelchairs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what criteria are used by the health service in the allocation of (a) wheelchairs and (b) electrically powered (i) indoor and (ii) outdoor chairs. (AQW 3247/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department's Policy for the provision of Wheelchairs is:

"A person should be provided with a wheelchair if he or she is permanently disabled and requires the use of a wheelchair on a regular basis and is assessed by an occupational therapist as meeting agreed criteria".

The Eligibility Criteria for provision of particular wheelchairs are developed by the Commissioning Trusts and by the Regional Wheelchair Forum. Details have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Is é polasaí mo Roinne i dtaobh soláthar Cathaoireacha Rotha ná:

"Ba chóir cathaoir rotha a chur ar fáil do dhuine má tá sé nó sí míchumasach go buan agus úsáid cathaoir rotha de dhíth ar bhonn rialta agus go gcomhlíonann siad na critéir i ndiaidh do theiripeoir saothair measúnú a dhéanamh orthu."

Forbraíonn na hIontaobhais Choimisiúnaithe agus an Fóram Réigiúnach Cathaoireacha Rotha na Critéir Theidlíochta do chathaoireacha rotha ar leith. Cuireadh na sonraí i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Scoliosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the comparison in cost of sending a surgical team and patient to Scotland for treatment of Scoliosis with having the treatment carried out in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3255/01)

Ms de Brún: Scoliosis surgery here is carried out at Greenpark Health Care Trust and the Royal Group of Hospitals Trust.

The average cost per patient for 2000/01 was £6093 at Greenpark and £7600 (paediatric) at the RVH.

In an effort to reduce waiting times for clinically urgent patients, arrangements have been made for a small number of patients to travel to another unit for surgery. The estimated cost per patient is £23,260.

Déantar máinliacht scolóise anseo in Iontaobhas Cúraim Sláinte Greenpark agus in Iontaobhas Ospidéal an Ghrúpa Ríoga.

Ba é an meánchostas i 2000/01 in aghaidh an othair ná £6093 i Greenpark agus £7600 (péidiatraic) i Otharlann Ríoga Victoiria.

In iarracht chun amanna feithimh a laghdú d'othair faoi phráinn clinice tá socrúithe déanta chun go mbeidh líon beag othar ábalta taisteal chuig aonad eile do mháinliacht. Is é an costas meastaithe in aghaidh an othair ná £23,260.

Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will the new wards be opened and available for use at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 3257/01)

Ms de Brún: When I announced my endorsement of the Ulster Hospital Strategic Development Plan (SDP) in July 2001, I also approved the business case for the reinstatement of 20 adult inpatient beds in Jaffe Ward. This was the first of 9 projects comprising Phase 2 of the SDP, to address critical capacity and continuity issues. The beds should be available by November 2002.

Also included in Phase 2 is a business case to create an additional 48 beds, 20 in Ward 12 and 28 in the Care of the Elderly Unit. My officials are working actively with the Trust and the Eastern Health and Social Services Board to conclude the business case process. I am hopeful that the Trust will be given approval to proceed with the project soon. That being the case the 20 additional beds in Ward 12 should be available by April 2004 and the 28 in the Care of the Elderly Unit by June 2005.

Nuair a d'fhógair mé formhuiniú Phlean Forbartha Straitéiseach Otharlann Uladh (PFS) mí Iúil 2001, cheadaigh mé cás gnó le haghaidh 20 leaba aosach othar

cónaitheach a thabhairt ar ais chuig Barda Jaffe. Ba é seo an chéad tionscadal de 9 tionscadal ina raibh Céim 2 den PFS ann, mar atá tabhairt faoi ghéaracmhainn agus ceistanna leanúnachais. Ba chóir go mbeadh na leapacha ar fáil faoi Shamhain 2002.

Áirítear chomh maith i gCéim 2 cás gnó chun 48 leaba bhreise a chruthú, 20 acu i mBarda 12 agus 28 agus Aonad Chúram na Sean. Tá mo chuid oifigeach ag obair go gníomhach leis an Iontaobhas agus le Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair leis an chás gnó a thabhairt i gcrích. Tá súil agam go dtabharfaí cead don Iontaobhas leanúint ar aghaidh leis an tionscadal gan mhoill. Más é sin mar atá ba chóir don 20 leaba bhreise i mBarda 12 bheith ar fáil faoi Aibreán 2004 agus 28 in Aonad Chúram na Sean faoi Mheitheamh 2005.

Maternal Alcohol Consumption

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the research currently being undertaken on the effects of maternal alcohol consumption on the health of the foetus. (AQW 3307/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department is not currently funding any research specifically into the effects of maternal alcohol consumption on the health of the foetus.

Níl an Roinn ag maoiniú sainthaighde ar bith faoi láthair ar thionchair ólachán alcóil na máthar ar shláinte an fhéateas.

Laboratory Services

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost to the Southern Health and Social Services Board of laboratory services at South Tyrone Hospital for the three year period before transfer to Craigavon Area Hospital and (b) the cost of provision of laboratory services to Southern Health and Social Services Board since the transfer of laboratory services to Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 3330/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) The cost to the Southern Health and Social Services Board of laboratory services at South Tyrone Hospital for the three year period before it was transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital was:

• 1998/99	£414,906
• 1999/00	£373,971
• 2000/01	£342,106

(b) The cost of provision of laboratory services to the Southern Health and Social Services Board since the transfer to Craigavon Area Hospital in 2001/02 is £169,202.

- (a) Is é an costas a bhí ar Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt i leith seirbhísí saotharlainne ag Ospidéal Dheisceart Thír Eoghain don tréimhse trí bliana roimh an aistriú go hOspidéal Limistéar Craigavon ná:
- 1998/99 £414,906
 - 1999/00 £373,971
 - 2000/01 £342,106
- (b) Is é costas na seirbhísí saotharlainne ar Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt ó thráth an aistrithe go hOspidéal Limistéar Craigavon in 2001/02 ná £169,202.

Peanut Allergy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of people who have a peanut allergy; and (b) any measures used to highlight associated problems. (AQW 3341/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The information requested is not available.
- (b) The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) has delivered two major reports on food allergy to Government. A report on peanut allergy, published in 1988 and a major report on food intolerance & allergy was published in July 2000. The Food Standards Agency has published leaflets aimed at the catering sector to raise awareness of food allergy. The Agency has recently commissioned research to look at problems associated with foods sold loose at catering establishments. The Agency has research work in progress looking at the problems associated with the use of advisory labelling of nuts. Proposals to make important changes to the rules on food labelling are under discussion in the European Commission. The Food Standards Agency has been instrumental in bringing these proposals forward. The changes are aimed at ensuring all consumers are given comprehensive ingredient listing information, and people with food allergies are able to identify ingredients they may need to avoid.
- (a) Ní an t-eolas a heiliodh ar fáil.
- (b) Tá an Coiste ar Thocsaineacht Ceimicí i mBia, Tairgí Tomhaltóirí agus Comshaoil tar éis dhá thuairisc mhóra ar ailléirge bia a sheachadadh don rialtas. Foilsíodh tuairisc ar ailléirge pise talún i 1988 agus mórthuairisc ar choll bia agus ailléirge in Iúil 2000. Tá bileoga eolais foilsithe ag an nGníomhaireacht um Chaighdeán Bia atá dírithe ar an earnáil lónadóireachta chun feasacht maidir le ailléirge bia a ardú. Tá taighde coimisinúnaithe ag an nGníomhaireacht le gairid chun féachaint ar fhadhbanna a bhaineann le

bia a dhíoltar leo féin in ionaid chócaireachta. Tá obair thaighde ar siúl ag an nGníomhaireacht chun féachaint ar na fadhbanna a bhaineann le húsáid na lipéidí comhairleacha ar chnónna. Tá moltaí chun athruithe tábhachtacha a dhéanamh ar rialacha a bhaineann le lipéadú á bplé i gCoimisiún na hEorpa. Tá ról lárnach ag an nGníomhaireacht um Chaighdeán Bia i dtabhairt chun cinn na moltaí seo. Tá na hathruithe dírithe ar a chinntiú go bhfuil eolas cuimsitheach ar liosta comhábhar ar fáil do gach tomhaltóir agus go mbeidh daoine le ailléirgí bia in ann comhábhair nach mór dóibh a sheachaint a aithint.

Food Safety Legislation

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if she is aware of inconsistencies by local authorities in applying Environmental Health legislation within the (i) food manufacturing; and (ii) processing industry; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3391/01)

Ms de Brún: I am not aware of any such inconsistencies. However the Food Standards Agency, which has responsibility for the preparation of food safety legislation, has also a key role in overseeing district council food law enforcement and has been instrumental in the introduction of measures intended to ensure high standards and consistency of application.

The Agency, with the co-operation of local authorities in Great Britain and here, has developed a framework agreement on Food Law Enforcement by which the Agency sets and monitors standards of enforcement by district councils as well as regularly auditing their performance.

Nílímse ar an eolas maidir le haon neamhréireachtaí den chineál sin. Tá ról tábhachtach ag an nGníomhaireacht Caighdeán Bia, a bhfuil sé de fhreagracht uirthi reachtaíocht sábháilteachta bia a ullmhú, maoirsiú a dhéanamh ar fheidhmiú dlí bia chomhairle ceantair, agus bhí páirt lárnach ag an nGníomhaireacht i mbearta a thabharit isteach chun ardchaighdeán agus leanúnachas maidir le feidhmiúchán a chinntiú.

Trí chomhoibriú le húdaráis áitiúla sa Bhreatain Mhór agus anseo tá comhaontú creatoibre ar Fheidhmiú Dlí Bia forbraithe ag an nGníomhaireacht trína leagan an Ghníomhaireacht amach caighdeán fheidhmithe na gcomhairlí ceantair agus a ndéanann sí monatóireacht orthu chomh maith le hiniúchadh a dhéanamh ar a bhfeidhmíocht.

National Health Service

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of vacancies currently existing in each of the clinical professions in the National Health Service; and (b) the

shortfall that exists between the current number and the target needed for each. (AQW 3401/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The following vacancy information is the most recent date available to the Department:

VACANCY INFORMATION

	Date of Information	Total Number of Vacancies
Speech and Language Therapy	June 2001	51
Occupational Therapy	September 2001	53
Physiotherapy	December 2001	42
Radiography	December 2001	37

- (b) Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts are responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient staff to provide the level of service to meet the assessed need of their populations. However, in order to address recruitment and retention issues throughout the HPSS, my Department is engaged in a workforce planning initiative that will produce detailed plans for each of the main health and personal social services groups. These plans will inform future decisions on student intake levels.

- (a) Is é an t-eolas folúntais seo a leanas an dáta is déanaí atá ar fáil don Roinn:

EOLAS FOLÚNTAIS

	Dáta an Eolais	Líon iomlán follúntas
Teiripe Urlabhra agus Teanga	Meitheamh 2001	51
Teiripe Shaothair	Meán Fómhair 2001	53
Fisiteiripe	Nollaig 2001	42
Radagrafaíocht	Nollaig 2001	37

- (b) Tá Iontaobhais agus Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta freagrach as a chinntiú go mbíonn dóthain foirne ann chun an leibhéal seirbhíse a sholáthar chun freastal ar riachtanas measta na bpobal. Ionas gur féidir tabhairt faoi cheisteanna earcaíocta agus coimeádta ar fud an SSSP, áfach, tá mo Roinnse i mbun tionscnaimh phleanála fórsa saothair a chuirfidh pleananna mionsonraithe ar fáil do gach ceann de na príomhghrúpaí sláinte agus seirbhísí pearsanta sóisialta. Tabharfaidh na pleananna seo faisnéis ar chinn amach anseo ar leibhéal ionghabhála mac léinn.

Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the total expenditure allocated as a result of the ‘Myths and Reality’ report published by her Department in November 2000. (AQW 3439/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department made available a funding package of £250,000 in 2001/02 for projects aimed at reducing unplanned teenage pregnancy and supporting young parents. The Department is allocating £300,000 in this financial year towards implementing the “Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood” Strategy and Action Plan.

Chuir mo Roinn pacáiste airgid de £250,000 ar fáil i 2001/02 do thionscadail a bhfuil sé de chuspóir acu toircheas neamhphleanáilte i measc déagóirí a laghdú agus tacú le tuismitheoirí óga. Tá an Roinn ag dáileadh £300,000 sa bhliain airgeadais seo le Straitéis agus Plean Gníomhaíochta “Toircheas agus Tuismíocht Déagóra” a chur i bhfeidhm.

Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the PSI working group tackling the problems of teenage parenthood.

(AQW 3440/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department issued the Report of a Working Group on Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood entitled “Myths and Reality” for public consultation in November 2000. Following the consultation, a Working Group was established to consider the responses and develop the Strategy and Action Plan. The Group is currently finalising the document which is due to be published next month.

Chuir mo Roinn amach Tuairisc an Ghrúpa Oibre ar Thoircheas agus ar Thuismíocht Déagóra dar theideal “Miotais agus an Réalachas” le haghaidh comhairlithe phoiblí i Samhain 2000. I ndiaidh an chomhairlithe, bunaíodh Grúpa Oibre le machnamh a dhéanamh ar na freagraí agus leis an Straitéis agus an Phlean Gnímh a fhorbairt. Faoi láthair, tá an Grúpa ag cur na dlaoi mullaigh ar an cháipéis atá le foilsiú an mhí seo chugainn.

Omagh Day Centre

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the availability of places at Omagh Day Centre for Young Adults with special needs. (AQW 3473/01)

Ms de Brún: Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust has advised that there are currently 75 places in Omagh Day Centre, 20 of which are in the Special Needs Unit. The Trust advises that there is currently one person waiting for a place in the Day Centre. An allocation of funds from the Western Health and Social Services Board to meet ‘in year’ pressures will be used to address this need.

My Department’s Priorities for Action 2002/03 requires Boards and Trusts to continue to expand the provision of day care and respite care places for people with a learning disability.

Some of the additional funding allocated to Health and Social Services Boards for the development of community services in 2002/03 will be available for this purpose.

Tá sé curtha in iúl ag Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sláinte Lakeland Sperrin go bhfuil faoi láthair 75 áit in Ionad Lae na hÓmaí, 20 acu ata san Aonad do Riachtanais Speisialta. Tá sé curtha in iúl ag an Iontaobhas go bhfuil, faoi láthair, duine amháin ag fanacht le háit san Ionad Lae. Bainfear leas as leithdháileadh cistí ón mBord Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sláinte an Iarthair chun freastal ar bhrúnna “laistigh den bhliain seo” chun tabhairt faoin riachtanas seo.

Éilíonn Tosaíochtaí do Ghníomh 2002/03 mo Roinnse go leanfadh Boird agus Iontaobhais ag leathnú soláthar áiteanna cúraim lae agus cúraim faoisimh do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas foghlama.

Beidh roinnt den mhaoiniú breise a leithdháileadh do Bhoird Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sláinte d’fhorbhairt seirbhísí pobail i 2002/03 ar fáil dó seo.

Local Health and Social Care Groups: Appointments/Nominations

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline if the process for appointment/nomination of members to local health and social care groups, whilst as open and inclusive as possible, will ensure that the system attracts people with the most appropriate competencies. (AQW 3530/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Boards are charged with the responsibility of establishing the Management Boards of the new Local Health and Social Care Groups. Guidance issued by my Department on 12 February 2002 on the arrangements for selecting Management Board members for the new Groups stressed the need to appoint those best suited to the job. To this end, Boards were required to draw up a competency framework taking account of the Local Health and Social Care Group Management Board roles outlined in the guidance. In the nomination or selection of members for the Management Boards, a common job description and personnel specification was used. A competency-based series of questions were used at interviews to identify those candidates with the knowledge, skills and experience to successfully carry out the job.

Tá an fhreagracht ar Bhoird Seirbhísí Sóisialta Boird Bhainistíochta na nGrúpaí nua Sláinte Áitiúla agus Chúram Shóisialta a bhunú. Leag an treoir a d’eisigh mo Roinnse an 12 Feabhra 2002 béim ar na socruithe do roghnú comhaltaí do Bhord Bainistíochta do na Grúpaí nua chun iad is siúd is oiriúnaí don obair a cheapadh. Chuige sin éilíodh ar na Boird creat inniúlachta a tharraing aníos ag glacadh san áireamh rólanna Bhord Bainistíochta Ghrúpaí Sláinte Áitiúla agus Chúraim Shóisialta mar atá leagtha amach sa Treoir. Agus

comhaltaí don Bhord Bainistíochta á roghnú nó á n-ainmniú baineadh leas as tuairisc poist nó sonraíocht phearsanra choitianta. Baineadh leas as sraith ceisteanna bunaithe ar inniúlacht ag agallamh chun teacht ar na hiarrthóirí sin leis an eolas, na scileanna agus an taithí le go n-éireodh leo an obair a dhéanamh.

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis who have requested the use of Enbrel in each of the last 2 years; (b) the number of sufferers who have been prescribed Enbrel; and (c) to make a statement on her plans to make Enbrel available to all rheumatoid arthritis sufferers. (AQW 3547/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) This information is not available. Anti-TNF drug treatments such as Enbrel are not made available on request, but only after a full assessment of the patient’s condition by a consultant rheumatologist.
- (b) The number of patients currently prescribed Enbrel and Remicade is 99.
- (c) Rheumatologists here have had the opportunity to prescribe this treatment for appropriate patients since November 1999.

The approach adopted here to the prescribing of these specialist drugs for the treatment of adults with severe rheumatoid arthritis and children with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, is broadly in line with recent recommendations made by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence. While NICE has endorsed the use of these drugs within clearly defined guidelines, it has identified the need for further assessment to determine their long-term clinical effectiveness.

A recent report by rheumatologists here has also concluded that while these drugs represent a major advancement in the treatment of this illness, it is essential that their use should continue to be strictly controlled and monitored, particularly in light of possible serious adverse effects. My Department is continuing to work with Boards and clinicians to promote a cautious approach to their introduction, within the resources available.

- (a) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil. Ní chuirtear cóireáil le drugaí fhrith-TNF amhail Enbrel ar fáil ar iarratas ach i ndiaidh do réamaiteolaí comhairleach measúnú iomlán a dhéanamh ar riocht an othair.
- (b) 99 is ea líon na n-othar a dtugtar na hoidis Enbrel agus Remicade dóibh faoi láthair.
- (c) Bhí an deis ag réamaiteolaithe anseo an chóireáil seo a shocrú d’othair chóra ó Shamhain 1999.

Tá an modh oibre a dhéantar anseo i dtaca le hordú na saindrugaí seo le daoine fásta a bhfuil airtríteas géar scoiltigh orthu agus le páistí a bhfuil airtríteas ideapaiteach don óige orthu a chóireáil, go ginearálta de réir na moltaí déanta ag an Institiúid Náisiúnta um Fheabhas Cliniciúil (NICE) ar na mallaibh. Cé gur aontaigh NICE le húsáid na ndrugaí seo laistigh de shainthreoirlínte soiléire, chuir sí béim ar an ghá le tuilleadh measúnuithe a dhéanamh lena dtionchar cliniciúil fadtéarmach a fháil amach.

Chríochnaigh tuairisc déanta ag réamaiteolaithe ar na mallaibh fosta cé gur cruthúnas iad na drugaí seo ar an dul chun cinn mór atá déanta i gcóireáil an tinnis seo, tá sé riachtanach gur cheart a n-úsáid a stiúradh go dian agus monatóireacht dhian a dhéanamh orthu go fóill, go háirithe agus ag cuimhneamh ar na seachthorthaí dochracha féideartha. Tá mo Roinn ag obair go fóill le Boird agus le dochtúirí chun modh cúramach oibre dá dtionscnamh a chur chun cinn, laistigh de na hacmhainní ar fáil.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the type of health and social services projects eligible for funding from the investment initiative announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Belfast on Thursday 2 May 2002.

(AQW 3561/01)

Ms de Brún: The Reinvestment and Reform Initiative represents a significant and much-needed opportunity to increase our capital budget. As a result of years of underinvestment, the HPSS has a large backlog of essential maintenance and refurbishment work, together with a need to construct new facilities and procure modern equipment for twenty-first century standards of treatment and care. In my initial bid for RRI money, I am including both types of work. Among the new facilities for which I shall be seeking funding will be the Cancer Centre.

Tugann an Tionscnamh Athinfheistíochta agus Athchóirithe deis shuntasach a bhfuil géarghá léi lenár mbúiséad caipitil a mhéadú. Mar thoradh ar na blianta easpa infheistíochta, tá riaráiste mór d'obair éigeantach chothabhála agus dheisiúcháin ann, chomh maith leis an ghá le háiseanna nua a thógáil agus trealamh nua-aimseartha a fhóireann do chaighdeán chóireála agus chúraim an aonú haois fichid a fháil. Iniata le m'iarratas d'airgead TTA, tá mé ag cur an dá cineál oibre san áireamh. Beidh an tAonad Ailse i measc na n-áiseanna nua a mbeidh mé ag cuardach maoinithe dó.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Accounts

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of invoices remaining unpaid to suppliers to the Royal Victoria Hospital for (i) 30 days after receipt; (ii) 45 days after

receipt; (iii) 60 days after receipt; and to make a statement on the performance of the Accounts Department of the Royal Victoria Hospital in the payment of invoices received from suppliers. (AQW 3577/01)

Ms de Brún: During the month of March 2002, the total number of invoices remaining unpaid to suppliers to the Royal Victoria Hospital were as follows:

- (i) 30 days after receipt – 4018 (or 42.6% of invoices)
- (ii) 45 days after receipt – 2127 (or 22.6% of invoices)
- (iii) 60 days after receipt – 1347 (or 14.3% of invoices)

The majority of purchases by the Royal Group of Hospitals are made under standard contracts, which affirm the Trust's obligation to pay suppliers at the end of the month following the month in which the invoice is received or the goods are delivered, whichever is the later. Under these standard terms, payment to suppliers will be due anywhere between 30 and 61 days.

The Department monitors the performance of all Trusts in relation to prompt payments on a monthly basis and has raised the prompt payment performance of the Royal Group of Hospitals with its senior management. Improvements have been achieved in the last year but further improvements are necessary and the Department will be monitoring this in the course of 2002/03.

I rith mhí an Mhárta 2002, seo a leanas méid na sonrasc nár íocadh go fóill do sholáthraithe Otharlann Ríoga Victeoiria:

- (i) 30 lá i ndiaidh a nglactha – 4018 (nó 42.6% de shonraisc)
- (ii) 45 lá i ndiaidh a nglactha – 2127 (nó 22.6% de shonraisc)
- (iii) 60 lá i ndiaidh a nglactha – 1347 (nó 14.3% de shonraisc)

Tá bunús na n-earraí ceannaithe ag Grúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann ceannaithe faoi ghnáthchonarthaí, a dheimhníonn dualgas an Iontaobhais na soláthraithe a íoc ag deireadh na míosa i ndiaidh na míosa ina bhfaightear an sonrasc nó ina seachadtar na hearraí, cibé ceann is moille. De réir na ngnáth-théarmaí seo, íocfar soláthraithe ag am ar bith idir 30 agus 61 lá.

Déanann an Roinn monatóireacht ar fheidhmiú na nIontaobhas go léir i dtaca le híocaíochtaí láithreacha in aghaidh na míosa agus chuir sí feidhmiú Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann le híocaíochtaí láithreacha a dhéanamh i dtreis lena bhainistíocht shinsearach. Baineadh amach feabhsuithe sa bhliain seo a chuaigh thart ach tá tuilleadh feabhsuithe de dhíth go fóill agus beidh an Roinn ag déanamh monatóireachta orthu seo i rith 2002/03.

Ards Community Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why was the flag-pole and flag removed from the Ards Community Hospital.

(AQW 3583/01)

Ms de Brún: The flagpole was removed due to deterioration and damage in an act of vandalism. I understand it will be replaced as soon as possible.

Baineadh an crann brataí ar shiúl mar thoradh ar mheath agus ar dhamáiste de dheasca gníomh loitiméireachta. De réir mar a thuigim déanfaidh é a athsholáthar a luaithe is féidir.

Consultants: Waiting Lists

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were waiting 13 weeks or more to see a consultant at (a) 31 March 2002; and (b) 31 March 1997.

(AQW 3587/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 3520/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3520/01.

Sure Start

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps taken to strengthen family life since devolution.

(AQW 3598/01)

Ms de Brún: The main initiative taken to help strengthen family life since the establishment of the institutions has been the introduction of the Sure Start programme. Sure Start recognises the importance of children and families and aims to strengthen families by encouraging early bonding between parents and their children. One of the core services to be provided under any Sure Start project is “support for families and parents.”

The Sure Start programme aims to help parents develop more confidence in their own abilities and respond to their children more positively. By learning better parenting skills, parents can help to improve their child’s health and educational attainment, as well as their own confidence and self-esteem.

Is é an príomhghníomh a rinneadh le saol teaghlaigh a neartú ó bunaíodh na hinstiúidí ná tionscnamh na scéime Sure Start. Aithníonn Sure Start tábhacht pháistí agus teaghlach agus tá sí d’aidhm aici páistí agus teaghlaigh a neartú trí cheangal luath idir tuismitheoirí agus a bpáistí a spreagadh. Is í ceann de na croisheirbhísí atá le soláthar faoi scéim Sure Start ar bith “tacaíocht do theaghlaigh agus do thuismitheoirí”.

Tá sí d’aidhm ag an scéim Sure Start cuidiú le tuismitheoirí níos mó muiníne a bheith acu ina gcumais féin agus freagairt níos dearfaí dá bpáistí. Trí níos fearr scileanna tuismíochta a fhoghlaim, is féidir le tuismitheoirí sláinte agus éachtaí oideachais a bpáiste a fheabhsú, agus a bhféinmhuinín agus a bhféinmheas a fheabhsú chomh maith.

Family and Parenting Institute

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the Executive’s views on the work of the Family and Parenting Institute which seeks to increase the profile of parenting and encourage the development of support for all parents.

(AQW 3599/01)

Ms de Brún: The Executive has never specifically addressed the work of this group.

Ní dheachaigh Coiste an Fheidhmiúcháin i ngleic le hobair an ghrúpa seo ar bhonn leithleach riamh.

Prescription Charges

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will consider extending help with prescription charges to people with incomes just above the exemption level, similar to her Ministerial counterpart in Wales; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3604/01)

Ms de Brún: My Ministerial counterpart in Wales has not extended help with prescription charges in the manner that you have suggested, and I understand there are no plans to do so. However, the National Assembly for Wales decided in April 2001 not to increase their prescription charges, but to hold them at £6 for a period of 3 years, and also to extend exemption to all persons under the age of 25. I do not intend to extend Health Service prescription charge exemptions here in such a way. Almost 90% of all Health Service prescription items are dispensed free of charge here. Also, patients who need regular medication can make considerable savings by purchasing a pre-payment certificate to obtain as many prescription items as necessary for a set fee.

Níor thionscain mo chomhghleacaí Aireachta sa Bhreatain Bheag cuidiú le táillí oidis a íoc sa dóigh ar mhaigh tú, agus tuigim nach bhfuil sé beartaithe sin a dhéanamh. Chinn Tionól Náisiúnta na Breataine in Aibreán 2001, áfach, gan a dtáillí oidis a mhéadú, ach iad a choinneáil ar £6 ar feadh tréimhse 3 bliain, agus gach uile dhuine faoi 25 bliain d’aois a shaoradh uathu chomh maith. Níl sé ar intinn agam díolúintí ó tháillí oideas na Seirbhíse Sláinte a thionscnamh anseo ar a leithéid de dhóigh. Tugtar amach beagnach agus 90% d’oidis na Seirbhíse Sláinte saor in aisce anseo. Is féidir le hothair a bhfuil cógas rialta de dhíth orthu cuid mhór airgid a choigilt fosta trí theastas réamhiocaíochta a

cheannach a ligfidh dóibh a mhéad oideas a bheidh de dhíth orthu a cheannach ar tháille shocraithe.

GP Fundholding

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff employed by GP fundholding who have been successful in securing other employment as a result of contacting the Department's Redeployment Unit. (AQW 3605/01)

Ms de Brún: The Redeployment Unit is not operated by the Department, but by the Central Services Agency. It provides a mechanism whereby staff who may potentially be made redundant due to the ending of GP fundholding may register their details with a view to re-employment in the Health and Personal Social Services. I understand that to date 6 staff previously employed within GP fundholding have taken up new positions within the HPSS, as a result of registering with the Redeployment Unit.

Níl An tAonad Athlonnaithe faoi stiúir na Roinne, ach faoin Lárgníomhaireacht Seirbhísí. Cuireann sé meicníocht ar fáil sa dóigh go dtig le hoibrithe, ar féidir go ndéanfar iomarcach iad mar thoradh ar dheireadh curtha le cisteshealbhú GDanna, a sonraí a chlárú le haghaidh athfhostaithe sna Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta. De réir mar a thuigim, go nuige seo ghlac 6 oibrí a d'oibrigh laistigh de chisteshealbhú GDanna le poist nua laistigh den SSSP, mar thoradh ar chlárú leis an Aonad Athlonnaithe.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can she make of the medical provision for sufferers of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME. (AQW 3610/01)

Ms de Brún: The broad range of symptoms and disabilities associated with this condition means that to address sufferers' needs, care must be determined on an individual basis. Close co-operation between patients, carers and the relevant health and social care professionals is therefore essential for ensuring that sufferers obtain the most suitable treatment for their needs.

Is é is ciall leis an an réimse leathan airíonna agus míchumas bainteach leis an riocht seo nach mór cúram a shocrú de réir an duine aonair le freastal ar riachtanais an fhulangaithe. Mar sin de, tá comhoibriú dlúth idir othair, feighlithe agus na gairmithe cuí sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta riachtanach le cinntiú go bhfaighidh fulangaithe an chóireáil is fóirsteanáí dá gcuid riachtanas.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME is treated as a recognised illness. (AQW 3612/01)

Ms de Brún: I recognise that Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME is an illness which can vary across a broad spectrum of symptoms and disabilities, and acknowledge the difficulties faced by clinicians and patients alike as a result of the lack of specific disease markers and a clear understanding of the cause and disease process.

Close co-operation between patients, carers and the relevant health and social care professionals is therefore essential for ensuring that sufferers obtain the most suitable treatment for their needs.

