



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard) and JOURNAL OF PROCEEDINGS

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Table of Contents

Assembly Members	ix
Principal Officers and Officials of the Assembly	x
Ministerial Offices	xi
Office of the Official Report (Hansard).....	xii

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Monday 8 October 2012

Ministerial Statement

Public Procurement	1
--------------------------	---

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders	6
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: First Stage	6
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021	7

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	20
Justice	25

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021 (<i>continued</i>)	30
---	----

Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Extension of Committee Stage	32
Farming	32

Private Members' Business

Food Banks.....	46
Economic Recovery	56

Tuesday 9 October 2012

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways	71
North/South Ministerial Council: Languages.....	73

Executive Committee Business

Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.....	75
Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage	77

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development.....	86
Social Development.....	90

Ministerial Statement

Health: 'Transforming Your Care'	95
--	----

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage (<i>continued</i>).....	103
---	-----

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel.....	164
--------------------------------------	-----

Monday 15 October 2012

Assembly Business

Committee Membership	173
----------------------------	-----

Ministerial Statement

Housing Strategy	173
------------------------	-----

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders	177
Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012	178
Education Bill: Second Stage	181

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	193
Agriculture and Rural Development	197

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health, Social Services and Public Safety Marie Stopes Northern Ireland.....	202
---	-----

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage (<i>continued</i>).....	204
--	-----

Tuesday 16 October 2012

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport	235
North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety.....	238
Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service	242

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure	248
Education	252

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage.....	257
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage.....	259

Committee Business

Standing Order 59	271
-------------------------	-----

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared	272
-----------------------	-----

Adjournment

St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision	282
---	-----

Monday 22 October 2012

Ministerial Statement

Welfare Reform	287
----------------------	-----

Assembly Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34	293
--	-----

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Consideration Stage	295
Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage.....	295
Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012	298

Private Members' Business	
Unemployment	302
Oral Answers to Questions	
Employment and Learning	306
Enterprise, Trade and Investment	310
Private Members' Business	
Unemployment (<i>continued</i>)	315
 Tuesday 23 October 2012	
Ministerial Statements	
Youth Justice Review	327
North/South Ministerial Council: Education	332
Executive Committee Business	
Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012	335
Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012	337
Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion	339
Private Members' Business	
Cross-border Education	342
Oral Answers to Questions	
Environment	344
Finance and Personnel	347
Private Members' Business	
Cross-border Education (<i>continued</i>)	351
Adjournment	
Hillsborough: Traffic Issues	362

Written Ministerial Statements

Environment	
Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme	WMS 1
Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	
Delivering Social Change Signature Projects	WMS 2
Amendments to the Terms of Reference of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry	WMS 3

Committee Stages

Committee for Social Development	
Charities Bill [NIA 11/11-15]	CS 1
Charities Bill [NIA 11/11-15]	CS 3
Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill [NIA 7/11-15]	CS 5

Written Answers

Friday 5 October 2012

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	WA 1
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	WA 3
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure	WA 14
Department of Education	WA 20
Department for Employment and Learning.....	WA 40
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	WA 43
Department of the Environment.....	WA 58
Department of Finance and Personnel	WA 73
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	WA 78
Department of Justice	WA 86
Department for Regional Development.....	WA 95
Department for Social Development	WA 103

Friday 12 October 2012

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	WA 113
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	WA 115
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure	WA 127
Department of Education	WA 135
Department for Employment and Learning.....	WA 142
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	WA 149
Department of the Environment.....	WA 154
Department of Finance and Personnel	WA 172
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	WA 185
Department of Justice	WA 197
Department for Regional Development.....	WA 206
Department for Social Development	WA 215

Friday 19 October 2012

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	WA 225
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	WA 233
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure	WA 239
Department of Education	WA 246
Department for Employment and Learning.....	WA 278
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	WA 283
Department of the Environment.....	WA 287
Department of Finance and Personnel	WA 299
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	WA 306
Department of Justice	WA 312
Department for Regional Development.....	WA 319
Department for Social Development	WA 333
Northern Ireland Assembly Commission	WA 352

Friday 26 October 2012

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	WA 355
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	WA 358
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure	WA 367
Department of Education	WA 367
Department for Employment and Learning.....	WA 382
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	WA 388
Department of the Environment.....	WA 402
Department of Finance and Personnel	WA 408
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	WA 418
Department of Justice	WA 448
Department for Regional Development.....	WA 454
Department for Social Development	WA 462
Northern Ireland Assembly Commission	WA 469

Revised Written Answers

Department for Regional Development.....	RWA 1
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	RWA 1
Department of the Environment.....	RWA 3
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	RWA 6

Official Report (Hansard) Indexes

Members' Index	IDX 1
Business Index	IDX 39
Strangers' Index.....	IDX 51

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Monday 8 October 2012	MOP 1
Tuesday 9 October 2012.....	MOP 9
Monday 15 October 2012	MOP 19
Tuesday 16 October 2012.....	MOP 25
Monday 22 October 2012	MOP 31
Tuesday 23 October 2012.....	MOP 39

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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 October 2012

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Public Procurement

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on public procurement. It is an issue that has been raised in the Assembly on a large number of occasions. I want to outline some of the issues that are pertinent to the questions that Members have raised. It is a cross-cutting issue, and, as Ministers in the Executive, we must explore further the potential for procurement to help to deliver the Programme for Government. That is critical if we are to maximise the benefits for our economy and society as a whole from public procurement.

Departmental procurement plays a very significant role in the Northern Ireland economy. In 2010-11, it amounted to £2.7 billion, which is the equivalent of 26% of departmental budgets. As we face a period of continuing severe economic difficulty, I assure Members that public procurement is meeting expectations and achieving best value for money. I also want to update Members on the further work that is being done to simplify processes, promote increased access to procurement opportunities and ensure that procurement plays its part in supporting the economy.

Members will be familiar with the comprehensive report on public procurement that was produced by the Committee for Finance and Personnel in February 2010. The report highlighted a number of important issues, including the degree of access to public procurement for local businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); the need to collect data on the impact of public procurement; the importance of fair payment in government contracts; the need to reduce bureaucracy in procurement processes; and the importance of using procurement to deliver social benefits, particularly employment and training opportunities.

Officials have been working through the recommendations, and I am pleased to say that they have been largely implemented. As a result, we now have a range of measures aimed at ensuring that opportunities for local businesses are maximised. I believe that we are also beginning to dispel the myth that doing business with the public sector is beyond the reach of smaller firms.

Notwithstanding the work that has been done to improve our processes, two further key reviews have been initiated. The first will look at wider issues around the commissioning, planning, procurement and delivery of major infrastructure projects. Construction accounts for

about £1.3 billion of the total spend by the Executive each year. Given the impact of the current recession on the construction industry, it is essential for the industry and its clients that the procurement system operates as efficiently as it can. We are working with the Strategic Investment Board, the Construction Employers Federation, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) to ensure that we adopt practices that are streamlined and deliver value for taxpayers' money. The second review concerns the procurement of supplies and services, and it involves working with the CBI to consider whether government's processes can be further improved.

Members will also be aware of the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report, 'Department of Finance and Personnel: Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand'. I ask Members to bear in mind that there are protocols for making comments on NIAO reports. Consequently, I will not comment or take questions on the report. However, I have asked my officials to consider its findings and bring to my attention any issues that need to be addressed.

At this point, I want to examine a number of common misperceptions surrounding public procurement. They are not borne out by the facts. The first misinterpretation is that local firms play second fiddle to national and multinational companies. However, in 2010-11, 77% of all contracts awarded by government went to businesses based in Northern Ireland. For construction contracts, the figure was significantly higher at 96%. That means that almost all construction contracts that year went to Northern Ireland firms.

The second misperception is that small businesses lose out when tendering for public contracts. I recognise that there can be issues with some frameworks and term service contracts, which smaller businesses find difficult to access. However, in spite of this, Northern Ireland remains on a par with Scotland and Wales. Some 67% of all contracts in 2010-11 were awarded to SMEs, a figure significantly higher than the position in England.

The third misperception is that microbusinesses and small businesses are not able to contract directly with government. Again, the figures for 2010-11 tell a different story. In that year, 51% of all government contracts were awarded to businesses with fewer than 50 employees.

These figures demonstrate that local businesses already have a high success rate in securing government contracts. By participating in public contracts and being subject to the disciplines of the procurement process, many local

firms are better equipped to compete in other markets. I am aware that Northern Ireland firms have won many contracts in the rest of the UK. I visited a very good example in the Olympic Park, and I am sure that all Members would join me in recognising those successes. It is right that procurement should play its part in helping to enhance the efficiency of local industry.

I do not pretend that our processes are perfect. There is a perception that public procurement processes are overly burdensome. I am sympathetic to that view. The application of procurement principles has been an evolving process. At the outset, the focus was on ensuring an understanding of the process. Now, with greater familiarisation, we are turning our attention to simplifying the processes and ensuring that Departments and their centres of procurement expertise (COPEs) apply them consistently. The procurement regulations limit how far we can go with simplifying processes for higher value contracts. However, we have taken measures to substantially reduce the inputs that are required from tenderers and shorten the time that is taken to award lower value contracts. Those changes have been made as a result of consultation with the industry. Such engagements are vital in helping to develop workable solutions, and, as a result, businesses should find bidding for government contracts easier and less costly.

I have a word of caution, however. Simplification will not deliver the desired outcomes until it is applied consistently. I will be asking my ministerial colleagues with responsibility for COPEs for their support on this important point. Steps have also been taken to address disproportionate requirements that could prevent smaller businesses from competing for contracts. For example, some contracts include unrealistic insurance requirements. Guidance has recently been issued to help Departments to set more proportionate levels that better reflect the underlying risks. That guidance is a result of direct representations that were made to me by various firms that felt that they were being excluded because of the insurance qualifications.

The public sector is very much open for business. We want to encourage local firms to participate in government procurements, and, to that end, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and COPEs meet with suppliers in a variety of settings. For example, there have been nearly 50 "meet the buyer" events in the past three years, the most recent being in Cookstown on 27 September. That attracted 340 SMEs from across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I encourage Members to support these events and to encourage SMEs in their constituency areas to avail themselves of these opportunities.

Joint working with groups, such as the Construction Industry Forum and the business and industry forum, is important in informing policy development and providing feedback on policy implementation. I regularly meet with businesses and industry representatives. For example, I met representatives of the north-west small businesses lobby group in July to help me to better understand the particular difficulties that it faces. As Members know, I also met the all-party working group on construction in January, and I am scheduled to meet it again on 16 October. This is an opportune moment for me to thank the members of the working group for their support.

The £2.7 billion that is being spent through procurement presents tremendous opportunities to help to deliver

other policy objectives. That was recognised in the public procurement policy and by the Programme for Government. You will all be aware of the commitment on social clauses and the need for government contracts to deliver employment and training opportunities. At a time of high unemployment, we must exploit those opportunities to the full.

There are examples of contracts that have successfully delivered employment opportunities. The Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) property management framework required the contractor to provide employment opportunities for up to 14 unemployed persons and 35 apprenticeships over the four-year life of the contract. By March this year, the contractor had provided 32 employment opportunities. In addition, 15 apprenticeships have been created, and we are still only halfway through the contract period. I remind my ministerial colleagues that the inclusion of social clauses and the scope for achieving social benefits should be considered as early as possible. Indeed, it should be addressed when the project is being defined to ensure that the potential is maximized. Those requirements are now being incorporated into contracts, and it is essential that suppliers and contractors deliver.

That brings me to contract management. We have focused on stripping out bureaucracy from the procurement process, and we have been partly successful. However, whenever contracts are awarded, suppliers must meet the specified requirements, because not to do so would jeopardise the delivery of public services. That puts major responsibilities on suppliers' shoulders, and it is important that they recognise that.

12.15 pm

Government must be a fair but demanding client. I have put steps in place to ensure that firms contracting with government are treated fairly and, in most cases, paid promptly. It is frustrating for me then to hear from subcontractors that they are being subjected to archaic practices. Those include blatantly unfair or non-existent contract arrangements and excessively long payment timescales. I am determined that government contracts will ensure that the benefits of government policies, such as prompt payment, are passed down the supply chain. Let me be quite clear: when a contractor fails to deliver on a government contract — whether it relates to meeting the specification or to the treatment of the supply chain — it will be prevented from tendering for future government contracts.

In conclusion, procurement is about the acquisition of goods and services and works. Public procurement requires higher standards of compliance and openness. It also offers the opportunity to deliver wider policy objectives. It is an area that receives a great deal of public scrutiny, and rightly so. In that context, I am grateful to MLAs who take the time to raise procurement issues with me on behalf of their constituents. However, please bear in mind that, in spending £2.7 billion through procurement, the vast majority of government competitions are not subject to challenge or adverse comment.

It is also important to appreciate that public procurement will never be a panacea to solve our economy's ills. We have to be realistic. The limits on public spending have had an impact on procurement budgets. There is also overcapacity in some supply sectors. In that context, we must guard against the danger of cut-throat pricing,

which could have serious implications for otherwise viable businesses.

I have endeavoured to provide the Assembly with assurance that public procurement is being undertaken appropriately, is achieving value for money and is enabling the delivery of wider objectives. It remains under constant review. Changes must be put in place quickly and applied consistently. Public procurement is of great interest to me. My door is open, and I will listen to the views of all concerned, including, importantly, those of business and supplier representatives.

Let me make a final point. If procurement issues are raised, I need specific information, not comments of a general nature. I assure the Assembly that I am committed to having any such issues properly investigated and addressed so that we can continue to procure in a way that supports the economy of Northern Ireland. I welcome the progress made to date but recognise that there is still work to be done. The ongoing reviews will identify what changes need to be made to the procurement process, and, from those, we will put in place measures that ensure that the necessary improvements are delivered. I will continue to work with ministerial colleagues and Members to ensure that the public procurement process continues to meet local companies' needs.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the reference to social clauses under the Department's property management framework, as the Minister outlined. Is it possible to provide cross-departmental statistics on how social clauses are being included in government contracts, with particular reference to employment and training opportunities? Further to that, I know that the Scottish Government are proposing to put the use of community benefit clauses in procurement on a statutory footing. What is the Minister's view on that?

Mr Wilson: First, guidelines on social clauses now go out to all Departments. Of course, since those guidelines are endorsed by the Executive in the Programme for Government, Departments will be required to include social clauses in contracts. For construction contracts above certain values, there is a requirement to employ unemployed people, provide apprenticeships, and so on. I give the Member one example from my Department, where the guideline has not only been put into the contract but has already been delivered, within half the period of that contract. Further guidelines are being issued. As far as the community benefit clauses are concerned, we do not have those formally in contracts, but those social clause guidelines are continually being updated.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the fact that £2.7 billion of spend will make its way through the system. As the EU delivers quite a lot of policy on procurement, how will the EU proposals for modernising public procurement help or impact on Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: First, the EU is undertaking a review of the guidelines. That is being taken forward by the Cabinet Office, and the view of the Northern Ireland Executive is being put forward through CPD.

I suppose there are two ways. First, there is a recognition at European level that there needs to be a simplification

of the processes, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. The other point that we have made to the European Commission and the Government is that we want to see a break between the title of a procurement exercise and some of the things that can then be included in it, so that wider consideration can be given and there can be more flexibility in the contract. Those are the kinds of things that we have been looking at. However, I think it has been clear that there is unlikely to be any softening in the EU approach to larger contracts. It is pointed out that there are international obligations as well, through the World Trade Organization, and that if the guidance were to be relaxed, it would be subject to international dispute.

Mr Beggs: The Minister referred to a recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on collaboration, procurement and aggregated demand. There is protocol preventing officials from commenting on areas that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has decided to investigate, but I am not aware of limitations on the Minister. Will the Minister indicate to us what protocol stops him from commenting on issues? I have checked with the PAC staff, and they are not aware either. Will he advise us, for instance, why he cannot comment on statements in that report such as:

"Basic price comparisons of common goods and services should be undertaken regularly by all procurement bodies",

so that ridiculous prices are not awarded in tenders?

Mr Wilson: On the general point of whether comparisons should be or have been made by COPEs when they are looking at services, we did not need a Northern Ireland Audit Office report to tell us that. This is something that COPEs should be doing on a regular basis. Indeed, even in the latest guidance that we have issued to COPEs, we have told them that, for tenders under £5,000, all that we require so that we can simplify the purchasing process is for them to compare two prices. We are already giving guidance that they should be benchmarking so that they can have a comparison to ensure that there is value for money. The aims and objectives in the procurement board's own statement for this year emphasise the need for value for money. Value for money requires that there is that benchmarking and that a comparison should be made. As for the point that the Member made about commenting on the report, since my officials will be going through the report and then making a response to the Committee, I would have thought that that is the appropriate way in which we deal with it, rather than going through the detail of the report today.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister invites us to join him in recognising successes. I ask him and the Members to join me in recognising the successes of the Armagh and Antrim ladies Gaelic football teams, who procured some silverware for Northern Ireland at Croke Park yesterday.

The Minister welcomed the fact that 67% of all contracts in 2011 and 2012 were awarded to small and medium-sized enterprises and that 51% of all government contracts awarded went to businesses with fewer than 50 employees. Will he provide some clarity on the spread of these figures? To what extent are these statistics made up of the same businesses? Is it possible to identify —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr D Bradley: — how many new businesses are getting contracts?

Mr Wilson: I certainly do not have the details that the Member asks for on the spread of businesses or on how many of the businesses that were awarded contracts this year were brand new businesses to the process. However, I will say that over 15,000 businesses have registered through the e-sourcing portal, which means that a large number of small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland are now accessing the information. That number is up considerably from two years ago. Two years ago, 500 businesses were awarded contracts having registered through e-sourcing, and now it is over 1,500, which shows that a large number of new businesses are coming into the system.

I join the Member in congratulating the teams that won cups yesterday, but I hope that they did not procure them in the way in which we are talking about procurement today, and that they won them fair and square rather than buying them.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. Are there any means at his disposal to make it compulsory to ensure that all Departments secure social clauses for construction and any other relevant contracts?

Mr Wilson: We have clear guidance, given the value of a contract, as to what we require on employing long-term unemployed people, creating apprenticeships, creating opportunities through Steps to Work and the 40-week secondments for people who come into work through that programme. Those are standard guidelines for large contracts over certain values, and COPEs are required to ensure that they are met.

I do not have the exact figures across Departments for the total values of those contracts, but when I visit firms that have won government contracts, it is one of the first questions that I ask. On all occasions, the firms are able to point out that they are abiding by the guidelines. I said in my statement, however, that it is important that, when a contract is awarded, compliance with those social clauses is carefully monitored. Non-compliance with those social clauses or other types of non-compliance will attract sanctions.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. What is his assessment of the barriers that prevent SMEs from tendering for larger contracts? What actions can be taken to overcome those barriers?

Mr Wilson: The main barrier seems to be one of perception, in that they believe that the process is lengthy and bureaucratic and one that they would find difficult to handle. We have done a number of things. First, we have simplified the rules and the amount — and the duplication — of information that has to be given. All that has been done with the relevant business bodies. Secondly, we have issued guidance, which is now available to businesses, that tries to dispel some of the myths around public procurement. Thirdly, through the e-sourcing portal, businesses can be taken through the process very easily. There are videos and other types of guidance on that site to enable firms to see how they can get through the process.

Lastly, as I said in the statement, to try to encourage businesses, we have held “Meet the buyer” days in all

different parts of Northern Ireland. They have been attended by thousands of businesses. That has been an important way of illustrating to companies the opportunities that there are for business and the help that they can get when applying for government contracts.

12.30 pm

Mr McQuillan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Does the procurement board have a strategy?

Mr Wilson: We, like all Departments and all sections of Departments, have a strategy. There are a number of things. The first thing is to provide and to ensure that we get value for money when it comes to public contracts. Secondly, there must be an assurance that public procurement is done properly and with integrity; that is an important one. The other thing, as I mentioned in my statement, is to ensure that the £2.7 billion that we spend through government in Northern Ireland is used in the best way possible to stimulate the economy here. Those are the procurement board's main general objectives.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. Like Mr Beggs, I regret that, due to protocol, the Minister cannot address questions that were raised in the recent Audit Office report on procurement. Can he elaborate on the penultimate paragraph of his statement? How does he intend to deal with the rogue arm's-length bodies that ignore the basic principles of procurement and the tendering process, in particular the Belfast Education and Library Board, Northern Ireland Water and, most recently, the PSNI? How do we restore confidence among the public who wish to tender for government contracts when those people persistently ignore every principle of procurement?

Mr Wilson: The ultimate deterrent to not doing procurement properly is legal challenge. Where there is a legal challenge, there will be consequences for the organisation in its ability to deliver the work that was required for the bodies associated with that organisation in the form of delays and extra costs. That is the ultimate sanction.

The Member asks an important question. There is a number of things that we can do. First, we seek to have all COPEs accredited so that, before they get accreditation, they have to show that they have met certain standards. Secondly, through the procurement board, which is attended by the permanent secretaries of the major purchasing Departments, we have the opportunity to discuss the kinds of issues that the Member talked about and to ensure that work is done within Departments to ensure consistency. Lastly, we issue updated guidance on a regular basis. Often — this is an important point — that guidance is a result of lessons that have been learnt from procurement exercises that have gone wrong. The guidance being given to COPEs should help to do away with the kinds of problem that have arisen with purchasing arrangements in the past, which have not been good for public procurement or, indeed, the organisations concerned.

Mr D McIlveen: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I am sure that you will agree with me that, at times, there is a negative perception of public procurement that it is almost cloak and dagger. Can you give us an assessment of how small and medium-sized companies in Northern Ireland benefit from the procedure today and

of how that compares with other regions in the United Kingdom?

Mr Wilson: First of all, as I said in the statement, 67% of contracts awarded have gone to small and medium-sized enterprises and 51% to microbusinesses, which are businesses of fewer than 10 employees. Nearly half the value of contracts has gone to those firms. The most obvious gain is through the business that they obtain as a result of the contracts, but there is another thing that I found as I went round firms. Some people think that we have a very rigorous public procurement process, but many of the firms said that the rigours of the process in Northern Ireland and the learning experience that it provided had enabled them to compete much more outside Northern Ireland in other parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in other countries. That is valuable in itself. There is hardly a construction firm in Northern Ireland that is not working somewhere in GB and winning contracts there, either as the main contractor or a subcontractor. Many of them will say that the experience that they gained in the tendering process here enabled them to win contracts and be successful elsewhere.

Mr Allister: Has the practice of single tender actions without accounting officer approval been dealt with adequately across the Departments, bearing in mind that, not so long ago, an answer from one Department — OFMDFM — revealed that it had engaged in the practice to the tune of contracts totalling over £350,000? Has that now been dealt with across the Departments, and what actions can you take in respect of other Departments?

Mr Wilson: First, let us be clear that a single tender action is not always a bad thing. Sometimes, single tender actions are undertaken because a contract has to be awarded quickly and a situation has arisen in which expenditure is required. On such an occasion, a Department has to make a decision based on the fact that someone is doing work or, in some cases, the fact that a contractor is already in place. It would not make sense to go out to another contractor because the discontinuity in the work would mean a costly delay. We should lay that point down first. However, I understand the concern that the Member expressed, and, indeed, on a number of occasions, I have expressed the concern that single tender actions may well not lead to best value for money. By their very definition, there is no competition. Where a single tender action is required, it must be authorised by the accounting officer or Minister. At least there is then a trail of accountability and reasons given for the decision. Of course, subsequently, there should also be monitoring to ensure that the procurement has delivered what was promised. Those are the steps that need to be taken to show clear accountability for decisions: why they were taken, what the alternatives were and what the outcomes were.

Mr Elliott: I noted that the Minister said that small and medium-sized businesses with fewer than 50 employees still gained a relatively low percentage of the contracts awarded. Is there anything that prohibits procurement in smaller contracts? In other words, could some major contracts be split to allow smaller businesses to access them? That may have a particular effect on stopping cut-throat pricing, which he mentioned at the end of his statement.

Mr Wilson: First, I want to make it clear that the percentage of small businesses in Northern Ireland that gain from government procurement is higher than in

England and commensurate with Scotland and Wales. Therefore, it is not that, relatively, we are performing badly; we are performing well. Of course, we would love more of that work to go to local firms, and we will keep endeavouring to achieve that, albeit within the rules.

Can I just make something clear? If we are seen to be biased towards local firms, there is, first, the chance of a legal challenge, because the rules are fairly clear. Secondly, as I said, many of our firms now compete outside Northern Ireland, and, if other jurisdictions felt that unfair advantage was being given to local firms, there could be reciprocation. That could damage many of our local firms. They may be good firms that can compete, but they may find that, for political reasons, they are not given the opportunity to do so.

The Member asked whether it was possible to break down contracts so that small firms can compete. That is one way to make contracts smaller so that small firms can compete. However, the Member in front of him raised the issue of collaboration in contracts and making sure that we got best value for money, benchmarking etc. On the one hand, one Member from the Ulster Unionist Party tells us to listen to what the Northern Ireland Audit Office said, which is that we should try to get best value for money by bringing contracts together so that we make economies of scale. On the other hand, the Member behind says, "By the way, we would like you to divide the contracts up so that small business can get up". That is one of the ways in which the Ulster Unionist Party seems to want the best of all worlds with these things. It seems that there is no difference between its approach to procurement — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to continue.

Mr Wilson: — and its approach to relationships in its own party.

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes questions on the ministerial statement.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Minister deliberately attributes something to a Member that they did not say, what responsibility falls on the Speaker to deal with that issue?

Mr Speaker: Order. I see this very much as the cut and thrust of debate in the Chamber, and I have said that continually. Let us move on.

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 8 October 2012.

Mr Speaker: Before I proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 8 October 2012.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. Today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm.

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill [NIA 15/11-15], which is a Bill to set the rate of air passenger duty for the purposes of section 30A(3) to (5A) of the Finance Act 1994.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

12.45 pm

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have seven minutes.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021.

Following extensive consultation and consideration by Members of the Assembly, I am now in a position to present the Executive's investment strategy for 2011 to 2021. The investment strategy is the expression of the Executive's long-term vision for investment to renew and upgrade our infrastructure. It sets out a rolling programme of investment for a 10-year period and offers a platform to deliver the objectives of the Programme for Government.

Much has been achieved since the last investment strategy, which was published in December 2008. There have been unprecedented levels of capital investment, delivering some £6.5 million in the past four years. We have improved roads, public transport, schools, healthcare facilities, water treatment and telecommunications networks. The 2011-2021 strategy seeks to prioritise the delivery of investment through the seven major pillars — transport, health, education, social, environmental, productive and justice infrastructures — to meet the needs of the whole community in the years ahead.

The strategy was published in draft form to give everyone an opportunity to have a say and shape the final strategy. During the consultation period, seven public consultation events were held. We also engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Construction Employers Federation, the CBI, NICVA, NILGA and the Equality Commission. In addition to the face-to-face events, 45 written submissions were received. We are grateful for all the comments and feedback. It is particularly pleasing that those who responded to the consultation were generally supportive of our approach and welcomed the investment proposals. They thought that the draft investment strategy provided a more holistic and integrated view of the Executive's investment plans.

As a result of the consultation and the input received, the document has been revised, strengthened and updated. Some of the themes that emerged during the consultations and are addressed in the final document include social clauses; harnessing alternative finance for investment; providing clarity on investment plans; increasing the indicative allocation for particular sectors; and greater recognition of regional balance and monitoring delivery. Also included in the final draft are key achievements since 2008, including those completed in the period since the draft was published. They include achievements such as the opening of the new Titanic Belfast and Giant's Causeway visitor centres. The final draft gives a sense of the breadth and scope of the capital projects completed and demonstrates our achievements and progress. There are plans to deliver £13.3 billion of capital investment over

the next 10 years, with funding of £5.1 billion for the first four years. That includes the investment we announced in February 2012 in the A5 and A8 road schemes and an amount of alternative finance that we will pursue. More detail has been added on social clauses, which will be supported by other work that is under way. There is a commitment to ensuring that information included on the online delivery tracking system is accurate, complete and up to date and a clear articulation of the need for and benefits of greater recognition of regional balance.

Our investment strategy must help us correct the years of underinvestment in our infrastructure. The new strategy for 2011 to 2021 sets out how we intend to invest approximately £5 billion in the first four years and a total of £13.3 billion over the lifetime of the strategy. Despite the fact that an all-party delegation secured from the previous Labour Government an £18 billion investment package to address the infrastructure deficit, the current coalition Government have reneged on their commitment. Hence, the amount received through the block grant will fall by 40% between 2010-11 and 2014-15, with a similarly bleak outlook for the years that follow.

The financial constraints mean that it is essential that we make every pound spent matter, if we are to get best value. The strategy itself commits us to focusing on investment in the right infrastructure in the right place, using the most effective processes. That means that we programme our capital expenditure effectively so that, whatever the budget, it is fully invested here to improve the life of everyone. We recognise the pain out there in the economy and want to address those needs in our capital investment decisions. A large percentage of capital investment under this investment strategy will go to the construction and associated sectors, but the impact spreads much further as jobs are created and people have money to spend. For example, research suggests that every pound spent on infrastructure creates a stimulus of up to £2.84 in the wider economy. One of our biggest social needs is the creation of jobs. To that end, this strategy is expected to support around 13,000 jobs in the local economy. Where possible, we will prioritise the infrastructure projects that contribute most to employment and make the biggest contribution to the wider economy. We will ensure that major capital contracts include social clauses that give opportunities for employment to the long-term unemployed and young people. This has already been used successfully on projects such as Ebrington Square and the new Peace Bridge, where 23 unemployed people got jobs and seven young people got apprenticeships.

We have put the needs of everyone at the heart of the investment strategy, ensuring that we have the right infrastructure in the right place to help us drive up productivity, drive out waste and improve service. All of this helps protect front line services at a time of lower public funding. The future lies in putting everyone's needs centremost, with investment focused on delivering the modern joined-up services that people need and allowing for the social impacts that such investments can have. The strategic infrastructure planning models being pioneered by the SIB have a big part to play in going forward.

The investment strategy is not just about public services; it also needs to support economic recovery and growth. Local businesses have a vital part to play in helping us deliver the investment strategy and the benefits that

will flow from it. High-quality transport, communication and energy networks power competitive advantage in business, reduce social isolation and link people to an expanding world of information, services and opportunity. We want to use our capital investments to target the cost of doing business here and to make us much more productive and competitive.

To support economic growth when appropriate, we will seek to bring forward investment in public works that are more labour-intensive, at the expense of schemes that would deliver a lower employment impact. This will maximise the impact on jobs and the wider economy. As an Executive, we will continue to promote equality of opportunity, so that all our people can fulfil their potential. It is important that we develop a modern, dynamic and confident society with respect for all. That vision is reflected in the investment strategy by the introduction of social clauses into contracts for major public works. Such clauses require contractors to deliver employment and training opportunities for apprenticeships and the long-term unemployed, and I am aware of the work being undertaken by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to include social clauses in the stadia developments. We will soon launch a social clauses toolkit as a best practice guide to maximising social benefits from all relevant publicly procured contracts.

The skill base of countries and regions is increasingly key to attracting and keeping private sector investment. Under the investment strategy, we will invest in schools, higher and further education, youth services and libraries. That will ensure that we have the infrastructure in place to create a skill pool to support the expansion of home-grown businesses and attract inward investment. The Executive's commitment to addressing regional disparities and the economic and social sustainability of rural areas is demonstrated by the decision to relocate the DARD headquarters to Ballykelly. That will enhance the availability of quality public sector jobs in rural areas.

The devolution of justice functions on 12 April 2010 has brought that sector into the investment strategy for the first time. Capital investment in the justice community is already under way to support the delivery of front line services. The necessary funding is in place to build a joint services training college at Desertcreat near Cookstown to cater for the police, fire and rescue and prison services. That not only brings the prospect of employment to a rural area but reflects our position of addressing east-west regional disparities.

We are actively exploring all options to achieve the levels of investment that we believe necessary to transport this region and promote our economic recovery. Therefore, we are exploring alternative funding options that will add to the amount that we have allocated from within the Budget. The Executive's Budget review group is considering a scheme to be put forward for Executive consideration, and the investment strategy reflects that in stating the intention to raise just over £1 billion through alternative financial arrangements. Those must be pursued in a manner that protects the public interest, protects front line service to users, facilitates greater efficiency and offers genuine long-term value for money. We are determined not to delay investments that can improve the productivity and quality of essential public services to deliver jobs when alternative means of bringing forward those benefits remain within reach.

The Executive approved the investment strategy on 3 September 2012. I commend the final document to the House.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

First of all, Mr Speaker, I will speak in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and then I will say a few words as a Member. Although OFMDFM does not expect to receive a large amount of capital funding — a fact borne out in appendix 2, where, I think you will see, only the Department of the Environment receives less by way of allocation — the Committee has a key role in co-ordinating the responses of Committees to the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland, and, in February of this year, the Committee produced a composite report. Chairpersons and members will, of course, be able to speak to their own Committee responses, and I will leave them to do that. My comments will focus on OFMDFM's contribution.

The Committee had the benefit of a briefing from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy on 14 December last year. The Committee was also briefed in January 2012 by the Strategic Investment Board. During that briefing, SIB highlighted that it was currently supporting almost 50 projects, with a total value of some £4 billion. Although OFMDFM's capital spend is relatively modest compared with other Departments, the Committee has taken a particular interest in the development of the former military sites and receives regular updates on the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site, where, as we know, the corporation board has just been established.

The Committee will continue to take an interest in the One Plan regeneration plan for Derry/Londonderry under Ilex, hitherto accountable to OFMDFM and the Department for Social Development. The Committee recently wrote to OFMDFM regarding the filling of the vacancies for Ilex chairperson and chief executive, and it is also aware of the current review of the reporting and accountability arrangements for Ilex. The Committee has not yet had the opportunity to consider this final version of the investment strategy.

Mr Speaker, I will now say a few words as a Member. The document itself, like all others published by the Assembly and the Executive, should be in support of putting the economy at the heart of all of our activities. I note that, after the introduction, the first heading is 'Supporting economic recovery and growth'. Much is made of the fact that we now have faster and more reliable access to the global internet than many other competitor regions, and that is paying real dividends by way of new jobs. The document highlights the New York Stock Exchange's Euronext, which is streaming market data through its Belfast site.

I am sure I am not the only Member who recently listened with great interest to a series of reports on BBC Radio Ulster's 'Good Morning Ulster'. I think they even surprised themselves by the amount of reaction they got from people, including men and women from small businesses around Northern Ireland, complaining about the lack of high-speed internet access in their area. I was struck by one rather exasperated listener who contacted 'Good Morning Ulster' to say that his connection speed was so slow that he could not even download the software to

measure his internet speed. Clearly, that is not acceptable in a 21st-century business environment.

My party also welcomes a focus on the social clauses and the intention to publish a social clauses toolkit in the near future. It is important that such a toolkit puts a focus on practical actions and outcomes, and that it is embedded — for want of a better word — in what we do going forward and is not some sort of a bolt-on. It is something that might well blend into the sort of data we heard earlier from the Finance Minister in his speech on procurement in Northern Ireland.