Aithním gur féidir le hairíonna agus le míchumais éagsúla bheith bainteach leis an tinneas Siondróm Ainsealach Tuirse/ME, agus aithním na deacrachtaí atá ag dochtúirí agus ag othair araon de dheasca na heaspa sainairíonna ar leith bainteach leis an ghalair agus an easpa tuisceana soiléire ar chúis agus ar phróiseas an ghalair.

Mar sin de, tá comhoibriú dlúth idir othair, feighlithe, agus na gairmithe cuí sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta riachtanach le cinntiú go bhfaighidh fulangaithe an chóireáil is fóirsteanáí dá gcuid riachtanas.

Orthopaedic Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to address the waiting lists for those needing orthopaedic operations. (AQW 3613/01)

Ms de Brún: There has been a general increase in demand over recent years for orthopaedic services, and waiting lists have grown as a result. A number of measures are being taken to deal with this increase in demand, including increasing the number of orthopaedic surgeons in training and purchasing operations in Scotland.

My Department, in liaison with Boards and Trusts, is also exploring options for increasing theatre capacity for orthopaedic surgery, and for ensuring that existing facilities are used to maximum efficiency.

Le blianta beaga anuas bhí meadú ginearálta éilimh ar sheirbhísí ortaipéideacha, agus d'fhás liostaí feithimh dá bharr seo. Táthar ag cur i bhfeidhm roinnt beart le dul i ngleic leis an mheadú ar an éileamh seo, ina measc táthar ag cur le líon na máinlianna ortaipéideacha i dtraenáil agus obráidí a cheannach in Albain.

Tá an Roinn s'agam, i gcomhar le Boird agus le hlontaobhais, ag fiosrú roghanna le hacmhainn obrádlainne don mháinliacht ortaipéideach a mheadú, agus le cinntiú go mbaintear éifeachtúlacht is mó as na háiseanna atá ann cheana.

Hospital Cleanliness

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) her assessment of the

standard of cleanliness in Health Service hospitals; and
(b) how individual hospitals are assessed in regard to standard of cleanliness. (AQW 3641/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) All Trusts have a duty to ensure that high standards of cleanliness in hospitals are being met and maintained. As levels of cleanliness vary between hospitals, my Department is currently working with the service to develop a common set of standards to which all Trusts will have to adhere.

(b) Regular inspections on the standards of hospital cleanliness are carried out by Trusts.

(a) Tá dualgas ar gach Iontaobhas le cinnítú go mbíonn glaineacht d'ardchaighdeán bainteach amach in otharlanna agus go gcoinnítear sin. Toisc go mbíonn éagsúlacht de ghlaimeacht ann idir otharlanna, tá an Roinn s'agam ag obair leis an tseirbhís chun caighdeán choitianta a fhorbairt nach mór do gach Iontaobhas cloí leo.

(b) Déanann Iontaobhais cigireacht rialta ar chaighdeán ghlaimeacht otharlainne.

FIRE AUTHORITY — NAVIGATOR BLUE - CREDIT NOTES

Credit Note Ref.	Date	Value (£)	Reason
409123	11.01.99	1,058.40	Part credit for invoice 409071 – Belfast Telegraph Newspaper's Fire Safety Advertising
409635	24.05.99	337.52	Full credit for invoice 409577 – Ulster News Letter Fire Safety Advertising
308318	30.06.99	222.78	Full credit for invoice 308318 – publicity artwork
511051	31.12.99	8,018.20	Part credit for invoice 501048 – Ulster TV Fire Safety Advertising
410455	31.01.00	9,996.00	Full credit for invoice 410390 – Belfast Telegraph Newspaper's Fire Safety Advertising
501079	29.02.00	1,175.00	Credit reference Ulster TV Fire Safety Advertising a/n 65627
309696	30.04.01	8,025.25	Full credit for invoice 309696 – Sticker Collection Card
309683	30.04.01	22,372.00	Full credit for invoice 309683 – Design & Artwork for Binder +220 page document
309718	28.03.01	10,416.38	Full credit for invoice 309718 – Safety Crew Website – pens, pencils, baseball caps, balloons
600015	31.08.01	27.82	Credit for Century Newspaper's Fire Safety Advertising overcharge on invoice 411930, 411964, 411976, 412002, 412017 & 412043
600016	30.09.01	1.35	Overcharge on print production invoice 310086
309932	31.05.01	400.00	Credit for invoice 309684 – Print 'After the Fire' Booklet – final print cost less than quoted
600021	31.10.01	2.30	Under credit 0.63 on credit 309932, 0.32 on credit 309876 + 1.30 on credit 309844
309876	30.04.01	209.15	Credit for invoice 309722 Production Costs – balloons
309845	30.04.01	433.13	VAT credit for invoice 309690 – Postcards x 7 Reprints – zero rated item
412379	31.10.01	1,822.80	Full credit for invoice 412309 – Belfast Telegraph Newspaper's Fire Safety Advertising
309844	30.04.01	215.00	Credit for invoice 309690 – Postcards x 7 Reprint – final printer costs less than quoted
600018	31.10.01	20,000.00	Credit offset against invoice 501367, 501372, 412312, 412310 + 412380 sponsorship support Harry Corry
412624	31.01.02	3,525.00	Full credit for 412488 – Channel 9 TV Fire Safety Advertising
600018A	27.03.02	3,500.00	VAT credit in respect of sponsorship support from Harry Corry
504126	31.03.02	11,045.00	Full credit for invoice 501425 – Ulster TV Fire Safety Advertising – Spot No 31 dated 26.03.02
		102,803.08	

Alcohol/Drug Misuse

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much funding was allocated by each Health Board for schemes to tackle (i) alcohol misuse; and (ii) drug misuse in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3655/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Navigator Blue

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3063/01, to detail the goods and services for which credit notes totalling £102,803.08 have been issued by Navigator Blue. (AQW 3676/01)

Ms de Brún: Details of the goods and services for which Navigator Blue issued credit notes are shown below. The majority of the credit notes were issued by Navigator Blue due to amounts paid for Fire Safety advertising being subsequently reduced by receipt of sponsorship funding and V.A.T. adjustments.

Tá sonraí faoi na hearraí agus na seirbhísí ar eisigh Navigator Blue nótaí creidmheasa ina leith léirithe thíos. D'eisigh Navigator Blue an chuid is mó de na nótaí creidmheasa de bharr suimeanna a híocadh d'fhógraíocht Sábháilteacht Tine a bheith íslithe ina dhiaidh sin nuair a fuarthas maoniú urraíochta agus coigeartuithe CBL.

AN TÚDARÁS DÓITEÁIN — NÓTA CREIDMHEASA - NAVIGATOR BLUE

Creidmheas Nóta Tag.	Dáta	Luach (£)	Cúis
409123	11.01.99	1,058.40	Páirtchreidmheas do shonrasc 409071 – Fógraíocht do Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Nuachtán an Belfast Telegraph
409635	24.05.99	337.52	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 409577 – Fógraíocht do Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Nuachtán Ulster News
308318	30.06.99	222.78	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 308318 – fógraíocht do dhearadh ealaíne
511051	31.12.99	8,018.20	Páirtchreidmheas do shonrasc 501048 – Fógraíocht teilifíse do Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Ulster TV
410455	31.01.00	9,996.00	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 410390 – Fógraíocht do Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Nuachtán an Belfast Telegraph
501079	29.02.00	1,175.00	Tagairt chreidmheasa d'fhógraíocht Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Ulster TV a/n 65627
309696	30.04.01	8,025.25	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 309696 – Cárta Bailiúcháin Greamaitheoirí
309683	30.04.01	22,372.00	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 309683 – Dearadh agus Obair Ealaíne do Cheanglóir + doiciméid 220 leathanach
309718	28.03.01	10,416.38	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 309718 – Láithreán Gréasáin Criú Sábháilteachta – pinn, pinn luaide, caipíní baseball, balúin
600015	31.08.01	27.82	Creidmheas d'fhógraíocht Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin ró-mhuirearaithe Nuachtán Century ar shonrasc 411930, 411964, 411976, 412002, 412017 & 412043
600016	30.09.01	1.35	Rómhuirear ar shonrasc táirgeadh cló 310086
309932	31.05.01	400.00	Creidmheas so shonrasc 309684 – Cló ar leabhrán 'After the Fire' – costas deiridh cló níos lú ná an meastachán
600021	31.10.01	2.30	Íos-mhuirear 0.63 ar chreidmheas 309932, 0.32 ar chreidmheas 309876 + 1.30 ar chreidmheas 309844
309876	30.04.01	209.15	Creidmheas do shonrasc 309722 Costais Táirgíochta - balúin
309845	30.04.01	433.13	Creidmheas CBL do shonrasc 309690 – Cártaí Poist x 7 Athchló – ítim ráta nialas
412379	31.10.01	1,822.80	Creidmheas iomlán ar shonrasc 412309 – Fógraíocht do Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Nuachtán an Belfast Telegraph
309844	30.04.01	215.00	Creidmheas do shonrasc 309690 – Cártaí Poist x 7 Athchló – costais deiridh cló níos ísle ná an meastachán
600018	31.10.01	20,000.00	Creidmheas a chur i gcoinne shonrasc 501367, 501372, 412312, 412310 + 412380 tacaíocht urraíochta Harry Corry
412624	31.01.02	3,525.00	Creidmheas iomlán do 412488 – Fógraíocht teilifíse Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Channel 9
600018A	27.03.02	3,500.00	Creidmheas CBL faoi thacaíocht urraíochta ó Harry Corry
504126	31.03.02	11,045.00	Creidmheas iomlán do shonrasc 501425 – Fógraíocht theilifíse Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin Ulster TV Láthair Fógraíochta Uimh 31 dár dháta 26.03.02
		102,803.08	

Ophthalmological Surgery

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to reduce the waiting time for ophthalmological surgical procedures. (AQW 3680/01)

Ms de Brún: In order to reduce waiting times and improve access to services, cataract surgery is now provided at Lagan Valley Hospital and at South Tyrone

Hospital, augmenting the service at the Royal Group, Altnagelvin and Mater Hospitals.

Following a regional review of ophthalmology services, a group of professionals in the field has been working with my Department to develop proposals for the future of these services. I expect to receive their report shortly and I will then consider what action should be taken to improve services.

Le hagai feithimh a laghdú agus leis an rochtain ar sheirbhísí a fheabhsú, soláthraítear máinliacht fhinn anois in Otharlann Ghleann an Lagáin agus in Otharlann Thír Eoghain Theas, mar sin de, ag cur leis an tseirbhís in Otharlanna an Ghrúpa Ríoga, Alt na nGealbhan agus an Mater.

I ndiaidh athbhreithnithe réigiúnaigh ar sheirbhísí oftairmeolaíochta, bhí dream gairmithe a oibríonn sa réimse seo ag obair le mo Roinn chun moltaí ar thodhchaí na seirbhísí seo a fhorbairt. Tá mé ag súil lena dtuairisc a fháil ar ball agus ansin déanfaidh mé machnamh ar an bheart a ba chóir a dhéanamh le seirbhísí a fheabhsú.

Diabetes

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of people in West Tyrone diagnosed with diabetes; and (b) the number of psychologists in West Tyrone providing support to people suffering from diabetes. (AQW 3741/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) This information is not available.
- (b) At present there is no psychologist dedicated to the diabetes care team in this area. The Western Health and Social Services Board are currently examining their priority developments for 2002/03 and hope to be able to develop dedicated clinical psychology input for diabetes care. However, this is dependent on the finalisation of an investment plan and the availability of funding.
- (a) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.
- (b) Faoi láthair, níl síceolaí ar bith ann tiomnaithe don fhoireann cúraim diaibéitis sa réimse seo. Tá Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair ag scrúdú a bpríomhfhorbairtí don bhliain 2002/03 faoi láthair agus tá súil acu go mbeidh siad ábalta ionchur síceolaíochta cliniciúla tiomnaithe do chúram diaibéitis a fheabhsú. Braithfidh sé seo, áfach, ar thabhairt chun críche plean infheistíochta agus ar infhaighteacht maoinithe.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Improvements: Funding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by District Council area, the expenditure allocated by the 4 Roads Service Divisions on major and minor road improvements during the years (a) 1998-1999; (b) 1999-2000; and (c) 2000-2001. (AQW 3004/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The attached tables show how the financial

resources allocated to my Department's 4 Roads Service Divisions, for capital expenditure on major and minor road improvements, were spent across each district council area over the 3 year period.

However, I want to make it clear that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. In particular, as I explained in my response to your written Assembly Questions AQW2591/01 and AQW2592/01 on 8 April 2002, 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. In this context, while the £4.5M soon to be spent on the Comber Bypass will be revealed as expenditure within the Ards Borough Council area, the scheme will also greatly benefit through traffic from other council areas in terms of reduced journey times.

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 on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON MAJOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS 1998/1999 TO 2000/2001

Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Northern	Antrim	113	388	227
	Ballymena	1,627	1,460	3,389
	Ballymoney	0	0	0
	Coleraine	10	1,027	12
	Larne	0	0	0
	Limavady	0	0	16
	Londonderry	174	471	1,015
	Moyle	0	0	0
Divisional Total		1,924	3,346	4,659
Eastern	Belfast	1,401	3,928	6,223
	Carrickfergus	205	47	90
	Castlereagh	1,010	3	6
	Lisburn	334	177	16
	Newtown-abbey	300	148	0
	North Down	0	0	0
Divisional Total		3,250	4,303	6,335

Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Southern	Ards*	36	0	28
	Armagh	0	943	96
	Banbridge	5	36	22
	Craigavon	127	156	216
	Down*	325	41	37
	Newry and Mourne	632	1,776	193
Divisional Total		1,125	2,952	592
Western	Cookstown	0	0	0
	Dungannon	90	77	79
	Fermanagh	1,836	62	308
	Magherafelt	156	0	0
	Omagh	104	475	773
	Strabane	118	728	2,738
Divisional Total		2,304	1,342	3,898

* Excludes Expenditure on Purchase of the Ferry Vessel "MV Portaferry" - 30 2,127

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON MINOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS 1998/1999 TO 2000/2001

Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Northern	Antrim	477	319	286
	Ballymena	523	608	430
	Ballymoney	220	107	505
	Coleraine	559	432	789
	Larne	153	46	97
	Limavady	259	82	490
	Londonderry	588	494	658
	Moyle	132	109	55
Divisional Total		2,911	2,197	3,310
Eastern	Belfast	1,502	2,063	1,374
	Carrickfergus	309	220	116
	Castlereagh	421	405	864
	Lisburn	594	469	821
	Newtown-abbey	381	464	649
	North Down	509	556	276
Divisional Total		3,716	4,177	4,100
Southern	Ards	417	204	269
	Armagh	1,004	579	712
	Banbridge	337	382	205
	Craigavon	611	379	1,245
	Down	403	297	414
	Newry and Mourne	614	339	613
Divisional Total		3,386	2,180	3,458

Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Western	Cookstown	165	296	336
	Dungannon	375	439	545
	Fermanagh	608	568	463
	Magherafelt	225	252	260
	Omagh	161	164	329
	Strabane	282	461	299
Divisional Total		1,816	2,180	2,232

Road Improvements: Funding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the expenditure allocated to each of the 4 Roads Service Divisions for the purpose of major and minor road improvements in (a) 1998-1999; (b) 1999-2000; and (c) 2000-2001. (AQW 3005/01)

Mr P Robinson: The attached tables show how the financial resources allocated to my Department's 4 Roads Service Divisions, for capital expenditure on major and minor road improvements, were spent across each district council area over the 3 year period.

However, I want to make it clear that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. In particular, as I explained in my response to your written Assembly Questions AQW2591/01 and AQW2592/01 on 8 April 2002, 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. In this context, while the £4.5M soon to be spent on the Comber Bypass will be revealed as expenditure within the Ards Borough Council area, the scheme will also greatly benefit through traffic from other council areas in terms of reduced journey times.

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 on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

**CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON MAJOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS
1998/1999 TO 2000/2001**

Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Northern	Antrim	113	388	227
	Ballymena	1,627	1,460	3,389
	Ballymoney	0	0	0
	Coleraine	10	1,027	12
	Larne	0	0	0
	Limavady	0	0	16
	Londonderry	174	471	1,015
	Moyle	0	0	0
Divisional Total		1,924	3,346	4,659
Eastern	Belfast	1,401	3,928	6,223
	Carrickfergus	205	47	90
	Castlereagh	1,010	3	6
	Lisburn	334	177	16
	Newtown-abbey	300	148	0
	North Down	0	0	0
Divisional Total		3,250	4,303	6,335
Southern	Ards*	36	0	28
	Armagh	0	943	96
	Banbridge	5	36	22
	Craigavon	127	156	216
	Down*	325	41	37
	Newry and Mourne	632	1,776	193
Divisional Total		1,125	2,952	592
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	Dungannon	90	77	79
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	Omagh	104	475	773
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Divisional Total		2,304	1,342	3,898

* Excludes Expenditure on Purchase of the Ferry Vessel "MV Portaferry" - 30 2,127

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Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Northern	Antrim	477	319	286
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	Ballymoney	220	107	505
	Coleraine	559	432	789
	Larne	153	46	97
	Limavady	259	82	490
	Londonderry	588	494	658
	Moyle	132	109	55
Divisional Total		2,911	2,197	3310

Division	District Council	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Eastern	Belfast	1,502	2,063	1,374
	Carrickfergus	309	220	116
	Castlereagh	421	405	864
	Lisburn	594	469	821
	Newtown-abbey	381	464	649
	North Down	509	556	276
Divisional Total		3,716	4,177	4,100
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	Banbridge	337	382	205
	Craigavon	611	379	1,245
	Down	403	297	414
	Newry and Mourne	614	339	613
Divisional Total		3,386	2,180	3,458
Western	Cookstown	165	296	336
	Dungannon	375	439	545
	Fermanagh	608	568	463
	Magherafelt	225	252	260
	Omagh	161	164	329
	Strabane	282	461	299
Divisional Total		1,816	2,180	2,232

Domestic Water Charges

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) if he has assessed the cost of an administrative process necessary to assess and collect water charges from households in Northern Ireland; (b) the expected cost; and (b) the timescale necessary to establish such an administrative process.

(AQW 3151/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have made no such assessments since there are currently no plans to introduce domestic water charges.

However, I understand that the Review of Rating Policy, led by the Department of Finance and Personnel, will consider future funding options for water and sewerage services.

Grass Cutting: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the reason for the new commencement date of the Road Service grass cutting programme in the Carrickfergus area and (b) the date it will begin.

(AQW 3263/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that its grass cutting contract for Carrickfergus

expired at the end of the 2001 summer season and that it invited tenders for the 2002/2003 contract in March 2002.

The criteria for selecting the winning contractor was the lowest tender total received based on a Bill of Quantity priced by tenderers. The conditions of the contract used by Roads Service were the Institution of Civil Engineers Conditions of Contract (Fifth Edition). The contract conditions require £10 million for Public Liability / Employers Liability and Contractors All Risk. The contract was awarded on 10 April 2002.

Subsequently, when carrying out the normal insurance checks it was discovered that the winning contractor did not have Contractors All Risk cover. This type of insurance is mainly to cover against damage to the civil engineering works during construction. After reviewing this matter, Roads Service concluded that this type of insurance was not appropriate for grass cutting operations. The contractor was informed of this decision and he commenced grass cutting on the 29 April 2002, perhaps a week or so later than would otherwise have been the case.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1912/01, to detail the level of expenditure, in each of the last three years, on consultancy firms/consultants that are based in (a) Northern Ireland (b) the Republic of Ireland (c) the rest of the UK and (d) outside the British Isles. (AQW 3270/01)

Mr P Robinson: The breakdown of expenditure by the Department on external consultancy in each Of the last three years is as follows:

	NI (£000s)	ROI (£000s)	GB (£000s)	Outside the British Isles
Dec 1999/00	374.4	0	186.5	0
2000/01	627.6	0.2	834.2	0
2001/02	1,605.3		1,005.9	0
Total	2,607.3	0.2	2026.6	0

Note:

AQW1912/01 erroneously included some proposed expenditure to 31 March 2002 causing a difference of approx £10,000 between the 2001/02 figures reported above and the previous figures supplied.

Grass Cutting: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the tender criteria, including insurance provision, for grass cutting contractors. (AQW 3311/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that its grass cutting contract for Carrickfergus expired at the end of the 2001 summer season and that it invited tenders for the 2002/2003 contract in March 2002.

The criteria for selecting the winning contractor was the lowest tender total received based on a Bill of Quantity priced by tenderers. The conditions of the contract used by Roads Service were the Institution of Civil Engineers Conditions of Contract (Fifth Edition). The contract conditions require £10 million for Public Liability / Employers Liability and Contractors All Risk. The contract was awarded on 10 April 2002.

Subsequently, when carrying out the normal insurance checks it was discovered that the winning contractor did not have Contractors All Risk cover. This type of insurance is mainly to cover against damage to the civil engineering works during construction. After reviewing this matter, Roads Service concluded that this type of insurance was not appropriate for grass cutting operations. The contractor was informed of this decision and he commenced grass cutting on the 29 April 2002, perhaps a week or so later than would otherwise have been the case.

Grass Cutting: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain the delay in grass cutting in the Carrickfergus area. (AQW 3312/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that its grass cutting contract for Carrickfergus expired at the end of the 2001 summer season and that it invited tenders for the 2002/2003 contract in March 2002.

The criteria for selecting the winning contractor was the lowest tender total received based on a Bill of Quantity priced by tenderers. The conditions of the contract used by Roads Service were the Institution of Civil Engineers Conditions of Contract (Fifth Edition). The contract conditions require £10 million for Public Liability / Employers Liability and Contractors All Risk. The contract was awarded on 10 April 2002.

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Subcontractors

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline if contracts issued by his Department include clauses requiring subcontractors to dispose of excavated material through legal means. (AQW 3313/01)

Mr P Robinson: Contractors working for my Department's Roads and Water Services are expected to fully comply with all statutory legislation and it is not considered necessary or advisable to single out any particular piece of legislation in their contracts.

However, the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) Conditions of Contract which frequently form part of the contracts used by my Department require that:

"the Contractor shall ascertain and conform in all respects with the provisions of any general or local Act of Parliament and the Regulations and Bye-laws of any local or other statutory authority which may be applicable to the Works and with such rules and regulations of public bodies and companies as aforesaid..."

The ICE Conditions of Contract also require that when consent is given to a contractor to employ subcontractors, such consent shall not:

"relieve the Contractor from any liability or obligation under the contract and he shall be responsible for the acts defaults and neglects of any sub-contractor his agents, servants or workmen as fully as if they were the acts, defaults or neglects of the Contractor his agents servants or workmen".

In addition, the contracts used by Water Service for capital construction contracts require the main contractor, and any subcontractors, to dispose of excavated material using a waste carrier registered under the Controlled Waste (Registration of Carriers and Seizure of Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999.

Water Service carefully monitors the performance of contractors to ensure compliance with all contract specifications including the requirement to dispose of excavated material to approved sites. In the case of capital construction contracts, monitoring includes the assessment of monthly construction waste returns completed by main contractors and, where appropriate, subcontractors. These returns require the quantities of waste produced to be recorded and the disposal locations identified.

Subcontractors

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development how does he ensure that subcontractors working for the Roads Service and Water Service use legally established landfill sites to dispose of excavated material when carrying out work for his Department.

(AQW 3314/01)

Mr P Robinson: Contractors working for my Department's Roads and Water Services are expected to fully comply with all statutory legislation and it is not considered necessary or advisable to single out any particular piece of legislation in their contracts.

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Public Transport: Funding

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement comparing the rate of funding for public transport in Northern Ireland with that in the rest of the United Kingdom, and to give his assessment of whether Northern Ireland is underfunded.

(AQW 3451/01)

Mr P Robinson: An analysis of revenue support for public transport in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, discounting subsidised travel to school, which supports education and comes from the education budget, shows that funding per capita in Great Britain in 2000/01 was £28.58 compared to £21.09 in Northern Ireland. Information on public transport capital investment in Great Britain is not available in a form which enables a meaningful comparison to be drawn with Northern Ireland, but I consider that it is likely that the overall level of funding for public transport is lower in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Traffic Scheme: Newry

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the proposed timetable for the commencement and completion of the approved traffic scheme at the Rathfriland Road/Upper Damolly Road (Newry) junction. (AQW 3452/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service is progressing this scheme in 3 stages.

Stage 1 involved the permanent stopping up of Elmwood Park and the two Beechmount Parks. Work on this stage commenced on site in early January 2002 and is now complete.

Stages 2 involves signalling the junction and widening Upper Damolly Lane to provide a left turning lane for traffic exiting on to Rathfriland Road. The design of the works is complete and Roads Service is currently negotiating with the adjacent landowner to acquire the necessary land. The timescale for implementation of the full scheme is dependent on the satisfactory completion of the negotiations with the landowner.

In the interim, the installation of the traffic lights at the existing junction in advance of necessary land acquisition is being considered. However site constraints mean that the available sightlines between the traffic lights are restricted and engineers are currently assessing the implications of this restriction.

To minimise delay once the above matters have been resolved, the traffic lights controller, poles and heads have already been purchased and much of the necessary civil engineering work, including cable ducting has been completed.

Stage 3 involved the introduction of legislation necessary to permit the extension of the 30 mph speed limit zone on the Rathfriland Road. This legislation became effective on 15 May 2002 and new signs to identify the new limits will be erected within the next two weeks.

Beech Hill Dual Carriageway

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the progress in relation to the Beech Hill Dual Carriageway (A1 route) contract; and (b) an estimated start date for the project. (AQW 3453/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Member will be aware that my Department's Roads Service has already held public inquiries into the Environmental Statement and the Direction Order for this scheme from the 13 to 15 November and on the 8 January 2002 respectively.

Road Service are considering the modifications to the scheme recommended in the Inspector's Reports for both inquiries and a formal statement on the final outcome of the inquiries will be published within the next two months. Following this the next stage will be the publishing of a

'Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order' to facilitate the acquisition of the land necessary for the scheme. It is anticipated that all the statutory procedures could be complete by early 2003 with construction starting as soon as possible afterwards.

Street Lighting

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to (a) enquire into the ongoing scheme to replace electricity poles at Victoria Square, Rostrevor; and (b) give an assurance that the replacement poles/lamps will be in keeping with the Victorian character of the Square. (AQW 3534/01)

Mr P Robinson: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised me that NIE is currently involved in an extensive project in the Rostrevor area, including Victoria Square, to replace its existing overhead equipment with underground services. As a direct consequence of this work, Roads Service is installing its own street lighting cables and columns to replace the existing lighting on NIE poles.

I understand that, whilst the street lighting ducting has now been installed in Victoria Square, the columns and lanterns cannot be erected until NIE has de-commissioned and removed its overhead equipment. The remaining street lighting work will be timed to coincide with NIE's de-commissioning and removal work, which is expected to commence in the autumn.

Unfortunately Roads Service is only funded to provide standard street lighting columns and lanterns. Where there is a requirement to provide decorative or period fittings the additional cost has been met in the past through Environmental Improvement Schemes (funded by DSD and administered by DOE Planning Service) or local District Councils. In the absence of such additional funding the lighting in Victoria Square will be by means of standard equipment.

Road Signage

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any consultation he has had with his counterpart in the Irish Government to ensure the correct reference for Northern Ireland cities and towns on road signage. (AQW 3553/01)

Mr P Robinson: I understand that the city and town names displayed on traffic signs in the Republic of Ireland have remained unchanged since before the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

To date, no problem regarding the way by which Northern Ireland towns and cities are referred to on such signs has been brought to the attention of my Department's Roads Service. As such it has not been necessary to consult with the Irish Government on the matter.

Pedestrian and Vehicular Movement

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to improve pedestrian and vehicular movement at the traffic lights at the Square, Comber. (AQW 3590/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service is currently working on a scheme to improve pedestrian movement and safety at these traffic signals. This will provide additional facilities to assist pedestrians wishing to cross the road at the Bridge Street and Killinchy Street legs of the junction. Design work is now complete and the scheme is due to start in late summer/autumn.

In addition, as you are aware, the Comber Bypass scheme is making good progress. All the statutory procedures are now complete and Roads Service has commenced the tender process. It is anticipated that, when completed, this major scheme will significantly reduce vehicular movements at the signal controlled junction at The Square, Comber.

Road Signs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how many road signs have been stolen in the last 12 months within the Ards Borough Council area. (AQW 3614/01)

Mr P Robinson: Although road signs do occasionally go missing, it is not always the case that they have been stolen. In some cases they have been struck by a vehicle, vandalised or the fixing mechanism has come loose and the sign has fallen. However, the theft of road signs is not perceived by my Department's Roads Service to be a major problem and their best estimate of the number of such signs stolen during the last twelve months in the Ards Borough Council area would be in the low single figures.

I am aware the Member has already discussed this matter with local officials and that some of the missing signs he highlighted were not the responsibility of Roads Service, but were erected by the local Council who provide and maintain all town and street name signs. If he is aware of any other missing signs and supplies me with the details, I will be happy to have the matter investigated.

In the meantime, I can assure the Member that Roads Service will continue to be vigilant in maintaining existing road signs which are provided for the safety and information of road users.

Roads Service

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2559/01, to detail (a) if Roads

Service had scheduled the date for the inspection prior to 28th November and if so, (b) the revised date. (AQW 3619/01)

Mr P Robinson: Roadways are not usually scheduled for inspection individually but, for practical purposes, are grouped together in sectors. The inspections for the sector including Far Circular Road were programmed to be completed by Friday 24 November 2000. Various factors can create slight delays, however, for example, paint to mark out a defect may not adhere properly to the roadway during very wet weather. Also, the inspectors have other duties to undertake in addition to inspecting the roadways and sometimes that has to be prioritised.

On this occasion, the inspectors were running about 2 days behind schedule, discounting the weekends. The sector to be inspected immediately prior to the Far Circular Road sector was completed on Monday 28 November 2000 leading to inspection of Far Circular Road on 29 November 2000, a delay of 2 days. As I stated in my reply to AQW 2559/01 such slight variances has been accepted as reasonable by the Courts in Northern Ireland.

Roads Service

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1553/01, to detail the target time for the processing of claims where (a) the Roads Service are responsible; and (b) a third party are responsible. (AQW 3620/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Department aims to make a decision on all vehicle damage claims within an average of 6 months from receipt regardless of who may be considered responsible.