1.00 pm

I take a particular interest in the gifting of military sites, something that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has, as I said previously, been looking at. Some months ago, the Committee visited Shackleton barracks in Ballykelly to look at the practical issues that make the annual maintenance costs so high. We do have, I believe, legitimate concerns, and continue to question the fact that the old adage that the polluter pays is not necessarily being enforced with regard to the gifting of military sites, which actually come at quite a high annual cost. We will look with interest at how the Shackleton site in Ballykelly is developed by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

As the deputy First Minister said, £5.1 billion is a lot of money, which can pump-prime economic development and recovery. We need some regional balance. We must remember that we are a relatively small country with a relatively small population, and there will be a need to maintain an appropriate focus on our main cities and to make sure that we have agglomeration and appropriate focus of resource where it is needed, particularly in the city of Belfast. To summarise, it will be a challenge to look at those focuses, because we have Members from all over Northern Ireland, who will focus not just on the capital or other cities but on their own regional area. That is, of course, to be expected. However, we must ensure that there is an appropriate balance, given the size of the country, the population and the resources available.

Mr Givan: I welcome the strategy released today and the commitment to spend £5 billion over the first four years of the strategy on the back of having spent around £6.5 billion from 2008. That is a demonstration of how the Executive are working and trying to deliver on projects that will benefit the people of Northern Ireland and deal with a struggling economy that is difficult to turn around.

I welcome especially the commitment to maximise every pound that is being spent, to speed up the economic recovery. Where appropriate, there is particular emphasis on those labour-intensive projects that will create the jobs that will sustain the current level of employment; they will be given priority by the Executive. That is a very practical way to deal with the problems we are facing. Ultimately, the economy will recover. It is important that, when we get to the point where the economy is growing, we have retained the skills and abilities of those currently in employment, so that we will be able to benefit from that recovery and really drive on Northern Ireland's economy. Sadly, too many of our young people are having to leave these shores to gain employment elsewhere. Whatever the Executive can do to retain them in Northern Ireland should be welcomed and supported by the Assembly.

I welcome the commentary in the report that work will be taking place with local businesses to provide detailed information on the schemes, allowing them to properly plan. That is something that has been raised with me before by businesspeople. They will tool up themselves to engage with government when they know better what schemes are coming online and the volume and capacity of the work involved, and they need to be prepared to do that. Something that the Executive have been doing successfully is working with businesses to help them to prepare themselves for the work that is coming from the public sector. The commitment in the document to continue to do that, so that organisations can have the proper people in place to take forward the work, is to be welcomed. Within that is the commitment to continue to work with small and medium-sized businesses to actually bid for a lot of that work. In a previous role, when I worked for the Federation of Small Businesses, companies would regularly come forward to articulate their view that they were not properly aware of the contracts available or properly prepared as to how they could engage with government to bid. A lot of them could do the work, but they did not know how to engage with government to be able to be competitive in the process of tendering. Again, something that the Executive have been doing successfully is working with those companies so that they can have a piece of the cake and benefit from that. The document also shows how the Executive have worked on having a much more joined-up approach to how they go about delivering these programmes. It also refers to the ability to identify any waste or opportunities in the public sector, which means that one Department can take the opportunity to utilise any available space in a different Department. Obviously, that saves the taxpayer money. There will be a reduction in unnecessary capital projects through identifying where such space exists in the system. Having that information and data, and sharing it right across the Executive and all government bodies, will be important in ensuring a reduction in waste. It will also be important in ensuring that every pound being spent is being spent because it is necessary and that all other opportunities to cater for any need in the public sector have already been ruled out. Therefore, the clear need to spend on particular projects will have been demonstrated.

The strategy also refers to the objective being to drive down the costs of doing business here through quality infrastructure, a well-educated workforce and ensuring that we can attract high-end jobs at the cutting edge of technology. Therefore, it is important that we recognise how the likes of Project Kelvin have benefited Northern Ireland's creative industries. We need to have this debate at a high strategic level. Mr Nesbitt referred to a constituent who could not download the software required to measure the speed of broadband. We need to resist reducing this debate to that level and instead look at the high strategic end, which is what this document does, and I welcome that commitment.

I also have an interest in justice. The commitment of £138 million to Desertcreat is a demonstration of different organisations pulling together to provide an opportunity to train on one site rather than three different organisations having three separate training facilities. This is a demonstration of collaboration and coming together.

Although this is a multibillion pound strategy, the £12 million being spent on forensic science is very important.

If you boil it down to your communities, when people involved in antisocial behaviour are arrested for drug dealing, for example, the backlog in testing frustrates the whole process of going through the courts. This money will deal with those underlying issues and help our communities.

In my last minute, I will touch briefly on constituency-based activities. The Maze/Long Kesh site is an opportunity that nobody should minimise, as it has great potential. The site is twice the size of the Titanic Quarter, which puts into perspective what can be achieved there to drive the economic agenda in Northern Ireland over the next decade. Everything that can be done by the Executive to support the board should be done. We have public sector investment, which is important, and we want to leverage in the private sector. Politicians will say that these are the projects that we now want to deliver. The processes that the Civil Service follows need to be outcome driven. Often, people get hung up on process. When private sector companies that are engaging in the likes of the Maze and other opportunities come to those in government for a decision, it is important that that decision can be turned around very quickly. Therefore, let us have the right processes in place to deliver what is a very important strategy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an straitéis infheistíochta. I am delighted to welcome the publication of the strategy, which sets out the priorities for investment until 2021. It is crucial that, as we move forward, projects are planned and prioritised well in advance and that a fair process for deciding priorities is put in place. That cannot be done at the last minute. Therefore, I welcome that this was planned so far in advance, and, hopefully, we have our priorities correct.

The previous investment strategy, published in 2008, proposed £19 billion of investment. In the current strategy, the comparable figure has been reduced to £13.3 billion. When the First Minister responds to the debate, perhaps he would provide an explanation or rationale behind that significant drop. Much of it may be down to the failure of the British Government to live up to financial agreements, and I would appreciate the First Minister providing the House with an update on how the dispute mechanism is progressing and whether we are any closer to a positive resolution.

The subject of social clauses has already been discussed in the Chamber today. Their inclusion, not only in capital projects but in the delivery of goods and services, is particularly welcome. A number of examples have been cited, and those are a good way of demonstrating to the public that progress has been made. However, perhaps the Minister can outline how progress will be monitored in the coming years.

The investment strategy is crucial if we are to deliver on the Executive's social agenda of tackling poverty and disadvantage. In particular, the decisions taken by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to relocate her Department's headquarters to Ballykelly and, more importantly, to move the headquarters of the Forest Service to County Fermanagh demonstrate real delivery by the Executive in tackling regional disparities. That allows me to move nicely along to talk about County Fermanagh.

If Members turn to page 5 of the publication, they will see a finely produced screen grab of the ISNI website, but, unfortunately, much of County Fermanagh has been covered by a key. The people of that affected area, including those living in Enniskillen, Belcoo, Derrylin, Kinawley, Boho and Derrygonnelly, will want assurances that their local area will be included in the roll-out of the strategy. I would appreciate that confirmation from the Minister.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: Happily, Jim.

Mr Wells: I knew that this was going to happen: somebody from Fermanagh would be complaining. I hope that the Member will mention that, in Enniskillen on 24 June, we opened the most modern hospital in Europe at a cost of £279 million. Will he recognise that that is a huge vote of confidence in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area and at least acknowledge that a lot of money has been spent in his constituency in recent years?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for that, and I thank the Speaker for the extra minute. Obviously, I am delighted at the opening of the new hospital. However, I would like to point out to the Member, who is the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee and maybe a future Health Minister, that it is not about only buildings and that, despite the opening of the new hospital, the people of Fermanagh and Tyrone have raised serious concerns.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will in a second, Mr Wells.

The building is an amazing feat, but it is about the services and the staff, as well as the support that is provided to staff and patients. We welcome the building. Of course it is a positive development, and an awful lot of good work was put into it. I note that I am standing beside Barry McElduff, so I will stop talking about the hospital and give way to the Member.

Mr Wells: Does the Member also accept that the Minister authorised additional expenditure to the Western Trust for an extra 16 nurses at the new hospital to cope with the increased demand on that excellent new service?

Mr Flanagan: I will, of course, acknowledge that, but we will wait to see how it pans out. Some nursing staff have reported that they are walking up to 12 miles a day, which is unacceptable. So, we will wait for that to pan out.

When we look at the areas that I mentioned, which Mr Wells was quite perturbed by, we see that considerable investment is needed as a result of historical underinvestment. As Mr Nesbitt referenced, broadband access and mobile phone coverage are very poor in those areas, although I do not think that he was specifically talking about them. The roads in many parts of Fermanagh are in a terrible state. We do not boast a single metre of dual carriageway, motorway or active railway line. So, it is good to see that there will be further investment in telecommunications. I had a couple of engagements last week with prospective telecommunications providers, and, working with DETI and DARD, they are talking about a further roll-out of mobile phone and broadband access in very hard-to-reach areas, which is very positive.

It is, however, disappointing to note that no further improvements to the A4 and N16, which link Sligo and Belfast, including a much talked-about bypass of Enniskillen, are included in the strategy. However, I note that that remains a priority in the regional development strategy. The Executive can expect to hear more about that in the coming years, because the people of Fermanagh expect considerable progress to be made on it.

I also warmly welcome progress on the redevelopment of the Ulster canal, which will provide a significant rural investment and regeneration opportunity and recreate an extensive all-island inland waterway network of over 600 miles, as well as provide further activities for the people of Fermanagh and the tourists who go there.

The redevelopment of the old Erne Hospital site in Enniskillen to turn it into a public services hub for all government agencies is a very ambitious project that Fermanagh District Council, in conjunction with the MP and six MLAs for the area, is taking forward. It is important that that project receives support from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as well as from the Strategic Investment Board. Having recently visited Enniskillen to hear further details about the proposal, I am hopeful that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will roll in behind the scheme, which will deliver significant regeneration opportunities for the town centre and stop the slippage of crucial public sector jobs from Fermanagh. Some key tenants, such as the South West College, have already bought into the concept and are prepared to move forward on it. It is important that other Departments assess the potential benefits of greater collaboration and join us on that project.

1.15 pm

One point missing from the strategy is spatial planning on an all-island basis. The Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister hit the nail right on the head when he said that we are a small country. However, we have a population of 6.4 million, not 1.8 million. We cannot afford to have two systems of everything. That leads to unnecessary wastage and duplication. Looking at my area, which you are all fed up hearing about, that leads to the complete neglect of border communities. There is no need for back-to-back planning on this island. Such an approach needs to be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leat as an seans an stráteis seo a phlé. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the strategy. I welcome OFMDFM's presentation of the investment strategy for 2011-2021 and the opportunity that it presents to debate the long-term plans of the Executive to address the economic situation.

I go back to a point made by Mr Givan. Perhaps he did not regard as important broadband speeds and communications in some of our rural areas. If we are to have a roll-out of proper business, we need an effective and efficient communications strategy. That includes broadband, which is so pivotal to growth, especially of the agrifood sector, as anyone with a knowledge of the sector knows. It is how many farms develop and monitor their operations, right through to the host and parent companies. Therefore, if we are emphasising agrifoods, as

we rightly do, communications has its role to play as well in the development of that sector.

The strategy envisages some £5 billion being spent between 2011-12 and 2014-15, and a further £7 billion between 2015-16 and 2020-21. As we saw with previous long-term investment strategies, however, the actual investment delivered will depend on economic circumstances and political decisions beyond the control of this or the next Executive. Perhaps by 2021 the A5 project will be complete.

Corporation tax remains the great unknown in the Executive's investment strategy, and it may have implications for the strategy. There is general agreement that a reduction in corporation tax would encourage investment and provide a much-needed boost to our economy. We continue to hear about the negotiations with the Treasury and how they are at a critical point, but we have no clear information about when or if the devolution of the power to set the corporation tax rate will take place. More importantly, we have little or no information about how much the devolution of that power will cost the Executive, other than speculation ranging from £200 million to £700 million. It is very important to provide us with more detailed discussion and factual advice in that regard. It is a key point that needs to be resolved if we are to be able to plan for investment in the years ahead.

According to the strategy, cohesion, sharing and integration are at the heart of how we plan for the future. That is another area of OFMDFM strategy in which we have lack of clarity. Even today, that clarity may not exist. As well as the specific policy, there is much more to be done on increasing the cohesion, sharing and integration of public services on a North/South basis. Mr Flanagan referred to that. I welcome the Health Minister's recently declared intention to explore fully an all-island solution for the provision of paediatric congenital cardiac services. That, too, is an important, reasonable and sensible position.

A successful investment strategy can be seen in the results. How successful has the strategy been to date? A key result by which we can assess the Executive strategy to date is in job creation. I welcome the £138 million investment in the policing and emergency services centre at Desertcreat in my constituency. That is very important and is good to see. It will have benefits and spin-off for local services, and, hopefully, it will lead to local employment of unemployed people from the construction industry.

Given the make-up of the Executive, however, let us compare the impact of the Executive strategy for the past five years in the First and deputy First Ministers' constituencies. The figures are from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. From 2007-2012 in East Belfast, total planned investment was over £750 million, assistance offered by Invest NI was £58.81 million, and the number of new jobs expected is 2,914. In Mid Ulster over the same period, total planned investment was £165 million, assistance offered by Invest NI was £17.71 million, and the number of new jobs expected is 1,690.

[Interruption.] You are bound to be clapping for all sorts of reasons after hearing those figures and not just because of the 1690 one. Members can draw their own conclusions about the apparent regional disparity that shows up through those figures. I should declare an interest — I represent that constituency and was born and brought up in it.

On the subject of investment over those five years in a constituency that the deputy First Minister's party used to be concerned about, West Belfast, the relevant figures are £51.16 million for total planned investment; £5.74 million of assistance offered by Invest NI; and 913 new jobs expected. Those figures are not a record of actual new jobs created. The Northern Ireland Audit Office review of Invest NI's performance noted that Invest NI's own estimate of the conversion rate from expected to actual new jobs is 75%. Other estimates suggest that the conversion rates into jobs created that are fully additional is as low as 50%.

Across the North, between 2007 and March 2012 there was a decrease of 38,500 jobs, one third of which was in the construction sector. Therefore, for many of those people, the issues around corporation tax, investment and, indeed, looking to Europe, which is the responsibility of OFMDFM, and how matters might pan out there as we move from the notion of austerity alone to the idea of growth and how investment may be drawn down is paramount. The role of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in liaising and working with Europe as we seek to get information, look for investment, and to be at the races in drawing down that investment is of crucial and paramount importance to the many people we represent. Indeed, instead of watching the boats leave for places such as Australia, we should be giving hope to our young people.

The rises in unemployment have been higher here than in England, Scotland or Wales. That in itself can hardly be viewed as a coherent, shared and integrated success. The SDLP wants to see an investment strategy that delivers jobs in all our constituencies not just those with a particular party representative at Executive level.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr McGlone: That would mean an investment strategy for all our people, particularly for our young people.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party broadly welcomes the investment strategy as brought to the Assembly this afternoon by the deputy First Minister. The strategy is a key overarching document from the Executive, and it is important to give strategic direction over the medium to long term. It is also important that we continue to invest in our local and regional infrastructure for a number of reasons.

First, especially when investments are strategically planned, capital expenditure will increase the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy. The quality of our infrastructure is something that does make a difference to investors, both international and local. Ease of mobility is one key aspect. That is something we should bear in mind in light of the ongoing traffic chaos in Belfast. Let us hope that that is a short-term inconvenience to reach a long-term goal.

Secondly, it is important that we continue to provide quality accommodation for the delivery of our public services. A number of sectors have suffered from a lack of investment down the years. That includes water and sewerage services, and the consequences of that have been very clear this year and in recent years.

Thirdly, investments will bring employment opportunities. That is particularly important for the much beleaguered construction sector, which has suffered more than any other sector in the recession. All efforts must be made to

get our tradesmen and tradeswomen back to work as soon as possible.

Finally, the multiplier effect of that investment in construction in spending and the maintenance of jobs in the wider economy is regarded as greater than other aspects of public expenditure. The Construction Employers Federation has been consistently strong in making that point in recent times.

Our public expenditure environment has changed considerably over the past few years. We have suffered as the UK Government pursues their austerity measures overzealously. As a result, our capital budgets have been constrained. Indeed, the future remains uncertain in that regard. Therefore, we in the Alliance Party are content for consideration to be given to other forms of revenue-raising and alternative sources of finance.

I wish to highlight a number of specific issues. Although the Alliance Party welcomes the investment in transport by the Executive, we continue to be concerned by the balance between roads and public transport. Our balance is tilted very much in favour of roads, which is still the case even when you factor in the rural nature of much of Northern Ireland. Perhaps Belfast needs proper investment in public transport rather than the creation of an artificial battle between public transport and the private motorist.

The Alliance Party accepts that our health estate is in need of substantial investment. We must strive to provide first-class facilities that are as near to our public as humanly possible. I think of the threat to our children's cardiac unit in Belfast. We must also appreciate that the health sector is about to go through its biggest change in a generation through the Transforming Your Care process. It is critical that future investment in health and social services reflects and is consistent with changes in policy and that it delivers a first-class service, from the cradle to the grave, to everyone in Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party supports further investment in our schools estate. It is important that our children are educated in modern and safe buildings. I very much welcome the fact that the brand new Tor Bank School in Dundonald for our children with special needs is almost complete. We have campaigned long and hard for it, and it is almost there. We welcome that. We cannot deny the current demographic problems in our education sector, with a forecast of some 85,000 empty school places and an already inefficient sector, with many layers and providers. An over-provision of schools already means that our education revenue budget is skewed in favour of maintaining buildings, many of which are underutilised, rather than investment in the direct needs of our pupils. It is important that future investment does not lock us into an already inefficient pattern for another generation. We need to ensure that future investment reinforces policies around area planning and sustainable schools. In particular, full consideration needs to be given to a range of options for shared education, including schools that are integrated and open to all.