NI Health and Social Services Estate Agency: Targets 2002/03

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the top ten two-lane single carriageways according to the Mean Peak Hourly Flow in (a) Eastern Division; (b) Southern Division; (c) Western Division; and (d) Northern Division. (AQW 3642/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service routinely monitors traffic flows using a network of some 180 census points across Northern Ireland. The data from these census points has been analysed and details of the top ten flows on two-lane single carriageways (ie 1 lane in each direction) is given on the following page for each division.

Ranking	Road	Average Two-Way Mean Peak Hour Traffic Flow
Eastern Division		
1	C265 Old Dundonald Road, Belfast (west of Ice Bowl)	2,310
2	B1070 Belmont Road, Belfast (north of Schomberg Park)	2,178
3	A2 York Road, Belfast at Arosa Parade	2,151
4	C704 Cregagh Road, Belfast (north of Montgomery Road)	2,093
5	A55 Balmoral Avenue, Belfast (east of Shrewsbury Gardens)	1,956
6	B95 Mallusk Road, Newtownabbey (west of Scullions Road)	1,912
7	A20 Albertbridge Road, Belfast (east of Templemore Street)	1,784
8	C701 Grand Parade, Belfast at Orby Road	1,769
9	B59 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey at Kings Road	1,747
10	B102 Stewartstown Road, Belfast at Kells Avenue	1,574
Southern Division		
1	A3 Northway, Portadown	2,110
2	A25 Newry-Camlough road, at Egyptian Arch	1,780
3	A1 Loughbrickland-Newry road	1,500
4	A21 Newtownards Road, Comber	1,260
5	A28 Armagh Road, Newry	1,250 ¹
6	A20 Partaferry Road, Newtownards	1,030
7	A7 Belfast Road, Downpatrick at Quoile	1,000
8	A24 Belfast Road, Ballynahinch	870
9	A27 Tandragee-Portadown, south of B78	810
10	A26 Banbridge-Lurgan road (north of Broken Bridge)	610
Western Division		
1	A6 Belfast to Londonderry road at Toome Bridge	2,030
2	A5 Ormagh Bypass	1,480
3	A32 Enniskillen-Irvinestown road at Cherrymount	1,360
4	A38 Strabane-Border at check point	1,350
5	A4 Dungannon Bypass at Granville	1,303 ²
6	A45 Coalisland-M1 at Tamnomore	1,290
7	A31 Castledawson-Magherafelt (southwest of Killyneese)	1,220 ²
8	A46 Enniskillen-Belleek road at Drumlyon	806 ²
9	A29 Dungannon Road, Cookstown	780
10	A34 Lisnaskea Road, Maguiresbridge	640
Northern Division		
1	A6 Dungiven Road, Londonderry at Rosstowney	1,940
2	A2 Culmore Road, Londonderry (urban)	1,880
3	B507 Branch Road, Londonderry	1,830
4	A29 Ring Road (A26-B67), Coleraine	1,740
5	A2 Queens Quay, Londonderry	1,660
6	A2 Ballykelly Road, Limavady	1,600
7	A6 Moneynick Road, Toomebridge	1,586
8	A26 Tully Road, Nutt's Corner	1,580
9	DR514 Northland Road, Londonderry	1,480
10	A29 Dunhill Road, Coleraine - Limavady	1,450

1. Figure taken from the Vehicle Kilometres of Travel Report.

2. Figures quoted are based on those taken from the Annual Traffic Census Report for 1999 which has been amended to reflect the annual increase in traffic growth between 1999 and 2000.

Aquarius Mourne Water Project

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Regional Development if work on the Aquarius Mourne Water Project Phase II at Alderwood Hill, Purdysburn commenced before planning permission was granted; and to make a statement. (AQW 3643/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service is presently undertaking work related to the Aquarius Mourne Water Project in the Purdysburn and Alderwood Hill areas. The work includes a major refurbishment of Purdysburn Reservoir, the completion of the replacement pipeline and major cross connections to the existing watermain infrastructure within the Purdysburn site. This work does not require planning permission.

It is proposed to provide an energy recovery installation at the Purdysburn service reservoir. A planning application has been submitted, and is under consideration by Planning Service. Work has not commenced and will not commence until planning approval is received.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative: Funding

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the type of regeneration initiatives which would be eligible for funding from the investment initiative announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Belfast on Thursday 2 May 2002. (AQW 3563/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The Chancellor's initiative presents both opportunities and challenges for all Government Departments. It will take some time for each Department to consider its priorities in terms of the type of regeneration and public service improvement schemes that might best be funded under the initiative, particularly in the short term.

However, the decision to transfer a number of ex-prisons and security bases to devolved control within Northern Ireland, free of charge, presents an opportunity for my Department, through its Comprehensive Development Scheme powers and associated urban regeneration instruments, to unlock the development potential of a number of the key sites earmarked for release. My Department therefore expects to play a valuable and significant role in the Chancellors initiative and to act as a catalyst for major physical, economic and social development that meet the needs of local people.

Air Quality

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3239/01, to outline (a) if his

officials are aware of the "UK Smoke and Sulphur Dioxide Network" summary report for January-December 2000 prepared by the National Environmental Technology Centre as part of the air quality research programme of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, The Scottish Executive, The National Assembly for Wales and the Department of Environment in Northern Ireland, published in October 2001 and (b) if he will undertake to factor this into the prioritisation of the Housing Executive's heating replacement programme. (AQW 3607/01)

Mr Dodds: My officials are aware of the "UK Smoke and Sulphur Dioxide Network" summary report for January-December 2000. The Housing Executive's continuing heating replacement programme, which is providing natural gas or oil heating, will contribute to better air quality throughout Northern Ireland. However, the prioritisation of the programme is based on a phased replacement of those solid fuel heating systems which have reached the end of their useful life.

SPED Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been moved by the SPED Scheme in the last 12 months. (AQW 3615/01)

Mr Dodds: The purpose of the SPED scheme is to provide a ready buyer, in the form of the Housing Executive, for people who have been intimidated or are under threat, and who wish to sell their home quickly to move away from the threat. For the period May 2001 to April 2002, the number of applications made to the Housing Executive was 323.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Charter

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the timescale for house sales from the Housing Executive and (b) if this is in line with the Housing Executive Charter. (AQW 3616/01)

Mr Dodds: The main performance indicator associated with the Housing Executive's House Sales scheme and published in its Business Plan is the time taken to make an offer. The performance target is to do so within 10 weeks of application in 95% of cases. Performance is monitored by both the Housing Executive and my Department. Due to continued unprecedented demand, exacerbated by a dramatic increase in applications since the publication of proposals for change in the scheme, the achievement rate during the year just finished was around 73%. Additional staff resources have been allocated and other changes have been made to try and improve matters in the current year. The Housing Executive will be informing applicants that due to the exceptionally high levels of applications, processing may take longer

in some instances than the above target times, but all applications will be dealt with in date order. It will continue to monitor performance and take action as necessary.

‘Tenant Charter’

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the number of maintenance repairs that were not carried out within the ‘Tenant Charter’ guidelines for April 2001-March 2002. (AQW 3628/01)

Mr Dodds: During the financial year, April 2001 - March 2002, there were 473,016 response maintenance repairs carried out by the Housing Executive. Of these, 51,038 were not completed within the timescale allocated in the ‘Tenant’s Charter’. The breakdown of these jobs and the percentage not carried out within the ‘Tenant’s Charter’ are as follows:

	No. of Jobs	Allocated timescale ‘Tenants’ ‘Charter’	Not carried out within the ‘Tenant Charter’ (no. of jobs)
Emergency	100,589	Within 24 hrs	9% (9,053)
Urgent	115,615	Within 4 working days	13% (15,030)
Routine	231,334	Within 4 weeks	10% (23,133)
Change of Tenancy	25,478	Dependant on category of repair	15% (3,822)

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Research and Library Services: Advisers/Experts

Mrs Nelis asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) the method and criteria used by Research & Library in drawing up lists of advisors/experts, (b) how this pool of advisors/experts is evaluated and (c) who evaluates the advisors/experts. (AQW 3623/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter): I am responding to you on behalf of the Assembly Commission.

- (a) For work that is expected to exceed a total cost of £10,000, the committee should undertake an open tender exercise. For work that is not expected to exceed a total cost of £10,000, Research and Library Services (R&LS) will provide a list of suitable candidates.

The method used at present comprises all of the following:

- (i) Reference to a list of advisers used in the past and the CV’s volunteered to the R&LS by persons wishing to be considered as advisers.

- (ii) Reference to research material related to the area of committee concern
- (iii) Research networking – particularly with the two NI universities
- (iv) Internet and bibliographical searches

Application of the above methodology results in the production of a list of several potential advisers. Information is then sought from each of these to assess whether they meet the set of specific pre-defined criteria established by the committee.

- (b) The evaluation criteria used for identifying suitable candidates includes the following:
- evidence, based on CV, that experience/qualifications are relevant and sufficient to enable them to be regarded as specialist on the issue(s) being considered;
 - evidence, based on references from previous client(s), that previous work was of satisfactory quality, including achievement of deadlines;
 - availability to deliver project specification within time allotted.

R&LS require terms of reference for the inquiry and specific terms of reference for the work to be undertaken by the specialist adviser before approaching potential candidates for a CV together with information on fees, experience, availability and any possible conflicting interests. This information is then passed to the committee along with any other relevant information to facilitate the final selection process.

- (c) The Research and Library Service carry out the initial evaluation of potential advisers. This evaluation assesses compliance with the criteria set by the committee drawn from its terms of reference. The committee is responsible for the final evaluation and selection of the specialist adviser and will decide in advance on the most appropriate criteria to be used in the process.

Once an appointed specialist adviser has compiled a final report the committee then evaluates it. A committee may request the Research and Library Service to assist in the assessment of a report.

A Good Practice Guide to providing an effective research service to committees has been issued by the Research and Library Service and the Committee Office. This is available through the Committee Office.

Equality Commission: Code of Practice

Mr J Kelly asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to AQW 2631/00, to outline (a) whether or not the recruitment of non-civil servants on a negotiated reduction of their former salaries fully complied with equality legislation and the Equality Commission’s Code of

Practice; (b) whether or not such compliance was adhered to; and (c) what procedures were adopted to ensure that the process did not entail disproportionately adverse effects in terms of gender and/or religion.

(AQW 3751/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter): I am responding to you on behalf of the Assembly Commission.

(a) The Assembly Commission is content that the recruitment of non-civil servants on a negotiated reduction of their former salary is not contrary to current equality legislation or the relevant Equality Commission codes of practice.

(b) All action taken to date is in compliance with the relevant Equality Commission codes of practice.

(c) All persons involved in the recruitment process have been trained in non-discriminatory criterion based recruitment and selection techniques including the content of the Equality Commission's Code of Practice. From the information currently available, there is no evidence that any process used, or currently in use, has had a disproportionate affect in terms of gender and/or religion. The affects of the negotiation processes on the starting pay policy applied to some early recruitment competitions is under review to ensure fairness and consistency of approach.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 07 June 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Commissioner for Children

Mr Wells asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the legislation for the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Bill. (AQW 3231/01)

Reply: Work on the drafting of the legislation for the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Bill is well advanced and we intend to introduce the Bill to the Assembly in June.

Commissioner for Children

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what additional functions are being proposed for a Children's Commissioner for Northern Ireland compared to (a) Wales; (b) Norway; and (c) Republic of Ireland (Ombudsman). (AQW 3383/01)

Reply: Ultimately the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People will be a matter for the Assembly to decide.

The consultation paper, which was issued last year, however envisaged the Commissioner having functions in four main areas: advocacy; legal representation; complaints; rights promotion and research.

This can be compared to Wales and Norway where the respective Commissioner and Ombudsman have no power to bring legal proceedings in their own name or to intervene in legal proceedings.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Bill to establish an Ombudsman for Children does not contain powers in relation to assisting children or intervening in relation to legal proceedings nor bringing test proceedings in his own name.

Civic Forum

Mr Wells asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the costs associated with the establishment and running of the Civic Forum since its inception. (AQW 3539/01)

Reply: The cost of establishing the Civic Forum was approximately £75,000. This covered the cost of filling the post of Civic Forum Chairman and the costs to nominating sectors.

The Civic Forum's running costs since its establishment in October 2000 until 24 May 2002 have been as follows:

October 2000	March 2001 £145,000
April 2001	March 2002 £450,000
April 2002	24 May 2002 £ 40,000

Civic Forum

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the costs for the Civic Forum in the last 12 months for (a) building; (b) Secretariat; and (c) Members. (AQW 3578/01)

Reply: The running costs of the Civic Forum from April 2001 until 24 May 2002 were approximately £490,000. This includes £207,000 for Secretariat salaries and expenses and £50,000 for members' travel and accommodation.

The Civic Forum currently occupies offices in a property, which is leased by the Department of Finance and Personnel and thus is part of the Government estate.

Euro

Dr Birnie asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what position, if any, has the Executive adopted on the possibility of the UK adopting the Euro. (AQW 3591/01)

Reply: This is a matter for the UK Government but we would anticipate there would be consultations with the devolved administrations before any developments take place.

Rural Post Offices

Ms Morrice asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) if it will undertake to support rural post offices as they are fundamental to the local community, and (b) if it will support their financial assistance. (AQW 3634/01)

Reply: Responsibility for the postal service is a reserved matter and support for rural post offices subsequently falls to the Department of Trade and Industry.

The Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit Report "Counter Revolution" in June 2000 placed a formal requirement on the Post Office to maintain the rural network.

The Post Office Regulator Postcomm has provided advice to the Department of Trade and Industry on support to the rural network following the transfer of Social Security payments to bank accounts from January 2003.

A £2m capital funding project has been established by the Department of Trade and Industry to assist community and voluntary groups maintain or re-establish rural post offices. To date funds have been provided in respect of Stranagawilly Post Office, Co Tyrone and Ballyward Post Office, Co Down.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs I Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 1133/01, to outline (a) any plans it has for the Review of Public Administration; (b) the date for its commencement and completion; and (c) the proposed timescale for its implementation. (AQW 3635/01)

Reply: As stated in response to AQO 1133/01, the proposed terms of reference for the Review of Public Administration were debated in the Assembly on 25 February 2002, and in the subsequent weeks we engaged in a pre-consultation process with a broad spectrum of stakeholder interests.

We are now in the process of finalising the terms of reference, taking on board points raised during the pre-consultation. The revised terms of reference will then have to be quality assured by high-level independent experts before we launch the Review. We expect to launch the Review in the coming weeks, and the main phase is expected to take eighteen months to complete.

The length of time necessary to implement the recommendations emerging from the Review will depend on the nature of those recommendations. It is not possible to be definitive about the time needed at this stage.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

'Taste of Ulster' Initiative

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail funding and other support the Department has given to the 'Taste of Ulster' initiative, over the past 5 years. (AQW 3785/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The Department's financial contribution

to the 'Taste of Ulster' initiative over the past 5 years was £93,787. Officials have also supported the work of the Management Board of 'Taste of Ulster' and provided technical support to the 'Taste of Ulster' Speciality Food Group.

Review of the Horticulture Sector

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the completion date of the Review of the Horticulture Sector; and (b) the date it will be made available to the public. (AQW 3820/01)

Ms Rodgers: The consultants appointed to undertake a strategic review of the Commercial Horticulture Sector now expect to present their report at the end of June. Given this timescale and the forthcoming holiday period, I would anticipate that it would be early autumn before I will be seeking the industry's views on their findings and recommendations.

Review of the Horticulture Sector

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps will be taken to implement the Review of the Horticulture Sector following publication. (AQW 3821/01)

Ms Rodgers: I will not be in a position to respond to your question until I have received the Consultant's report on the review of the Commercial Horticulture Sector and have had the opportunity to consider its content and recommendations, and indeed have taken account of the industry's views on the latter.

Greenmount College: Vacancy

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the current position regarding the vacant post of 'Top Fruit Advisor' for the apple industry; and (b) the timescale for an appointment to this position. (AQW 3868/01)

Ms Rodgers: The position of Top Fruit Adviser within Technology and Business – Crops and Horticulture Division at Greenmount College is currently vacant due to the promotion of the member of staff who previously filled this post.

Arrangements have been made for the previous incumbent to provide part-time cover until such times as the post can be filled. This will take some time due to the very specialist nature of the post and funding constraints. The post may not be filled on a permanent basis until April 2003.

I realise the importance of this sector and assure you that my Department will endeavour to provide the necessary expertise to ensure its sustained development.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Signage: Irish Language

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken to ensure that all signage in buildings and workplaces within the Department's responsibility are in the Irish language. (AQW 3679/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Research commissioned by my Department to inform work on implementing the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages has shown a degree of general public support for some signage in indigenous languages.

My Department has tri-lingual signs in English, Irish and Ulster-Scots at the entrances to the Interpoint Centre. It is a matter for the Department's Agencies and other Associated Bodies to determine wider dual practice on Irish and/or Ulster-Scots signage.

European Capital of Culture 2008: Belfast Bid

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much is being spent on consultation fees in respect of Belfast's bid to become European capital of culture in 2008. (AQW 3707/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The total amount spent on consultation fees to date in respect of Belfast's bid to become European Capital of Culture 2008 is £21,282.56.

EDUCATION

Education and Library Boards: Staffing Levels

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of staff in all categories currently employed by (a) each Education and Library Board; and (b) all Inter-Board services. (AQW 3651/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The latest information available is at 30 September 2001 and is as follows:

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Headquarters Administration	3	10	232	17
Curriculum Advisory & Support	-	-	47	15

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Youth Service	-	27	33	112
Transport	72	80	6	-
Miscellaneous (school crossing patrol, maintenance, others)	-	111	-	-
School Meals Service	41	530	17	1
Library Service	15	31	49	54
School-Based Staff	150	921	548	239
Inter-Board Services	10	9	51	-

NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Headquarters Administration	2	11	353	61
Curriculum Advisory & Support	-	-	47	15
Youth Service	4	24	36	470
Transport	69	86	-	-
Miscellaneous (school crossing patrol, maintenance, others)	78	161	3	-
School Meals Service	139	1,098	15	-
Library Service	-	32	91	150
School-Based Staff	198	2,233	430	993
Inter-Board Services	-	-	4	-

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Headquarters Administration	8	13	256	24
Curriculum Advisory & Support	1	-	106	7
Youth Service	15	30	65	10
Transport	93	79	10	-
Miscellaneous (school crossing patrol, maintenance, others)	29	166	2	-
School Meals Service	42	833	14	1
Library Service	3	31	115	93
School-Based Staff	151	1,622	505	1,185
Inter-Board Services	-	-	19	2

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Headquarters Administration	9	15	381	38

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Curriculum Advisory & Support	2	4	123	21
Youth Service	2	42	60	23
Transport	72	152	-	-
Miscellaneous (school crossing patrol, maintenance, others)	42	699	-	-
School Meals Service	-	1,315	32	2
Library Service	10	34	128	80
School-Based Staff	181	1,691	377	1,446
Inter-Board Services	-	-	6	-

WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Headquarters Administration	9	17	225	16
Curriculum Advisory & Support	2	7	133	32
Youth Service	14	36	46	173
Transport	146	221	6	-
Miscellaneous (school crossing patrol, maintenance, others)	53	205	-	13
School Meals Service	224	1,133	20	-
Library Service	9	26	113	42
School-Based Staff	144	2,041	548	934
Inter-Board Services	-	-	76	4

Nursery Teachers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many full-time posts of 4½ hours are available for Nursery Teachers within each Board area in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3652/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is not possible to provide the information on the basis requested.

As all full-time teachers have the same working time contract irrespective of the phase in which they teach, the number of full-time teachers in nursery schools over the last 3 years is set out in the table below. It does not include teachers in nursery units attached to primary schools, as the Department does not hold this information separately. The figures have been extracted from the teachers' payroll.

	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
BELB	64	63	61
WELB	21	22	23

	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
NEELB	33	35	35
SEELB	31	31	31
SELB	27	26	26

NEELB: Staffing Levels

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education to detail current staffing levels within the North Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 3661/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The latest information available is at 30 September 2001 and is as follows:

	Industrial		Non Industrial	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Headquarters Administration	2	11	353	61
Curriculum Advisory & Support	-	-	47	15
Youth Service	4	24	36	470
Transport	69	86	-	-
Miscellaneous (school crossing patrol, maintenance, others)	78	161	3	-
School Meals Service	139	1,098	15	-
Library Service	-	32	91	150
School-Based Staff	198	2,233	430	993
Inter-Board Services	-	-	4	-

School Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to commend the achievement of the Province's grammar schools in placing high numbers of students in 'Ivy League' universities throughout the UK. (AQW 3667/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I frequently commend our schools and our teachers for their dedication and commitment to ensuring that all our young people are helped to achieve their full potential. I am happy to reiterate my gratitude to our teachers but I think it would be invidious for me to single out any one sector for special commendation.

Burns Report

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the completion date of the recently announced public postal consultation on the Burns Report; (b) the cost of this exercise; and to make a statement.

(AQW 3690/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The closing date for responses to the consultation exercise, including completion of the

household response form, is 28 June 2002. The estimated cost of this exercise is £185,000 but the final cost will depend on the level of response. I want as many people as possible to let me have their views and all responses will be considered. I intend to publish an analysis of the responses received from all the strands of consultation around the end of September.

Primary and Secondary Schools: Funding

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) any proposed changes to the common funding formula for primary schools; and (b) any steps he is taking to address the current funding imbalance between primary and secondary education. (AQW 3744/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department's consultation document on the common funding formula for all grant-aided schools, published last year, proposes a skewing of resources to the primary sector. The adjustment to AWPU weightings and changes in other factors, such as premises, small schools protection and teacher salary protection, proposed in the consultation document will contribute to the shift in the share of resources received by primary schools. The cumulative effect of all the proposals, planned for implementation in April 2003, would be to increase primary sector funding by around £12m or 4% and the balance between funding attracted by primary schools compared to post-primary schools would rise from 65% to 67%.

Summer Literacy and Numeracy Schemes

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the number of summer literacy and numeracy schemes that were established for children in each of the last 3 years; and (b) the number he anticipates in place for summer 2002. (AQW 3752/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of summer literacy and numeracy schemes in each of the last 3 years was 61, 106, 131 respectively. The Department has made available funds for 161 schemes for summer 2002.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

University Equality Schemes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures local universities have taken to fulfil their obligations under section 75(1)(a) of the NI Act 1998. (AQW 3871/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): The universities have produced Equality Schemes

which set out how they will meet their duties under Section 75. These have been submitted to the Equality Commission for approval. The institutions have also carried out extensive staff awareness training on issues such as obligations under the legislation, dealing with complaints and the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Equality Schemes. They have also employed a Research Officer and Research Assistant to support Equality Impact Assessments.

University Awards

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether local universities should have concern at any proposal to name university awards after persons who have been linked with paramilitary activity by Garda Síochána informers or other security personnel. (AQW 3885/01)

Ms Hanna: The local Universities are, like all UK Universities, legally independent bodies with a large degree of autonomy in managing their own affairs including the awarding and naming of scholarships and bursaries. I have, therefore, no locus in this area which is internal to the respective Universities.

Further and Higher Education Institutes: Disabled Access

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on what steps have been taken to ensure adequate access for people with disabilities, not only to buildings but to all services and facilities, in Institutes of Further and Higher Education. (AQO 1496/01)

Ms Hanna: Institutes of Further and Higher education currently have duties under the Disability Discrimination Act to disabled employees and when providing non educational services to the public. There are also a number of initiatives already in place at Further Education colleges which promote access for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, including specific support for individuals. The Department will be adding to these measures shortly by taking forward, with the Department of Education, new legislation which will provide comprehensive and enforceable rights to education for all disabled people on the same basis as the rest of the United Kingdom.

Investors in People

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how does the uptake of 'Investors in People' awards in Northern Ireland compare to Great Britain. (AQO 1466/01)

Ms Hanna: There are currently in excess of 25,000 recognised 'Investors in People' organisations in GB

accounting for 23.8% of the workforce. Northern Ireland has 570 recognised organisations employing 20.4% of the Northern Ireland workforce.

University Funding

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make as to whether research and training at our universities is suffering as a result of shifting resources to widening access.

(AQO 1500/01)

Ms Hanna: Funding of research and training and funding towards widening access to higher education are separate aspects of my Department's grant allocation to the universities. There has been no shift in resources from one area of activity to the other. Indeed, additional resources have been provided for both SPUR £43 million and the Student Support package £65 million.

Further Education Colleges

Rev Robert Coulter asked the minister for employment and learning to detail the total cost of senior management salaries as a proportion of the total allocated budgets of further education colleges.

(aqo 1491/01)

Ms Hanna: The total cost of service management salaries was approximately 3% of the overall expenditure by colleges in 2000/01, the latest year for which figures are available.

Further Education Colleges: Centres of Excellence

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) the centres of excellence which exist within further education colleges; and (b) the criteria normally used for determining a centre of excellence.

(AQO 1492/01)

Ms Hanna: In 2000/2001 colleges bid for recognition as centres of excellence in one or more of six key vocational areas significant to the regional economy. This resulted in the creation of eight centres of excellence across six colleges - in four key vocational areas: Information and communication technology; electronics; manufacturing engineering; and tourism and hospitality.

The criteria for the assessment of the centres of excellence bids focused on the quality of teaching and learning and the links with the relevant local business.

'Roberts Report': Postgraduate Studies

Mr Foster asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make of the recent

'Roberts Report' on postgraduate studies in science and engineering.

(AQO 1481/01)

Ms Hanna: The Roberts Report, commissioned by the Treasury, the Department for Education and Skills, and the Department of Trade and Industry was published very recently on 15th April. The report examines the reduction in the supply of science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills in the UK and its adverse impact on the economy. The Department's postgraduate advisory board will consider the report at its June meeting and will advise me of its recommendations.

Student Grants

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps is she taking to increase the number of students receiving grants.

(AQO 1503/01)

Ms Hanna: The aim of the recent Student Support Review was to increase participation in third level education. Grants of up to £1,500 pa were introduced in September 2001 to support further education students from low-income families. A similar level of assistance will be available to higher education students from September 2002. Also in place from September 2001 are childcare grants and an increase in the level of parental income at which a contribution towards tuition fees becomes due.

Further Education Courses

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she will take to ensure the provision of software engineering and information technology at a higher education level at East Down Institute in Downpatrick.

(AQO 1463/01)

Ms Hanna: Subject to the normal course approval process East Down Institute is free to develop higher education level provision in software engineering and information technology on a part-time basis. Due to financial considerations the level of publicly funded full-time higher education provision is subject to restriction.

Unemployment

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how the task force on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment will address those areas of Northern Ireland with the highest incidences of long-term unemployment.

(AQO 1482/01)

Ms Hanna: The taskforce is giving careful consideration as to how it will deal with those areas of Northern Ireland with the highest incidences of long-term unemployment. Its action plan is currently undergoing rigorous drafting to bring it to the final draft stage. I intend to

issue the draft action plan to the Assembly Committee and subsequently to report to the Executive before the summer recess. Until this has been achieved I am not in a position to announce details of proposed initiatives.

Adult Literacy Strategy

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to the adult literacy strategy, to outline (a) targets she has developed for the reduction of low levels of literacy skills; and (b) measures being put in place to ensure that those targets are achieved.

(AQO 1498/01)

Ms Hanna:

- (a) The long term aim is, by 2012, to reduce by half the number of people with low levels of literacy and numeracy.
- (b) I will establish and lead an essential skills committee who will drive the essential skills for living strategy forward and implement the key recommendations to achieve the targets detailed in the strategy.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Wind Turbines

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the health and safety record of wind turbines located at wind farm developments in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3636/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): HSENI has not received reports of any dangerous occurrences, accidents, or cases of disease at wind farm developments in Northern Ireland as required by The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997.

Health and Safety Practices

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many companies as a result of accidents at work were (i) fined; (ii) penalised in some other way; or (iii) ordered to implement changes in health and safety practices.

(AQW 3683/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The numbers of companies fined following prosecutions for breaches of health and safety at work legislation during each of the last 3 years, and the numbers required to make improvements to health and safety at work practices/procedures as a result of formal enforcement action, are as follows:

Enforcing Authority	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02
Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland			
Prosecutions	11	8	10
Enforcement notices	43	121	219
District Councils			
Prosecutions	11	10	3
Enforcement notices	158	93	81

The figures for 2001/02 are provisional. Figures provided above relate to the total number of prosecutions and enforcement notices. Separate figures are not available for prosecutions and enforcement notices which would have resulted following accidents at work.

Injuries at Work

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline, in each of the last 3 years, (a) the number of people injured at work with (i) minor injuries; and (ii) major injuries; (b) the average time off work due to injuries; and (c) the cost of injuries to industry and business.

(AQW 3684/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) Based on information reported to the enforcing authorities under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997, the number of people injured at work with minor and major injuries in each of the last three years is set out in the following table:

Year	Specified major injuries	Other injuries resulting in more than 3 days absence from work
2001/02	525*	3,152*
2000/01	644	3,832
1999/00	605	3,843

* These figures relate solely to injuries reported to the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI). Details of injuries reported to district councils during 2001/02 are not yet available.

- (b) A recent research study commissioned by the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland indicated that the average time employees are off work due to injuries is 5.5 days.
- (c) The study also estimates the annual cost of workplace accidents to the Northern Ireland economy to be almost £500 million of which some £370 million represents the costs to employers.

Renewable Energy Resources

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he is considering any proposals for improving green and renewable energy sources.

(AQO 1486/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department, together with DTI and NIE, are sponsoring the completion of an important network study which will determine the maximum potential which NI can realise for generating electricity from renewable energy sources. This study will help form renewable energy policy and indicate what target should be set for 2010.

Fish Processing Industry

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what support will be provided to sustain the fish-processing industry in Ardglass and Kilkeel; and to make a statement. (AQO 1464/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is currently implementing a development strategy for the fish-processing sector for the period of 2000-2006. This was completed in conjunction with the industry, the trade body — Northern Ireland Seafood Ltd and DARD. This strategy sets out my Department's continued and sustained approach to the development of this important sector.

Imports and Exports

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the value of imports and exports from/to (a) Republic of Ireland, (b) England; (c) Scotland; and (d) Wales. (AQO 1499/01)

Sir Reg Empey: For the calendar year 2001, total imports from Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland were £965 million and total exports from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland were £981 million. These statistics are produced by HM Customs and Excise and only refer to goods that have crossed the UK frontier. Comparable information for England, Scotland and Wales is not available.