As I come from the Alliance Party, you would expect me to reinforce the need to "shared future-proof" all our future investments. All public space is and should be protected as common and shared. However, until now, the divisions in our society have often shaped the provision of public buildings and facilities. Often, their use has been

dominated by one particular section of the community. Hopefully, that state of affairs is now coming to an end. Future investments should be situated and designed in such a manner as to maximise their use by all members of our community on an equal and free basis, regardless of race, colour, religion, etc.

I welcome the recognition of what has happened in the past and the commitment to more proactively seek options for sharing in the investment strategy. In that regard, the strategy goes somewhat further than some other government documents, which can only be good for our entire society. Those commitments should be integrated into the consideration of business plans, with specific requirements to demonstrate that opportunities for sharing have been maximised and the risk of partial use minimised. Furthermore, issues around sharing should be encompassed in future planning. The investment strategy that was presented this morning contains many —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has almost gone.

Mr McCarthy: — ideals. Let the Assembly prove its worth, and let us do our utmost to bring prosperity, employment, etc, to every corner of Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: I welcome the investment strategy. As politicians, sometimes the accusation is that we engage in short-termism, that we are reactionary in our nature, or, indeed, that, on some occasions, we do nothing at all.

This document is the very antithesis of that. Instead of being short-term, it builds on what is already in place and projects ahead to 2021, the anniversary of the foundation of the state of Northern Ireland.

1.30 pm

In the debate, I would like to hear unambiguous support for the document, although I suspect that I will not, necessarily, hear that. It seems that some Members — we have heard from some already — cannot look into a bright, sunny day without seeking the clouds on the horizon. I urge Members to take a leaf out of the progressive book of Mr Flanagan across the Chamber. I see a slightly surprised look from Mr Wells and others, but Mr Flanagan has shown that this is very much a day for moving forward. Five or 10 years ago, he would have complained about any map that contained Fermanagh within Northern Ireland — he was trying to get it out. Now his complaint appears to be that Fermanagh is obscured on a map of Northern Ireland. We should all welcome that positive embracing of the strategy.

There is no doubt that we all should embrace the importance of the document. An investment of £13.3 billion is talked about. Let me give one indication of the scale of that investment. About half of the construction jobs in Northern Ireland, around 30,000 jobs, are dependent on ongoing public investment and public works. If there was, for instance, no investment strategy and no investment, that, in and of itself, would increase the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland by 50%; it would rise from around 60,000 to 90,000. The investment is highly significant.

In a joined-up approach, as highlighted by the Finance Minister in his earlier statement on public procurement, through this document and other means, we are looking at how best we can focus in that investment for Northern Ireland. That is particularly seen with the social clauses that are referred to in the document and the ongoing work

to ensure that public procurement is very much open to local small and medium-sized enterprises. It is about delivering for the whole of Northern Ireland.

I think that it was Mr Flanagan who compared the levels of investment in the previous Assembly with those of this Assembly. The very obvious reason for that difference is that the block grant from across the water has been cut so substantially. Although a lot of the focus at that time was on the impact on revenue spend, the levels of reduction that came from the Westminster Government were much more heavily weighted towards capital spend. I believe that government across the water — across the UK — needs to focus much more on capital spend, and, as a party, we will return to that focus later today in our amendment to the final motion.

The document covers a wide range of areas, and it would be impossible to touch on them all. However, I want to mention a couple.

The high level of significant investment in health has been mentioned, and I suspect that, in his contribution, Mr Wells will deal with that. We have seen investment in state-of-the-art equipment and buildings that can enable us to move towards a much healthier society. Locally, significant investment has been made and continues to be made at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. That is very important for the wider greater Belfast area, particularly for north Down, Strangford and east and south Belfast. We can make a massive difference through that.

A vast investment has also been and is intended to be made in our town centres. One of the concerns raised, particularly by local businesses, is that town centres have suffered from the growth of out-of-town shopping centres and internet sales. Investment has taken place and continues to take place in our town centres, and I look forward to the ongoing work between North Down Borough Council, local traders and the Department for Social Development to invest in Bangor and Holywood town centres. That is a major step forward.

Much has been made of our waste water infrastructure. Clearly, we have suffered the consequences of that from time to time when there are, for instance, heavy deluges of rain and flooding. The commitment in the document to improve the waste water infrastructure and, on the other side of the coin, the waste infrastructure with the waste groups will bear dividends for Northern Ireland as a whole.

The previous Member who spoke mentioned education. There are areas in education requiring specific investment, but we must ensure that we have appropriate buildings for our children in the 21st century. Rightly, the specifics of where investment will take place await the wider education audit. However, I express my hope that, in my constituency, priority will be given to the shared building scheme in Holywood and the much-needed newbuild for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School.

This is a good news story for Northern Ireland. It shows that the Executive are delivering. The document looks beyond what government can do; it looks to where government can lever in additional funding. We can expand the capital amount, not simply by lobbying Westminster or through direct spend by Departments but through trying to find innovative solutions. I do not believe that ideology should act as a barrier to practical solutions. We need to ensure that we have solutions that work, but every

additional piece of capital that we can lever into Northern Ireland to find that investment is to be welcomed.

I believe that this document builds for the future, that it will help our economy and that it is something that we can look forward to with great anticipation. In a number of years, we will be able to look back with a sense of pride at the fact that, at a time of great economic troubles, we were prepared to invest in our capital structure. The strategy is both an end in itself and the means to an end, and so I call on the House to support it.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the publication of the investment strategy. It is important that it lives up to its key objectives if it is to have a lasting impact on disadvantaged communities. This is about standing up for deprived areas. It is about ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected as far as possible from the demoralising impact of the continuing economic downturn. The investment strategy must support communities to build pathways to employment, tackle deprivation, increase community services and address dereliction.

I welcome the further investment in telecommunications. I come from a rural area, and broadband provision in such areas has been a key issue. Evidence-based studies can be provided to show mapped hotspots with little or no coverage. Local people face issues including an impact on businesses, particularly in export businesses that require adequate infrastructure. Many of those are major rural employers. The agriculture sector is also impacted, particularly through the additional requirements to make online transactions, including those for HMRC, VAT returns and so on. Many rural residents do not receive the same opportunities as those in urban areas, and that can impact on their education and quality of life.

I also welcome the focus on skills. During August, in the Dungannon district of my constituency, 500 young people were not in work, education or training. As outlined in research papers, one of the main planks of the road map for economic growth is ensuring that the long-term unemployed keep in contact with the labour market. Skills levels are an important factor for economic growth, and there is a need to deliver genuine potential for full-time employment.

Finally, it is important that all agencies are involved so that communities get the best value from the money invested in their area and a positive legacy is created.

Mr Wells: Mr Speaker, you will recall that, during the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement, an honourable Member's mobile phone went off. I trust that you will search out that culprit and that the full wrath of the Speaker's Office will come down upon them.

Mr Speaker: The search is ongoing.

Mr Wells: Good. I hope that the full wrath of the Speaker's Office will come down on the head of the culprit who offended the House by letting his or her mobile phone go off in the middle of that important statement.

On a more serious note, this is, as many Members have said, a good news document. Huge progress has been made, much of it west of the Bann. As expected, some Members have already stood up and accused the Executive of concentrating resources in specific areas, but, if we look at the health estate, we see that most of the good news has been in Fermanagh and Tyrone. I

have already mentioned, in response to the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the new South West Acute Hospital. The Health Committee had the privilege of visiting that new facility three weeks ago. As it stands, it is the most modern acute hospital in Europe. Of course, new hospitals are being built elsewhere on the continent, and, eventually, that situation will no longer apply. However, at the moment, we can be proud of the fact that we have delivered that amazing new facility at a cost —

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. I am not being negative about the hospital; it is just the negative thing that I have about language. However, there is this line that is always used that says, "It is the most modern hospital in Europe". It is the most modern hospital in Europe until another new one opens, and then it is not any more.

Mr Speaker: The Member has another minute added to his time.

Mr Wells: If Mr Flanagan sees light at the end of the tunnel, he goes out and orders more tunnel. That is the reality. It is always a case of the glass being half empty rather than half full. On an occasion when the Executive deliver a brand new facility, I would love Members from west of the Province to stand up, recognise that fact and acknowledge that huge resources have been put into Mr Flanagan's constituency. The vast majority of the work in that contract was carried out by local contractors. The stone was supplied from Fermanagh. Much of the electrical work and a huge proportion of the construction work were carried out by his constituents. That local contractors successfully tendered for that work in the face of very stiff competition is also a good news story.

We then move up to Omagh, where, again, after a lot of campaigning from the representatives of Mid Ulster and West Tyrone, the Minister of Health has announced a brand new local hospital at a cost of £90 million. That is to be very much welcomed.

Of course, we then had the announcement of a new radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry. We all remember that, on the last day of the previous mandate, the then Minister of Health and Social Services, Mr Michael McGimpsey, stood up and said that there was not the money to buy that new cancer therapy unit for Altnagelvin. Within a few weeks, we had an election and a new Minister. In conjunction with the First Minister, he was able to announce that the money had been found for that new unit. It is essential that it goes ahead, not only for cancer sufferers from the north-west but for those from the Irish Republic. That is a good news story that, again, I hope individuals would recognise as such.

I, of course, am delighted with the provision of the new local, and, again, extremely modern, hospital in Downpatrick. To use an Americanism that I do not like but that sums up what we must do, we have to sweat those assets. Having put a huge amount of capital into the development of those new facilities, we have to make certain that they are fully utilised. That may mean that we have to move patients down to those facilities. As we all know, it is much further from Belfast to Fermanagh than it is from Fermanagh to Belfast, in the sense that we expect people to travel from rural areas of Northern Ireland to Belfast to avail themselves of acute services, but it is unreasonable, we are told, to expect Belfast people to go west of the Bann to visit modern facilities. We are going to

have to try to encourage consultants and experts in their fields to utilise these modern facilities, wherever they are in Northern Ireland, and not concentrate on the congested greater Belfast area.

All those capital investments — I could mention Gransha, the new wing in Altnagelvin and so many others — are very welcome. However, we are moving forward in the context of Transforming Your Care, which will fundamentally change the direction of how health is provided for in Northern Ireland. There will be a move towards more community, secondary-based care. There will an expansion in the number of local clinics and health villages, and a moving of resources down the ladder of healthcare provision and away from the very expensive A&E facilities that we have in Northern Ireland.

I, therefore, welcome, for instance, the development of a new healthcare facility in Portadown. We were all delighted in south Down when the Minister came to Banbridge to announce its new health village. Seven of those villages have already been completed, but if we are to deliver Transforming Your Care, we will have to develop such facilities throughout Northern Ireland so that the first port of call is not the hospital A&E but your local healthcare provider in the form of a community health facility. That will require a fair degree of investment over the next few years.

Setting aside my health hat, I make one plea. Missing from this document is the Ballynahinch bypass. I think that all those who represent South Down or Strangford want to see that facility provided very soon, because the congestion is killing Ballynahinch and preventing access to the rest of south Down.

1.45 pm

Mr Kinahan: I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the debate, which I very much welcome. However, I question its true value, given that it is taking place months after the publication of the Programme for Government and 17 months after the return of the Assembly. Those are two events with which, you would have thought, the 2011-2021 investment strategy should have sought to be in tandem. Nevertheless, its eventual publication is still very welcome.

My comments today will largely focus on the proposed investment in skills, of which the lion's share unsurprisingly appears to be directed towards education. I will follow my brief as education spokesman for my party and say that, although unreasonable spending reductions should be required by most Departments, and I believe that education should be no exception, I fear that, without due consideration and thought, cutting hastily now will have huge impacts on education in years to come.

Given that a significant contributory factor to our future economic success will be the ability of our workforce to adapt to future challenging circumstances, we must ensure that our young people are given the skills and training required to allow them to enter what will be a truly globalised world economy. Sometimes I fear that we are a little too insular in the Chamber. Jobs are important and, indeed, vital here, but we must also look outwards at the same time, find every Northern Irishman, every Ulsterman, every Ulster Scotsman, the Irish and everyone abroad, and develop our links with them for apprenticeships. Do not exclude the voluntary sector either, or the Churches. We

should be developing all our links worldwide and investing in every possible corner that we can touch.

The skills section of the strategy unsurprisingly contains many lines of self-praise and self-adoration, just like those we heard in a previous speech, but I warn that, in sweating our assets, what we seem to be doing is sweating our patients. It is they who are taking a lot of the stress. I would like to delve into detail a little. The strategy refers to 47 major capital school projects having been completed since 2008, as well as the announcement in June 2012 of a further 18 capital projects. I make the point that, for every one of the schools that was fortunate enough to have been included in June's statement, there were, and still are, many that are desperately clinging to the hope of new funding as they literally watch their buildings crumble around them.

One school in particular that I know has yet to go through a fruitless battle with many over its new resources is Parkhall Integrated College in my constituency. For nearly 10 years it has been expecting a newbuild. It watched Massereene Community College be demolished and thought that that was the start of it all happening, yet it is costing over £200,000 a year to keep the school running on split sites. The newbuild was delayed by the previous Education Minister, with more loopholes being added, and it is now being delayed by the area planning consultation. There are many schools like that, all waiting for building work.

The Education Minister will be aware that I have long had concerns about the excessive attention that he is devoting to prioritising the Irish-medium sector. Although spending his time on such projects is all fine and well, and it is his democratic right to do so, it is when he continues to spend large sums of money on such projects to the detriment of the other sectors that the situation becomes unacceptable. Today's strategy has quite rightly identified area plans as a key determinant of future capital priorities. Again, all Executive Ministers will be aware of the huge concerns over the current consultation on area planning. Every Minister represents his or her constituency, and they all will no doubt have had representations from local schools and parents about the flawed nature of the entire process.

Consultation is ongoing on post-primary education, but parents, teachers, staff, governors and even boards do not feel that they have been properly consulted. A week ago, the members of the stakeholders' group, mainly the parents and teachers there, complained that they had not been properly consulted. They asked us to hit the pause button and then move quickly when we have got the decisions.

The investment strategy refers to working towards the sharing of education. Indeed, it even makes particular reference to Lisanelly in Omagh. That should have been a site with huge potential, but because of the failure of the Department to secure appropriate buy-in, as well as the failure to show flexibility for local concern, the site continues to represent missed opportunities. I suppose that, in a way, that sums up the past five years of mutual carve-up. Everyone in the Chamber truly believes that the future of our education system is one that is built on greater sharing and collaboration between sectors. My party is clear about how we see its future here, which is as a single education system in which children of all faiths and none are taught in a welcoming environment. I am in no doubt that Northern Ireland is still years from seeing

this, but we should be looking towards current efforts, such as the shared education programme, to see how it may be done in years to come.

The area planning process is carving up our education system, not sharing it out. The investment strategy should be helping to promote sharing, not limiting it. We all know of cases in almost every town and village where there are multiple schools from different sectors, often all of them with an intake below the maximum enrolment.

At present, many of them are terrified of the changes that are coming, but of which they know so little. In many cases, it is those schools, of all types, that are leading the way in sharing and working together. I think of the excellent example in Moyle, or possibly what is coming up in Crumlin, where there is a proposal for a shared management school to suit unionist and nationalist families. That is truly groundbreaking.

Just think of the savings that area planning could bring in.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Kinahan: Hopefully, when the Assembly gets around to discussing the 2021-2031 investment strategy in a decade's time, this vision for education in Northern Ireland will not be so far off in the distance.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the publication of the Executive's investment strategy. With laissez-faire underinvestment characterising much of direct rule governance of the North in previous decades, the local Assembly has been faced with serious infrastructure inadequacies from its very inception. Thankfully, however, the Executive recognised that modern infrastructure is vital to the future regeneration of our local economy, and with that in mind initiated schemes to ensure that moneys available were used. In total, more than £5 billion has been invested in the past four years.

Set against the backdrop of unprecedented international economic decline, the ability of the Executive to consolidate local accountable government with a capacity for global investment has been a remarkable achievement for all concerned. Communities throughout the North now enjoy the benefits of improved healthcare facilities, modern transport systems, new schools and one of the most modern telecommunications networks in Europe.

However, both the supranational and regional economic environments remain delicate, to say the least, and the Tory-led coalition Government in London continues to cut public spending. With the Executive's focus now turning to protecting jobs and public services, infrastructure investment will undoubtedly reflect the current climate. In the next few years, investment will have to secure value for money at every level. Now, more than ever, we must invest in the right place at the right time. Only by doing so can we provide the catalyst for growth in tandem with protecting front line services.

Linking the investment strategy to the continued delivery of the Executive's social agenda of tackling poverty and disadvantage is to be welcomed. Indeed, the inclusion of social clauses in goods and services as well as capital investment projects has been a real success in the past few years, and we continue to see how they can help

young people to access valuable training and employment opportunities.

I call on the Executive to reinforce the already considerable impact of social clauses in investment contracts. In these economic times we should be looking to include such measures in as many places as possible. I would also like the Executive to publish details of the impact of social clauses on a regular basis so that the Assembly can monitor the commitment of all Ministers and their Departments to the Executive's social agenda throughout the North.

Connected to the significance of social clauses and the wider principle of equality of opportunity in Executive investment is its ability to incorporate economic growth with cohesion, sharing and integration in our society. We are only too aware of the deadly divisions that have come to characterise life across many parts of the world. From Jerusalem and Beirut to Berlin and Belfast, walls have kept communities apart and services duplicated, with existing patterns of infrastructure still imitating those divisions today.

It is crucial that this new investment strategy leads the way in breaking down barriers, both physical and mental. Only through area-based planning and investment can we ensure that public moneys are used effectively and efficiently, while supporting the strategic aims for cohesion, sharing and integration.

Such principles guide much of what is contained in this investment strategy, but there can be little doubt that it is within education in particular that these challenges are being put front and centre of future planning and investment. Sinn Féin has continuously advanced the argument that the priority in education going forward must be to ensure that all our young people receive the highest quality education.

Against a backdrop of the most challenging Budget settlement in education history, it is clear that we must prioritise the needs of children over institutions. At the core of that challenge is how we plan investment in the education system. The 2006 Bain report illustrated beyond all reasonable doubt that we have inherited a pattern of provision that is unsustainable both educationally and financially. As outlined by various educationalists, we have too many schools that do not have the capacity to give young people the broad and rich educational experience that they deserve.

It is encouraging to know that the Executive plan to invest to meet the needs of our children and not the demands of the institutions that we inherited. Through area-based planning, the pattern of provision and investment will be dictated by the needs of education in the 21st century and an economy that requires a diverse, educated workforce with a vast array of skills. Bearing in mind that the needs for investment far exceed the funding available, the importance of strategic and focused area plans cannot be overstated. That will be fundamental in identifying priorities for capital investment.

With more than 40 capital school projects completed in the last few years, a further 18 major capital school projects are now under construction, including five special school projects. Coupled with the schools enhancement programme, that exceptional investment in education provision has been a considerable boost to the local construction industry. Taken in conjunction with the wider

educational estate of further and higher education, the best part of £1 billion has been invested in local education provision. That will undoubtedly enhance our local skills base and contribute greatly to the local economy in years ahead.

The investment strategy outlines that:

"A peaceful, fair and prosperous society has at its heart a well educated populace with the skills to engage fully and positively in society and in the economy ... The skills-base of countries and regions is increasingly the key determinant of relative economic growth, competitiveness and productivity — factors vital to support higher living standards in an increasingly globalised economy."

The commitment to spend £5 billion in the first four years is to be welcomed, especially when such investment contains a solid focus on job-maximising programmes. I welcome the emphasis on focused and integrated planning. In times of economic hardship, it becomes increasingly pertinent to invest taxpayers' money effectively and efficiently. I am content that the investment strategy bears that in mind.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an díospóireacht seo ar an straitéis infheistíochtas. I welcome this debate on the investment strategy. The strategy recognises that growing a regional economy will benefit from strong cities and rural areas. It states that our rural areas, including our towns and villages, have a key role in supporting economic growth:

"Our rural areas offer real opportunities in terms of potential for growth in the provision of rural recreation and tourism, their attractiveness as places to invest, live and work".

I certainly agree with that.

You will forgive me if I use examples from my own constituency to illustrate some of my points. Newry and Armagh are good examples of cities that are ripe for future investment. Newry is well placed to capitalise on North/South trade, not just retail but tourism and commerce. The city would benefit greatly from infrastructural investment. For example, a southern relief road would take heavy traffic from Warrenpoint docks directly onto the A1. Such infrastructure, as well as freeing up Newry city centre from heavy commercial traffic, would significantly reduce journey times to and from Warrenpoint docks, thus making that facility more competitive and placing it as one of Ireland's key ports for imports, exports and ferry services.

Reference was made earlier to the development of army sites. I look forward to the development of the old army base at Forkhill. I want to see progress on that site in the near future. The transformation of sites from symbols of conflict to signs of hope for the future is very important.

The facilities that they will offer local people will be welcome.

2.00 pm

I welcome the urgency that the Minister of the Environment has brought to planning decisions. Tardiness in the planning process has frustrated commercial and industrial development through the years. Speed and efficiency in the planning process will encourage future and further investment, which is badly needed at this time.

As was mentioned earlier, it is important that connectivity in rural areas and, indeed, cities outside of Belfast and Derry is a priority. Recent indications show that much still has to be done to ensure that broadband speed and mobile connectivity are enhanced in all areas. These are now a prerequisite to investment.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

The document emphasises the investment in tourism. There is a growing perception that, in this respect, the focus is on Belfast to the exclusion of other areas. We in Newry and Armagh have cities that have much to offer and areas that would benefit from further investment. Newry is a city of waterways where there is potential to develop the Albert Basin as a key regenerator for the city and where a new weir on the Clanrye would control the flow of the river through the city centre. Newry canal has great potential for development, and the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland has been leading the way in showing what is possible.

Both the cities of Newry and Armagh are ideally situated to exploit the Irish Christian heritage that we are all so proud of. Both cities are also within reach of Belfast and Dublin and the rich heritage of the Boyne valley. We have world-class places to visit: the Mourne, the Ring of Gullion and the Cooley peninsula. Investment in tourism infrastructure, including the bridge at Narrow Water, would do much to enhance the tourism product.

The strategy states:

"Through the Investment Strategy we will also seek to tackle regional disadvantage by addressing the issues that affect our rural communities: tackling —

Ms Ruane: Go raibh míle maith agat. I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I am glad to hear that he has mentioned the bridge at Narrow Water. Will he agree with me that we need to get planning in the North and with An Bord Pleanála in the South and that the sooner we do that the better? He speaks about regional disparity. Will he agree that that is one of the areas and ways of reducing regional disparities?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. If the Member had been in earlier, she would realise that I mentioned two bridges: the southern relief road, which is also a bridge, as well as the Narrow Water bridge. She will know that the SDLP has led the battle for the Narrow Water bridge, and I welcome the fact that she has come on board as well. Hopefully, we will be able to cross the bridge together some day in the future.

As I was saying, the investment strategy states that it will:

"seek to tackle regional disadvantage by addressing the issues that affect our rural communities: tackling poverty, encouraging diversification, enhancing connectivity and improving the overall quality of service provision."

I hope that these are more than mere words and that they will, in fact, be put into action in the future. I hope that this will be applied to such areas as Newry and Armagh.

Much has been said about the importance of the devolution of corporation tax powers. Perhaps one illustration of that is a report that I saw recently in 'The Irish Times' that announced 300 extra jobs in the creative industries for Galway city. It said below the headline that corporation tax was the key element in securing the investment.

That illustrates, if anything does, the need for Northern Ireland to have a rate of corporation tax that is competitive and attracts jobs. Hopefully, this will be pursued with even greater vigour by the Executive in the weeks and months ahead. Cuirfidh mé críoch le mo chuid cainte ansin, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leat fosta as an deis cainte seo a thabhairt domh inniu. I will end there. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute today.

Mr Allister: Judged by its cover and glossy presentation, this is an impressive document. However, like most things associated with this Executive, when you begin to read it, you discover that it really is a triumph of form over substance and, indeed, laid throughout with contradictions.

My first point is this: where has it been? When I pick up the OFMDFM business plan for 2011-12, and, if I am meant to take that document seriously and read it, I discover the promise to:

"By June 2011 submit a final Investment Strategy 2011-2021 for Ministerial approval"

Here we are, 16 months later. Has it been becalmed for all that time in the Executive? Was it submitted in June 2011? Has it been the object of some dysfunctional disagreement? Or was that promise not kept? Did it not get to the Executive by June 2011? Either way, it has taken a very long time to get to the House. Here we are, more than a third of the way through the first term of the period 2011 to 2015 before this shiny, glossy document lands on our desks. In itself, it is a demonstration of the failure and dysfunctional operation of this Executive that it has taken so long to get to this point.

I turn to page 6 of the document and read some very good-sounding, sensible affirmations:

"When it is appropriate, we will seek to bring forward investment in those public works that are more labour-intensive at the expense of schemes that would deliver a lower employment impact. Research has demonstrated that areas like facilities and roads maintenance, refurbishment, upgrades and extensions typically support twice as many jobs as similar value works that require the purchase of land and specialist materials. The Executive is determined to maximise the impact on jobs of every pound invested in order to speed up economic recovery."

I then turn over a few pages and discover that one of the projects that it lauds is the A5 project, which, of course, does not meet the criteria for a dual carriageway judged by the standards applied to others and does not have the required traffic volumes but is there because it is, essentially, a political demand. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, who might be thought to know something about these things, once said in the House about the A5 project:

"Believe me, that project is not job rich, because most of the money will go on buying land, and the rest will

go on a capital intensive project." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 62, p382, col 2].

So much for making sure that every pound buys the most jobs, especially as one of the capital projects that is now highlighted in this document is something that the Minister of Finance said is not a job-rich project at all.

If we turn further into this document, we find at page 21 that it states that the focus now is:

"on moving people rather than moving vehicles".

That has been working. That has been a rip-roaring success in Belfast city centre in the past few weeks. Moving people rather than vehicles? We take half the road, prohibit vehicles other than buses and some taxis from travelling on it and say that we are in the business of moving people, not vehicles, while people sit in their vehicles for hours on end. Someone must have forgotten to tell those involved in the A5 road scheme that the focus is now not on moving vehicles but on moving people.

This is a document that I think, in itself, is flawed in much of what it has to say. It then tells us that one of the capital projects — this is about capital investment — is the moving of the DARD headquarters. I must say that the moving of the DARD headquarters will not create one new Civil Service job — not one new job in the public sector. So, it is hardly an example of jobs for pounds. It is another illustration of a strategy, if we can call it that, that does not really seem to have much idea where it is going.

Then I turn to page 44 and begin to read about things pertaining to our prison estate. I read about the enthusiasm for this consultation exercise on the outline estate strategy, with proposals for the development of the prison estate over the next 10 years. Not a mention of the fact that, just three or four short years ago, a programme was produced to rebuild Magilligan. Four million pounds was spent on bringing that proposition to the point of detailed plans.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will you bring your remarks to a close?

Mr Allister: Not a mention of the fact that, in concert with that, we are spending £5 million just opposite the prison to build a new sewerage works —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Allister: — to accommodate an 800-bed prison, as well as the local community. So, one has to ask —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: — in which direction this strategy is going. Alternatively, is it just going in whatever direction suits the expediency of the moment?

Mr A Maginness: I think that the acid test of this document is in asking what difference it will make to investment in Northern Ireland over the next number of years. We are in a very difficult economic situation. We are in a double-dip recession. The United Kingdom certainly has not come out of recession yet, many countries in Europe are in recession, and the euro zone is effectively in recession. We are in a very difficult world, where capital transfers very quickly — in the space of a few months — from one area to another.

I look at this document to see whether there is a remedy in it that addresses those fundamental issues of recession,

underinvestment, unemployment and under-resourcing. I do not sense that there is a real strategy in this document. Yes, there is an outline of various programmes across a wide spread of different Departments, and I welcome those. I think that it is important that we invest in projects such as the prison estate, the Desertcreat police college and Forensic Science. All those things — I take just that small section of quite substantial investment — are to be welcomed, and only a curmudgeon would be overly critical of the fact that £5.1 billion is going to be invested over the next four years or so.

2.15 pm

However, in my opinion, that is not sufficient. What one looks for in the document is some innovative thinking. It is not so much what is contained in the document as what is left out. I do not see a big emphasis on our relationship with the European Union. I do not see a great emphasis on how we will attract more funding from Europe through its various agencies into this region. Moreover, if we are to build an alternative strategy post-2013, I do not see much discussion on how we deliver on corporation tax. Those omissions, and the lack of detail and development, are glaring, and that makes the document weaker and less effective. I hope that that can be remedied. It is important that the Executive look at those areas to see whether we can develop in a deeper way those relationships with Europe and the fiscal policy for corporation tax.

In addition, I looked for innovation on the green economy — the greening of our economy. There is massive potential in that area, yet there is little or no mention of it in the document. Yes, it mentions renewable energy, but it is almost an afterthought. It does not have the centrality that I believe it deserves. There is huge potential in the green economy and renewable energy, something that will affect not just our rural economy but our urban economy.

Therefore, there are deficiencies in the document. Although one welcomes a more considered view of government and government policy here —

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes; of course.

Mr Bell: Pages 36 and 37 of the document refer to the environment. What has the Member to say about the £1 billion investment since 2008; the work that has been done on recycling, through the Rethink Waste campaign; the work that has been done on flood protection measures, on defence and on drinking water; and Rethink Waste grants of £4.38 million? In 2011-12, there were grants for 26 projects, totalling £1.49 million. All those are on a double-page spread in the document, yet you say that the green economy is not included?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Let me make this point: you are highlighting things that have taken place in the past. Another aspect of the document that I found rather odd was that there is a lot of emphasis — the First Minister can look at me strangely — on historical objectives and achievements. Yes, the Executive have every right to say, "Yes, we did this, and we intend to try to do more." However, the fact is that the document should be looking forward, not backwards. Yes,

there are positive achievements, but we have to develop things in a much cleverer and much more innovative fashion in order to exploit the great opportunities that are there. Yes, the junior Minister is right to point out such things, but I do not believe that what he said contradicts the fundamental point that I am making, which is that there must be more innovation and creativity in government green policy. I would like to see the Executive becoming a model innovator of the green agenda. I do not sense that it is, but that is the approach that I urge the House, the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to pursue.

I look at this document as a representative of North Belfast, and I ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister, what difference will this make to my constituents? What difference will this make to a North Belfast man? How much better will his life be? Will the strategy provide more job opportunities or a better standard of living? That is the acid test. I am not giving a definitive view on this, because we are only noting it today —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr A Maginness: — but I am not certain that a North Belfast man would be entirely satisfied with the document.

Mr Storey: It is only right to place on record the fact that, despite all the negatives that Members have raised with regard to what is or is not in this document, an overall accumulative amount has, and will be, invested. That is something that we cannot simply set aside, given where we are and the economic challenges that we all face — comments with which, I think, the Member who has just spoken prefaced his remarks. We have control over some of those challenges and no control over others. In many regards, we are subject to forces that are, sometimes, beyond the control of any of the local devolved Administrations.

However, I come now to the area that I want to focus on particularly, and which has been mentioned in a number of contributions — education. There is no doubt that if we look at the maintenance backlog in education, we will see that there is an excess of somewhere in the region of £300 million. There is an absolute need to ensure that we have a strategy and a process that deals with maintenance, but which also knows where we are going with regard to capital build. That is where what we say about it being in a document and how it translates to being delivered in practice sometimes become problematic.

Members will be aware that all of us are subject to the area plans that are out for consultation in the five education and library board areas, for example. However, nowhere in those plans, ideas and suggestions on how we rationalise the schools estate is there anything that aligns and joins up the strategy with regard to the capital build. Rather, over the past number of years, we have had, from the previous and current Education Ministers and Departments, what seems to be a very disjointed approach to implementing the strategy and the way forward.

I will give an example, and I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School. This is an issue that has been going on for some time. There was a plan to have a newbuild, joined with Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt. It was to be progressed under a PPP project, but the Department of Education, in its wisdom, decided to ditch having a PPP and to go the conventional route. What all of that has led

to is that Rainey Endowed is going in one direction, in a proposal with Sperrin Integrated College according to the area plan but probably not according to the reality on the ground, and Ballymoney High School is going to sit as it is currently — an 11-16 school, with no prospect, as far as area plans are concerned, of having its newbuild. That is where Members will have a challenge in joining up the practicalities of what is set out in a strategy and how it is delivered by individual Departments. However, there are elements of the strategy, such as the capital build programme that the Education Minister has said he will take forward, that are to be welcomed. For example, in June of this year, he announced newbuilds, particularly in relation to special educational needs provision. Hopefully, Castle Tower School in Ballymena will be a beneficiary of that announcement, and that project will be brought forward.

Let me come to another element that was mentioned: the Lisanelly site. Here we have a vision. Here we have a plan. However, does the Department of Education really know, at this minute, who it is that will be part of Lisanelly? The Education Committee will visit Omagh on Wednesday. Part of the reason for that visit is to have a discussion about whether there can be any clarity as to who will be part of the Lisanelly project. Remember, Members, that there was considerable investment in a new school — namely, Drumragh Integrated College — and it will remain in that new school with only the possibility of the transfer of sixth-form provision to the new campus. We have already had the Department of Education being taken to court. The Catholic maintained grammar school in the town decided to take the Department to court over a promise for a newbuild. That has been under consideration by the Department for some months now. So, although we see things outlined in the strategy, serious questions have to be asked of the Department of Education as to how it is that it can deliver this project and this particular educational provision.

I conclude by putting a challenge to the Education Minister around area plans. That is a vital point to make. We can have plans for the rationalisation of the schools estate. However, aligned to that must be a capital project plan that reflects accurately the needs of schools that have been sitting waiting, for some considerable years, and that will still require newbuilds, despite whatever the area plans will be for that area. I welcome the investment we have had. I look forward to the practical outworkings of further investment in a way that is consistent with ensuring good educational provision in our constituencies.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be the First Minister.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 11 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Transforming Your Care

2. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on Transforming Your Care. (AQO 2586/11-15)

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the voices of carers will be heard during the Transforming Your Care stakeholder engagement and the implementation and evaluation of the population plans. (AQO 2590/11-15)

9. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the Transforming Your Care proposal will target health inequalities. (AQO 2593/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 2, 6 and 9 together.

In July this year, I announced that I had taken receipt of draft population plans and the draft strategic implementation plan. The development of those plans was a key proposal in 'Transforming Your Care'. The draft plans have been subject to a quality assurance process over the summer months. I plan to make a statement to the House tomorrow in which I will provide an update on 'Transforming Your Care' and the arrangements for moving to consultation.