Biomedical Research

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the current level of commercial activity in the Province which is based on biomedical research. (AQO 1487/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There is an emerging cluster of commercial operations within Northern Ireland based on biomedical research. At present there are 7 companies, which are clients of Invest NI, and together these are generating a turnover of over £20m.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Application: Killyleagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the current stage of the proposed Gocean

Development at Killyleagh; and (b) the timescale for the completion of the planning application. (AQW 3629/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): The Department is awaiting additional information from the applicant in the form of an addendum to the Environmental Statement submitted with the planning application on 24 November 2000.

The additional information, which was requested from the applicant on 11 January 2002, was identified by Environment and Heritage Service, which noted a number of deficiencies in the Environmental Statement, such as the impact of the proposed development on the Strangford Lough Area of Special Scientific Interest/Ramsar site.

The Department is currently engaged in discussions with the applicant in relation to the outstanding information. Until that information is received, the application cannot be taken any further forward.

Once the outstanding information is received, I will ensure that the application is determined as quickly as possible.

Planning Applications

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his current policy in respect of planning applications for wind farm developments at Garrane, Rosslea and Callagheen, Belleek. (AQW 3639/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am combining the answers to the above questions as they overlap in relation to the Department's planning policies for wind farms.

The relevant planning legislation, including European Directives is:

- (a) The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 which requires that an application for such development is submitted and determined in accordance with legislative requirements.
- (b) Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. This legislation transposes EU Directive – Annex III to Council Directive 85/337/EEC (c) as amended by Council Directive 97/11/E C (d) into Northern Ireland law. A determination of whether an application requires to be accompanied by an Environmental Statement is made by the Department where the installation of more than 2 turbines, or the hub height of any turbine or other structure exceeds 15 metres in height.

The planning policies, which are used to consider planning applications for wind farms, are:-

- (a) PSU12 - of the planning strategy for Rural Northern Ireland 1993, which is the policy relating to Renewable Energy.

- (b) Planning Policy Statement 1 – General Planning Principles.
- (c) Planning Policy Statement 2 – Planning and Nature Conservation, in so far as it is relevant to a particular site.
- (d) Planning Policy Statement 6 – Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage, in so far as it is relevant to a particular site.
- (e) Planning Policy Statement 3 – Planning & Roads Considerations regarding access and traffic generation.
- (f) The relevant Development Plan for the area in which the proposed wind farm is located. In the case of the Garrane, Rosslea and Callagheen proposals, this is the Fermanagh Area Plan 2007.
- (g) Supplementary guidance is also provided in:

Development Control Advice Note 15 – Vehicular Access Standards.

Development Control Advice Note 10 – Environmental Impact Assessment.

I can assure you that the Department will give careful and detailed consideration to the wind farm proposals at Garrane and Callagheen against the policies and regulations outlined above.

Planning Applications

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 2125/01, to detail the planning legislation, including European Directives, and planning policies used to consider a planning application for a wind farm. (AQW 3640/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I am combining the answers to the above questions as they overlap in relation to the Department's planning policies for wind farms.

The relevant planning legislation, including European Directives is:

- (a) The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 which requires that an application for such development is submitted and determined in accordance with legislative requirements.
- (b) Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. This legislation transposes EU Directive – Annex III to Council Directive 85/337/EEC (c) as amended by Council Directive 97/11/E C (d) into Northern Ireland law. A determination of whether an application requires to be accompanied by an Environmental Statement is made by the Department where the installation of more than 2 turbines, or the hub height of any turbine or other structure exceeds 15 metres in height.

The planning policies, which are used to consider planning applications for wind farms, are: -

- (a) PSU12 - of the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland 1993, which is the policy relating to Renewable Energy.
- (b) Planning Policy Statement 1 – General Planning Principles.
- (c) Planning Policy Statement 2 – Planning and Nature Conservation, in so far as it is relevant to a particular site.
- (d) Planning Policy Statement 6 – Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage, in so far as it is relevant to a particular site.
- (e) Planning Policy Statement 3 – Planning & Roads Considerations regarding access and traffic generation.
- (f) The relevant Development Plan for the area in which the proposed wind farm is located. In the case of the Garrane, Rosslea and Callagheen proposals, this is the Fermanagh Area Plan 2007.
- (g) Supplementary guidance is also provided in:

Development Control Advice Note 15 – Vehicular Access Standards.

Development Control Advice Note 10 – Environmental Impact Assessment.

I can assure you that the Department will give careful and detailed consideration to the wind farm proposals at Garrane and Callagheen against the policies and regulations outlined above.

Exotic and Wild Animals

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) what assessment he can make in relation to the availability of expertise and suitable premises in Northern Ireland to look after exotic and wild animals; and (b) if he intends to give responsibility to the USPCA for seized exotic and wild animals. (AQW 3681/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department has policy responsibility for regulating the keeping of dangerous wild animals by private individuals. What is categorised as a dangerous wild animal will need to be established by legislation but is unlikely to include all exotic and wild animals.

My Department has been working on primary legislation in this area. A Bill was to have been introduced in the Assembly last December, but work has had to be deferred for a number of reasons. One reason is to allow for the development of proposals for a centralised regulatory regime, to take account of concerns expressed by the Assembly Environment Committee about the original policy proposal to have the regime administered by district councils.

The development of the new proposals will include consideration of the options for securing the expertise necessary to undertake the inspections that would form an essential part of the process for processing applications for licences to keep dangerous wild animals. This work will also involve examining the options available for dealing with any seized animals, where this action is deemed necessary.

I acknowledge that both expertise and premises suitable for accommodating seized or unwanted dangerous wild animals, particularly the larger species, are very limited in Northern Ireland. Work to consider the options is at an early stage and no decisions have yet been made. Any proposal for an organisation such as the USPCA to provide expertise and/or accommodation facilities in support of the operation of the proposed regulatory regime will need to take account of established procurement policies.

ASSI: Strand Lough and Killough

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he can make of the impact on the environment and farming activities of the new ASSI designation for the Strand Lough and Killough areas.

(AQW 3682/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service declared Killough Bay and Strand Lough as an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) on 14 December 2001. Our aim is to safeguard the plants and animals of this coastal site along with its associated swamp, fen and wet grassland for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The past management of this area has ensured the survival and wellbeing of the many special plants and animals found throughout the ASSI. Continued careful use of the area should allow current activities to be sustained at levels that do not threaten the important features of the ASSI. Landowners, and those who hold rights within the designated area, who wish to undertake certain potentially damaging operations specified in the declaration documents, are legally obliged to seek consent from my Department. If the operation is judged likely to have an adverse effect, a management agreement will be offered in order to protect the conservation interests of the site. To date, Environment and Heritage Service has received only one application from a private landowner at this site and this is currently being assessed.

Planning Permission

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment in what circumstances would a new planning application be permitted to bypass the outline planning stage of the Planning Service's planning procedure.

(AQW 3693/01)

Mr Nesbitt: When seeking planning permission applicants have the option of making an outline or a full planning application. The purpose of outline planning permission is to determine in principle, the acceptability of a proposal to build on any particular site. Where an outline planning permission is granted, it is conditional on the subsequent approval by the Department of the details of the proposed development, which is known as 'reserved matters'.

Where an application is made for full planning permission it should include all the particulars needed to describe the development. In this way the principle of the development is determined along with the details of the proposal.

It is up to the applicant to decide which type of application that he wishes to submit. Reserved matters applications submitted following an outline consent will only be approved where they comply with the conditions of the outline permission. Where a submission of reserved matters is clearly not in accordance with the outline planning permission to which it relates, the application will be refused. The applicant will be advised to submit either a new full application or a new reserved matters application, in accordance with the terms of the existing permission.

If a new application is required in the above circumstances, the principle and the detail of the proposal will again be judged for their acceptability in planning terms. This determination will also take into account any previous site history as a material consideration.

Therefore, there are no circumstances in which the 'outline planning stage' is bypassed by a new planning application.

Deer Park, Newtownstewart, West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3300/01, to detail the representations received from the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, in respect of the Deer Park, Newtownstewart, West Tyrone.

(AQW 3731/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) was consulted by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service on the proposed Deer Park area of special scientific interest (ASSI) in February 1998. The council's scientific committee was presented with the documentation that subsequently formed the designation package, together with a description of the site, its importance and the management considerations.

The committee supported the proposed designation and this was endorsed by the full council at its meeting on 6 March 1998. The research contract with the University of Ulster ran for three years, from September 1994. The work programme involved identification, mapping and interpre-

tation of the main glacial landform complexes. Over 30 discrete areas were identified and described. The many reports and maps generated by this research are not suitable for placing in the Assembly Library but are available for inspection at the offices of the Environment and Heritage Service. Critical localities, selected on the basis of scientific importance and landscape significance, were then identified in discussion between the University of Ulster and EHS. EHS's subsequent survey work had two aims:

- to determine what elements of the Deer Park moraine would merit inclusion in the designated site, and
- to identify a specific boundary for the proposed ASSI.

This work ensured that only the most significant element of the landform feature was included within the designated site and that it had a site boundary that would be easily identifiable.

Deer Park, Newtownstewart, West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3299/01, to outline (a) the research paper undertaken by the University of Ulster into key glacial landform complexes throughout Northern Ireland and to lodge this paper in the Assembly Library; and (b) the survey undertaken by the Environmental Heritage Service in regard to the Deer Park, Newtownstewart, West Tyrone. (AQW 3732/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) was consulted by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service on the proposed Deer Park area of special scientific interest (ASSI) in February 1998. The council's scientific committee was presented with the documentation that subsequently formed the designation package, together with a description of the site, its importance and the management considerations.

The committee supported the proposed designation and this was endorsed by the full council at its meeting on 6 March 1998. The research contract with the University of Ulster ran for three years, from September 1994. The work programme involved identification, mapping and interpretation of the main glacial landform complexes. Over 30 discrete areas were identified and described. The many reports and maps generated by this research are not suitable for placing in the Assembly Library but are available for inspection at the offices of the Environment and Heritage Service. Critical localities, selected on the basis of scientific importance and landscape significance, were then identified in discussion between the University of Ulster and EHS. EHS's subsequent survey work had two aims:

- to determine what elements of the Deer Park moraine would merit inclusion in the designated site, and
- to identify a specific boundary for the proposed ASSI.

This work ensured that only the most significant element of the landform feature was included within the designated site and that it had a site boundary that would be easily identifiable.

Equality Impact Assessments

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the number of equality impact assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA. (AQW 3773/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

(a) The Department has carried out 6 equality impact assessments (EIAs) to date; of which 2 are complete and 4 are at consultation stage.

(b) The total costs are set out below:

- Research, £25,824
- Consultation, Nil
- Printing, Nil
- Dissemination, £1857

These figures do not include staff costs or departmental overheads which constitute a large proportion of the total cost of producing the EIAs.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) what steps are in place to ensure that health and social care groups (LHSCG), when established, will be adequately resourced; and (b) that budgets delegated to LHSCG will be based on a weighted capitation approach reflective of the need of communities. (AQW 3529/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I am making over £5million available to cover the management and administration costs of the local health and social care groups. I believe this will be sufficient for the initial stages of the groups' development, but it will be kept under review. Staff resources at health and social services board level will also be available to provide professional, administrative and management support to LHSCG. As the groups take on greater responsibility, I also expect resources to move to them from the boards.

LHSCG will also receive budgets for primary care development and, increasingly, for commissioning. I can confirm that the delegation of these budgets to groups will be informed by the weighted capitation approach,

which takes account of the relative need of communities. Prescribing budgets for LHSCG will also be calculated using a weighted capitation formula.

Tá mé chun níos mó ná £5 mhilliún a chur ar fáil chun costas bainistíochta agus riaracháin na nGrúpaí Sláinte Áitiúla agus Cúram Sóisialta a chlúdach. Creidim gur leor é seo do chéimeanna tosaigh i bhforbairt na nGrúpaí, ach coinneofar súil air. Cuirfear acmhainní foirne ag leibheál Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ar fáil chomh maith chun tacaíocht ghairmiúil, riaracháin agus bainistíochta do na LHSCGanna a sholáthar. De réir mar a ghlacann na Grúpaí le níos mó freagrachtaí, tá mé ag súil go dtabharfar acmhainní dóibh ó na Boird.

Gheobhaidh na LHSCGanna buiséid chomh maith d'fhorbairt chúram phríomhúil agus do choimisiúnú de réir a chéile. Is féidir liom a dheimhniú go roinnfear na buiséid do Ghrúpaí de réir an chur chuige ceannsráithe ualaithe, a chuireann riachtanas coibhneasta na bpobal san áireamh. Déanfar comháireamh i moladh na gcostas le haghaidh LHSCGanna ag baint úsáide as foirmle ceannsráithe ualaithe.

Orthopaedic Surgery: South Tyrone Hospital

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3321/01, if the two modern operating theatres in South Tyrone Hospital have been used for orthopaedic surgery since the service was transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 3709/01)

Ms de Brún: The two theatres in question have not been used for orthopaedic surgery since acute services were temporarily transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital.

Níor úsáideadh an dá obrádlann atá i gceist le máinliacht ortaipéideach a dhéanamh ó aistríodh géarsheirbhísí go sealadach go hOtharlann Cheantar Craigavon.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive: Houses in Multiple Occupation

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development how many properties were converted into houses in multiple occupation by local authorities in (a) 1999; (b) 2000; and (c) 2001. (AQW 3657/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The Housing Executive does not convert properties into houses in multiple occupation (HMO). It provides grant-aid which allows the owners of properties to do so. The number of grants awarded to convert properties to HMO is shown in the following table.

Year	Grants Awarded
1999	17
2000	18
2001	8

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Social Development to outline, in each of the last 3 years, (a) the number of requests for a review of a decision to refuse (a) disability living allowance (DLA) applications which were successful; and (b) the number of decisions to refuse applications for DLA which were overturned at appeal. (AQW 3695/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of people who requested a review of a refusal of disability living allowance and were successful over the last 3 financial years are as follows:

Year	Number Allowed
1999/2000	676
2000/2001	1,991
2001/2002	2,346

The number of people who appealed decisions not to allow disability living allowance and were successful over the last 3 financial years are as follows:

Year	Number Overturned
1999/2000	287
2000/2001	455
2001/2002	771

Request for Meetings

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3194/01, how he monitors all requests for meetings to ensure that they are dealt with in accordance to both the Ministerial Pledge of Office and the Code of Conduct with regard to equality of treatment, impartiality and preventing discrimination. (AQW 3711/01)

Mr Dodds: I decide on all requests for meetings with me, and as explained in my written response to AQW 3194/01, I take all my decisions in accordance with the Ministerial Pledge of Office and the Code of Conduct, as I undertook to do when taking up Ministerial office.

Housing Grants

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development how many grants aimed at (a) reducing unfit housing; and (b) improving private sector housing conditions, have been awarded in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3712/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested is as follows:

Grant Type	1999/2000 No	2000/2001 No	2001/2002 No
Remedying unfitnes			
Renovation	1,370	1,584	1,435
Replacement	351	373	340
Houses in Multiple Occupation	146	174	183
Total	1,867	2,131	1,958

Grant Type	1999/2000 No	2000/2001 No	2001/2002 No
Improving housing conditions including those for a disabled occupant			
Disabled Facilities	1,388	1,564	1,600
Minor Works Assistance	1,944	2,378	2,413
Repairs	3,529	3,820	3,382
Total	6,861	7,762	7,395

Full Duty Applicants

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the percentage of applicants, accepted as statutorily homeless, who have secured permanent tenancies within three months of application, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3713/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive measures performance in respect of full duty applicants from the date of acceptance as homeless rather than the date of application. From that perspective, performance, within 3 months, in the last 3 years is as follows:

1999/2000	67%
2000/2001	60%
2001/2002	51%

Social Housing Sector: New Homes

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development how many new homes have been built in the social housing sector in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3714/01)

Mr Dodds: I refer the member to my response to AQO 1271/01 which is contained in the Official Report for 7 May.

Adaption of Properties

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development how many properties have been adapted to meet

the needs of occupants such as the elderly or those with disability in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3715/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested is as follows:

1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
5,439	6,471	8,073

The figures relate to work carried out to Housing Executive, housing association and private sector properties. The Housing Executive also carries out a significant number of minor works for people with disabilities. These include the provision of handrails, ramps, lever taps and lowering of cupboards. However, it does not routinely gather statistics on such works.

Housing Executive Properties: Heating

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties have been converted to oil or gas heating in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3717/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested is as follows:

Year	Gas	Oil
1999/00	2,950	4,291
2000/01	4,232	3,604
2001/02	3,597	4,939
Total	10,779	12,834

Gambling Laws: Casinos

Mr Berry asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the legislation which relates to the establishment of casinos in Northern Ireland and to ensure that a casino will not be established at the Gosford Castle site, Markethill. (AQW 3865/01)

Mr Dodds: The law on gambling in Northern Ireland is contained in the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The 1985 Order does not permit facilities for high stakes gaming such as are provided by commercial gaming clubs (casinos) in Great Britain and similar establishments elsewhere. A casino cannot, therefore, operate lawfully anywhere in Northern Ireland.

Benefit Entitlement

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Social Development what are his plans to further the uptake of benefits. (AQO 1475/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department is committed to ensuring that everyone claims and receives their proper benefit entitlement. The Social Security Agency has a range of

measures in place designed to encourage people to claim social security benefits. These include undertaking regular publicity campaigns to signal the arrival of new benefits or increase awareness of existing ones. For example:

- the minimum income guarantee campaign has resulted in just over 8,000 additional successful claims;
- information days have been held recently in a number of towns across Northern Ireland; and
- A to Z guides for pensioners and for farmers have been widely distributed.

The agency also works closely with a number of voluntary sector organisations to identify and address barriers to benefits, including provision of interpreting facilities for some ethnic minority groups:

- a teleclaims service for new pensioners was introduced last year and the pension advisers are being evaluated in 2 social security office areas; and
- finally the agency provides comprehensive information, advice and assistance to people through each of the social security offices and the Benefit Shop in Castlecourt.

Work will continue in this area and will take account of emerging uptake issues from the agency's welfare reform and modernisation programme.

Housing Executive: Sale of Land and Property

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) land or properties the Housing Executive sold off in the last 10 years and then re-purchased; (b) the amount of money received for such land and property; and (c) how much was involved in the re-acquisition.

(AQO 1497/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested is not held centrally, and could only be collected at a disproportionate cost. In general terms, there have been occasions when land has been sold by the Housing Executive and compulsorily purchased at a later stage to form part of an urban renewal area or a redevelopment area. In addition, houses sold through the Housing Executive's houses sales scheme have been bought back, either through the acquisition of satisfactory houses scheme, commonly called the ASH scheme, or the Scheme for the Purchase of evacuated dwellings, known as SPED.

There will often be differences between the sale proceeds and the re-purchase costs, both of which are dependent on overall market changes and the time scales involved. The sale and the repurchase prices are determined by the Valuation and Lands Agency or other valuers.

Housing: Interface Areas

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what housing action he plans to undertake to improve interface areas in towns outside Belfast.

(AQO 1506/01)

Mr Dodds: I am conscious of the impact that inter-community strife has on housing and particularly on the lives of people residing in interface areas. I deplore violence in any shape or form but especially when it impinges on such a basic human right as one's home. Clearly there is a security dimension to this which falls outside my responsibility but, where possible, I would encourage community leaders to work together to try to resolve difficulties. If there are specific housing issues to be addressed I will endeavour to facilitate resolution of these through the Housing Executive and other housing agencies. For example, I have recently introduced a scheme to provide protective security measures for homes at interface areas.

Housing Executive: Economy 7

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to discuss with the Housing Executive the need to review the eligibility criteria for financial assistance for the installation of Economy 7; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1465/01)

Mr Dodds: I have no plans to discuss with the Housing Executive the need to review the eligibility criteria for financial assistance for the installation of Economy 7.

There are no specific eligibility criteria for financial assistance in the private sector for the installation of Economy 7 heating; qualification for such assistance is the same, no matter what type of heating is installed.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 14 June 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Women's Centres: Funding

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the core funding which has been awarded to women's centres; and (b) any action the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will be taking to address recent funding problems encountered by these centres. (AQW 2826/01)

Reply: Generally Departments only consider core funding for groups operating on a regional basis and relatively few organisations receive such funding.

In the current financial year, the Department for Social Development through its Belfast Regeneration Office have just recently approved £190,000 from their Making Belfast Work Action Plan budget to secure management and administration posts and to provide running costs for 2 Women's Centres (Ballybeen and Windsor). In the last financial year the same two centres received £167,597 from the same source. The Department for Social Development through its Londonderry Development Initiative also provided funding of £39,026 to three Women's Centres in the city, because these centres deliver services relevant to that Initiative.

Our officials are presently finalising a position paper on the funding of women's organizations generally. They are also liaising with officials in the Department for Social Development with a view to identifying how these funding problems can be most effectively addressed.

Children's Commissioner in Northern Ireland

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) the current number of children who will be monitored by a Children's Commissioner in Northern Ireland; and (b) the comparable number in (i) Wales; (ii) Norway; and (iii) Republic of Ireland under the current proposals. (AQW 3382/01)

Reply: The number of children living in Northern Ireland is 460,484¹, approximately one third of the total population.

In Norway, there is a total child population of 1.16 million, approximately one quarter of the total population.²

There are 671,300 children living in Wales, which make up about one fifth of the total population.³

There are approximately 1.1 million children living in the Republic of Ireland, making up 29% of the total population.

Electronic Service Delivery: Online Transactions

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what has been the percentage increase in take-up of on-line transactions between the public and Ministerial Departments in the last 12 months. (AQW 3419/01)

Reply: Online transactions are a key priority for all Northern Ireland Departments although they are only one, albeit important, aspect of electronic service delivery.

In the main such transactions are currently related to requests for information, publications and assistance. It is important to note that for many Departments key services include the provision of information and advice and electronic access to that advice is rightly considered to be a transaction. The under-pinning principle is that having contacted government electronically, the customer is satisfied at the end of the interaction.

At present, not all Departments are routinely capturing take-up figures for these transactions although plans to introduce a formal monitoring regime are under consideration as part of the overall e-Business programme.

Nevertheless, a number of Departments have already acknowledged encouraging increases in the uptake of electronic transactions for example Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment have recorded increases as high as 30% month on month and the overall expectation is that this upward trend will continue, particularly as the number of transactions available online grows.

¹ 2000 figures

² November 2001 figures

³ 1999 figures

Background statistics which are available for some of the Northern Ireland Civil Service websites also give an indication of the interest in, and usage of, online Departmental information. These, too, have shown encouraging growth in the use of the Internet as a means of interaction between the public and Government Departments and services. For example, job vacancies viewed at Department of Employment and Learning's 'JobCentre Online' increased from 28,128 in April 2001 to 213,129 in April 2002, an increase of 758%.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in light of the Prime Minister's announcement last week on borrowing monies from the Exchequer, to outline (a) the terms for borrowing; and (b) if there will be a consultation process for political parties and the general public. (AQW 3460/01)

Reply:

- (a) As part of the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative the Executive will be able to borrow from Treasury at highly advantageous interest rates which would be below commercial rates. There are two aspects to the borrowing arrangements. In the short term the Executive would be able to borrow up to £125 million from the Treasury under existing legislation. This loan would be repaid from revenue income currently planned. The Initiative also provides for new borrowing arrangements for the Executive in the longer term which, subject to the progress with the Review of Rating Policy, could come into operation from 2004/05.

Terms of borrowing. The loan, like any other loan, needs to be repaid. The interest rates for borrowing will be very keen – GILT market based from National Loan Fund.

- (b) It will be up to the Executive and the Assembly to decide whether to borrow and by how much to fund public services, though there will be no major changes in local revenue until after full public consultation and until a fairer system for revenue raising has been developed to replace the present system. The extent to which the borrowing power is used will be the subject of full debate within the Executive and the Assembly. There will be major public consultations launched shortly on Public Private Partnerships and the Rating Policy Review, both of which have a relevance to the longer term borrowing under the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative. Consultation will also take place with the Assembly and the public on proposals for the Budget allocations for the coming years.

Reports Commissioned

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) the reports commissioned on community relation issues over the years (1999-2000; 2000-2001; 2001-2002); and (b) which of these reports have been published.

(AQW 3646/01)

Reply: The table provided contains details of research commissioned over the period 1999 to 2002 and whether or not it has been published. Some of the research is currently in progress and where this is the case a publication date or time period is indicated. The table shows that on one occasion research has not been formally published in terms of a hard copy report. However, this work has been disseminated within the former Centre for the Study of Conflict at the University of Ulster and is available on request.

Additional publications have been produced which are not listed in the table because they were commissioned outside the time period specified. These are either already on the OFMDFM website (www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk) or will be placed there in due course.

Financial Year	Project Commissioned	Published
1999/00	From Protagonist to Pragmatist: Political Leadership in a Divided Society	Yes
	Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey CR module (1999 data)	Yes
	Equity & Diversity Research	Yes
	Ethnic Minorities in NI	To be published 30 May 2002
	Sectarianism among children aged 3-11 in NI	To be published end 2002
	Management of Diversity	Yes
	Children and the Troubles	Yes
	Inter-group Friendship among Young People	No
	Relational Communications between Catholics and Protestants in the Workplace	To be published Autumn 2002
2000/01	Measuring and Visualising the Labour Market and Community Segregation	To be published Summer 2002
	Researching the Troubles (edited book)	Publication due Dec 2002
	NI Life and Times Survey Community Relations module (2000 data)	Yes

Financial Year	Project Commissioned	Published
2001/02	Social Capital and Religious Denomination	To be published early 2003
	Post Conflict Violence	To be published Autumn 2003
	Sectarianism in Sport	To be published Autumn 2002
	Community Relations Attitudinal survey module from NI Omnibus Survey (2002)	To be published June 2002
	Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey -community relations questions (2001 data)	To be published May 2002
	Comparative Review of Public Policies towards improving inter-community relations	To be published July 2002

Civic Forum: Vacancies

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to fill the vacancies allocated to the Agriculture and Rural Development sector on the Civic Forum.

(AQW 3743/01)

Reply: The report to the Assembly in February 1999 identified the ten sectors from which membership for the Civic Forum would be drawn. The Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association and representative organisations from the fishing sector were to nominate 3 members for the agriculture and fisheries sector. However, a member representing NIAPA was not appointed due to internal difficulties within the organisation. We also understand that the member representing the Ulster Farmer's Union has recently resigned.

The difficulties within NIAPA have now been resolved and officials have begun the process to obtain nominations to fill both the vacancies within the agriculture sector.

Exclusion of Ministers

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what consideration it has given to excluding Sinn Féin Ministers from Office under Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

(AQO 1458/01)

Reply: We have not jointly considered the exclusion of Sinn Féin Ministers under Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Freedom of Information

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if consideration has been given to the 'Freedom of Information' legislation being introduced to the Scottish Parliament in formulating the proposed Freedom of Information Bill for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1424/01)

Reply: The Executive previously agreed that the Freedom of Information Act 2000 should extend to Northern Ireland and it will be fully in force by January 2005. We will also be reviewing the desirability of separate legislation for Northern Ireland.

We are of course aware of the legislation being introduced in Scotland and we will take account of this in considering the desirability of separate legislation for Northern Ireland.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr McMenamin asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline plans and timescale for the development of their Re-investment and Reform Initiative.

(AQO 1434/01)

Reply: We explained to this House on 7 May that a lot of work now needs to be done to implement the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative. An Executive sub-Committee is being established to oversee the work.

We have already put in hand action to make early progress. We need to decide in the coming weeks how best to utilise the £200 million which will be available to us over the next two years. Departments have already been asked for their proposals. A new regional cancer centre has been identified as a possible project which could benefit from the short-term package.

We are also working to establish the new strategic investment body as soon as possible to help us take a more strategic approach to investment in our infrastructure. The Executive has agreed to set up a Project Board, with members nominated by parties in the Executive, to advise on the most appropriate remit and status for the new body. The Project Board is expected to meet for the first time shortly.

On the use of the sites at Ebrington and the Maze, Members will be aware that work to develop proposals for the use of Ebrington has already commenced. We are establishing a partnership and regeneration panel involving central and local government, community and business sectors, to bring forward proposals for the Executive's consideration. We want to use local experience and expertise to advise us on how best to use this strategically important asset. We also want local community and business groups to be consulted and involved in developing ideas for the use of other such sites including the Maze.

These extensive estates offer us many possibilities for major economic and social regeneration. We will want to consider the options carefully so that we achieve dynamic development, working in partnership with local communities.

NSMC

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when and where is the next plenary NSMC scheduled to take place. (AQO 1556/01)

Reply: The next plenary of the NSMC is scheduled to take place on Friday 28 June in Armagh.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr McMenamin asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when will the project board for the Re-investment and Reform Initiative be established. (AQO 1558/01)

Reply: The first meeting of the Project Board took place on 11 June.

A key function of the Project Board, which comprises members nominated by Ministers from the parties in the Executive, will be to advise on the role, remit and status of the new Strategic Investment Body.

We have nominated the chairs of the Project Board and the UUP, SDLP, DUP and Sinn Féin Ministers have nominated members.

HMP Maze

Mr Close asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what factors will determine when ownership of HMP Maze will pass to the Northern Ireland Executive. (AQO 1537/01)

Reply: These are, of course, mainly matters for the Northern Ireland Office.

We understand that the timing of the release by the Northern Ireland Prison Service of the Maze will be determined by operational factors including the availability of adequate contingency accommodation within the Prisons estate (currently restricted by an extensive refurbishment programme at other prison establishments) and the need to relocate a number of operational units from the Maze to other sites. It is not, therefore, possible at this stage to put a precise timescale on the site's release.

Tourism

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline their plans for developing

tourism between Britain and Northern Ireland, with particular reference to the British-Irish Council agenda. (AQO 1569/01)

Reply: At the second British-Irish Summit Council meeting in November 2001, it was agreed that tourism was of significant importance to all members in terms of jobs, revenue, culture and heritage and that benefit would be derived from greater co-ordination across this industry. The Council decided that Guernsey should take the lead on the Tourism Sector and a progress report will be made to the next British-Irish Summit Council meeting which is scheduled to take place in Jersey on 14 June.