During the development of the population plans, a number of meetings were held with the voluntary and community sector, which included a number of carer views. The views of carers will be an important part of the forthcoming consultation, which will include a series of public meetings at which carers will be invited to participate. Consultation will provide the opportunity for the community as a whole to have its say on proposals for improving health and social care services to optimise outcomes for patients and other service users.

Addressing health inequalities is a priority for me. 'Transforming Your Care' highlights the need to address inequalities in areas such as lower life expectancy, rates of respiratory mortality, suicide, smoking and alcohol-related deaths and self-harm. The draft population plans and draft strategic implementation plan include proposals for change to improve health outcomes for all our population.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister will know that change always causes some people concern. Will he take the opportunity here this afternoon to assure the House that it is not part of his vision for the health service in Northern Ireland that any aspect of primary care health service delivery will be delivered through any vehicle other than the National Health Service?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Change causes concern, but that does not mean that you should not do it. The Member may be asking whether I am looking to engage in some privatisation process of primary care, but that is not on the agenda. We will deal with the issues in more detail tomorrow, but it will be fairly evident that that is not part of our agenda.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the input that the carers will have as we move forward. Can the Minister give any details of the new models of respite and short breaks that are in the implementation plan?

Mr Poots: In terms of respite, we recognise that carers make an essential contribution. In fact, the carers organisation has identified that carers save our economy about £4 billion through the work that they do. Therefore, in recognition of the work that carers do, we need to ensure that carers are sustainable. Otherwise, if the carer breaks down and is not able to continue carrying out that service, it will be much more expensive to us as a Government. Therefore, investing in carers is something that I support, and it needs to go beyond paying lip service to having an effect on the ground. That is a course of work that needs to be addressed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am aware that Maeve McLaughlin's question was linked and that she was not here for the first part of the answer. I call Maeve McLaughlin for a supplementary.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Apologies for not being here for the original comment. Will the Minister give an update on how the welfare reform cuts will impact on the Transforming Your Care strategy? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: That is an interesting question. Of course, welfare reform has an impact. If we were to do something completely daft and cost the Assembly £220 million, it would probably cost my Department around £100 million. Therefore, if we do not proceed with welfare reform and stay with parity, we will have longer waiting lists for hip operations, we will have longer waiting lists for people who require heart surgery, and we will have people dying as a consequence of that. I urge all Members to take great cognisance of the fact that this health service, which is under significant strain as things stand, would be put under much greater pressure as a consequence of taking some grandstanding position on welfare reform.

Mr Gardiner: Family carers already lose their caring allowance when they care for their loved ones. Will the Minister assure us that Transforming Your Care will not lead to the state dumping even more responsibility on family carers?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that it does not, and the Member is right to highlight that. Transforming Your Care is about looking at what is likely to be expected of us over the coming years. If you add that expectation to the problems we have meeting the public's expectations now and then look at the size of the budget, you will see that the three elements do not stack up. Transforming Your Care is about making them stack up. It is about making the service more efficient, smarter working and doing more through primary care, early intervention and prevention. No aspect of it is about dumping on carers. We certainly need careers and the support of families to deliver good health. This needs to

be done in a way that aids and supports the people who provide that care.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister assure us that there will be joined-up working across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors during the implementation of the population plans?

Mr Poots: That will be the role of the integrated care partnerships. That course of work has already started, and there has been very good progress on that front.

Flu Vaccination

3. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to promote the uptake of the flu vaccination. (AQO 2587/11-15)

Mr Poots: I launched this year's seasonal flu vaccination programme on 27 September. This is its thirteenth year in Northern Ireland. Eligible groups are now familiar with the need to get vaccinated, which is one reason why Northern Ireland consistently achieves one of the highest uptakes in the UK. The vaccine is free for anyone in the target groups. Every year, the Public Health Agency closely monitors the uptake in each GP practice and takes steps to improve it where it is low. The agency also runs training sessions for the healthcare staff who deliver the programme, and one of the aims of the training is to promote uptake by the target groups. In addition, this year, the agency will rerun a media campaign encouraging people to get vaccinated in advance of the flu season. Last year, that contributed to a 25% increase in the number of people coming forward to be vaccinated compared with 2010. That is vital in reducing serious complications and deaths from flu.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he provide us with further details on the public information campaign?

Mr Poots: The strapline for the campaign is:

"Flu is more serious than you think – so get the flu vaccination now."

Last year's campaign contributed to the uptake of the seasonal flu vaccination surpassing the target set by DHSSPS, with a 25% increase and the highest vaccination rates in the UK. It is important that we encourage this and encourage uptake by our professional staff. There are two new strains of flu this year, and all the indications from, for example, Australia, where the flu season happens earlier, are that there are fairly significant problems. So we want to encourage as many people as possible to get the flu vaccine.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree with the Minister that we need to encourage as many people as possible to take up the vaccination, and I am encouraged by the increase in the number doing so. How many flu vaccinations have not been used over the past number of years? What is the shelf life of said vaccination? Although there has been an increase in the uptake, we still need to encourage people to be vaccinated so that we do not lose money.

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland, unlike the rest of the UK, the PHA centrally purchases the seasonal flu vaccine for onward transmission to GPs and trusts. This year, 428,000 doses have been procured for use in Northern Ireland, and, by mid-September, over 430,000 doses had

already been received. So we do not believe that we are overordering lots of flu vaccinations and then not using them.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that the effects of increased flu vaccine uptake include a reduction in flu-related deaths and hospital admissions? Does he also agree that there is a great benefit to the individual and community in reduced winter pressures, meaning that that should be the greatest issue in selling the vaccine to the public so that uptake can be increased even further?

Mr Poots: Unusually, there is nothing that I can disagree with Mr Beggs on.

Mrs D Kelly: Are there any other contagious diseases that the Department will be concerned about over the next few months and that the public ought to know about?

Mr Poots: Whooping cough is one of the more recent ones that we highlighted. We heard about that a lot, certainly, when I was a child; maybe that was not the case for Mrs Kelly. It was something that we heard of in our younger days. Unfortunately, it is back, and there have been quite a number of incidents of it in parts of GB. We want to encourage mothers to take up the whooping cough vaccination during pregnancy, so I thank the Member for highlighting that.

Health Technology

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the potential for the health technology sector to assist Northern Ireland's economy. (AQO 2588/11-15)

13. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the role that electronic health records can play in improving healthcare delivery. (AQO 2597/11-15)

Mr Poots: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 4 and 13 together.

The increasing use of technology is key to providing high-quality health and social care that is based around patients' needs. 'Transforming Your Care' sets high standards that are to be attained in providing patient-centred care. We simply cannot achieve those standards with current ways of working. Indeed, the increased use of technology was a key recommendation in the report.

The introduction of the electronic care record (ECR) will benefit everyone in Northern Ireland. The new system provides the ability to access and share information securely across the health and social care system. It has the potential to vastly improve the quality, speed, safety and clinical outcomes for patients and service users. The ECR will help to cut the time spent searching for appropriate records, allowing clinicians to spend more time treating patients. It will be rolled out across the HSC, streamlining the process.

Some of the technology that we need is available, but much development work is necessary. Last December, I signed a memorandum of understanding on Connected Health and prosperity with the economy Minister. Arising from that is the recent establishment of the Northern Ireland Connected Health ecosystem, which brings together academia and industry, along with the health and social care sector, to take forward developments. We are working closely with the economic development

Department to contribute to the Executive's economic strategy. Products developed and, hopefully, manufactured in Northern Ireland should be commercially viable worldwide, thus contributing to the local economy. By becoming a recognised centre of excellence for Connected Health, we will attract more business and investment.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. Will he outline the benefits of an ecosystem coming to Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The ecosystem is one of the methods of delivering the action plan between DHSSPS and Invest NI. We are looking for significant participation by business in engagements and events, along with the life sciences sector, that are organised by Northern Ireland Science Park or the universities. We are also looking for the successful drawdown of funding for research and development and new product innovation by local companies working in partnership with universities and our HSC trusts through competition for UK-wide funds, including, for example, those available in Technology Strategy Board competitions.

We are also working closely with Europe on the matter. Considerable work is being done on that front, and I hope that we will make substantial progress so that Northern Ireland is recognised as a leader in technology and its application to health.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What were the findings from the ECR proof-of-concept evaluation?

Mr Poots: Well, 94% of clinical users agreed that the use of ECR improved patient care, 89% of users agreed that its use improved patient safety, and 83% of doctors reported a better clinical outcome as a result of its use. So, it is evident from the clinical and user side that people believe that they are getting better results as a consequence.

2.45 pm

Mr Kinahan: In south Antrim, we have Randox, which is one of the top diagnostic companies. How is the Minister helping such high-tech companies to reach overseas markets such as the USA, Finland and Spain, where I believe he has been recently?

Mr Poots: I have developed a good working relationship with Randox. As Health Minister, I have visited the site on a number of occasions. It is a leading company in diagnostics, supplying, I think, around 7% of the world's diagnostic equipment, which is significant for a country the size of Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the world. We need to recognise such companies and the work that they do. We also need to work with them and assist them. Some of the things that we are doing to assist technology companies and those that are developing in the pharma field include the development of the electronic care record, which will enable us to simplify tests and prove the benefits of what is proposed.

The Member mentioned Finland. We were able to connect Kainos, a company based in Belfast, with VTT in Finland, and substantial work is being done there. There are terrific opportunities for us in little Northern Ireland to make a significant contribution to healthcare across the world. We need to be flexible and business-minded in our approach, and we can really help.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he have any plans to introduce stereotactic body radiation therapy, which has been shown to be very effective in treating some forms of cancer?

Mr Poots: That is slightly off-question, but at this stage we do not have any plans. We do not have the numbers of people available to use it, thankfully. However, people can obtain the service in GB, and we support people in doing so. There is a process to go through, which requires consultant support and all of that, but we can ensure that people from Northern Ireland receive that treatment.

Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha

5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the recent incidents in Ralph's Close, Gransha. (AQO 2589/11-15)

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that, in the first instance, my overriding priority and that of the Western Trust is to ensure the safety and well-being of all those in its care.

Further to my response in the House on 10 September, I can advise that the trust, working closely with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), has put in place an improvement plan to bring about the change required to ensure that Ralph's Close fully meets all the statutory regulations and standards. The improvement plan will transform the culture of care at Ralph's Close from a nursing model to a social care model, which is more in keeping with a residential home. It will also address leadership and governance, training and development, and adult safeguarding. Implementation is being overseen by a project board that is made up of senior managers from the trust. The trust is reporting progress to the Department, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the RQIA. It is also keeping all the families of residents in Ralph's Close fully informed of developments.

The PSNI investigation into the original allegations is continuing. It remains the case that we should not comment in any way that might prejudice that investigation. However, along with other Members, I encourage anyone with information that may assist the investigation to bring it forward.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I also acknowledge his role in dealing with the matter.

The Minister has put a process in place. I know that he is aware that staff training was a big issue that was pointed out by the families and staff. Is he satisfied that the process will ensure that staff training is adequate?

Mr Poots: It is absolutely essential that it be adequate, and we are doing a considerable amount of work to ensure that that is the case. When you have vulnerable people in your care, the ability of individuals to take advantage of the situation is enhanced greatly. We need to take every step and every precaution that we can to ensure that it does not happen. Obviously, the investigation into Ralph's Close is not complete, but I think that, after all the time that we have had to consider vulnerable people and the care that they receive, it would be very disappointing if, in 2012, that sort of behaviour can still happen in our facilities. Therefore, if the investigation finds that it has happened, there will have to be a thorough inquiry into how it was allowed to happen

and how we can ensure that it does not happen again elsewhere.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. What arrangements are in place to ensure that residents of Ralph's Close receive adequate care as the investigation is ongoing?

Mr Poots: Subsequent to the first anonymous letter, which was received on 24 July, considerable effort has been made to ensure that there is adequate support in the facility. Key agencies, including the Western Trust, the PSNI, the RQIA, the Health Board, the Public Health Agency and the Department, along with professional advisers, have been involved. The Western Trust is collaborating very closely to deal with the allegations. People from outside the facility have been brought in to oversee, supervise and ensure the safety of everyone in the facility. Therefore, a huge amount of supervision is currently taking place.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister confirm whether, following that particular incident, he has reviewed all other trusts to ensure that this type of incident will not happen in any other trust facility?

Mr Poots: What is so disappointing is that this particular facility is new. It is excellent in its ability to meet the requirements of the individuals who use it. Perhaps, processes and so forth have fallen down, which have allowed the circumstances to develop that have brought about the discussion that we are having at present.

With respect to other facilities: when all investigations are complete and the facts are known, we will want to identify what comes out of the report and apply it elsewhere. Trusts and other organisations that are contracted to provide services for vulnerable adults need to ensure that the guidance and procedures for best practice are adhered to and, indeed, that proper records are maintained. There are already specific regulatory requirements and minimum standards that apply across a range of health and social care settings to ensure that people are vetted before working with vulnerable adults; appropriate training and supervision is given, and minimum standards of care are maintained. Guidance on adult abuse in all its forms is in place for staff and the general public with instructions on how to report it or suspicions that it might be occurring. Additionally, there are procedures for staff to properly report concerns that they have about their workplace, particularly about the safety and protection of people in their care and, indeed, their fellow staff.

People should operate on the first principle that, in if doubt, it is better to be safe than sorry. It is better that someone is investigated and it is found that there is no substance to the allegations than for someone not to be investigated and it later transpires that that person was engaged in some form of abuse.

Mr Campbell: I know that people will be reassured by the Minister's comments so far.

Without prejudice to the outcome of any ongoing investigation, will the Minister undertake to ensure that following those investigations, he will be open and transparent about any report that comes out in order to try to ensure that people get reassurance from the very top of the Department?

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that whatever comes out of the investigation will be dealt with in an open, transparent and honest way because I see no benefit in trying to cover things up.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 6 was grouped.

Health: Republic of Ireland Patients

7. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the annual cost of providing health services to patients from the Republic of Ireland and the amount received for treating these patients.

(AQO 2591/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is a reciprocal arrangement between the UK and the ROI on the provision of healthcare. The financial information for the agreement is dealt with centrally by the Department of Health in England on behalf of all four UK jurisdictions. As it is a centrally held budget, there is no breakdown by individual UK country.

Earlier this year, my Department's guidance to health and social care trusts, which set out the arrangements to be put in place, was to identify all non-resident patients and determine whether they are entitled to healthcare. Trusts are currently working on implementing the guidance. I reiterate that the HSC is, first and foremost, a resource for the residents of Northern Ireland and is not automatically available without charge to everyone regardless of their status.

Mr Allister: Can I express surprise that, although we know the number of children from the Republic of Ireland whom we educate and the cost of that education, we do not know the number of patients whom we treat in Northern Ireland and the cost of their treatment? Surely, as the Finance Minister said himself in a recent debate, that information is vital to future budgetary and planning processes. Is it acceptable to the Minister that he is ignorant of those matters?

Mr Poots: Mr Allister appears to be someone who always wants to have parity with the rest of the UK and wants to be an integral part of the UK. If he had listened to the answer that I gave him, he would have heard me say that the Department of Health in England, on behalf of all four UK jurisdictions, looks after that matter. If he wants to break that, he can write to the Health Minister in England to ask him to break it. Perhaps he could go along with others who want to make a lesser connection between Northern Ireland and the rest of GB.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister in a position to tell us how much money could be saved by both Departments if there were more all-island co-operation?

Mr Poots: It is not so much a matter of saving money. One area that we are looking at is paediatric congenital cardiac care to see how we can work together to ensure that the best services possible can be provided to families and children north and south of the border. The same will apply when the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin is open. The same may apply in circumstances in the South West Acute Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital and to other aspects of care in Altnagelvin. That is in the public's best interest because, in some cases, people in County Fermanagh may lose services if more people do not use them. It is in everybody's interests that we work together on these

issues. Perhaps people in Monaghan and Donegal will get a far better service from the South West Acute Hospital than they would otherwise get. Where it is of mutual benefit to the public's health, we need to act.

Mr Dallat: To cheer this place up a bit, could the Minister tell us of any recent conversations that he has had with James Reilly, the Health Minister in Dublin, on how we can further enhance cross-border co-operation on health matters for the sake of everybody?

Mr Poots: I am not sure that the full details of those meetings would cheer people up. I am happy enough for them to know them. Had the Member announced his resignation today, that might have cheered the House up. Nonetheless, my more recent conversations with Mr Reilly have been around paediatric congenital cardiac care and the work that needs to be done on that. Things are progressing with the Altnagelvin radiotherapy centre as planned and in a very steady way, with good reciprocation from the Republic of Ireland Government. We are also working quite closely with them on minimum pricing for alcohol. That is moving ahead apace. We are watching closely what is going on in Scotland. There are things to which reciprocal arrangements can make a real difference, and we need to apply those.

Health and Care Centres

8. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many primary care centres he proposes to establish during this Assembly term.

(AQO 2592/11-15)

Mr Poots: Work is currently ongoing to construct new health and care centres in Ballymena, Banbridge and Omagh. The centres in Banbridge and Ballymena are due to be completed in spring 2014, and the centre in Omagh, as part of phase 1 of the local hospital project, is due to be completed sometime in 2016. Recently completed health and care centres include Shankill centre and Beech Hall centre, which were both completed in early summer 2011. My aim is to provide a full range of health and social care services that are outside the acute sector and closer to people's homes. I have given approval to move forward with a business case for the development of Lisburn and Newry health and care centres to evaluate an alternative revenue-based funding approach, to test value for money and to work through any other emerging issues. More details about the potential network of health and care hubs across the Province will be available following my Assembly statement on 'Transforming Your Care' tomorrow.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister. What criteria will you use to determine the priority of further health centres?

Mr Poots: We certainly intend to develop a considerable number of health and social care centres. A course of work that was carried out some time ago recommended what was required. Unfortunately, the previous Minister decided to shelve that and allowed it to gather dust. I have dusted it down and resurrected it, and we are currently working on that basis as we move forward.

It will involve non-public funding from the private sector, which will mean that we will have to make repayments. However, those repayments should be on a basis that will ultimately save the health service money, because we will be able to carry out more earlier interventions and, as a consequence, avoid hospital admissions.

3.00 pm

Justice

Office of the Police Ombudsman

1. Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Justice what action his Department intends to take following the consultation on the future operation of the Police Ombudsman's office. (AQO 2598/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The consultation on the future operation of the Police Ombudsman's office ended on 8 June. My Department has prepared a report that summarises the views of all respondents and draws out the key themes that have emerged. The report will be considered by the Justice Committee at its meeting on 11 October and will then be published on my Department's website.

I will continue to work with stakeholders, including the Justice Committee and the Police Ombudsman, in considering what detailed changes are needed to enhance the office's effectiveness and to contribute to public confidence in the operation of the ombudsman's office and policing more widely. Over the coming months, I also intend to meet with all parties to discuss the contents of the report and the next steps.

Once that process is complete, I will publish detailed policy and legislative proposals for consideration in the first half of 2013. The outworking of the consultation, along with the lifting of the suspension of historical cases, which I understand is a priority for the Police Ombudsman, will assist in restoring and securing public confidence in the office.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister will remember that some of the difficulties with regard to confidence in the office came from its dealing with historical cases. Is the Minister in a position to tell us when the ombudsman might start to look again at historical cases? What safeguards will be put in place to ensure that it does not affect public confidence in the future?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCrea for that question. The new ombudsman, Dr Maguire, has made lifting the suspension of investigation into historical cases a significant priority, and I understand that a lot of work is ongoing in the ombudsman's office. The expectation is that Criminal Justice Inspection will do the independent validation, which is part of restoring confidence, during December, with the hope that the work will be able to proceed from January onwards. Members will, of course, also remember that my Department was able to provide additional funding of some £10 million for an enhanced history directive in the ombudsman's office in order to speed up the work that is being done to better provide assurance to the community.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer and particularly his outline on the historical cases. Does the Minister agree with me that one of the things that led to a lack of public confidence in the past was external interference? What steps will be taken to ensure that the office is free from external interference in the future?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr McCartney's point. There were allegations of previous interference and suggestions of

inappropriate behaviour by an official in the then Northern Ireland Office, which were included in the findings of the Tony McCusker report. However, the suggestions made then that there was interference historically have certainly not been suggested by Tony McCusker in the current operation. I am determined to see the good work that is being done by my Department in sponsoring the ombudsman's office continue. There is no suggestion of interference, and I will ensure that there is no operational interference.

I think that it is noteworthy that, although there has been a small drop in public confidence in the operation of the office, the most recent survey shows that public confidence remains at over 80%. That is an indication of the good work that is being done, and I am committed to ensuring that that good work continues.

Mr A Maginness: Dr Maguire has taken over as ombudsman and has brought stability and an element of reorganisation to the office. When will the chief executive be appointed? That will further help the efficiency and effectiveness of that office.

Mr Ford: I entirely agree with Mr Maginness about the importance of getting a new chief executive into the office. That process is under way, and it is, of course, being led by Dr Maguire. It not my direct responsibility, although the Department will have to agree remuneration and terms and conditions. It is my understanding that the process is proceeding speedily. I think that we would all hope to see the new chief executive in place as soon as possible.

Mr McCarthy: As usual, we are grateful to the Minister for the work done over the past year to improve the effectiveness — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Ask a question.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister tell us what arrangements are in place to increase the effectiveness of the office?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for reminding me that there are a few in the House who agree with me some of the time. It is always good to know that. *[Laughter.]* A number of issues clearly run together, including the fact that society and the Assembly have not collectively worked out how we deal with the impact of the past. The result is that justice agencies, including the Police Ombudsman in particular, have to perform a lot of tasks that I wish that they did not have to perform because we had a more inclusive process. However, I believe that we have seen Dr Maguire take a grip of the office since his appointment and that work is being done to deal with the historical backlog; to ensure that comfort can be provided to victims and bereaved families; to ensure that that work will be done in a proper, professional and efficient way; and to ensure that the staffing structures will be put in place and the money my Department is providing will be put to good use. So I believe that the House can have confidence in the future of the ombudsman's office.

Hate Crime

Mr D Bradley: Ceist uimhir a dó. *[Interruption.]*

2. Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Justice whether he will review the Criminal Justice (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 with a view to improving the response to hate crime. (AQO 2599/11-15)

Mr Ford: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, no translation was necessary, thank you. *[Interruption.]* The Criminal Justice (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 places a requirement on the courts to consider hostility as an aggravating factor that increases the seriousness of an offence and to state in open court that the offence was so aggravated. An offence is aggravated by hostility if, at the time of an offence or immediately before or after its commission, the offender demonstrates hostility to the victim based on the victim's racial, religious or sexual orientation group, or on their disability; or where the offence is motivated wholly or partly by hostility towards members of a group. The implementation of the legislation has been subject to review, including by Criminal Justice Inspection, which carried out a follow-up inspection in 2010. On foot of that inspection, changes were made to the management of cases through the justice system, but it is clear that further work is needed.

I have instructed my officials to review the implementation of the 2004 order to identify and address any weaknesses in the administration of cases through the courts. The review will ensure that all necessary changes are made to the recording of cases in courts to ensure that the legislation is applied as it was intended to be. I have instructed officials from across all relevant justice agencies to monitor the use of the 2004 order and to report to me regularly. I will keep the issue under review, and I am determined to ensure that the legislation is effective. If the changes being made to the system do not improve the use of the order, I will revisit the use of the legislation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that, for the courtesy of the House, all questions must be translated.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra ar cheist uimhir a dó. I thank the Minister for answering question 2. Given the increase in sectarian hate crime, will he strengthen the courts' capacity to increase sentences in order to highlight the odious nature of such crimes?

Mr Ford: I am not sure whether we need to enhance the courts' capacity in the way that the Member suggests. The key difficulty, as we all appreciate, is that we start off with victims' perceptions of the crime. Whether that is necessarily accepted by the police in how it is investigated, or by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) in how it is prosecuted, are different issues. It is also clear that, at times, it can be very difficult to obtain a conviction that includes the hate element of a hate crime, even though it may be relatively easy to get a conviction for the offence as such. That is the sort of issue that I have asked officials to look at, and if there are specific suggestions for changes that need to be made to make the legislation more effective, I will consider them. In many cases, we should recognise that although a case is not prosecuted with the addition for hate crime, cases are successfully prosecuted for the basic underlying offence. That certainly does not mean that people are getting off. However, there is obviously more work to be done about the enhancement.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. In doing the review, is the Minister's Department engaging with relevant sectoral bodies, such as NICEM, NICRAS and, indeed, the Assembly's all-party group?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Kelly. At this stage, the issue is for my officials and those who are in other relevant agencies to examine their practice. However, I have no doubt that, to conduct a review properly, it will be necessary after that preliminary work to engage, as he highlighted, with all the relevant organisations, such as NICEM.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister elaborate on what discussions he or his officials have had with other Departments with a view to supporting existing, or instigating new, initiatives that are aimed at tackling hate crime in our community? Those could include renewing the media campaign that was so successful in the past.

Mr Ford: Clearly, Mrs Dobson is widening the issue from the specific one of the operation of hate crime to hate, which is not an issue that is solely for my Department. I believe that the very fact that I stand here with the emblem of the Unite Against Hate campaign in my lapel indicates my Department's commitment to engage in that work across a range of hate areas and in all the work that needs to be done. I trust that that would be recognised by all Members.

Ms Lo: I believe that I was the victim of a recent hate crime, whereby my house was damaged. The damage was slight, but it was damaged. I must say that when I called the police, they responded really quickly. Within minutes, a police car arrived at my door. Will the Minister let us know the number of hate crimes that have been prosecuted and the proportion that succeeded in convictions?

Mr Ford: I certainly sympathise with my colleague for the attack on her house. I remember that she also suffered a personal attack some time ago, so we should recognise the seriousness of hate crime, and, indeed, of a variety of crime and its effect on members of society.

The statistics that she asks for are slightly difficult to present in a meaningful way. Research that Neil Jarman of Queen's presented at the recent conference shows that the number of crimes that are recorded as hate crime incidents in the victim's perception — or hate incidents, as they are recorded — compared with the number that the Police Service records as hate crimes results in a drop of something like a third. The number of cases where it is possible to produce a file to go to the PPS drops by a further 50%. The number that the Public Prosecution Service is prepared to prosecute drops by a further 50%, and then a very small number are successfully prosecuted for the hate element. As I indicated in my principal answer, that is the sort of issue that we need to address. However, it is an issue that goes beyond the immediate management of individual cases and into the way in which wider society reacts to hate between different groups.

Prison Officers: Memorial

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Justice what plans his Department has to provide a memorial for the 29 prison officers who lost their life whilst on duty. (AQO 2600/11-15)

Mr Ford: I recognise the sacrifice that was made by the 29 prison staff who lost their lives while in service, and I acknowledge how important it is that, as we look to the future, we also remember the past. Across the individual sites that make up the prison estate, there are four commemorative plaques bearing the roll of honour and two memorial stones, as well as gardens of remembrance at the college at Millisle and Magilligan Prison. The

Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) will maintain those memorials across the estate where establishments remain operational. In the event that any establishment ceases to be operational, the Prison Service will identify alternative sites where the memorials can be relocated.

The outline prisons estate strategy also considers how best NIPS should remember those who lost their lives while on duty. That strategy is subject to public consultation, and careful consideration will be given to any proposals that are raised through that consultation process.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the Minister's commitment to honour the memory and sacrifice of these prison officers. Will he assure me that there will be no delay and that, if a relocation has to happen, he will contact the families to discuss where this appropriate memorial will be put?

3.15 pm

Mr Ford: I recognise the sensitivity that Mrs Hale has outlined in her supplementary question. I am not sure that we could necessarily consult all the individual families, but I can certainly give a commitment that every effort will be made to contact those organisations that have specific responsibilities and that represent them, and to ensuring that any question of relocation of memorials, including the possibility that has been raised by the Prison Officers' Association (POA) and others about a specific memorial garden elsewhere, will be addressed in as sensitive a way as can be.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Is it his intention to discuss the matter with the Prison Officers' Association and its spokesman? Can he further confirm whether HMP Hydebank Wood young offenders' centre is viewed as a potential location for such a memorial, given the desire for work to be done there by the POA?

Mr Ford: I can certainly confirm to Mr Copeland that I have discussed the issue with the POA and expect to continue to do so. It has made specific representations about part of the land at Hydebank Wood. Obviously, the wider issues of the estate strategy have to take that particular point into account.

Mr Allister: Is it not the case that, by saying that the matter will wait out the outcome of the estate strategy consultation, the Minister is dragging his feet on an issue that is a slight on the sacrifice of 29 officers, and that it is the very clear view of the Prison Officers' Association that he should get on with it, and get on with it now, at Hydebank?

Mr Ford: Mr Allister can talk about all the slights that he likes. The recognition that we have a number of memorial tablets already in place and that we are seriously considering the question of an alternative memorial — particularly in the context of the college at Millisle closing in the next few years — is an indication that the issue is being considered with appropriate sensitivity. If Mr Allister is suggesting that we should go ahead and advance a relocation of the memorial garden from Millisle to Hydebank Wood in advance of properly working through the estate strategy, with all its financial implications, I do not think that that would be a particularly wise use of public money.

Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the use of body scanners at Magilligan and Hydebank prisons. (AQO 2601/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have previously announced, the Prison Service continues to make progress on the testing and evaluation of body-scanning technologies. The first of two millimetre-wave body scanners has been operational in Magilligan prison for the past two weeks. Although it is very early in the evaluation process, the pilot is progressing well. A second millimetre-wave scanner from a different supplier is due to be delivered to Hydebank Wood young offenders' centre next week, and a similar pilot will commence then.

Mr F McCann: Thank you very much. Will the Minister tell us whether there is a timeline provided for the licensing of a body scanner at Maghaberry?

Mr Ford: If Mr McCann is referring to the transmission X-ray scanner that is being considered for Maghaberry, as opposed to the millimetre-wave scanners at the others, I cannot give any definite timeline beyond the work that is being done and is due to be completed in the Prison Service by the end of this month. However, that will then require consultation with a number of other Departments across the UK, and I can give no timeline for the potential for that. The work being done on that by the Northern Ireland Prison Service is at the forefront of work being done anywhere in the UK, and we will have to wait for some of the other regions to catch up with us.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. However, given that an integral part of ensuring that an effective body scanner is in operation is to have bodies to be scanned, will he give us an indication that there will be a prison at Magilligan in the future, contrary to the current consultation, and that he will ensure that Magilligan prison remains where it is and is not relocated?

Mr Ford: Pardon me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I did not expect to be answering question 15 at this stage. Given that there is an ongoing consultation on the estate strategy, I cannot give the sort of assurance that Mr Storey is asking for. I can give an assurance that, contrary to what may be the perception, when the Department of Justice carries out consultations, they are genuine consultations seeking people's opinions. That is why there is a public meeting in Limavady tonight, which, I suspect, will concentrate largely on the future of Magilligan prison. The Criminal Justice Inspection has highlighted the positive work being done at Magilligan, but in its report, it also highlights the difficulties with the accommodation, which is simply described as being wholly unsuitable.

There are serious issues that need to be addressed. I am determined to see that we have a prison estate that is fit for purpose and is not dealing with the situation of 30 and 40 years ago. If people can suggest appropriate ways of using the Magilligan site as opposed to another site, I hope to hear them, but we cannot give a blank cheque to simply rebuild Magilligan on its current site as it is, particularly in the expensive way proposed under direct rule. I am keen to hear any suggestions on the best way to make use of the estate that the Prison Service has or might build in the future.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to the question from the Member for West Belfast, will the Minister accept the rationale

for the introduction of pilot schemes at Hydebank Wood and Magilligan prison to enable him to set in train the installation of scanners in Magilligan? Is it not reasonable to expect him to outline to the House the time frame within which he expects those scanners to be installed?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Ramsey's point that it may be reasonable to ask me to give a timeline, but where there is no precedent anywhere in the UK and where consultation is required with the other jurisdictions and a number of Whitehall Departments, it would simply be unrealistic for me to give any specific commitment. The commitment I can give is that the matters will be proceeded with as fast as I can manage. That means that good work is being done in the Prison Service, but when issues get to Whitehall or in consultation with Scotland and Wales, we can give no specific timeline except that we will not be lacking.

Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to carry out a review of delays in the removal of bodies from the scene following sudden death.
(AQO 2602/11-15)

Mr Ford: The loss of a loved one is a distressing time for families, and I can understand that, when the death is sudden, unexpected or violent, the distress can be all the more traumatic. I appreciate that, in some cases, the necessary involvement of the police and the coroner in investigating a death can result in further unintentional distress being caused.

The police have necessary duties to perform in investigating sudden deaths, and the particular circumstances of each death will dictate the course of action taken. There are legitimate and necessary steps that must be taken before a body can be moved from the scene of death. A funeral director will not be tasked by the police to remove a body until they are satisfied that their investigation is at an appropriate stage to do so.

The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland has established contracts with funeral directors to remove bodies from the scene of death within specific time frames. In Mid Ulster, and indeed, all of police F and G districts, that is two hours. In the vast majority of cases, these time frames are met and there is no delay in the removal of bodies, so no review is required.

I can reassure the Member and the House that any concerns raised by families are fully investigated and responded to by the Coroners Service.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that the time frame for the collection of such bodies should not just be the two hours allocated from when the police contact the contracted undertaker, but should be from when the police are first notified?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that I cannot agree to that. No one other than the police officers and those who assist them from the forensic science agency at the scene can possibly give, in advance, a time frame for how long it will be required to secure a scene and carry out the necessary investigations at the scene.

Therefore, although I accept, and as I acknowledged in my first answer, that there can be additional trauma for families in those circumstances, the important thing is

to ensure that the investigation is carried out properly and that any evidential opportunities that might lead to a conviction are taken. In those circumstances, all that can be done is to set the time frame from the time when the Coroners Service notifies the funeral director who is responsible for lifting the body.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Minister, this is something that came to my attention when a neighbour died suddenly recently. You have mentioned the two-hour time frame. This woman lay for four hours, and the undertakers arrived late because they had got lost on the way from Lurgan. It was in a rural area and they did not know the way.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr Lynch: Does the Minister agree with me that it is unacceptable for someone to have to wait four hours for a loved one to be picked up?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Lynch. If it was four hours from the point that the undertaker was tasked by the coroner, that is unacceptable because the time frame is two hours. Current performance in F district, the south-west area, is that 93% of removals met the two-hour time frame. In a further 5% of removals, the two-hour time frame was exceeded by only five minutes or less. In fact, only one of the 61 removals to the end of August 2012 exceeded 125 minutes. Clearly, one is one too many, but we need to acknowledge that, in many cases, the delay is caused by necessary work that has to be carried out by the police rather than the specific issue of the removal time.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Minister content that the State Pathologist's Department has the capacity to deal with the number of current cases? Can he give some outline of the role of the State Pathologist's Department?

Mr Ford: I have no evidence to suggest that there is inadequate capacity in the State Pathologist's office. Frequently, delays that are blamed on the pathologist are not necessarily the pathologist's fault. In one example that was drawn to my attention recently, there was an issue of a delay over a weekend. The coroner required to contact the patient's GP, but the GP was not available over the weekend. That cannot be blamed on the Coroners Service, because contacting the GP was an essential part of carrying out the work before consideration of a post-mortem examination. So, a number of factors come together. However, if Mrs Kelly or any other Member wishes to raise specific concerns about resourcing for the Coroners Service, I would be happy to take any evidence from them.