The lead responsibility for taking work forward within this sector in Northern Ireland lies with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. A representative from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has attended Tourism senior officials meetings held on 1 March and 21 May 2002, with a view to agreeing a future work programme which would be of most benefit to all members.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Common Fisheries Policy

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what input her Department had to the recent negotiations on the new EU fisheries policy, scheduled to be published in May 2002. (AQW 3688/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department conducted a consultation, locally, on the European Commission's Green Paper proposals for reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, and fed these through by way of contributions to the Commission's Green Paper consultation. Through regular ongoing communication with UK Ministerial colleagues, I have ensured that issues specific to Northern Ireland, such as the long term future of our nephrops industry, and recognition for the capacity reductions which we have made, have been maintained at the forefront of Member State thinking and communicated at European level negotiations.

The process of consultation on the Commission's substantive legislative proposals, which were published on 28 May 2002, has now begun. I shall continue to pursue Northern Ireland's regional interests at Member State and European Level, and by pressing our interests at Fisheries Council meeting. I attended the June Fisheries Council in Luxembourg on 11 June to ensure, through meetings and representations to UK Ministers, that Northern Ireland's interests are were represented in these negotiations.

I attach particular importance to local consultations with fisheries interests, to ensure that all important aspects of the future viability of Northern Ireland's fisheries industry are appropriately covered in our response to the Commission's legislative proposals. I am pleased to say that the Commission's "Blue Team", which is spearheading their consultation with visits to various locations throughout Europe, will visit Northern Ireland on Thursday 13 June, where the European Commission's representative office in Belfast will host a seminar for fisheries interests, which will both present the Commission's proposals, and allow stakeholders to ask questions and put their views directly to Commission officials. I will meet the team during their visit.

Equality Impact Assessments

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by her Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3769/01)

Ms Rodgers: Equality Impact Assessments have been carried out on the following policies:

Less Favoured Area Support

Payment of Agricultural Grants and Subsidies (which included the Implementation of Agenda 2000); and

Natural Resource Tourism Measure (Peace II)

Cost of Research £	Consultation	Printing £	Dissemination £
Nil	Nil	80.00	110.00

Imported Meat

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of beef imported from (i) Argentina; and (ii) other countries, in the last 12 months.

(AQW 3780/01)

Ms Rodgers: There have been two imports of consignments of corned beef from Argentina in the past 12 months. There have been no other imports of beef from Third Countries within this period.

From the introduction of the European Single Market 1992, the conditions for trade in most products between Member States have been harmonised. This means that, regardless of whether a product is destined for the UK market or another Member State of the European Union, certain basic trade requirements have to be met. With regard to personal imports, general import licences apply which mean that importers can bring small quantities of meat and dairy products into Northern Ireland, without

any additional conditions applying. Therefore, no records are kept on the import of beef from Member States.

Imported Meat

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the effect imported beef has on the level of local beef sales; and (b) any steps she is taking to increase the level of local sales.

(AQW 3781/01)

Ms Rodgers: Inspections of imported meat from Third countries are carried out at Border Inspection Posts in accordance with EU Regulations. Once such meat enters the EU it can be traded freely in the same way as EU beef. It is therefore not possible to maintain statistics on the quantity of beef imported into NI, nor is it possible to assess the effect imported beef has on the level of local beef sales.

Market research would however indicate that beef is being imported from the ROI, other EU countries and Third countries with beef from Third countries going to the catering and institutional sectors. It is also understood supermarkets continue to source the majority of their beef from local suppliers. All beef must comply with EU import conditions and with EC beef labelling requirements by having the beef marked with the country and establishment of origin.

I continue to encourage supermarkets and others to make greater use of local produce, including beef, through my attendance at suppliers conferences, company visits and at other events.

Livestock Dealers

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will undertake to establish a unit to provide a registration system for livestock dealers.

(AQW 3795/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Department has made provision under the Animals and Animal Products (Import and Export) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 to ensure dealers that import livestock from other Member States and sell them on, are registered.

However, the introduction of the 30 day standstill requirement following the Foot and Mouth outbreak, has meant that the requirement for dealers to be registered has been overtaken by the fact that animals are not able to move through registered dealers premises at present.

It is recognised that standstills contribute significantly to preventing the spread of exotic animal disease and that the principal trigger for spread of animal disease is animal movement, particularly repetitive movement as through dealers premises or movement involving multiple source contacts or destinations. It is therefore the Depart-

ment's intention to maintain the 30 day standstill requirement in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future.

Dairy Production

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment has she made of the levels of egg production in 2001. (AQW 3796/01)

Ms Rodgers: There were 65.8 million dozen eggs graded and packed in registered NI egg packing stations during 2001. This represents a 6% increase on the 62.2 million dozen recorded for the previous year. The laying flock also increased by 1% to 2.63 million birds in the year 2001.

Freedom of Information

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom of Information Act will be completed by November 2002. (AQW 3845/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department will comply fully with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act including the preparation of a publication scheme in time to meet the November 2002 deadline. I am also in the process of appointing an Information Manager who will have specific responsibility for Freedom of Information matters. I have asked senior officials within my Department to detail all the information they publish or intend to publish and this will form the basis of the Publication Scheme.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Foyle Fisheries

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to develop the tourism potential of the Foyle Fisheries area. (AQO 1440/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): *[holding answer 27 May 2002]*: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) administers a number of financial assistance schemes- the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 2000-2004, the International Fund for Ireland Visitor Attractions Scheme, the Tourism Development Scheme and Events Support Scheme- which are aimed at developing existing visitor attractions and amenities, marketing projects and events support. Applications for assistance under these initiatives will be welcome for projects located in the Foyle Fisheries area.

In addition, all existing tourist accommodation businesses located in the area which have been certified by the NITB are eligible to apply to Invest NI for selective financial assistance. Invest NI can also provide support for a range of management disciplines including marketing, finance and operations.

I am also aware that the Foyle Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC), a cross-border body sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, is currently preparing a marine tourism strategy which will set out the Agency's plans for the development of marine tourism in these areas. As part of this strategy the Agency is in the process of commissioning a marine tourism audit with a view to ascertaining the level of facilities currently available in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas. The Agency hopes to be in a position to publish its marine tourism strategy later this year.

National Soccer Stadium

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when will a decision be made regarding the national stadium project for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3797/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The national stadium issue is currently being considered in the context of my Department's work on developing a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland.

I hope to make a statement in the near future about the Soccer Strategy and this will include my views on the way forward on the national stadium issue.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3822/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has not as yet carried out any equality impact assessments but has contributed £10k to the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland project carried out by the education and library boards in compliance with the equality schemes of the five boards.

Freedom of Information

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures he has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom of Information Act will be completed by November 2002.

(AQW 3846/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has taken steps to ensure that it fully complies with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. To this end, a dedicated resource has been identified to oversee the production of a 'Publication Scheme' which will cover my core Department and our Executive Agencies, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland.

I have also established an informal Working Group to ensure we meet the November 2002 deadline.

EDUCATION

Consultants/Consultancy

Mr Close asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 427/01, to provide a breakdown by (a) project; (b) period of project; and (c) expenditure, the consultancy work carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of his Department and the Education and Library Boards over the past 5 years. (AQW 3488/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) has only been in existence as a company since July 1998 as a result of the merger between Price Waterhouse and Coopers and Lybrand; the following information relates only to the period since the merger.

Information in relation to specific a) projects and b) period of project is provided below. However, the value of individual contracts awarded to consultants can not be provided as this would breach commercial confidentiality.

Project	Sponsor	Period
NDPB Accounting - Education Service Information Systems Strategy (ESISS)	DE	1998 - 1999
HR Review of Accounts Branch	NEELB	1998 - 1999
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) ESSIS	DE	1998 - 2000
Private Finance Initiative (PFI)	ELBs & DE	1998 - date
PFI Accruals Accounting Project	SEELB *	1998 - 2001
CLASS/CLASPS and Classroom 2000	WELB *	1998 - date
Appointment Panel – Best Value Officer	SELB *	1998 - 1999
Local Management of Schools - Commonality	DE	1998 - 1999
Sports Council NI (ESISS)	DE / DCAL	1999 - 2000
National Stadium Feasibility Study	DE / DCAL	1999 - 2000
Programme Management - (ESISS)	DE	1999 - 2001
Armagh Market House Development	SELB	1999 - 2001
Investors in People	SEELB	2000 - 2002

Project	Sponsor	Period
Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) training	BELB	2001 - 2002
Year end Accounts	BELB	2001 - 2002
Estates Management	BELB *	2001 - 2002
Final Accounts / Accountancy support	SELB	2001 - 2002
Telecommunications Inter-Connectivity Project	BELB *	2001 - 2002
Recruitment and advertising - specification for school	BELB	2001 - 2002

*Project Led on Behalf of all Education & Library Boards (ELBS)	
BELB – Belfast Education & Library Board	SELB – Southern Education & Library Board
NEELB – North Eastern Education & Library Board	WELB – Western Education & Library Board
SEELB – South Eastern Education & Library Board	DE - Department of Education

Primary Schools: Composite Classes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what assessment can he make of the effect of composite classes on (a) primary school pupils; (b) teachers; (c) resources; and (d) value for money. (AQW 3745/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Inspections conducted during the current school year in individual schools indicate that such classes do place important demands on teachers in terms of organisation, planning and approaches to teaching and learning but also provided evidence that, in general, teachers are responding well to the differing learning needs within their classes and that children experienced a programme of activities appropriate to their individual needs.

Primary School Classes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of primary school composite classes (a) per constituency; and (b) per Board area. (AQW 3746/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is as follows:

(a) Per Constituency	
Belfast East	22
Belfast North	30
Belfast South	17
Belfast West	27
East Antrim	66
East Londonderry	103

(a) Per Constituency	
Fermanagh South Tyrone	206
Foyle	77
Lagan Valley	77
Mid Ulster1	71
Newry Armagh	195
North Antrim	179
North Down	30
South Antrim	82
South Down	162
Strangford	61
Upper Bann	89
West Tyrone	214
Total	1808

(b) Per Board Area	
Belfast	80
Western	436
North-Eastern	486
South-Eastern	248
Southern	558
Total	1808

NEELB: Funding

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what assessment he can make in relation to (a) the 1.8% inflationary rise given to schools in the NEELB area; and (b) the 3.5% salary increase awarded to teachers.

(AQW 3747/01)

Mr M McGuinness: While the level of resources delegated to its schools is primarily a matter for the NEELB, I am aware of the financial difficulties that have been identified by the Board in relation to its schools and have initiated a full review of the Board's expenditure plans across its total allocation, in order to inform decisions on what further action can be taken. My officials are currently working closely with Board Officers to examine the position in detail.

Allocation of Resources

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what directives have been given at Board level to save money on administration.

(AQW 3748/01)

Mr M McGuinness: When Boards allocate resources across their services they take due cognisance of the Department's allocation letter which requires Boards to keep administration costs to the minimum levels required to

maintain core services. It is particularly important that Boards keep administration costs to a minimum with the ever-increasing emphasis on maximising resources that go to the classroom.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3770/01)

Mr M McGuinness: (a) There has been one Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) carried out by the Department of Education to date to the formal consultation phase. This was in respect of the Consultation Document "A Common Funding Formula for Grant-Aided Schools" which was launched on 5 April 2001.

(b) This EQIA formed an integral part (ie Chapter 21) of the Consultation Document and it was prepared in accordance with the Equality Commission's "Guide to Statutory Duties" document. Therefore, in these circumstances, the specific costs in relation to research, consultation, printing and dissemination in relation to this EQIA were subsumed in the overall cost of the Consultation Document.

Primary Schools: Data

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to detail, by primary school in Belfast City Council area for the past 5 years, (a) the number of schoolchildren entitled to free meals in each school; (b) the Transfer Test results for each school; (c) the numbers of schoolchildren in P7 in each school; and (d) the total enrolment in each school.

(AQW 3786/01)

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.

Transfer Test

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education how many schoolchildren, over the past 5 years, were not required to sit the Transfer Test due to transfer through the Dickson Plan or other direct transfer procedure.

(AQW 3788/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Transfer Test is not compulsory therefore no pupil is required to sit the test.

Over the past five years the number of pupils opting out of sitting the test is as follows:

2001/02	8,956
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2000/01	8,856
1999/00	8,398
1998/99	8,591
1997/98	8,518

Non-Grammar Schools

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education how many children, over the past 5 years, entered non-Grammar Schools which provides tuition up to and including 'A' Level. (AQW 3789/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information, in respect of non-Grammar schools which had pupils entered for A-level or equivalent examinations in June 2001, is as follows:

YEAR 8 PUPILS

1997/98	10,641
1998/99	10,572
1999/00	10,594
2000/01	10,181
2001/02	10,062

Comber Technical College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education if money generated through the sale of land at the site of the former Comber Technical College will be re-invested in the Comber area. (AQW 3798/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that the South-Eastern Education and Library Board has advised the Ards Borough Council that any receipts accruing from the sale of this land will be used for expenditure on capital development in the Comber area.

Number of Pupils: First Year

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of pupils accepted into the first year of (i) Down High School; and (ii) St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick, respectively, for the year 2002-03; and (b) a breakdown of the 11+ results obtained by these pupils. (AQW 3844/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) The number of pupils accepted into Year 8 for the 2002/03 school year in Down High School and St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick, is as follows:

Down High School	128
St Patrick's Grammar School	110

- (b) A breakdown of the Transfer Procedure results obtained by these pupils is set out below:

Breakdown by Grade	Down High School	St Patrick's Grammar School
A	103	57
B1	21	14
B2	2	25
C1	0	13
C2	0	0
D	0	1
Other	2	0
Total	128	110

Publication Scheme: Freedom of Information Act

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Education what measures he has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom of Information Act will be completed by November 2002. (AQW 3847/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Education has appointed an Information Officer whose responsibilities include the preparation of the Department's Publication Scheme. An Implementation Plan has been drawn up to ensure compliance with the November 2002 deadline and an information audit of the Department is currently under way.

Burns Report

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the cause of the delay in the public receiving the response form in relation to the Post-Primary Education Report; and (b) any plans to extend the period of consultation on the Report due to this delay.

(AQW 3899/01)

Mr M McGuinness: This is the largest consultation ever undertaken on an education issue and the household response form is being distributed to over 670,000 households. Distribution has taken longer than was originally anticipated due to the massive scale of this exercise. However all forms will be delivered within the next few days.

The deadline for comments is 28 June 2002 and I believe this allows sufficient time for everyone to respond.

Driver: Minister of Education

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3660/01, to outline (a) who employs his driver; (b) if his driver is paid from an Executive budget;

(c) how was he selected for the position; (d) if there was open competition; and (e) the selection criteria for the position. (AQW 3972/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) My driver is an employee of Sinn Féin
- (b) The driver salary is met by Sinn Féin, which is in turn reimbursed by the Department of Education
- (c), (d), & (e) I consider these queries to be internal matters for my Party.

Attack on School Transport: Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to make a statement in light of the recent attack on a school bus in Strabane following Ireland's World Cup game with Germany on Wednesday 5th June 2002. (AQW 3980/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have said, on a number of occasions in the past, that children should be able to travel to and from school without fear of attack or abuse. I therefore totally deplore the attack which took place in Strabane on 5 June. Any attack on pupils, or vehicles used to transport pupils, when travelling to and from school, is totally unacceptable and there can be no possible justification or excuse for this recent incident.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Higher Education Sector

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of entrants to the Higher Education sector who came from non-Grammar School backgrounds; and (b) this figure as a percentage of the overall number of entrants to the Higher Education sector. (AQW 3787/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): The Department for Employment and Learning does not have information available on the type of school attended prior to enrolment on higher education courses.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by her Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA. (AQW 3799/01)

Ms Hanna: To date, a total of 14 Equality Impact Assessments have been carried out by my Department.

Identifiable invoiced costs are as follows:

Student Support Review (printing and distribution costs)	£3,400
Changes to Employment Legislation 13 Equality Impact Assessments (Research and Consultation costs)	£17,110

My Department makes every effort to keep the costs of conducting Equality Impact Assessments to a minimum. The Department does not routinely collate information in relation to in house preparation and ancillary costs associated with the completion of Equality Impact Assessments.

Post Graduate Certificate of Education

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, in the past 5 years, (a) the number of places in the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) (Secondary) full-time at the University of Ulster campus at Coleraine; (b) the number of successful applicants in the PGCE course; and (c) the number of successful applicants for the PGCE from the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 3823/01)

Ms Hanna:

- (a) The University of Ulster provides a number of places on PGCE (secondary) courses and the decision on how they are split over the various disciplines at both the Coleraine and Jordanstown campuses is at the discretion of the university. All places on the courses are normally filled.

**FULL-TIME ENROLMENTS ON PGCE (SECONDARY)
COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER,
COLERAINE CAMPUS 1997/98-2001/02**

Year	Number of students enrolled
2001/02 ¹	85
2000/01	79
1999/00	74
1998/99	74
1997/98	73

Source: HESA

- (b) The number of successful applicants will be the same as the number of enrolments, given in the table in part (a).
- (c) **NUMBER OF REPUBLIC OF IRELAND DOMICILED,
FULL-TIME ENROLMENTS ON PGCE (SECONDARY)
COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER, COLERAINE
CAMPUS 1997/98 – 2001/02**

Year	Number of students enrolled
2001/02 ¹	0
2000/01	2

Year	Number of students enrolled
1999/00	2
1998/99	4
1997/98	2

¹ The figure for 2001/02 is provisional

Source: HESA

Freedom of Information

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures she has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom of Information Act will be completed by November 2002.

(AQW 3848/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department will seek to ensure that it complies fully with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. To this end, an Information Manager has been appointed to oversee all corporate information matters. This includes preparation of the Publication Scheme in time to meet the November 2002 deadline.

Individual Learning Accounts Scheme

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline if there has been any progress towards launching a replacement for individual learning accounts.

(AQW 3860/01)

Ms Hanna: I will complete my review of the operation of the Individual Learning Accounts scheme as it applied in Northern Ireland, and announce my intentions for the future as soon as possible. It is important to absorb fully the lessons from the original ILA national framework, and in particular to take account of the work of the Employability Task Force, in shaping new arrangements to encourage and widen participation in adult learning.

Employment: Kilkeel

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) his assessment of the announced closure of Dunnes Supermarket, Kilkeel; and (b) any initiative he will pursue in relation to finding alternative employment for those who may be made redundant.

(AQW 3982/01)

Ms Hanna: I have noted with regret the announcement of the closure of Dunnes Stores in Kilkeel with the loss of 36 full and part time jobs.

My local JobCentre manager in Kilkeel has already been in contact with local Dunnes Stores management and has put in place arrangements to offer the full range of JobCentre services to all staff affected by the closure.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the types of renewable energy under development; (b) the amount of public money invested in the development of renewable energy; (c) the amount of public money invested in the development of renewable wind energy; (d) the amount of public money invested in the development of renewable solar energy; and (e) the amount of public money invested in the development of renewable wave energy. (AQW 3659/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): [holding answer 5 June 2002]: The development of renewable energy projects is a matter for the private sector. My Department would only generally become aware of the development of projects when planning permission is being sought and/or an application is made for a generating licence. It is known, however, that planning permission is currently being sought for 2 wind farms (one in Co Tyrone and the other in Co Fermanagh).

Public funding for renewable energy projects is provided through EU grants, and various UK and Northern Ireland support schemes. In the 5 years ending March 2002 a total of £2,781,995.72 was paid to developers of a range of eligible projects in Northern Ireland. Within this total the amounts allocated to wind, solar and wave projects is as follows:

- £447,302.85 for wind energy;
- £97,224.80 for solar energy; and
- £126,985 for an integrated wind/wave project.

Tourism: European Funding

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the amount of European funding received for tourism purposes; and (b) to whom such funding has been distributed, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 3704/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) Over the last 3 years, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has secured a total of £21,087,682.75 from the European Structural Funds for tourism purposes.
- (b) The funding secured and details on how it was distributed for each of the last three financial years is as follows:

	1999/00 £	2000/01 £	2001/02 £
Total EU funds secured	5,749,556.46	7,376,717.01	7,961,409.28

	1999/00 £	2000/01 £	2001/02 £
Allocations			
(i) Selective Financial Assistance to third party tourism projects	5,410,235.21	6,971,106.11	7,891,001.36
(ii) NITB Core Marketing Activities	266,000.00	-	-
(iii) NITB International Marketing Activities	73,321.25	236,726.90	15,291.92
(iv) NITB E-commerce Initiative	-	168,884.00	55,116.00

For the years ending 31 March 2000 and 2001, the full listings of the third parties who received selective financial assistance are published in the NITB annual accounts contained in the NITB Annual Reports. These Reports are held in the Assembly Library. The Annual Report for 2001-2002 is not yet available

Economic Potential: Waterside

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that a major economic facility is established in the Waterside area of Derry City Council which will recognise its regional status as outlined in 'Shaping our Future' document.
(AQW 3726/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department and Invest NI recognise the potential of Londonderry and the North West to develop as an economic hub as envisaged in the Regional Development Strategy.

We are committed to working with local partners to help those in the North West progress from the high level vision for the region towards conceiving solid new Developmental ideas that will help the region to fulfill its potential.

We believe that the availability of the Ebrington site is of major strategic importance to the overall economic potential, not only of the Waterside but of Londonderry and indeed the wider North West. We are supportive of the partnership concept being proposed to look at how the site could be best developed and would be eager to play a role in the consultations that will undoubtedly occur regarding the site. The development of the site needs to be set in the context of other opportunities such as Atlantic Cross at Dupont, the plans of the Londonderry Port & Harbour Commissioners for Fort George, the plans for development of the University of Ulster and North West Institute for Further & Higher Education and, of course, those of a number of private developers in the city.

Small and Medium Enterprises: West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of Invest NI's budget in the current financial year that has been allocated towards the promoting of Small and Medium Enterprises [SMEs] in West Tyrone.
(AQW 3740/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest NI's remit is for all of Northern Ireland. Part of this remit is to encourage an increase in the overall level and quality of new start up businesses and to stimulate growth in established businesses through a range of initiatives and services.

The budget allocated for those initiatives and services is based on anticipated demand and need and covers all of Northern Ireland rather than at sub-regional level.

Invest NI

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the percentage of Invest NI's budget in the current financial year, that has been allocated towards attracting inward investment to West Tyrone.
(AQW 3742/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest NI's remit is for all of Northern Ireland. It encourages new inward investment to locate in appropriate areas based on a range of criteria including availability of labour skills and infrastructure. Particular focus is given to New TSN areas which include West Tyrone.

Leaf Technologies, Mallusk

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any plans he has to safeguard employment at Leaf Technologies, Mallusk.
(AQW 3771/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As the company is currently in Administration, the Administrator is responsible for running the affairs of the company. Invest NI is awaiting the Administrator's proposals for re-establishing the business on a viable footing, and this will enable Invest NI to determine what role it may be able to play in facilitating the future development of the business.

Leaf Technologies, Mallusk

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment can he make of the long-term commercial viability of the Leaf Technologies plant in Mallusk.
(AQW 3772/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The company is currently in Administration and we are awaiting proposals from the Administrator on the way forward. I hope these proposals

will establish a basis for re-establishing the business on a commercial footing, but until these are to hand it is not possible to provide an assessment of the long-term viability of the company.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3794/01)

Sir Reg Empey: DETI has issued four EQIA's to date for consultation. The following table details these EQIAs and their associated costs:

EQIA	(i) cost of research	(ii) cost of consultation	(iii) & (iv) cost of printing and dissemination
1. Bill for Restructuring of the DETI Agencies	*Nil	*Nil	£5,280#
2. IDB policies relating to support for existing industry and for the attraction of inward investment	*Nil	*Nil	£1,123+
3. IRTU policies relating to research and development	*Nil	*Nil	£791+
4. BSD policies relating to the promotion of management development	*Nil	*Nil	£717+

* There were no external costs associated with research and consultation.

This figure is in relation to both the draft and final documents.

+ These documents are currently out for public consultation in draft form.

Key:

IDB - Industrial Development Board

IRTU - Industrial Research & Technology Unit

BSD - Business Support Division

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost of producing the Equality Impact Assessment of LEDU's Policy Area 1 document, published in March 2002.

(AQW 3825/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Costs associated with producing LEDU's Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) document of it's Policy Area 1, "To maximise the sustainable growth of small businesses in Northern Ireland (through increased competitiveness)" are shown in the following table.

£ Research/Creation of Document	£ Printing	£ Dissemination
* NIL	£700	£260

There were no external costs associated with research/creation of this document.

Tourism

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what percentage of the NI Tourist Board's budget in the current financial year has been allocated to promoting tourism in West Tyrone.

(AQW 3826/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) administers the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 2000-2004 which includes funding for marketing projects that will assist Northern Ireland position itself in the global marketplace. To date in 2002-2003 no allocations have been made to projects in the West Tyrone area but applications are under consideration by NITB. Further applications for assistance under this initiative will be welcome for projects located in the West Tyrone area.

Manufacturing Industry

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment on the current state of the manufacturing industry.

(AQW 3834/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The problems of the global economy have impacted on Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector. The latest available data shows that manufacturing output fell by 8.8% over the year to December 2001, and by 3.5% over the quarter September 2001 to December 2001.

It does not appear that the recent decline of Northern Ireland's manufacturing output will be reversed in the short term. The latest CBI/Business Strategies Limited Regional Trends Survey (May 2002) reports continued pessimism amongst Northern Ireland's manufacturers concerning the general business situation. The survey indicates that total orders recorded a pronounced decline in the last quarter (to March 2002) and a further, albeit smaller, fall is expected in the coming months. Despite this general pessimism, it is pleasing to note that export optimism has turned positive for the first time in over a year.

It is also worth noting that despite the decline in industrial manufacturing the small firms sector in Northern Ireland continues to outperform its counterparts in GB. In fact, the recent Engineering Output Survey from the Engineering Employers Federation indicates that Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK that projects an increase in total output over the next 3 months.

Freedom of Information

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures she has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom

of Information Act will be completed by November 2002. (AQW 3849/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In anticipation of the demands of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, and of other emerging requirements relating to records management, my Department appointed an Information Manager to coordinate the necessary preparatory measures.

DETI has also established an internal network of local information managers, comprising representatives from the Department's main business areas and NDPBs. This provides us with a channel for disseminating information and guidance on FOI and other matters and for coordinating action required at branch and division level.

To meet our obligations in respect of publication schemes, a programme of work has already been completed to gather required inputs from the various business areas of the Department. A draft publication scheme incorporating these inputs has been produced and is currently being reviewed by senior officials within the Department. Work is also ongoing to format a web version of the scheme.

In summary, we are on course to meet the November 2002 deadline for completion of this work.

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline if his Department has reprimanded the Manager of the New York office of the NI Tourist Board for credit card irregularities given that the Manager has issued a denial in the Belfast Telegraph on Thursday 30 May 2002. (AQW 3896/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Manager has been given a verbal and written reprimand about his failure to produce appropriate documentation.

He has also been given a written warning about his conduct in relation to duplicate and personal claims. This stressed the need for absolute accuracy when submitting expenses claims and the need for full supporting documentation.

Camlough Lake, Co Armagh

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of outstanding cases in relation to the purchase and transfer of land at Camlough Lake, Co Armagh; (b) the reasons for the delay in these outstanding cases; and (c) the timescale for completion. (AQW 3945/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The lands, in question, were acquired by the then Electricity Board for Northern Ireland, in the 1970s, to facilitate a pump storage electricity generation scheme which did not proceed. They are therefore being disposed of by Northern Ireland Electricity plc (NIE) in

accordance with a Disposal Strategy drawn up by the company and approved by the electricity Regulator under the terms of a formal Consent granted by the Regulator. The strategy involves offering the lands back to their original owners or their successors in title.

I am informed by NIE that: (a) at 31 May 2002, there remained 17 outstanding cases in which individuals have applied to purchase lots of land; (b) in 7 of the cases the company is waiting for the purchaser to complete the contract, in 8 cases negotiations between the company and the prospective purchaser are ongoing on a variety of matters, for example, clarification of rights of way, one case is the subject of litigation, and in the remaining case a number of members of the same family have applied to purchase the same portion of land; and (c) it is not possible to give a timescale for completion of all outstanding cases, since this depends on the legal process and the complexity of each case, and is not within the company's direct control.

Young's Bluecrest, Kilkeel

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made to avoid closure of Young's Bluecrest Fish Factory, Kilkeel.

(AQW 3983/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Since the closure announcement of Youngs Bluecrest, Kilkeel on Thursday 2nd May Invest NI officials have been in ongoing contact with a wide range of interested parties in an attempt both to avoid closure, if possible, and to address the ramifications if Youngs Bluecrest do indeed cease trading in Kilkeel.

Invest NI has written to Youngs Bluecrest on two separate occasions to set up a meeting to discuss the following issues:

To understand the basis of the closure decision and to investigate if there is any possibility of Youngs Bluecrest (UK) Limited reconsidering or amending their plans.

To investigate alternative usage for Youngs Bluecrest, Kilkeel and to discuss the possibility of non-competing usage, and

To discuss any other possible solutions.

I regret to say that Invest NI is still awaiting a response from Youngs Bluecrest.

There is a strong demand for skilled labour in this sector and I understand that other Kilkeel fish processing companies will be in a position to offer employment to approximately 40 employees of Youngs Bluecrest in the event of closure.

Currently Invest NI officials are involved in discussions with other interested parties in an attempt to minimise the potential employment losses in Kilkeel.

ENVIRONMENT

Fly-Tipping

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what action is being taken to ensure that laws and regulations governing litter and flytipping are enforced. (AQW 3708/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): The enforcement of the legislation governing litter and fly-tipping is a matter for district councils.

The Litter (NI) Order 1994 provides district councils with powers to serve fixed penalty fines (currently £25) for littering. The provisions of the Order are further enforceable through the courts, where littering offences carry a maximum fine of £2,500.

The practice generally referred to as fly-tipping is an offence under Article 5 of the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £5000 or on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years or to an unlimited fine or both. The fines and jail term may be increased where the waste in question is of a hazardous nature.

District councils also have powers under Article 16 of the 1978 Order to require the occupier of the land to remove fly-tipped waste and to take any necessary remedial action. Failure to comply with such a notice is an offence liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding £2500 and to a further fine of £1000 for each day that the offence continues.

The 1978 Order also provides district councils with powers to remove fly-tipped waste and to recover its costs from the occupier or from the person responsible for the fly-tipping, if known.

Similar provisions in the Waste and Contaminated Land Order (NI) 1997, replacing those in the 1978 Order, will come into operation when new Waste Management Regulations are made, probably in autumn 2003. The 1997 Order penalties for fly-tipping are in some respects more severe; for example, the maximum fine penalty on summary conviction will be increased from £5000 to £20,000.

While I expect that the penalties for littering and fly-tipping act as a deterrent, the problem which remains is how to make those responsible for these activities, who can be very difficult to trace or apprehend, amenable to the enforcement powers of District Councils.

Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3548/01, who is responsible for the

unauthorised discharge of sewage to a downstream waterway, with subsequent water pollution. (AQW 3728/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The unauthorised discharge, referred to in AQW 3548/01, originates from the Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTW), which is the responsibility of the Water Service, an Agency of the Department for Regional Development.

The discharge, which occurs intermittently particularly in periods of heavy rain, is a result of sewage surcharging through a manhole cover inside the works, and flowing through the site fence, directly into a downstream waterway.

EU Waste & Packaging Directives

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on discussions between his Department and the European Commission regarding the implementation of European Waste and Packaging Directives. (AQW 3800/01)

Mr Nesbitt: No specific discussions have taken place with the European Commission in relation to the implementation of Waste or Waste Packaging Directives. In the general context, and to the extent that resources permit, my officials provide advice to Whitehall Departments on the Northern Ireland position within the overall UK negotiations on new European Community Directives and on discussions between the UK and the Commission in relation to the transposition and implementation of existing Directives. This is part of the ongoing development of EC law.

Apart from this ongoing indirect communication, senior officials from my department met with senior European Commission officials in February this year to discuss issues around the transposition and implementation of environmental Directives. The purpose of that meeting was to fully inform the Commission of the efforts being made by the Department to deal with the large backlog of untransposed Directives inherited from the period of Direct Rule. In the course of the visit an invitation to the Director General to visit Northern Ireland was issued. It is hoped this invitation will be taken up later in the year.

As the need arises and on a case by case basis, officials also raise detailed transposition or implementation issues with their counterparts in the Commission. Discussions on the implementation of the Nitrates Directive are a recent example of this.

Sea Pen

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) if the species of 'sea pen' are colonising in Carlingford Lough; (b) to what extent they are colonising;

(c) if any survey has been completed; and (d) the date the survey will be published. (AQW 3816/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) The sea pen *Virgularia mirabilis* is found in Carlingford Lough. It is found on all British and Irish coasts but is less frequent in the south. There are three species of sea pen found in the British Isles, but this is the only one found in Carlingford Lough.
- (b) The upper part of the Lough is shallow and the seabed consists of a plain of fine muddy sand. The sea pens are found in dense colonies in the shallower waters (0-5m).
- (c) There have been two surveys undertaken on behalf of my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS): - (i) the Northern Ireland Sublittoral Survey published in 1986; and (ii) the Estuarine Classification Monitoring Program published in 1997. The former was a diving project and the sea pens were recorded at six of the sites. The latter was a "grab sampling" programme which found examples of the species but did not indicate the extent of the colonies.
- (d) In August 2001, EHS commissioned Queen's University to undertake a project entitled 'Marine Survey and Mapping (Benthic Habitats) of Northern Ireland'. The object was to provide information on the extent and distribution of benthic communities and species around our coasts. This work will help identify sites of national and international conservation importance and inform the selection and management of sites under the Habitats Directive. A report is due in March 2003 and will be published shortly thereafter.

Fatal Road Accidents

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to give his commitment to investigate contributing factors to the causes of fatal road accidents. (AQW 3824/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My department and other local road safety agencies and departments are committed to using research and analysis of the causes of road collisions involving deaths and serious injuries in guiding our efforts aimed at road casualty reduction.

The investigation of road traffic collisions and the attribution of cause and responsibility is a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The PSNI annual report, "Road Traffic Accident Statistics", provides a summary of the road traffic injury accidents reported to the police including the main causes of collisions and the types of road user responsible for them.

In some collisions, other factors which contribute to the cause of the collision, in addition to the principal cause, may be identified. However, the principal focus of PSNI's statistical analysis is on the identification of

the main causes of collisions to inform road safety policy and assist targeting resources at road casualty reduction.

The PSNI's statistical information on collision causation factors is used by my Department in the development and direction of road safety education and publicity, by the Department for Regional Development in developing road engineering measures, including accident remedial and traffic calming schemes, and by the PSNI for targeting its education and enforcement activities.

Research and statistical analysis of the causes of road fatalities also underlie the development of the Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy to 2012, which will be published in Summer 2002.

I am advised that the PSNI is monitoring a current Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) examination of collision investigation methodology in Great Britain and will consider the findings of this examination with a view to providing more accurate determination of the causes of road collisions in Northern Ireland.

Freedom of Information

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment what measures he has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom of Information Act will be completed by November 2002. (AQW 3870/01)

Mr Nesbitt: A dedicated unit has been established within my Department to take forward the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, of which the Publication Scheme is one element. Work on the Scheme has commenced and it is anticipated that it will be sent to the Information Commissioner for approval around the beginning of September.

Haulage Industry

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3448/01, to detail (a) when he intends to review the proposals issued for consultation in 1998 by the former DOE on the regulation of the local haulage industry; and (b) how robust and widespread such a review would be. (AQW 3882/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) As indicated in my previous answer, I intend to update the review of the regulation of the road haulage industry in Northern Ireland undertaken in 1998 when resources and other departmental work priorities permit. It is not possible to be precise at this stage about when that might be.
- (b) I can, however, confirm that this review, when it takes place, will be comprehensive, robust and inclusive of the areas addressed in the 1998 consultation.

Wind Turbines

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment if the Planning Service consults with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in relation to Wind Turbine Farm planning applications. (AQW 3928/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I refer the Member to my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's reply to AQW 3927/01 of 14 June 2002

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment if he has had any communication with his colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, over the designation of areas of special scientific interest. (AQO 1533/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service routinely consults with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on all proposed nature conservation designations, including Areas of Special Scientific Interest. This consultation ensures that any agricultural, forestry and fishery interests in the area to be designated are brought to the attention of my officials and, if necessary, to me.

This close working relationship between the two Departments continues after declaration. The Environment and Heritage Service consults the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on all prospective management agreements with landowners and occupiers of Areas of Special Scientific Interest.

There are also consultations between the two Departments on policy and legislative matters connected with Areas of Special Scientific Interest and other statutory designations. In particular, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was consulted on my Department's proposals for a new Areas of Special Scientific Interest Bill, which I plan to introduce into the Assembly in the next session.

Planning Application: Strangford

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he has taken to ensure that the halt placed on processing planning applications for the village of Strangford is removed. (AQO 1511/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There are no current planning applications for new housing development in Strangford. My Department's Environment and Heritage Service has advised that they wish to discuss the level of treatment in the Strangford Waste Water Treatment Works with the Department for Regional Development's Water Service. These discussions are in hand to see if a satisfactory solution can be achieved.

Plastic Bags

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to introduce a levy on the use of polythene bags at Supermarkets and other retail outlets similar to that imposed by the Government in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 1545/01)

Mr Nesbitt: In the UK as a whole, around 10 billion plastic bags are given away each year. That constitutes a significant source of landfill and an equally significant source of litter.

Taxation is an excepted matter, so we do not have in Northern Ireland the powers that would enable us to introduce a levy independently of the rest of the UK.

I am aware that Michael Meacher at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has given notice that he intends to press for the introduction of a similar levy. It is my intention to support DEFRA in this. In particular I will raise the issue at meetings of the Environment Sector of the British-Irish Council.

In the meantime I have asked my officials to explore any option which might have an equivalent effect to the levy. They are engaging in discussions with the supermarket sector to look at the possibility of developing a voluntary scheme to encourage consumers to reduce the current excessive use of plastic bags.

The experience of the Republic of Ireland has shown that people are willing to act with greater environmental responsibility when given appropriate encouragement. I am hopeful that we can build constructively on the heightened awareness of waste issues brought about by my Department's recent 'Wake up to Waste' campaign and by District Councils' consultations on their draft Waste Management Plans.

Seamus Heaney's Former Home

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, in the light of the demolition of the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney's former home, if he would take immediate action to freeze all contentious planning applications pending legislation consequent on the review of local government and public administration. (AQO 1530/01)

Mr Nesbitt: It would not be lawful for me to impose a moratorium on planning applications, as my Department has a statutory duty to process and determine any valid planning application which it receives.

Accordingly, once all material planning information relating to a proposed development has been received and fully considered, including consultation replies together with any other representations received, my Department is under a legal obligation to determine that application. That obligation could not be set aside during the lengthy

period required to undertake the Review of Public Administration.

The member may also be aware that Article 33 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 provides an applicant, in all but major cases designated under Article 31 of that Order, with the right to appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission on the grounds that his or her application has not been determined by my Department within laid down timescales.

[In any case it would not be practicable to define "contentious" in a manner which would not be open to abuse.]

EU Environmental Directives

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions his officials have undertaken with the European Commission regarding the implementation of EU Environmental Directives. (AQO 1541/01)

Mr Nesbitt: In the general context, resources permitting, my officials provide advice to Whitehall Departments on Northern Ireland perspectives within the overall UK negotiations on new European Community Directives. This is part of the ongoing development of EC law.

Apart from this ongoing indirect communication, senior officials from my department met with senior European Commission officials in February this year to discuss issues around the transposition and implementation of environmental Directives. The purpose of that meeting was to fully inform the Commission of the efforts being made by the Department to deal with the large backlog of untransposed Directives inherited from the period of Direct Rule. It is hoped that senior Commission officials will visit Northern Ireland later in the year to continue the dialogue opened up in February.

As the need arises and on a case by case basis, officials also raise detailed transposition or implementation issues with their counterparts in the Commission. Discussions on the implementation of the Nitrates Directive are a recent example of this.

Planning Permission: Rosses Quay, Rostrevor

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he can make in relation to the planning approval granted to develop the site known as Rosses Quay, Rostrevor. (AQO 1534/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Rosses Quay private residential development to the rear of 24 Warrenpoint Road, Rostrevor, was granted full planning permission on 2 March 2000.

The residential development has been substantially completed in accordance with approved plans. However

works have been undertaken to the shore and beach which have raised concerns about the impact of the development on the adjoining Area of Special Scientific Interest. Concern has also been expressed that these works impinge on third-party lands and affect an existing right-of-way.

The Divisional Planning Office has discussed these matters with the developer, and an application for retrospective permission for these coastal protection works involving a wall and rock armour has been submitted and is currently under consideration. Progress on this application will be influenced by the resolution of the land-ownership and right-of-way issues.

The planning approval for the residential development is a valid permission, which has been substantially implemented. I have no basis for making any fresh assessment of it. My officials are currently considering the application for the coastal protection works.

Seamus Heaney's Former Home

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the demolition of Seamus Heaney's former home at 16 Ashley Avenue, Belfast.

(AQO 1538/01)

Mr Nesbitt: With the Speaker's permission I will take Questions 1538/01, 1539/01 and 1549/01 together.

Under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, my Department may list a building on the basis of it having special architectural or historic interest. The Lisburn Road area of Belfast was surveyed during the late 1970s as part of the First Survey of all buildings in Northern Ireland. 16 Ashley Avenue, the former Heaney home, did not meet the listing criteria at that time.

In October 1999, the Belfast Civic Trust requested that the building be spot-listed. My Department does not have spot-listing powers but is seeking such powers in the Planning Amendment Bill, which I introduced into the Assembly today. Notwithstanding this, the Environment and Heritage Service carried out an external appraisal. It concluded that, although it was a fine Victorian house, a full appraisal under the Second Survey of all buildings, then under way, was not appropriate as the building did not have sufficient special interest to meet the listing criteria. Later requests to consider listing the property, received in 2000 and 2002, were given a similar response.

When my Department was told recently of rumoured plans to demolish the house, I instructed my officials to approach the developer seeking an opportunity to undertake a full Second Survey appraisal, with a view to re-considering the case for listing. The developer chose not to do so and demolition began on the eve of the survey. I must emphasise that, as the house was neither listed nor in a Conservation Area, no statutory approvals were needed for its demolition.

Seamus Heaney's Former Home

Mr Close asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on his Department's interventions in the case of the house in Ashley Avenue, Belfast, once occupied by Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney. (AQO 1539/01)

Mr Nesbitt: With the Speaker's permission I will take Questions 1538/01, 1539/01 and 1549/01 together.

Under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, my Department may list a building on the basis of it having special architectural or historic interest. The Lisburn Road area of Belfast was surveyed during the late 1970s as part of the First Survey of all buildings in Northern Ireland. 16 Ashley Avenue, the former Heaney home, did not meet the listing criteria at that time.

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Seamus Heaney's Former Home

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment what steps were taken by his Department to designate the former home of Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney as a building of historic and cultural heritage. (AQO 1549/01)

Mr Nesbitt: With the Speaker's permission I will take Questions 1538/01, 1539/01 and 1549/01 together.

Under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, my Department may list a building on the basis of it having special architectural or historic interest. The Lisburn Road area of Belfast was surveyed during the late 1970s as part of the First Survey of all buildings in Northern Ireland. 16 Ashley Avenue, the former Heaney home, did not meet the listing criteria at that time.

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FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) any plans he has to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee; and (b) what measures he has put in place to ensure staff from his Department can celebrate this event. (AQW 3516/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The information you requested is as follows:

- (a) the Department of Finance and Personnel has no plans to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is the lead Department for Golden Jubilee Celebrations.
- (b) the NICS has awarded the additional Bank Holiday set for Monday, 3 June 2002 to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

Collection of Rates

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the value of lost rates due to vacant property, by District Council area, in relation to (a) commercial and retail property; and (b) residential property. (AQW 3526/01)

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 payment of rates. Rates on vacant properties are considered as rates foregone.

The total amount of rates foregone in the year ended 31 March 2002 was just over £48m.

A schedule showing the amount of rates foregone in each district council area on vacant property in the commercial and residential sectors, for the year ended 31 March 2002, is attached at Appendix 1. Amounts have been rounded to the nearest thousand pounds.

APPENDIX 1

SUMMARY OF RATES FOREGONE BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA OWING TO VACANCY 2001/2002

District Council	Vacant Commercial Rates Foregone £ M	Vacant Residential Rates Foregone £ M
Antrim	1.177	0.575
Ards	0.880	0.426
Armagh	1.198	0.533
Ballymena	0.627	0.184
Ballymoney	0.315	0.103
Banbridge	0.735	0.308
Belfast	12.042	3.020
Carrickfergus	0.665	0.183
Castlereagh	0.834	0.250
Coleraine	0.992	0.418
Cookstown	0.528	0.283
Craigavon	2.089	0.474
Derry	2.337	0.710
Down	0.804	0.477
Dungannon & South Tyrone	0.791	0.310
Fermanagh	0.732	0.408
Larne	0.444	0.176
Limavady	0.394	0.156
Lisburn	1.750	0.665
Magherafelt	0.336	0.245
Moyle	0.028	0.165
Newry & Mourne	2.048	0.663
Newtownabbey	1.431	0.459
North Fown	1.271	0.480
Omagh	0.667	0.467
Strabane	0.727	0.157

Air Travel

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each of the last 3 financial years, (a) the number of flights made between Northern Ireland and Great Britain by him or his officials; and (b) the total number of flights made on each airline. (AQW 3703/01)

Dr Farren: The table below details the number of flights booked through the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Travel Agent's (Business travel Management) by the Department of Finance and Personnel for the last two financial years.

Data for 1999-2000 is not available from the Travel Agent's computer system nor is it possible to identify individual journeys.

It should also be noted that these figures do not include any journeys undertaken which were booked through other channels.

Department of Finance & Personnel				
	Aer Lingus	British Airways	British European Airways	British Midland
2000-01	5	100	149	98
2001-02	6	71	156	278

Department of Finance & Personnel			
	Easy-Jet	Go Fly Ltd	Ryanair Ltd
2000-01	5	0	0
2001-02	13	5	1

Bowel Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people who died from bowel cancer in each of the last 5 years in each Health Board area. (AQW 3749/01)

Dr Farren: The table below shows the number of cases in each Health Board area, in each of the last 5 years, where Bowel Cancer was recorded as the main cause of death.

Health Board Area	Year of Death				
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Eastern	169	165	185	160	163
Northern	105	97	97	102	90
Southern	68	66	64	74	78
Western	56	63	55	53	52

Coding of deaths registered in 2001 is not yet finalized.

Energy Report

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the Public Sector Energy Committee's 1st Annual Energy Report 1999-00, to outline (a) what assessment he can make of the Public Sector's commitment to energy management; and (b) if performance targets will be introduced in regard to public sector energy management. (AQW 3765/01)

Dr Farren:

- (a) The Northern Ireland public sector encompasses a diverse range of organisations of varying sizes, many of which have been pursuing energy efficiency programmes for several years. The Government's Climate Change Programme introduced new targets based on appraising individual buildings. This requires a more detailed approach to energy reporting, to which some organisations did not give sufficient priority. However, I am satisfied that, given the necessary co-operation, the appropriate structures are in place to take this important work forward.
- (b) Performance targets are already in place, having been laid down under the Government's Climate Change Programme, as set out in the report.

Energy Report

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the percentage of returns, relating to the number of buildings per Government Department, of information requested by the Public Sector Energy Committee as reflected in their 1st Annual Energy Report 1999-00.

(AQW 3766/01)

Dr Farren: For the purposes of the 1st Public Sector Energy Committee Report for 1999 - 2000, Government Departments and their associated agencies, boards, trusts etc returned information on the buildings which they occupy as set out in the table below. However, not all this information was usable. (Figures relate to the year ending 31 March 2000; in some cases information was supplied for earlier years.)

Department	Estimated Number of Buildings	Number of buildings for which data was returned	Percentage Complete
DARD (<i>incl ARINI</i>)	124	109	88%
DCAL (<i>incl libraries & museums</i>)	148	79	53%
DE (<i>incl schools</i>)	1411	1411	100%
DEL (<i>incl universities & colleges</i>)	199	100	50%
DETI	10	10	100%
DFP	17	5	29%
DHSS&PS (<i>incl health service & FANI</i>)	508	508	100%
DOE	31	25	81%
DRD (<i>incl Road Service & Water Service</i>)	64	24	38%
DSD (<i>incl NIHE</i>)	101	101	100%

Department	Estimated Number of Buildings	Number of buildings for which data was returned	Percentage Complete
NIO (<i>incl Police, Prisons, Probation Serv</i>)	249	248	100%
OFMDFM	16	0	0%
District Councils	942	605	64%

Energy Report

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline those public bodies which failed to provide routine information to the Public Sector Energy Committee as reflected in their 1st Annual Energy Report 1999-00.

(AQW 3767/01)

Dr Farren: The following organisations failed to return information or provided data which was incomplete, unusable or returned too late for inclusion in the Public Sector Energy Committee's 1st Annual Energy Report 1999 - 2000. (These failures relate to year ending 31 March 2000; in some cases information was supplied for earlier years.)

- 8 Government Departments
- 7 District Councils
- 1 University
- 6 Further Education Colleges

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3801/01)

Dr Farren: To date a total of 5 Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) have been completed in the Department of Finance and Personnel. Unfortunately it has not been possible to provide a breakdown of costs as requested. The information available to me in respect of each EIA is shown on the following page.

Aggregates Tax

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he intends to instigate an impact assessment to be carried out on the likely damage to our roads, particularly in border areas, as a result of increased traffic by HGV lorries caused by the introduction of the Aggregates Tax.

(AQW 3819/01)

Name	Research £	Consultation £	Printing £	Dissemination £	Total £
Quinquennial Review of Rate Collection Agency	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	9 750
Managing EU Programmes – Structural Funds	-	19 387	-	1 000	20 387
Procurement Review	-	-	-	-	Nil
Physical Punishment of Children Bill	-	-	-	-	Nil
Divorce Bill	-	-	556	1 057	1 613

Dr Farren: Discussions with Treasury are continuing at an official level on how the effects of the tax could be reduced within Northern Ireland. I will be writing shortly to the Financial Secretary to Treasury to outline the outcome of these discussions and to determine whether a significant discount from the Aggregates Tax for Northern Ireland is achievable based on the environmental objectives of the tax being met through alternative means. An impact assessment on the damage to roads caused by the introduction of the Aggregates Tax may constitute further evidence as to the negative and disproportionate impact of the tax in Northern Ireland but the current focus must be on securing a version of the tax that better reflects the needs of the local quarrying industry.

Burial Tomb: Parliament Buildings

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if there are any plans to restore the burial tomb of Viscount and Viscountess Craigavon in the grounds of Parliament Buildings. (AQW 3839/01)

Dr Farren: In addition to its programme of annual maintenance to hedging and soft landscape the Department proposes to:

- (i) treat and power-wash the steps and hard standing areas around the tomb;
- (ii) regrout the paving;
- (iii) repair and repaint the gates; and
- (iv) clean the plinth.

The Department will also be consulting with the Environment and Heritage Agency on whether the inscription on the tomb should be re-cut to improve its definition.

Rate Collection Agency

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the quinquennial review of the Rate Collection Agency. (AQW 3979/01)

Dr Farren: I have considered the findings of the report into the first stage of the quinquennial review, together with the replies to the consultation, and I have decided to

proceed with the main recommendations. In particular, I have decided that a Public Private Partnership procurement project to support rate collection services should be initiated with the aim of securing a strategic business partner to help implement and manage the RCA's replacement IT systems and processes.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Food Standards Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is she taking to clarify the Food Standards Agency announcement that prawns originating from south-east Asia should be removed from sale. (AQW 2709/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): On Friday 15th March the Food Standards Agency, which has responsibility for food safety and related public health protection matters, issued a statement advising against the consumption of particular batches of prawns and shrimps from South East Asia and also calling for them to be withdrawn from sale because of the detection of residues of nitrofurans, a potential carcinogen, in some of the samples.

I am satisfied that the action taken by the Food Standards Agency was appropriate and commensurate with the problem.

Ar an Aoine 15 Márta d'eisigh an Ghníomhaireacht um Chaighdeán Bia, atá freagrach as sábháilteacht bia agus ábhair bhainteacha chosaint sláinte poiblí, ráiteas ag comhairliú i gcoinne chaitheamh baisceanna áirithe cloicheán agus ribí róibéis ó Oirdheisceart na hÁise agus d'éiligh sí go n-aistarraingeofaí ón margadh iad mar gur aimsíodh iarmhair nítrefúráin, carcanaigin fhéideartha, i gcuid de na samplaí.

Táim sásta go raibh an gníomh a ghlac an Ghníomhaireacht um Chaighdeán Bia cuí agus ag teacht le tromchúise na faidhbe.

Ministerial Transport

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the arrangements she has made for her Ministerial transport over the past 2 years, in terms of (a) if she used the in-house chauffeur service or a contracted-in service; (b) if she used a contracted-in service, which firms or individuals were employed; (c) how much this contracted-in service cost; (d) if the hire of this contracted-in service was conducted under the public tendering process; and (e) what is the comparative cost of the in-house Ministerial chauffeur service. (AQW 3363/01)

Ms de Brún: I do not use either the DFP Centralised Transport Unit or a contracted-in service. The Department initially rented and subsequently purchased, with the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel, a car for use by me on official business. The normal tendering procedures were followed in the purchase of the car. The hourly rate paid in respect of the driver is based on the rate paid to drivers in the DFP Centralised Transport Unit.

Ní bhainim úsáid as Aonad Lárnaithe Iompair an DFP ná as seirbhís ar conradh. Fuair an Roinn carr ar cíós ar dtús, agus ceannaíodh ina dhiaidh sin é, le cead na Roinne Airgeadais agus Pearsanra, do m'úsáidse ar ghnó oifigiúil. Leanadh na gnáthnósanna imeachta tairisceana i gceannach an chairr. Is mar seo a leanas an costas iomlán, lena n-áirítear tiománaithe, i ngach bliain airgeadais. Tá an ráta in aghaidh na huaire a íoctar maidir leis an tiománaí bunaithe ar an ráta a íoctar le tiománaithe Aonad Lárnaithe Iompair an DFP.

Epilepsy

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources have been allocated, by Board area, in terms of (i) staff; and (ii) research facilities, to treat those patients suffering from epilepsy. (AQW 3364/01)

Ms de Brún: Epilepsy is treated as a neurological condition and it is not possible to disaggregate the amount of staff time within this specialty which is spent specifically on treating patients suffering from epilepsy. No neurology services are provided by Trusts within the Northern HSS Board area and residents of this Board's area receive their services from the Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust.

My Department provides financial support for research through the HPSS Research & Development Office for implementation of the HPSS Research & Development Strategy. There is currently one fellowship with the title "Clinical and molecular genetic investigation in familial idiopathic epilepsy".

Tugtar cóireáil ar eipileipse mar bhail néareolaíoch agus tá sé dodhéanta scagadh a dhéanamh ar am a chaitheann

foirne laistigh den speisialtóireacht sin go sonrach ar choireáil othair a bhfuil eipileipse orthu. Ní chuireann Iontaobhais laistigh de cheantar Bhord SSS an Tuaiscirt aon seirbhísí néareolaíocha ar fáil agus faigheann áitritheoirí i gceantar an Bhoird sin a gcuid seirbhísí ón Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal Iontaobhas SSS.

Cuireann mo Roinnse tacaíocht airgeadais ar fáil to thaighde trí Oifig Forbartha agus Taighde SSSP d'fheidhmiú Straitéis Forbartha agus Taighde SSSP. Faoi láthair tá comhaltacht amháin ann leis an teideal "Clinical and molecular genetic investigation in familial idiopathic epilepsy".

New Cancer Clinic

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in view of the availability of increased funding, when will work begin on the new Cancer Clinic. (AQW 3469/01)

Ms de Brún: I have submitted a bid for Executive Programme Funds as the major element of my funding strategy for the Regional Cancer Centre. I cannot be specific on the start date for the work until the outcome of that bid is known. The Executive has yet to take decisions on these funds, including the enhanced funds under the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative, but, as I have said previously, I hope to make an announcement before the Summer Recess.

Tá tairiscint curtha isteach agam ar Chistí Chlár an Fheidhmeannais mar phríomhghné de mo straitéis maoinithe don Ionad Réigiúnach Ailse. Ní féidir liom a bheith sonrach faoi dháta tosaigh na hoibre go dtí go mbeadh toradh na tairisceana sin ar eolas agam. Tá cinneadh le déanamh ag an bhFeidhmeannas maidir leis na cistí sin go fóill, lena n-áirítear na cistí feabhsaithe faoin Tionsnamh Athinfheistíochta agus Leasaithe, ach, mar a dúirt mé cheana, tá mé ag súil le fógra a dhéanamh roimh Bhriseadh an tSamhraidh.

Adoption

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of children available for adoption; (b) the number of children adopted in each of the last 5 years; and to make a statement. (AQW 3483/01)

Ms de Brún: Adoption is the care plan for 162 children who are currently looked after by HSS Trusts. A total of 140 adoption orders were made in 2001 compared with 172 in 2000, 144 in 1999, 121 in 1998 and 150 in 1997. Priorities for Action places an increased emphasis on adoption as a means of securing permanency for children in care and has set a target for 4% of looked after children to be adopted in 2002/03.

Is é uchtú an plean cúraim do 162 páiste atá ag fáil cúnaimh ó na hIon taoibh SSS faoi láthair. Rinneadh 140 ordú uchtaithe ar an iomlán sa bhliain 2001 i gcomparáid le 172 sa bhliain 2000, 144 sa bhliain 1999, 121 sa bhliain 1998 agus 150 sa bhliain 1997. Cuireann Tosaíochtaí do Ghníomh béim níos treise ar uchtú mar mheán le haghaidh buaine a bhaint amach do pháistí atá faoi chúram agus tá sprioc leagtha síos acu go mbeadh 4% de pháistí atá faoi chúram uchtaithe sa bhliain 2002/03.

Targets: Mental Health

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the current targets set for mental health services; (b) how such targets are evaluated; and (c) any improvements in mental health services since 1997. (AQW 3522/01)

Ms de Brún: The mental health targets which Boards have been asked to deliver on this year are those set out in Priorities for Action.

I have required Health and Social Services Boards to set out clearly and transparently the services they intend to secure to meet the needs of their local population and deliver on the actions set out in Priorities for Action and have introduced quarterly monitoring to track progress towards achieving the targets.

The quarterly monitoring reports will be followed up by meetings between my officials and the Boards to tackle areas of underperformance.

Information on the range of improvements in mental health services since 1997 could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Is iad na spriocanna meabharshláinte ar iarradh ar na Boird gníomhnú orthu na cinn atá leagtha amach in Tosaíochtaí do Ghníomh.

D'iarr mé ar na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na seirbhísí atá ar intinn acu a dhaingniú chun freastal ar riachtanais an phobail áitiúil a leagan amach go soiléir agus go follasach agus na gníomhartha atá leagtha amach in Tosaíochtaí do Ghníomh a thabhairt i gcrích chomh maith le monatóireacht ráithiúil a thabhairt isteach chun cuntas a choinneail ar an dul chun cinn i mbaint amach na spriocanna.

Leanfaidh cruinnithe idir m'oifigh agus na Boird na tuarascálacha monatóireachta ráithiúla chun dul i ngleic le réimsí de thearcfheidhmíocht.

Ba ar chostas díréireach a fuarthas tuairisc ar aon fhorbairt ar sheirbhísí meabhairshláinte ó 1997.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if initial and ongoing training

and development will be available to local health and social care group members when LHSCGs are established.

(AQW 3531/01)

Ms de Brún: Introductory workshops have already been held for management board members of the two Local Health and Social Care Groups based in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. The other three Boards have plans for similar type workshops for their Groups. Work is progressing well on the development of a training and development strategy for the Groups which will encompass both local and regional training needs.

Training and development will be an important feature of the new Groups' first year. They will be learning organisations and will be encouraged and assisted to develop to their full potential. This means shared development, multidisciplinary training and team building. Those involved in the Groups will be given opportunities to develop the appropriate skills, and identifying their training and development needs will be one of the early priorities. In developing training and development programmes, Health and Social Services Boards will work closely with Local Health and Social Groups in their areas as well as linking with others who may be able to make a contribution.

Rinneadh réamhcheardlanna cheana do bhaill ar an bhord bainisteoirí den dá Ghrúpa Cúram Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta Aitiúil lonnaithe i gceantar Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair. Tá pleananna ag na trí Bhord eile faoi choinne ceardlann dá macasamhail dá nGrúpaí. Tá ag éirí go maith leis an obair ar straitéis oiliúna agus forbartha do na Grúpaí a chuirfidh riachtanais áitiúla agus reigiúnacha araon san áireamh.

Beidh oiliúint agus forbairt mar ghné thábhachtach de chéad bhliain na nGrúpaí nua. Eagraíochtaí foghlama a bheidh iontu agus spreagfar iad agus cuideofar leo lena lánacmhainneacht a fhorbairt. Ciallaíonn sé seo comhfhorbairt, oiliúint ildhisciplíneach agus tógáil foirne. Tabharfar deiseanna dóibh siúd a bheidh páirteach sna Grúpaí na scileanna cuí a fhorbairt, agus beidh aimsiú a riachtanais oiliúna agus forbartha ar cheann de na tosaíochtaí luatha. Leis na cláir oiliúna agus forbartha a chur chun cinn, oibreoidh Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta go dlúth le Grúpaí Áitiúla Sláinte agus Sóisialta ina gceantair chomh maith le nasc a dhéanamh le grúpaí eile a d'fhéadfadh cuidiú leo.

Health Spending: Statistics

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the accuracy or otherwise of the statistics on health spending as a percentage of GDP (based on OECD, Health Data 2001)

published in the Daily Mail (15 April 2002, page 15) which indicates the percentage for Northern Ireland is 9.2%, France 9.3% and Republic of Ireland 6.8%.

(AQW 3594/01)

Ms de Brún: It is not clear how these figures were derived. The calculations made in respect of Scotland, Wales and here were not, presumably, drawn from OECD data since the Organisation does not hold expenditure disaggregated in this way. Nor does it seem that the figures are up to date.

Apart from their precision or currency, however, there is a more fundamental point to be made about figures that express health spending as a percentage of GDP. An important determinant of the need for health care is deprivation. All things being equal, regions of greater deprivation will have to spend more on health care. Given that such regions have (by definition) lower than average GDP, their expenditure on health will account for a higher than average percentage of their local GDP.

Níl sé soiléir faoin dóigh ar thangthas ar na figiúirí seo. Níor tarraingíodh na háirimh maidir le hAlbain, leis an Bhreatain Bheag agus thall anseo, is dócha, ó dháta an OECD (Foras um Chomhoibrithe Eacnamaíoch agus Forbartha) mar ní choinníonn an Foras caiteachas neamhthathagaithe ar an dóigh seo. Níl an chuma air go bhfuil na figiúirí cothrom le dáta ach oiread.

Taobh amuigh dá bheachtas nó dá mbainteacht, áfach, tá pointe níos suntasaí le déanamh faoi fhigiúirí a léiríonn caiteachas ar shláinte mar chéatadán den GDP (Olltáirgeacht Intíre OTI). Is deitéarmanant tábhachtach den ghá le cúram sláinte an dith. Agus gach ní eile mar a gcéanna, beidh ar réigiúin faoi mhórdhíth níos mó a chaitheamh ar chúram sláinte. Ós rud é go bhfuil olltáirgeacht intíre níos lú ná an meán ag a leithéid de réigiúin (de réir sainmhínte), is amhlaidh go mbeidh a gcaiteachas ar shláinte ina chéatadán dá n-olltáirgeacht intíre áitiúil níos airde ná an meán.

GP Fundholding

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff have been made redundant since the end of GP fundholding.

(AQW 3606/01)

Ms de Brún: The known position to date is as follows. Seven members of staff who were previously employed by GP fundholding practices to carry out fund management work have been made redundant. Two of these staff are understood to have already found other jobs. In addition, a further 31 staff have been issued with redundancy notices. The majority of these staff have registered with the Redeployment Unit and it is anticipated that there will be new employment opportunities of some

30 posts in the Local Health and Social Care Groups in the coming weeks, for which these staff will be able to apply.

Seo a leanas cúrsaí mar is eol go dtí seo. Rinneadh seachtar oibrithe, a bhí fostaithe ag cleachtais chistesheilbhe GDanna roimhe sin le hobair stiúrtha maoinithe a dhéanamh, iomarcach. Tuigtear go bhfuair beirt de na hoibrithe seo poist eile cheana féin. Ina theannta sin, tugadh fôgraí iomarcachta do 31 oibrí eile. Chláraigh bunús na n-oibrithe seo leis an Ionad Athlonnaithe agus táthar ag súil go mbeidh deiseanna nua fostaíochta ann le 30 post ar fáil sna Grúpaí Áitiúla Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta sna seachtainí atá le teacht, a mbeidh na hoibrithe seo in inmhe iarratas a chur isteach dóibh.

Corporate and Business Plan

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what performance targets have been set for the Northern Ireland Health & Social Services Estates Agency for 2002/2003. (AQW 3624/01)

Ms de Brún: The targets, which have been set for 2002/2003, are based on the corporate aims and objectives of the Agency as set out in Section 5 of its Corporate and Business Plan. These have been placed in the Assembly library.

Tá na spriocanna, atá leagtha amach do 2002/03, bunaithe ar na haidhmeanna agus cuspóirí na Gníomhaíochta mar atá leagtha amach i gCuid 5 dá Plean Gnó agus Corparáide. Cuireadh iad siúd i leabharlann an Tionóil.

Neurologists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) target; and (ii) current waiting times for a neurological examination by a consultant neurologist in each NHS Board area.

(AQW 3654/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (i) A specific target has not been set in regard to waiting time for a neurological examination by a consultant neurologist. The Charter standard for outpatient treatment is that patients should have their first outpatient appointment within three months.
- (ii) The number of people waiting for their first outpatient appointment in the Neurology specialty in each HSS Board area is broken down into time bands and is detailed in the table on the following page. The latest figures relate to the quarter ending 31 December 2001.

PEOPLE WAITING FOR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE NEUROLOGY SPECIALTY (INCLUDING CANCELLATIONS & DEFERRALS) AT 31 DECEMBER 2001, BY LENGTH OF TIME WAITING

Fómhair 1998. Tá duine de na hOibritheoirí ar ardú céime sealadach mar Phríomh-Oibritheoir Rialaithe Dóiteán.

	Time waiting (in months)									
BOARD	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Total
EHSSB	682	550	404	172	77	44	18	7	3	1,957
NHSSB	51	12	3	2	2	1	2	1	0	74
SHSSB	100	76	67	58	3	3	0	0	0	307
WHSSB	126	123	152	89	43	16	4	0	2	555
Total	959	761	626	321	125	64	24	8	5	2,893

- (i) Níor leagadh sprioc áirithe maidir le hagaí feithimh i dtaca le scrúdúchán néareolaíoch ag néareolaí comhairleach. Is é atá sa chaighdeán Cairte maidir le cóireáil othar seachtarach ná gur chóir an chéad choinne othar seachtarach a bheith acu laistigh de thrí mhí.
- (ii) Tá líon na ndaoine ag fanacht ar a gcéad choinne othar seachtarach i sainfheidhm na Néareolaíochta i ngach Bord SSS breactha síos i sealanna ama agus tá sé léirithe sa tábla thíos. Baineann na figiúirí is déanaí leis an cheathrú a fhad le 31 Nollaig 2001.

DAOINE AG FANACHT AR A GCÉAD CHOINNE OTHAR SEACHTARACH I SAINFHEIDHM NA NÉAREOLAÍOCHTA (CEALUITHE AGUS IAD CURTHA AR ATHLÁ SAN ÁIREAMH) AG 31 NOLLAIG 2001, DE RÉIR FAD AGA FEITHIMH

	Aga feithimh (míonna)									
BORD	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Iomlán
BSSSO	682	550	404	172	77	44	18	7	3	1,957
BSSST	51	12	3	2	2	1	2	1	0	74
BSSSD	100	76	67	58	3	3	0	0	0	307
BSSSI	126	123	152	89	43	16	4	0	2	555
Iomlán	959	761	626	321	125	64	24	8	5	2,893

Fire Brigade: Staffing

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to temporary personnel employed in the Control Room of the Fire Brigade, to outline (a) the number employed; (b) their rank; and (c) the number of years employed. (AQW 3674/01)

Ms de Brún: There are currently five temporary Fire Control Operators employed in the Control Room, one since September 1996 and four since October 1998. One of the Operators is currently on temporary promotion to Leading Fire Control Operator.

Tá cúigear Oibritheoir Rialaithe Dóiteáin sealadacha fostaithe sa Seomra Rialaithe faoi láthair, duine amháin acu ó Mhéan Fómhair 1996 agus ceathrar ó Dheireadh

Upgrading and Residential Care Premises

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 1164/01, what is the timescale and cost involved to upgrade all Residential Care Premises to the Health Technical Memorandum 84 (HTM84) regulations regarding fire safety. (AQW 3710/01)

Ms de Brún: The information available is in two parts: that applicable to Trust owned premises and that for non-Trust owned premises.

For Trust owned premises the timescale and cost involved to upgrade all Residential Care Premises to the Health Technical Memorandum 84 (HTM 84) regulations regarding fire safety is the end of 2006 at a cost of £1.3m.

Non-Trust owned premises are working towards compliance with Health Technical Memorandum 84 (HTM84) standards. A number of homes are experiencing problems in achieving compliance, particularly because of the cost (of compliance) and their current difficult financial situation. Timescales and costs of compliance are not all available at present.

Tá an t-eolas atá ar fáil i dhá chuid: an chuid sin a bhaineann le háitrimh faoi úinéireacht na nÍontaobhas agus an chuid sin d'áitrimh nach leis na hiontaobhais iad.

I gcás áitrimh faoi úinéireacht na nÍontaobhas, is é an costas ag deireadh 2006 a bhain le gach Áitreabh Chúram Cónaitheach a uasghrádú chuig rialacháin Mheabhrán Teicniúil Sláinte 84 (MTS 84) maidir le sábháilteacht dóiteáin ná £1.3m.

Oibríonn áitrimh nach leis na hÍontaobhais iad i dtreo chomhlíonadh chaighdeán Mheabhrán Teicniúil Sláinte 84 (MTS 84). Tá fadhbanna ag roinnt tithe i gcomhlíonadh a bhaint amach, go háirithe mar gheall ar an gcostas (comhlíonta) agus a ndeacracht reatha i dtaobh cúrsaí airgeadais. Níl amscálaí ná costais chomhlíonta ar fáil i láthair na huaire.

Acute Hospital Review

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3322/01, when decisions on overall acute hospital provision in Northern Ireland will be completed. (AQW 3716/01)

Ms de Brún: Proposals on the way forward on the Acute Hospital Review have been discussed at the Executive, and will shortly be issued for public consultation. It is hoped that final decisions can be taken in the course of 2002.

Tá plé déanta ag an bhFeidhmeannas ar thograí maidir leis an mbealach chun cinn ar an Athbhreithniú ar na hOspidéal GEARLIACHTA, agus eiseofar na tograí sin go luath i gcomhair chomhchomhairliú poiblí. Táthar ag súil gur féidir na cinní deiridh a ghlacadh i rith na bliana 2002.

Child Immunisations

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of children given primary immunisations in the first year of life in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3718/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the percentage of children immunised before their first birthday against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) and HiB, and is detailed in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IMMUNISED BEFORE THEIR FIRST BIRTHDAY, 1998/99 - 2000/01

	Diph- theria	Tetanus	Pertussis	Polio	MMR	HiB ⁽¹⁾
1998/99	94.4	94.4	93.4	94.4	0.2	94.3
1999/00	94.8	94.8	94.0	94.8	0.1	94.7
2000/01	91.2	91.2	90.6	91.3	0.1	91.2

⁽¹⁾ Haemophilus influenzae B

Tá eolas ar fáil ar chéatadán na bpáistí imdhíonta roimh a gcéad bhreithlá ar dhiftéire, teiteanas, triuch, polaimiailíteas, bruitíneach, MMR (bruitíneach, plucamas, agus bruitíneach dhearg) agus ar HiB, agus tá sé léirithe sa tábla thíos.

CÉATADÁN PÁISTÍ IMDHÍONTA ROIMH A GCÉAD BHREITHLÁ, 1998/99 - 2000/01

	Diftéire	Teiteanas	Triuch	Polaimia ilíteas	MMR	HiB ⁽¹⁾
1998/99	94.4	94.4	93.4	94.4	0.2	94.3
1999/00	94.8	94.8	94.0	94.8	0.1	94.7
2000/01	91.2	91.2	90.6	91.3	0.1	91.2

⁽¹⁾ Haemophilus influenzae B

Specialist Medical Staff

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many extra specialist medical staff have been employed in the last 2 years to improve provision for those with (i) breast; (ii) lung; and (iii) colorectal cancer. (AQW 3720/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested. However, between April 1999 and March 2001, 26 doctors, 87 nurses and 97 other staff were appointed to provide cancer related services.

Níl eolas ar fáil sa leagan amach a iarradh. Ceapadh 26 dochtúir, 87 altra agus 97 d'fhoireann eile, áfach, idir Aibreán 1999 agus Márta 2001 chun seirbhísí a bhaineann le hailse a sholáthar.

Nurse Training

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses are expected to complete their training in the year 2003-04. (AQW 3724/01)

Ms de Brún: The total number of pre-registration nursing students expected to enter the final year of study in the 2003/04 Academic Year is 767.

This figure comprises the September 2001 intake of 411 students and March 2002 intake of 215 students by Queens University and the September 2001 intake of 141 students by University of Ulster.

All students have the potential to graduate but this can be influenced by academic progress, temporary withdrawals or permanent withdrawals for a variety of reasons.

Is é an líon iomlán mac léinn altranaís réamhchláraithe a bhfuiltear ag súil go rachaidh siad isteach sa bhliain deiridh staidéir i mBliain Acadúil 2003/04 ná 767.

Sa líon sin tá glacadh isteach 411 mac léinn i Meán Fómhair 2001 agus glacadh isteach 215 mac léinn i Márta 2002 ag Ollscoil na Ríona chomh maith le glacadh isteach 141 mac léinn i Meán Fómhair 2001 ag Ollscoil Uladh.

Tá de chumas ag gach mac léinn céim a bhaint amach ach d'fhéadfadh dul chun cinn acadúil, aistarraingtí sealadacha nó aistarraingtí buana ar chúiseanna éagsúla tionchar a imirt air sin.

Down Lisburn Trust: Funding

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety pursuant to AQW 2943/01, to outline any action being taken to ensure (a) the restoration of equitable funding to Down Lisburn Trust; and (b) the allocation of funding reflects retrospective inequities.

(AQW 3727/01)

Ms de Brún: I understand that the Eastern HSS Board are currently undertaking a three month communications process to brief interested parties on the approach used in producing the latest findings on locality equity shares. After this the Board will make proposals about how the issue might be addressed and this will be subject to public consultation.

Tuigim go bhfuil Bord SSS an Oirthir ag tabhairt faoi phróiseas cumarsáide trí mhí i láthair na huaire le páirtithe leasmhara a chur ar an eolas faoin mhodh oibre úsáidte leis na torthaí is déanaí ar scaireanna cothromais ceantair a chur amach. Ina dhiaidh seo, déanfaidh an Bord moltaí ar an dóigh ar féidir tabhairt faoin cheist seo agus beidh seo faoi réir comhairlithe phoiblí.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if she will support the Northern Ireland Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder application for funding for a support centre; and (b) what assessment she would make on the long term cost of not providing such a centre.

(AQW 3729/01)

Ms de Brún: I will be considering this application for funding in the context of both the budget allocation which will be determined by the Executive in the Spending Review and the other bids for resources which have been made to me. No information is collected centrally on this disorder and therefore it is not possible to assess the long term cost of not providing such a centre.

Beidh mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar an iarratas seo le haghaidh maoinithe i gcomhthéacs dháileadh an bhuiséid a chinnfidh an Feidhmiúchán san Athbheithniú ar Chaiteachas agus na dtairiscintí eile le haghaidh acmhainní a tugadh dom. Ní bhailítear eolas ar bith go lárnach ar an neamhord seo agus, mar sin de, ní fhéadtar measúnú a dhéanamh ar chostas fadtéarmach gan a leithéid d'ionad a sholáthar.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the financial implications to Social Services of non-diagnosis or late diagnosis of young people with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.

(AQW 3730/01)

Ms de Brún: No information is collected centrally on this disorder and therefore it would be impossible to assess the financial implications to Social Services of non-diagnosis or late diagnosis of young people with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.

Ní bhailítear eolas go lárnach ar an neamhord seo agus mar sin de, bheadh sé dodhéanta impleachtaí airgeadais neamhfháthmheas nó fháthmheas mall daoine óga le Neamhord Easpa Aire agus Hipirghníomhaíochta a mheasúnú do na Seirbhísí Sóisialta.

Diabetes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to ensure that those with diabetes receive (a) annual eye examinations; and (b) annual blood pressure checks.

(AQW 3733/01)

Ms de Brún: People with diabetes are routinely managed in primary care, at hospital or shared care between hospital and primary care. Good quality diabetes management would involve regular assessment of the patient's health so that early signs of any complications can be detected and managed appropriately. Part of this care should include monitoring of blood sugar, blood pressure and regular examination of eyes for signs of diabetic retinopathy.

Déantar bainistíocht go rialta ar dhaoine a bhfuil diabéiteas orthu i bpríomhchúram, san otharlann nó cúram roinnte idir otharlann agus príomhchúram. Bheadh measúnú rialta ar shláinte an othair i gceist le bainistíocht mhaith diabéitis sa dóigh go dtiocfadh luathchomharthaí aimhréidhe ar bith a thabhairt chun solais le go dtig bainistíocht chuí a dhéanamh orthu. Mar chuid den chúram ba chóir go mbeadh monatóireacht ar shiúcra na fola, brú fola agus scrúdú rialta na súl le teacht ar chomharthaí reitineapaite diabéití.

Bowel Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the ratio of bowel cancer consultants per head of population, in each health board area.

(AQW 3734/01)

Ms de Brún: On the basis of the amount of time oncologists devote to bowel cancer as part of their care

for cancer patients in general, the following figures have been derived:

CONSULTANT ONCOLOGISTS WHO SPECIALISE IN BOWEL CANCER – MAY 2002

	Headcount ¹	Whole Time Equivalent	Ratio per 100,000 population ²
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	4	1.4	0.21
Northern Health and Social Services Board	1	0.2	0.05
Southern Health and Social Services Board	1	0.2	0.06
Western Health and Social Services Board	1	0.2	0.07

¹ Some consultants provide services in more than one Board area.

² The 2000 mid year population estimates were used.

De réir an mhéid ama a chaitheann oinceolaithe ag cóireáil ailse inne mar chuid dá gcúram d'othair le hailse i gcoitinne, a fuarthas na figiúirí seo a leanas:

OINCEOLAITHE COMHAIRLEACHA A DHÉANANN SPEISIALTÓIREACHT AR AILSE INNE – BEALTAINE 2002

	Líon ¹	Coibhéis Lánaimeartha	Coibhneas an daonra 100,000 ²
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir	4	1.4	0.21
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt	1	0.2	0.05
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt	1	0.2	0.06
Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair	1	0.2	0.07

¹ Soláthraíonn roinnt comhairleacha seirbhísí i níos mó ná aon Bhordcheantar amháin.

² Úsáideadh na meastacháin lárbhlíana 2000 ar an daonra.

Bowel Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her policies and targets for the early detection, diagnosis and treatment of bowel cancer. (AQW 3735/01)

Ms de Brún: My objective is to build on the significant progress which has been made in recent years in the diagnosis and treatment of all cancers, including bowel cancer. My Department is at present awaiting information on a colorectal cancer screening pilot scheme established in England in 2000. These results should be available late 2002. For those patients with bowel cancer, Trusts are required to use guidelines produced or endorsed by my Department's Regional Advisory Committee on Cancer (RACC), which include specific guidance on improving outcomes in colorectal cancer. Additionally, my aim is

to ensure that treatment is provided by multidisciplinary cancer teams and that lead clinicians in a range of conditions, such as breast, lung and colo-rectal cancers, are identified.

Is é an cuspóir atá agam ná tógáil ar an dul chun cinn suntasach atá déanta le blianta beaga anuas i bhfáthmheas agus i gcóireáil gach cineál ailse, ailse inne san áireamh. Tá mo Roinnse ag feitheamh ar eolas i láthair na huaire ar scéim píolóta scagthástála ailse drólann-reictí a bunaíodh i Sasana sa bhliain 2000. Ba chóir go mbeadh na torthaí sin ar fáil i ndeireadh 2002. I gcás na n-othar sin a bhfuil ailse inne orthu, éilítear ar na hIontaobhais úsáid a bhaint as na treoirlínte a chuireann Coiste Réigiúnach Comhairleach ar Ailse (RACC) mo Roinnse ar fáil, nó na treoirlínte sin a aontaíonn sé leo, lena n-áirítear treoir shainiúil ar na torthaí in ailse drólann-reicteach a fheabhsú. Chomh maith leis sin, is í an aidhm atá agam a chinntiú go soláthraíonn foirne ildisciplíneacha ailse an chóireáil agus go sainaitheann cliniceoirí ceannródaíocha i réimse riochtaí mar ailsí brollaigh, scamhóg agus drólann-reicteach.

Bowel Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with bowel cancer in each of the last 5 years, in each health board area. (AQW 3737/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is as follows:

COLORECTAL CANCER BY HSS BOARD AND SEX 1994-98

	Males				
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Eastern					
Incident cases	208	211	224	203	181
Crude rate (per 100,000)	60.2	60.8	64.2	58.0	51.7
Northern					
Incident cases	129	102	114	112	117
Crude rate (per 100,000)	61.4	48.3	53.5	52.2	54.2
Southern					
Incident cases	69	80	79	72	91
Crude rate (per 100,000)	45.8	52.9	51.7	46.8	58.7
Western					
Incident cases	71	74	79	58	82
Crude rate (per 100,000)	52.2	54.3	57.2	41.7	58.5

COLORECTAL CANCER BY HSS BOARD AND SEX 1994-98

	Females				
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Eastern					
Incident cases	185	229	214	203	199
Crude rate (per 100,000)	53.5	66.0	61.4	58.0	56.8
Northern					
Incident cases	125	120	122	109	92
Crude rate (per 100,000)	59.5	56.8	57.2	50.8	42.6
Southern					
Incident cases	70	85	68	67	77
Crude rate (per 100,000)	46.5	56.2	44.5	43.5	49.7
Western					
Incident cases	50	63	57	66	67
Crude rate (per 100,000)	36.7	46.2	41.3	47.5	47.8

Seo a leanas an t-eolas iarrtha:

AILSE COLAIDRISEACHÁIN DE RÉIR BORD SSS AGUS GNÉIS 1994-98

	Fir				
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Oirthearach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	208	211	224	203	181
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	60.2	60.8	64.2	58.0	51.7
Tuaisceartach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	129	102	114	112	117
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	61.4	48.3	53.5	52.2	54.2
Deisceartach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	69	80	79	72	91
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	45.8	52.9	51.7	46.8	58.7
Iartharach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	71	74	79	58	82
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	52.2	54.3	57.2	41.7	58.5

AILSE COLAIDRISEACHÁIN DE RÉIR BORD SSS AGUS GNÉIS 1994-98

	Mná				
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Oirthearach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	185	229	214	203	199
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	53.5	66.0	61.4	58.0	56.8
Tuaisceartach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	125	120	122	109	92
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	59.5	56.8	57.2	50.8	42.6
Deisceartach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	70	85	68	67	77
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	46.5	56.2	44.5	43.5	49.7
Iartharach					
Cásanna Teagmhais	50	63	57	66	67
Ráta Teagmhais (an 100,000)	36.7	46.2	41.3	47.5	47.8

Sure Start Programme

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children under 4 years of age are currently included in the Sure Start Programme. (AQW 3753/01)

Ms de Brún: The 23 Sure Start projects which are now operating here provide a range of services for approximately 17,500 children under the age of 4 and their families.

Soláthraíonn na 23 scéim Sure Start atá ag feidhmiú anseo anois, réimse seirbhísí do thimpeall is 17,500 páiste faoi 4 bliain d'aois agus dá dteaghlaigh.

Community Care

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many additional community care packages have been agreed in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3754/01)

Ms de Brún: Increases in the number of care packages in effect over the last three years are detailed in the following table.

CARE PACKAGES IN EFFECT, 1999 - 2001⁽¹⁾

Year	Packages in effect	Increase on previous year
1999	14,756	+ 814
2000	15,485	+ 729
2001	16,587	+ 1,102

⁽¹⁾ At 31 March in each year

Tá méaduithe i líon na bpacáistí cúraim i bhfeidhm thar na trí bliana deireanacha léirithe sa tábla thíos.

PACÁISTÍ CÚRAIM I BHFEIDHM, 1999 – 2001⁽¹⁾

Bliain	Pacáistí i bhfeidhm	Méadú ar an bhliain roimh ré
1999	14,756	+ 814
2000	15,485	+ 729
2001	16,587	+ 1,102

⁽¹⁾ Ar 31 Márta i ngach bliain**Occupational Therapists**

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many additional Occupational Therapists have been employed in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3755/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is detailed in the table below. Figures refer to 31 March of each year.

YEAR ON YEAR INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS¹

	Increase on Previous Year	
	Whole Time Equivalent	Headcount
2000	20.3	20
2001	21.1	23
2002	15.3	23

¹ Excludes Occupational Therapist helpers.

Tá an t-eolas léirithe sa tábla thíos. Tagraíonn na figiúirí do 31 Márta i ngach bliain.

MÉADÚ BLIAIN AR BHLIAIN I LÍON NA DTEIRIPOIRÍ SAOTHAIR¹

	Méadú ar an Bhliain Roimh Ré	
	Coibhéis Lánaimseartha	Líon
2000	20.3	20
2001	21.1	23
2002	15.3	23

¹ Ní chuirtear cuiditheoirí Theiripeoirí Saothair san áireamh.**Residential Care: Children**

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of

additional residential care places for children provided in each of the last 3 years; and (b) the number she expects to be available in March 2003. (AQW 3756/01)

Ms de Brún: The numbers of additional residential care places for children which have been provided in each of the last three years have been as follows:

Year	Number of Additional Places
1999/2000	NIL
2000/01	24
2001/02	17

The 17 extra places provided in 2001/02 count towards fulfilling the commitment in the Executive's Programme for Government to increase by March 2003 the number of residential child care places by 52 above the level of provision at July 2001. At present there are several projects being developed by Health and Social Services Boards and Health and Social Services Trusts which will enable this commitment to be achieved.

Seo a leanas líon na n-áiteanna breise cúraim chónaithe a cuireadh ar fáil do pháistí i ngach bliain na trí bliana deireanacha:

Bliain	Líon na nÁiteanna Breise
1999/2000	NÁID
2000/01	24
2001/02	17

Tá na 17 áit bhreise curtha ar fáil i 2001/02 mar chuid de chomhlíonadh ghealltanas Clár Rialtais an Fheidhmiúcháin le líon na n-áiteanna cúraim chónaithe do pháistí a mhéadú go 52 áit faoi Mhárta 2003, níos mó ná leibhéal an tsoláthair i mí Iúil 2001. Faoi láthair, tá roinnt scéimeanna á bhforbairt ag na Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus ag na hÍontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta a chuirfidh ar a chumas an gealltanas seo a chomhlíonadh.

Inpatient Psychiatric Beds

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many additional child and adolescent in-patient psychiatric beds have been created in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3757/01)

Ms de Brún: There were no additional child and adolescent in-patient psychiatric beds created in the last 3 years. Funding has been secured to provide 10 additional adolescent psychiatric inpatient beds and it is planned that these beds will be operational by September of this year.

Níor cruthaíodh leapacha breise síciatracha othair chónaithigh do pháistí agus d'óganaigh sna trí bliana deireanacha. Fuarthas maoiniú le 10 leaba breise síciatracha

othair chónaithigh a chur ar fáil d'ógánaigh agus tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh na leapacha seo in úsáid faoi Mheán Fómhair na bliana seo.

Long-Stay Patients

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many long-term stay patients have been re-settled in the community in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3759/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

LONG-STAY PATIENTS RE-SETTLED IN THE COMMUNITY, 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
98	55	114

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

OTHAIR FHADFHANACHTA ATHSHOCRUITHE SA PHOBAL, 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
98	55	114

NI Hospice

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to help the Northern Ireland Hospice with their financial problems. (AQW 3760/01)

Ms de Brún: I recently received a request from the Hospice for an emergency loan to help with financial difficulties. My Department is currently considering this request.

Fuair mé iarratas ar na mallaibh ón Ospáis le haghaidh iasachta práinní le cuidiú le deacrachtaí airgeadais. Tá an Roinn s'agam ag déanamh machnaimh ar an iarratas faoi láthair.

Hayes Review of Acute Hospitals

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of formal invitations she received to meet district councils in respect of the Hayes Review of Acute Hospitals, in the last 12 months; (b) the number of invitations she accepted; (c) the district councils she met; and (d) the dates of such meetings. (AQW 3761/01)

Ms de Brún: In the last 12 months, in relation to the Acute Hospital Review:

- (a) I received invitations from 5 district councils;
- (b) I accepted all the invitations;

(c) I met with Omagh, Fermanagh, Magherafelt, Cookstown and Down District Councils;

(d) I met with Omagh District Council on the 30th October 2001; with Fermanagh District Council on the 21st November 2001; with Magherafelt and Cookstown District Council (jointly) on the 6th December 2001; and with Down District Council on the 9th January 2002.

Sna 12 mí deireanach, maidir leis an Athbhreithniú ar Ghéarocharlanna:

- (a) Fuair mé cuirí ó 5 comhairle ceantair;
- (b) Ghlac mé leis na cuirí go léir;
- (c) Bhuaill mé le Comhairlí Ceantair na hÓmaí, Fhear Manach, Mhachaire Rátha, na Coirre Críochaí (le chéile) agus an Dúin;
- (d) Bhuaill mé le Comhairle Ceantair na hÓmaí ar 30 Deireadh Fómhair 2001; le Comhairle Ceantair Fhear Manach ar 21 Samhain 2001, le Comhairlí Ceantair Mhachaire Rátha agus na Coirre Críochaí (le chéile) ar 6 Nollaig 2001; agus le Comhairle Ceantair an Dúin ar 9 Eanáir 2002.

Operation Waiting Lists: West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently waiting for Ear, Nose and Throat operations in West Tyrone. (AQW 3763/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

E.N.T. Operations: West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Ear, Nose and Throat operations have been carried out in West Tyrone over the past 18 months. (AQW 3764/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Oncology

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many oncology patients from West Tyrone have to travel outside the constituency for diagnosis, treatment and ongoing care. (AQW 3774/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Heart Surgery: West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people in West Tyrone are currently waiting for heart operations.

(AQW 3775/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Day Care and Learning Disability Needs: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the reduction of EU funding for day-care and learning disability needs, what discussions have taken place with the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure alternative funding is made available.

(AQW 3782/01)

Ms de Brún: Officials in my Department are in discussion with their counterparts in the Department of Education and Learning to assess the impact the reduction in ESF funding will have on health and social services.

Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts are already aware of the retraction of European funding in the coming years, and the pressures this will put on their own voluntary activity support budgets. It will be for them to assess the value of current projects and to decide whether to continue funding them, taking into account the impact withdrawal may have on the well-being of the service users involved. This will involve careful assessment of priorities, opportunity costs and available resources.

Tá oifigigh ó mo Roinn i mbun caibidlí lena gcomhghleacaithe sa Roinn Oideachais agus Foghlama le measúnú a dhéanamh ar an tionchar a bheidh ag an laghdú i maoiniú ESF ar na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta.

Tá a fhios ag na Boird agus ag na hIontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta cheana féin faoi aistarraingt an mhaoinithe Eorpaigh a dhéanfar sna blianta atá le teacht, agus faoi na brúnna a chuirfidh sí seo ar a mbuiséid thacaíochta féin do ghníomhaíochtaí deonacha. Fúthu féin a bheidh sé measúnú a dhéanamh ar fhiúntas na scéimeanna reatha agus cinneadh a dhéanamh iad a mhaoiniú go fóill nó gan iad a mhaoiniú, ag cur san áireamh an tionchar a d'fhéadfadh an aistarraingt a bheith aici ar leas na n-úsáideoirí seirbhísí lena mbaineann sí. Beidh measúnú cúramach ar thosaíochtaí, ar chostais deiseanna, agus ar na hacmhainní ar fáil i gceist.

Day Care and Learning Disability Needs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to develop a long-term strategy for those with day-care and learning disability needs.

(AQW 3783/01)

Ms de Brún: The provision of day services is a shared responsibility between statutory providers in the fields of education, training, employment and health and social services, and voluntary sector providers. The aim is to enable people with a learning disability to access the service most appropriate to their needs at a particular point in time. Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts have developed the necessary multi-agency networks and protocols to meet identified local need.

My Department's Priorities for Action 2002/03 require Boards and Trusts to continue to develop the range of day care and respite services for people with a learning disability. Some of the additional funding allocated to Boards for the development of community services in 2002/03 will be available for this purpose.

Idir soláthraithe reachtúla i réimsí oideachais, oiliúna, fostaíochta, na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta agus soláthraithe na hearnála deonaí atá an chomhfhreagracht as seirbhísí lae a sholáthar. Is í an aidhm ná cur ar chumas daoine le míchumas foghlama an tseirbhís is oiriúnaí dá riachtanais a fháil ag am ar leith. D'fhorbair na Boird agus na hIontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na gréasáin agus na prótacail riachtanacha ilghníomhaireachta le riar ar riachtanais aitheanta áitiúla.

Éilíonn Tosaíochtaí le hAghaidh Gnímh 2002/03 mo Roinne ar Bhoird agus ar Iontaobhais réimse a seirbhísí cúraim lae agus faoisimh a fhorbairt go fóill do dhaoine le míchumas foghlama. Cuirfear cuid den mhaoiniú breise dáilte ar Bhoird le haghaidh forbairt seirbhísí pobail i 2002/03 ar fáil don chuspóir seo.

'Arimidex'

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the cancer drug 'Arimidex' is available on prescription; and, if not, when will it become available.

(AQW 3802/01)

Ms de Brún: Arimidex has been available on prescription here for ten years and is widely prescribed for the treatment of advanced breast cancer. It is not yet licensed for use in the precautionary treatment of patients who have had surgery and/or radiotherapy for curable breast cancer. The results of clinical studies to date are not sufficiently matured to conclude that Arimidex provides a clear survival advantage in the long term in these cases.

Tá Arimidex ar fáil ar oideas le deich mbliana anuas anois agus moltar mar chóir leighis go forleathan é chun aile brollaigh forbartha a leigheas. Níl sé ceadúnaithe

go fóill i leigheas réamh-aireach na n-othar a chuaigh faoi mháinliacht agus/nó a raibh radaiteiripe d'aile brollaigh inleigheasta acu. Níl torthaí na staidéar cliniciúil go dtí seo aibí/forbartha go leor chun teacht ar an gcinneadh go bhfuil buntáiste soiléir san fhadtearma ag Arimidex ó thaobh marthanais de sna cásanna seo.

Fire Stations: Cover

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many occasions in the last year has fire cover in adjacent station areas been requested in order to provide fire cover for those stations under-resourced. (AQW 3803/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

'Arimidex'

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the results of the new cancer drug 'Arimidex'; and (b) the role the Ulster Hospital had in its trials over the last 5 years. (AQW 3805/01)

Ms de Brún: Arimidex has been available here for at least ten years and is widely prescribed for the treatment of advanced breast cancer. Preliminary results from a large multi-centre study comparing the use of Arimidex with the traditional agent Tamoxifen show that it is too early to say if Arimidex provides a clear survival advantage in long term use for patients who have had surgery for early breast cancer.

A number of patients from the Ulster Hospital's Breast Clinic have been included in this study, in which the health service here has been a major contributor.

Tá Arimidex ar fáil anseo le deich mbliana anuas ar a laghad agus molar go forleathan mar chóir leighis é chun aile brollaigh atá forbartha a leigheas. Léiríonn réamhthorthaí ó staidéar mór ilionad a chuir úsáid Arimidex i gcomparáid leis an oibreán traidisiúnta Tamoxifen go bhfuil sé róluath a rá an bhfuil buntáiste amach is amach san fhadtearma ag baint le Arimidex ó thaobh marthanais de maidir le hothair a chuaigh faoi mháinliacht d'aile brollaigh go luath.

Áirítear roinnt othar ó Chlinic Brollaigh Ospidéal Uladh sa staidéar sin agus ba mhó an cúnamh a bhí sa tséirbhís sláinte ansin dóibh.

Acute Hospital/Minor Injuries Unit

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail which constituencies

have neither an Acute Hospital nor a Minor Injuries Unit. (AQW 3809/01)

Ms de Brún: Belfast East, East Antrim and North Antrim constituencies have neither an Acute hospital nor a Minor Injuries Unit.

Níl Géarotharlann nó Ionad Mionghortuithe i dtoghlaigh Bhéal Feirste Thoir, Aontroma Thoir nó Thuaidh.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) any plans being considered for improving the diagnosis system for detecting Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); and (b) what support is available for both the individual diagnosed and their family. (AQW 3817/01)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible to assess the present standards of diagnosis of young people with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. Continual Professional Development of GPs and psychiatrists is designed to ensure increased awareness and to keep professionals up to date with developments in this area.

Support for the individuals diagnosed with ADHD is provided via the child and adolescent services. Support for the families and carers is available through a range of mental health carer support services provided by the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Ní féidir caighdeáin láithreacha fháthmheas dhaoine óga le Neamhord Easpa Aire agus Hipirghníomhaíochta (NEAH) a mheasúnú. Tá sé de chuspóir ag Forbairt Leanúnach Ghairmiúil Ghnáthdhochtúirí agus síciatraithe níos mó eolais air a chinntiú agus gairmithe a choinneáil ar an eolas faoi na forbairtí sa réimse seo.

Tugtar tacaíocht do na daoine aonair fáthmheasta le NEAH tríd na seirbhísí páistí agus ógánach. Tá tacaíocht do theaghlaigh agus d'fheighlithe ar fáil trí réimse seirbhísí tacaíochta d'fheighlithe sláinte meabhrach soláthraithe ag na hearnálacha reachtúla agus deonacha.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to educate psychiatrists on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). (AQW 3818/01)

Ms de Brún: Psychiatrists are educated about ADHD during their general professional training as part of child and adolescent mental health subjects. Child and adolescent psychiatrists, who undergo higher professional training in this sub-specialty prior to becoming consultants, would focus on relevant areas such as ADHD in considerably more depth. Post graduate Continual Professional Development of psychiatrists would ensure increased awareness

of ADHD and that professionals keep up to date with developments in this area.

Múintear ábhar an NEAH do shíciatraithe le linn a n-oiliúna gairmiúla ginearálta mar chuid d'ábhair sláinte meabhrach an pháiste agus an ógánaigh. Dhíreodh síciatraithe páistí agus ógánach, a dhéanann oiliúint ghairmiúil níos airde san fhospeisialtacht seo sula ndéantar comhairleacha díobh, i bhfad níos mine ar réimsí cuí amhail NEAH. Chinnteodh Forbairt Leanúnach Ghairmiúil larchéime na síciatraithe go mbeadh níos mó eolais acu ar NEAH agus go gcinneodh gairmithe súil ar fhorbairtí sa réimse seo.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Roads Maintenance: West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the percentage of the Roads Service budget for West Tyrone in the current financial year, that has been allocated for roads maintenance. (AQW 3739/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I can advise that the expenditure on roads maintenance in West Tyrone represents 9.0 % of the total spend on roads maintenance in Northern Ireland during 2001/2002.

Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the type of sewage treatment in each sewage and wastewater treatment works throughout Northern Ireland. (AQW 3776/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has 918 wastewater treatment works and sea outfalls. The treatment processes used are as follows:

- primary treatment which removes suspended solids in the wastewater prior to discharge to the receiving waters;
- secondary treatment which provides an additional stage of treatment involving some form of biological process which removes soluble and colloidal organic matter prior to discharge; and
- tertiary treatment which employs further processes designed to remove residual suspended solids and reduce ammonia, nitrogen or phosphorous.

Discharges from sea outfalls are normally provided with screened treatment to remove large floating solid material.

The treatment process used is determined by the effluent consent standards, which are set by the Environment and Heritage Service. The following table provides a

breakdown of the number of wastewater treatment works by treatment process.

Type of Treatment	Number of Works
Primary	98
Secondary	684
Tertiary	30
Sea Outfalls	106
Total	918

North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any additional costs which would be incurred to treat waste water by tertiary, rather than secondary treatment in the proposed 'North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works' project. (AQW 3777/01)

Mr P Robinson: The provision of secondary treatment processes at the proposed North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works will ensure that wastewater discharges comply with the standards set by the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service. These standards take account of European Community Directives and United Kingdom standards, together with local environmental requirements.

The site of the proposed works is large enough to permit the construction of tertiary treatment facilities, should standards be made more rigorous in the future. The additional capital cost would be in the order of £2 million and the additional running costs are estimated to be around £53,000 per annum.

Given the current underfunding of Water Service, and the pressures on its capital investment programme, I could not sanction spending an additional £2 million on treating wastewater to standards higher than those set by the regulatory authorities.

North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the proposed 'North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works' project, including an indicative timetable for the scheme. (AQW 3778/01)

Mr P Robinson: The proposed North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works is a substantial project. The works will be constructed at Craigtown More and treated effluent will be conveyed 1 kilometre out to sea through a submerged pipeline to be laid off Rinagree Point. This will enable existing wastewater treatment works at Coleraine to be downgraded, removing the present discharge of treated effluent to the River Bann. Wastewater from Castlerock and Articlave will be pumped to a storm water holding facility at the Coleraine site. New pumping stations, to be constructed

at Portrush and Portstewart, will transfer flows to the new North Coast Works and permit the removal of effluent discharges to the Articlave River and the sea at Castlerock, Blackrock and Ramore Head. The project will accommodate future residential, tourist and commercial growth for the next 30 years.

Water Service recently applied for outline planning permission for the Works and the timetable for its construction is presently under review. The earliest possible date that the construction could commence would be 2003, however, the actual date will be subject to the availability of funding. It is estimated that construction of the works will take 4 years to complete.

North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the capital costs involved in the proposed 'North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works' project.
(AQW 3779/01)

Mr P Robinson: The current estimate of the capital cost of the North Coast Wastewater Treatment Works project is in the region of £36 million. This comprises £18 million for the treatment works, £6 million for the sea outfall and £12 million for sewers and pumping stations.

Salt Boxes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria for the provision of salt boxes for use in inclement weather.
(AQW 3790/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am answering Question numbers AQW 3790/01, and AQW 3791/01 together.

I should explain that in certain circumstances my Department's Roads Service may provide salt bins on adopted roads, which are not included in the salting schedule. The salt bins are provided for use by local residents on a self-help basis during periods of icy weather conditions.

To qualify for consideration for the provision of a salt bin, the gradient of a road should be equal to, or greater than, 5% (i.e. 1 in 20) and where a reasonable alternative route on the salting schedule is not available. Other criteria taken into account are the road geometry, residential and commercial usage and community welfare reasons. A point scoring system is then applied.

From November to March inclusive the salt boxes are inspected and filled as required. If necessary, during the summer months some boxes are removed in case they would be stolen or damaged. Normally the boxes would not be provided within 100 metres of one another.

I am advised that there are 25 salt boxes within the Carrickfergus area. Details of the locations are detailed on the table below.

CARRICKFERGUS SALT BOXES — NUMBER OF SALT BOXES AS AT FEBRUARY 2002

No	Road Name	Location
1	Alexander Avenue	Opposite Street Light 5 Edward Road
2	Balfour Avenue	Number 9 on Footpath
3	Balfour Avenue	Victoria Avenue Opposite Street Light 5
4	Broadlands	Opposite Number 19 On Verge
5	Cairn Road	Number 61 Grass Verge
6	Cairn Road	Recess Opposite Mission Hall Number 16
7	Chester Avenue	At Bus Station
8	Coronation Road	At Victoria School
9	Councillors Road	Opposite Number 10
10	Donegall Avenue	Number 2 On Footpath
11	Fairview Drive	Right Number 1 On Footpath
12	Kings Road	At Post Office Opposite Side
13	Minorca Place	At Chapel School
14	Prince Of Wales Avenue	Jct Raphael Rd On Footpath
15	Raphael Road	Number 19 On Footpath
16	Raw Brae Road	Left Street Light 3 On Footpath
17	Silverstream	At School
18	Station Road	At School
19	Sunnylands Drive	At School
20	Uinty Street	Central School
21	Victoria Rise	Street Light 11 On Footpath
22	Victoria Road	Street Light 34 Rear Footpath
23	Woodburn Avenue	At School
24	Kingsland Drive	At Cul De Sac
25	Woodburn Road	At School (Behind Wall)

Salt Boxes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of salt boxes; and (b) their location, in the Carrickfergus area.
(AQW 3791/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am answering Question numbers AQW 3790/01, and AQW 3791/01 together.

I should explain that in certain circumstances my Department's Roads Service may provide salt bins on adopted roads, which are not included in the salting schedule. The salt bins are provided for use by local residents on a self-help basis during periods of icy weather conditions.

To qualify for consideration for the provision of a salt bin, the gradient of a road should be equal to, or greater than, 5% (i.e. 1 in 20) and where a reasonable alternative route on the salting schedule is not available. Other criteria taken into account are the road geometry, residential and commercial usage and community welfare reasons. A point scoring system is then applied.

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23	Woodburn Avenue	At School
24	Kingsland Drive	At Cul De Sac
25	Woodburn Road	At School (Behind Wall)

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3813/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has published one final EIA and issued a further one for consultation. The costs (including staff costs) are detailed below:

Costs	Proposed Discontinuance of Antrim-Knockmore Railway Line (EIA completed) £	Regional Transportation Strategy (Draft EIA issued for consultation) £
Research (including staff costs)	46,000	25,000
Consultation	Nil	Nil
Printing and Dissemination	3600	1600

Freedom of Information

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he has taken to ensure that the publication schemes required under the Freedom of Information Act will be completed by November 2002.

(AQW 3879/01)

Mr P Robinson: A dedicated unit has been established within my Department to take forward the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, of which the Publication Scheme is one element. Work on the Scheme is well advanced and it is anticipated that it will be sent to the Information Commissioner for approval in September.

Farmers/Landowners: Compensation

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to introduce a scheme that will offer additional compensation to farmers and landowners who lose small parcels of land for road development, to reflect the open market prices for small parcels of land as opposed to the price per acre of agricultural land currently paid.

(AQO 1522/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have currently no plans to introduce a scheme that will offer additional compensation to farmers and landowners who have small parcels of land acquired for road development. The Department of Finance and Personnel, Valuation and Lands Agency is responsible for the agreeing of compensation in such cases and I am informed by that Agency that compensation is based on open market value.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the bids he has made to the Executive under the Re-investment and Reform Initiative.

(AQO 1528/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department entered a total of 38 bids under the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative amounting to £277 million of which £99 million relates to 2002/03 and £178 million to 2003/04.

The detailed list of bids was made available to the Regional Development Committee and I have arranged for a copy to be put in the Assembly Library. The list includes 15 projects put forward in April for support under the Infrastructure Executive Programme Fund. The schemes include strategic road improvements on major routes throughout Northern Ireland, upgrading the Eastern Seaboard Corridor – i.e. the A8, Westlink, the M1 and various schemes on the A1 including the dualling of the road between Newry and the Border – Skeoge Link and the final stage of the Omagh through-pass. I have also sought significant investment in new buses and have bid for the funds necessary to continue work on the railways including the Antrim – Knockmore railway line. In respect of water and sewerage I am seeking resources to replace defective water mains and sewers, to reduce leakage, to improve water quality and enhance environmental protection measures.

Road Improvement: Belfast to Larne

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to update the progress on the improvements to the A8 Belfast to Larne road.

(AQO 1535/01)

Mr P Robinson: The A8 Belfast to Larne Road forms a key link in Northern Ireland's Strategic Transportation Network and is part of the Trans European Network. My Department's Roads Service intends to carry out a package of improvements costing some £12 million to the A8 Belfast to Larne road.

The current position on each of the 5 components is as follows:

- 2 climbing lanes at Ballynure – the climbing lanes are under construction and should be complete by October 2002;
- Doagh Road to Coleman's Corner dualling – all statutory procedures will be completed when the Vesting Order becomes operative on 24 June 2002. It is expected that the tender documents will issue in July 2002 and that the contract will be awarded in the autumn, with work commencing before the end of this year;
- New roundabouts at Millbrook and Antiville – this scheme has already completed the Environmental Assessment and Planning Approval (Direction Order)

stages of the statutory procedures. I am pleased to be able to announce today that the single objection to the Vesting Order is being set aside without recourse to a Public Inquiry; this will allow the land acquisition phase to be completed shortly. Roads Service has already initiated the tender process with a view to making a start on site later this year.

- Link road and roundabout scheme at the A57 junction, Ballynure – the Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order is being prepared and should be published this summer;
- Traffic calming measures at Ballynure – these will be implemented as part of the new link road and roundabout scheme at the A57 junction, Ballynure.

Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions will he take to ensure that the network investigation of the sewerage system at Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works is undertaken as soon as possible.

(AQO 1510/01)

Mr P Robinson: Officials of Water Service and Environment and Heritage Service met recently to discuss Environmental and Heritage Service's concerns about the pollution of waterways in the Downpatrick area, and the operation of the Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works.

In addition to installing new inlet screens, Water Service intends to carry out some modifications at the Works which will address Environment and Heritage Service's concerns. This work is due to be completed before the July holidays and Environment and Heritage Service has advised that it will enable the present restrictions on development, in the area served by the Works, to be lifted.

Water Service has a major ongoing and planned programme of detailed investigations into the sewerage networks across Northern Ireland. The aim of these investigations, which are known as drainage area studies, is to determine the improvements necessary to enable the sewerage networks to meet future capacity and environmental requirements.

The study into the Downpatrick sewerage network had been scheduled to commence in 2003. However, it has been agreed with Environment and Heritage Service, that it will be brought forward and will now commence in the Autumn of 2002. The study will take 2 years to complete.

East Antrim Railway Line

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what improvements are planned for the East Antrim Railway line over the next 12 months?

(AQO 1518/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it is currently considering options for the upgrading of the East Antrim Line. The extent of the upgrading will depend on the availability of funding.

Among the options being considered is the conversion of two level crossings at Jordanstown and Troopers Lane from automatic half-barrier to a manually controlled barrier with CCTV, and the re-lay of the line.

Translink has advised that work planned is in line with ongoing improvements. During the past 12 months, over £1m was spent on sea defences; Carrickfergus station was refurbished and new Park and Ride facilities were built at Whitehead station.

Infrastructure

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans exist to foster the growth of all of Northern Ireland's ports through the provision of infrastructural links. (AQO 1526/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) designates sea and air ports as regional gateways and highlights the need to develop the Regional Strategic Transport Network, based on Key Transport Corridors, to connect a number of towns and provide links to the major regional gateways. The Regional Transportation Strategy, which I will bring to the Assembly before the summer recess, will identify the transportation priorities and level of investment required, including that for the Regional Strategic Transport Network, over the next 10 years to progress significantly towards that vision.

Transport Strategy

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the level of investment needed to bring the key transport corridors up to the standard required for a modern and vibrant society.

(AQO 1553/01)

Mr P Robinson: To achieve the longer-term transportation vision for Northern Ireland, set out in the Regional Development Strategy, would require additional investment of around £2.5 billion over the next 25 years. The Regional Transportation Strategy, which I will bring to the Assembly before the summer recess, will identify the transportation priorities and level of investment required, including that for the Regional Strategic Transport Network (which includes the KTCs), over the next 10 years to progress significantly towards achievement of the vision.

Bridge Strengthening: Tillysburn

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any progress on the Tillysburn Road/Bridge realignment project; and to make a statement. (AQO 1509/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that currently this £5.5M scheme is 4 weeks ahead of schedule and is due for completion in September 2002.

The Tillysburn Bridge carries the Sydenham Bypass over the Bangor to Belfast railway line. It carries 56,000 vehicles per day and is being replaced as part of Roads Service's bridge strengthening programme. One element of the scheme is the provision of an underpass to service Belfast City Airport part-funded by the airport authorities. It will allow vehicles leaving the airport and intending to turn right, to pass under the Sydenham Bypass before joining the Belfast-bound carriageway via a slip road.

I hope the Member will agree that this project has been managed very efficiently and, due to considerable traffic management arrangements put in place by Roads Service and the contractor, disruption to road and rail users has been kept to a minimum.

Roads Service and Water Service: Expenditure

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current level of expenditure by the Roads Service and Water Service in West Tyrone. (AQO 1544/01)

Mr P Robinson: Roads Service expenditure in West Tyrone, which comprises the Omagh and Strabane District Council areas, was just over £15million in the 2001/2002 financial year. This includes some £4.5 million on major road improvement schemes, £1.5 million on other improvements including accident remedial and traffic calming schemes and £9 million on road maintenance including winter service, grass cutting and street lighting.

In the current financial year Water Service proposes to invest £14 million on upgrading water and sewerage infrastructure in the Omagh and Strabane District Council areas. Some £12 million of this is to be spent on the upgrading of Lough Macrory Water Treatment Works, Strabane Wastewater Treatment Works and Omagh Wastewater Treatment Works.

Water Service operational expenditure, which includes items such as wages, salaries, materials, hired and contract services, is not available on an Assembly constituency or District Council basis. However, operational expenditure in the Service's Western Division, which includes the West Tyrone area, was almost £22 million in the 2001/2002 financial year. It is envisaged that a similar amount will be spent in the current financial year.

Traffic: Kilkeel

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) any plans he has to address

the traffic problems in Kilkeel, particularly on a Friday afternoon and (b) when such measures will be implemented. (AQO 1561/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has taken several steps to address the traffic situation in Kilkeel. Traffic calming works at Knockchree Avenue and Rooney Road, Kilkeel, have recently been carried out in response to public requests to reduce vehicle speeds and improve safety on these roads. The effectiveness and impact of this scheme will be monitored over the coming months.

A number of dropped kerbs have also been provided in Kilkeel during the last financial year to facilitate the movement of pedestrians and my engineers have made further provision within this year's programme for similar work to be carried out at sites which will be selected in consultation with representative groups in the area.

In regard to traffic congestion in the town centre, a recent survey did not indicate significant delays during weekdays. It was noted, however, that inappropriate parking and delivery vehicles had an adverse affect on traffic flows particularly during peak times. I am pleased to inform you that where necessary Roads Service plan to refurbish the markings and signage associated with existing waiting restrictions in order to assist enforcement and improve traffic progression. This work will be completed within the next quarter.

Consultancy Firms/Consultants

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of expenditure in each of the past 3 years on consultancy firms/consultants, on all road scheme projects. (AQO 1516/01)

Mr P Robinson: The level of expenditure on consultant fees on Roads Service projects in each of the past 3 years is as follows:

1999/2000	£3,012,000
2000/2001	£3,285,000
2001/2002	£3,833,000

This includes road and bridge schemes, and work associated with Area Planning and Development Control.

Upgrading Road Network: Scotland

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what negotiations he has had with members of the Scottish Executive in respect of upgrading the fast road link between Stranraer and the M6. (AQO 1525/01)

Mr P Robinson: My colleague Gregory Campbell and I have both had correspondence with members of the Scottish Executive to emphasize the importance to the Northern Ireland economy of upgrading the network

of roads linking with the Scottish Ferry ports. I also took the opportunity to raise this issue with my counterpart in the Scottish Executive during a meeting earlier this year on another matter.

A planned meeting to discuss a range of issues including the upgrade of the Scottish roads network was subsequently postponed and as a result of changes within the Scottish Executive has not yet been reinstated.

Arthur's Bridge, North Belfast

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider implementing a pilot scheme to place a protective covering over the Arthur's Bridge, North Belfast; and to make a statement. (AQO 1512/01)

Mr P Robinson: Over the last few months there has 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 bridges over the M2 such as Arthur's Bridge. There is also a widespread problem of stone throwing from the roadside, which can have equally serious consequences for those using the roads.

My Department's Roads Service and the police treat these incidents very seriously and the matter is kept under constant review. A protective covering for Arthur's Bridge to try to deter such attacks would be a very large structure, requiring a headroom of some 5.3 metres high. Setting aside issues of cost, such engineering measures will only reduce but not eliminate the risk of this particular type of attack. They will be seen as a challenge to vandals who will find other modes of attack, possibly from the roads running beside the motorway.

There are also serious reservations about the visual amenity of such fortifications, with signals being sent of a community in decline. In particular, the M2 downhill approach is one of the most attractive gateways into Belfast and to fortify bridges along this route would not be conducive to the image we would like to portray for such a major entrance into our capital city.

Our conclusion at present, therefore, 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 in various locations for some time.

Essentially the throwing of objects from bridges is a matter for the Police and enhanced enforcement together with strong community leadership may well be the best way forward. I therefore welcome the recent announcements by the Security Minister, Jane Kennedy, that Arthur's Bridge will be one of the locations where a CCTV camera will be erected as part of the overall NIO CCTV initiative for North Belfast.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Co-Ownership Scheme

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development how many applicants have accessed home ownership through the Co-Ownership scheme in each of the last three years. (AQW 3723/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The information is as follows:

Financial Year	No of new Co-ownership participants
1999/2000	587
2000/2001	510
2001/2002	645

Local Government Boundaries: Newtownabbey

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development if local government boundaries between North Belfast and Newtownabbey inhibit his ability to improve the housing situation in both areas. (AQW 3725/01)

Mr Dodds: Local government boundaries are not major influencing factors in improving the housing situation, either by programmed improvement schemes or in assessing housing need for new build.

The social newbuild programme is determined by housing need, primarily based on an analysis of waiting lists, which again are not constrained by local government boundaries. When assessing housing need, recognition is given to both the local and wider housing markets in North Belfast and Newtownabbey, including those which straddle local government boundaries.

The Department has recently changed the method for determining the threshold levels for Co-ownership participants. These are no longer based on local government boundaries but are now calculated on the basis of broader area bands which reflect, more accurately, house price fluctuations. This means that there is an opportunity for participants to purchase housing in areas where house prices have risen markedly over the past few years.

Social Security Benefits: Staffing

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) any plans of introducing the private sector into the Social Security system; (b) the impact this would have on established jobs; (c) the impact on the current number of Social Security Offices throughout the province; and (d) the potential these plans would have in taking jobs out of the province. (AQW 3793/01)

Mr Dodds: There are no plans for the private sector to become involved in the direct delivery of social security benefits in Northern Ireland. A significant investment programme is currently taking place in all Social Security Offices across Northern Ireland which will result in major improvements in the range and quality of services available to the public. I can therefore confirm that no plans exist to reduce the number of Social Security Offices.

In common with other government departments, the private sector is engaged by the Social Security Agency to provide specific technical support. The use of the private sector in such circumstances does not have any impact on the number of civil service jobs in Northern Ireland.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the number of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) carried out by his Department to date; and (b) the total cost of (i) research; (ii) consultation; (iii) printing; and (iv) dissemination, for each EIA.

(AQW 3814/01)

Mr Dodds: Since the introduction of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Department for Social Development has issued five equality impact assessments for consultation. These are:

- Provision of relevant, accurate and timely information and advice about social security benefits
- Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill
- Child Support Agency Northern Ireland Field Operations
- Private Sector Grants
- Partners for Change – Government's strategy for the support of the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The table below sets out the cost for each equality impact assessment (EQIA).

COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Equality Impact Assessment	Research Costs	Consultation Costs	Printing Costs	Dissemination Costs
Provision of relevant, accurate and timely information and advice about social security benefits	None	£936.90	£30.46	£476.70
Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill	None	None	£20.00	£100.00
Child Support Agency Northern Ireland Field Operations	None	£1549.21	£34.93	£237.24
Private Sector Grants	None	£1792.04	£88.40	£12.35

Equality Impact Assessment	Research Costs	Consultation Costs	Printing Costs	Dissemination Costs
* Partners for Change – Government's strategy for the support of the Voluntary and Community Sector.	None	£200.60	£450.54	£258.38

* The EQIA costs for "Partners for Change" were bound up with the wider cost of consultation on the full strategy. The EQIA was therefore not issued as a stand alone document. The pro rata costs of the EQIA are provided.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Social Development has he any plans to review the procedures for awarding Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 3833/01)

Mr Dodds: The current procedure for deciding a customers entitlement to Disability Living Allowance is set to ensure that all decisions are made in accordance with Social Security legislation. The processes for making awards are constantly being reviewed and it is intended to introduce a new computerised process in the Autumn.

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