Human Trafficking

6. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice to outline his Department's plans for tackling human trafficking.
(AQO 2603/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have said to the House before, there is a raft of work ongoing to tackle human trafficking. Work is being taken forward by the Organised Crime Task Force's (OCTF) immigration and human trafficking subgroup and others on three fronts: prevention, prosecution and protection.

On prevention, there is training for health and social care staff, police officers and others. In fact, 2,800 PSNI officers

and staff have completed an online training package. I will launch guidance tomorrow on working arrangements for the welfare and protection of adult victims of human trafficking, which is directed primarily at the PSNI and health and social care trusts. Work is also being taken forward on a project to change mindsets and to drive down demand for organised crime activities generally. Proposals on engagement with non-governmental organisations will be announced at an event for NGOs on Anti-Trafficking Day and Anti-Slavery Day on 18 October.

Work ongoing on prosecution includes two new clauses on human trafficking offences in the Criminal Justice Bill. Proactive investigations are being taken forward by the PSNI, which is liaising as relevant with an Garda Síochána. There have been two convictions for human trafficking, and others are pending. Sentencing guidance on human trafficking was set out in April 2012 in the case of *Crown v Pis*. The Public Prosecution Service's policy for prosecuting cases of human trafficking will be published before the end of the year.

On protection, my Department funds a package of support for all victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland during the recovery and reflection period. That amounted to some £145,000 in 2011-12.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he satisfied that the UK Border Agency (UKBA) has enough staff to deal with human trafficking? Can he elaborate on what discussions have taken place with the agency in relation to staffing levels?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Spratt's point, but it is not for me to be satisfied with the operation of the UK Border Agency. I will leave that to the Home Office. What I can confirm is that I have had discussions with my ministerial colleague in Scotland and with the UK Border Agency about issues such as how we control movement across the North Channel in and out of Belfast, Larne and Cairnryan ports. I believe that good work is being done with the involvement, for example, of the PSNI alongside UKBA. I will duck his precise question on the UKBA and leave that to the Home Secretary.

Mr Beggs: Those involved in trafficking exploit weaknesses in the system. In the past, I have been advised of people destroying their IDs, claiming to be minors, and then being referred to social services. Can the Minister tell us whether there have been cases of people who might be involved in trafficking unwittingly disappearing from the referrals of social services and going into the hands of traffickers, who are modern-day slavers?

3.30 pm

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Beggs's point, which is on something that is clearly seen as a matter of concern in different regions of the UK. I have no specific knowledge of the issue of those who are under age and are in the care of health and social care trusts. Therefore, I fear that I would have to pass that one over to Edwin Poots.

Mr McDevitt: Has the Minister had any specific conversations with the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, Mr Alan Shatter TD, about human trafficking? If so, what was the specific nature of those conversations?

Mr Ford: I can certainly confirm to Mr McDevitt that human trafficking is an issue that features almost every time

that I meet Alan Shatter. Indeed, it features almost every time that I meet Kenny MacAskill. It is an ongoing issue of concern. I have seen the good work that is being done by the immigration and human trafficking subgroup of OCTF, where good work is being done between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána. That is one of the key ways in which we will address the issues of trafficking across an open border. Obviously, the issue is of significant concern to many Members, and I will do my best to ensure that we continue to maintain those good relationships with Scotland and the Republic, our closest neighbours and where movement happens between those jurisdictions and this one.

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021. — [Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister).]

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): I listened carefully to the points that were made in the debate, and I am grateful to my ministerial colleagues and their respective Departments and to the many external stakeholders who responded to the consultation for their help in the planning of this investment strategy. During the debate, a number of Members raised the issue of the length of time in bringing the strategy to the Assembly. Some, more than others, were prepared to ascribe sinister motives to that. More often than not, the deputy First Minister and I get attacked for pushing things through the Assembly and not allowing sufficient time for consideration and consultation. This time, this had more to do with the attempt by the deputy First Minister and I to encourage alternative finance as a feature. I am glad that, because of the delay that we agreed to, we have been able to include in the strategy £1 billion of alternative finance. We always have to take a decision on the most appropriate time to come to the Assembly with the issues, and we had to deal with a number of unfolding matters.

The Chairman of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister very rightly indicated that the economy is the number one priority for the Executive. That is outlined in our Programme for Government, and, naturally, the investment strategy flows from that. The blueprint before us will determine and shape Northern Ireland's success in the coming years, and, even in these hard times, I can assure you that the Executive have not been standing still. Much has been achieved since 2008, even against the difficult economic background that we are facing. We have already provided capital investment at unprecedented levels, delivering some £6.5 billion in the past four years. We have improved roads, public transport, schools, healthcare facilities, libraries, water treatment and telecommunications networks.

A number of Members raised the issue of the reduction in overall investment, and, of course, the decision by the coalition Government in Westminster to cut public spending by some 40% was, naturally, going to have a very considerable impact on our spending plans, particularly our infrastructure programmes. As an Executive, we have pressed the Government to put more funding, and immediately, into capital spend throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. The deputy First Minister and I signed a communiqué, along with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, to ask for precisely that to occur. The overall impact is that the Budget that we operate at present gives us an investment strategy valued at £13.3 billion, and we will continue to apply as much pressure as possible.

The Executive recognise the importance of improving Northern Ireland's infrastructure, not just for the benefit of public services but to make this region an attractive place for investment. I remind the House that, in the past four years, the Executive have made almost £3 billion worth

of commitments to the economy. At ground level, it has supported more than 15,000 new jobs, 9,600 of which came from some 170 projects set up by inward investors and have had the effect of protecting 1,300 existing jobs. It is important that the majority of the jobs created during this period are high-quality positions offering attractive rewards. Average salaries associated with new inward investment to Northern Ireland have risen by about 40% thanks to our appeal as an operating location to the software, IT, telecommunications and aerospace industries. Invest Northern Ireland is on target to meet the Programme for Government goal of 25,000 jobs by 2015, and, thanks to the Executive's energy and promotional drive, Northern Ireland is winning a higher share of these technological projects than Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland.

I say to the Chairman of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, though in his capacity as party leader, that when he says to his party conference that the Executive aspire to bring in only 25,000 jobs and so half of the unemployed will remain unemployed, he does not understand business very well. Those are the jobs that the Executive, through Invest Northern Ireland, are helping to fund and promote, but we expect the private sector, which must be the creator of jobs, to, as soon as we get out of this recession, get us down again to the lowest unemployment levels in the United Kingdom.

Software developers here are ahead of anything that you will find anywhere else in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. Software developed in Northern Ireland lies behind trades in every major international exchange, and Belfast is now the prime location of choice, beyond anywhere else in the world, for financial technology and research and development investment. We may be a small region representing a mere 2.8% of the UK population, but I am proud to say that we still won 7% of all the foreign direct investment attracted to the United Kingdom in the past three years. By co-ordinating our investment plans through a single investment strategy and channelling the work flowing from it through Departments and their related public bodies, we can identify opportunities to collaborate with one another other and with our external partners to deliver better services and avoid waste.

The investment strategy represents an intelligent response to today's economic realities, and it is a twin-track solution that will stimulate business and deliver public services. Its priorities were laid down by the Executive. It represents a significant commitment to investing in infrastructure over the coming years. Some £5.1 billion is to be invested over the current Budget period, and up to £13.3 billion will be invested overall. That breaks down as £2.6 billion for our networks, including roads, public transport, gateways, telecoms and energy; £2 billion to be spent on skills, which means schools, higher and further education, youth services and libraries; £3 billion for health, directed towards primary care, public safety, technology and hospital modernisation; £2.5 billion for social projects dealing with regeneration, social housing, culture, arts, sports and inland waterways; £1.8 billion for the environment in respect of water and waste water, waste management, flood risk management and the general environment; £700 million for enterprise and innovation, tourism, rural development, primary industries and public

sector reform; and £700 million for the justice system will contribute to the work of the police, prisons, the probation service, courts and tribunals, forensic science, the Youth Justice Agency and the Public Prosecution Service. We want to maximise the impact on jobs of every pound invested to speed up economic recovery and meet our Programme for Government commitments.

I noticed that some Members raised social clauses, and I would like to point out that considerable progress has been made in that area. We will soon be launching a social clauses toolkit as a best practice guide to maximising social benefits for all relevant publicly procured contracts. I have to say that, when I was in Finance and Personnel, I remember going to my first meeting of the procurement board, where I acted as the chair. At that stage, social clauses were not part of the procurement work programme. Indeed, I was warned to watch out for an independent member who had some crazy notion about inserting social clauses into public procurement contracts. The more I listened to that crazy member, the more I became convinced that he was the one who was sane and sensible. I am glad to say that, since then, we have been able to make this a standard and routine part of what we do with major contracts.

One example of how our investment in the past has helped to develop our economy is the high-speed telecoms link, which enables companies to locate core operations, such as systems support and quality assurance functions, in Belfast or, indeed, in Northern Ireland more generally. In the creative industries, too, major film producers' decisions to consider Northern Ireland as a production location reflect the very high-speed connections from here to post-production facilities on the west coast of the USA. We now have a distinctive competitive advantage as a result of earlier wise decisions.

Mr Nesbitt, a Member for Strangford, raised access to broadband, and a number of Members around the Chamber echoed that point. We recognise that although we can claim to have 100% access to broadband, some areas have to cope with fairly low download speeds. We have now moved on to the next generation of high-speed broadband. We have already invested £51 million in that, and 94% of homes and 89% of business premises have access to high-speed broadband.

In order to deliver an accelerated programme and support jobs, we will look at all the options for raising additional capital from alternative sources in a sustainable, affordable and cost-effective way. To do that, we are committed to working with business and social enterprise where appropriate and to sharing the burden of investment to transform our infrastructure. We recognise that the private sector already provides significant aspects of our infrastructure, such as energy, food distribution and, indeed, it has to be said, telecoms. Our voluntary and community sector has a wealth of knowledge about delivering services, having worked with the public sector to deliver cost-effective services that the user values. We are committed to working with those sectors to maintain the momentum of investment and ensure that we get best value.

My colleague Paul Givan raised asset management. Having invested in infrastructure assets, we must, of course, manage them effectively. An Executive asset management strategy has been drawn up under which all Departments and their sponsored bodies will develop

comprehensive asset management plans identifying clear plans for greater efficiency and value. Through asset management plans, Departments will identify assets that are no longer required or are underused. Those can be used either by another Department or a public body, or they can be sold to raise money for capital reinvestment. Although market conditions are not, of course, favourable for an extensive programme of asset disposal, potential opportunities for sales or other innovative approaches will be considered, always with value for money in mind.

In line with the principle of open and transparent government, the Executive have launched an online information website at www.isni.gov.uk to monitor programme delivery for the investment strategy's key projects and to provide up-to-date information on projects that are in the pipeline. That means that the public and the industry have a greater degree of foresight into public sector investment in a format that is quick and easy to access and understand. Recognising the particular challenges that are facing the construction industry, a delivery-tracking system has been designed to provide updates on major capital projects and programmes and their procurement stage. We will continue to update and improve that website to support the needs of the industry and the public.

3.45 pm

I now turn to some other points that Members raised. The Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness asked why the document did not outline the approach for securing EU funding additional to that which we have at present and why it did not include issues relating to corporation tax. Those matters, of course, are not contained in the document because they are relevant to the Programme for Government as opposed to the investment strategy. He will see that they are contained in that document and that we have goals set in the Programme for Government on those issues.

A number of other Members also raised the issue of corporation tax. I point out that the ministerial working group will meet on 18 October. We have not abandoned the issue. We are not looking for a plan B; we are still promoting plan A.

The Member for Mid Ulster Mr McGlone raised the issue of cohesion, sharing and integration. I am not quite sure exactly how it fitted into the debate. He will, of course, be aware that we have delayed handing over the document on cohesion, sharing and integration at the behest of his party. The Executive want to make every penny of capital count for our capital investment towards providing better public services and making Northern Ireland an even better place for business by employing a carefully thought-out strategic approach. This document helps us to do that. It will be an ongoing process, because government will always need to be flexible, responding to change and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. Crucially, the investment strategy represents new thinking and strikes an important balance between planning ahead strategically and giving Departments the flexibility to use their allocations effectively.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I see that I am running out of time. There are a number of other issues. We will look over them and reply in writing to Members where we have not

been able to include their comments today. I commend the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021.

Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 December 2012 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill [NIA 9/11-15]. — [Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development).]

Farming

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the current crisis in farming caused by the failure of the food supply chain to react to rising production costs and feed prices in particular; further notes the lack of transparency within the food supply chain and the existence of a very significant differential between Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Republic of Ireland producer prices; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to acknowledge the crisis and to bring forward initiatives to alleviate the short-term financial pressures on farmers.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, it is my privilege to bring this important topic to the attention of the Assembly, the Minister and the wider public. The Committee decided to table the motion in light of concerns raised with it by various bodies and stakeholders. Individual members of the Committee, and no doubt many other MLAs, have heard at first hand from their constituents about the crisis facing our farming industry. Indeed, given the media coverage of similar and ongoing crises all over Great Britain and the world, it would be hard to avoid being aware of the crisis at the moment.

What is happening? Our agrifood sector is one of Northern Ireland's successes in the current economic climate. Over the past 10 years, external sales from the food and drink processing industry have risen 66% in real terms, with external sales of almost £2.4 billion recorded in 2009. External sales represent approximately 70% of the value of all sales from the food and drinks processing industry. As for our farms and farmers, the total agriculture labour force in 2011 was 47,000 people, with nearly 24,500 active farm businesses in Northern Ireland. By any standards, but particularly in today's economy, the farming industry is a substantial employer. Food and drink processing and our farming industry is spread throughout Northern Ireland, creating jobs and wealth across the Province. It is vital that we do all that we can for both industries and to create the conditions for them to flourish and grow equally.

Farming is at the very foundation of potential economic growth, and the industry is under severe strain. The heart

of the matter is that many of our local farmers are being paid less for their products than they cost to produce, and that is putting them under severe financial pressure. More must be done to help our farmers receive a fairer price for their produce. Otherwise, one of the most important industries in Northern Ireland could collapse. If help is not forthcoming, it could have serious consequences for the whole of the agrifood industry, which is one of the cornerstones of the proposed economic recovery in Northern Ireland.

Why is the crisis happening? Why is it happening now? It appears to be down to a combination of factors. It is partly coming from rising input prices of fertilisers, animal feeds and oil prices; partly down to the price that the farmer is getting for their produce; and partly down to issues in the food supply chain and the impact of the weather, not only in Northern Ireland, but across the world.

Let me give you some examples of what I mean. There has been a massive hike in grain prices in the past year. According to research commissioned by the Committee, the price of soya bean, for example, the common foodstuff imported into Northern Ireland and used to feed cattle, pigs, sheep and poultry, has increased by 66% in eight months; and, over the past 10 years, one of the most commonly used fertilisers has increased by 223%. As for the weather, and it has been a bad summer here, the period from June to August was the wettest for 100 years. It was also one of the dullest and coolest. For farmers, a wet, cold and dull summer meant that livestock had to be kept indoors for longer, and that meant extra demands on fodder. The harvesting of crops has also been affected, and there are some concerns about the effect that the weather has had on the quality of the crops harvested, particularly silage.

There is also the impact of the worst drought in the USA since 1939 and, indeed, the drought in the Russian and South American farming belts. That means that the world price for the grains and seeds that we import into Northern Ireland to feed our livestock will continue to increase. The ramifications of that shortage of feed crop will be felt in all the farming industries, be that pig, meat or poultry producers.

It is currently costing more to produce our milk and meat than the farmer can sell at, and it looks like costs will not be going down any time soon. Let me expand on that latter point. During the summer, farmers from all over the UK and Northern Ireland protested over the gap between what they receive for their produce and what the customer pays. There appears to be a lack of transparency in the food supply chain. During the summer, the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) opened a shop for one day at its headquarters to demonstrate that. It sold produce, not at supermarket prices but at the price received by the farmer. The gap between the two prices is shocking and alarming. There is some hope that the Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill, which is going through Westminster, will help to address that issue. There is also some concern that the Bill lacks teeth and will not make any real, meaningful difference. Irrespective of that, the Bill is some time away from coming into law. In the meantime, the crisis is here and now, and we do not have the luxury of waiting to see what difference it will make.

Local farmers have always been at the mercy of the weather and, indeed, know all about shifting prices driven

by market forces. It is the very pace of change that is concerning at the moment. The marked and rapid increase in animal feed, the unpredictability in world markets and the price variations between regions, on top of one of the worst summers for decades, are having an impact. Because of those conditions, we as a Committee are calling for the Minister to acknowledge the crisis and to bring forward initiatives to alleviate the short-term financial pressures on farmers. As a Committee, we would like to see the Minister accept that what farmers are facing is a combination of extraordinary circumstances, and, in recognising that farming is the foundation of one of the main pillars of growth in Northern Ireland, to bring forward initiatives to help farmers weather the storm.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will speak now on behalf of my party, the DUP. Yesterday, I was at a harvest service, where we gave thanks for the yield and harvest we have had this year. I know farmers are generally very positive and thankful for what they do receive. We have to always keep that in mind. There are people throughout the world who are starving. However, as legislators and MLAs, we have a responsibility to Northern Ireland, its population and its farming community to ensure that what we do makes the industry the best that it possibly can be. We cannot interfere with business. We do not want to interfere with the commercialism of the sector. However, we have to ensure that we have a Department that is fit for purpose, works well in Europe and has the capacity to deal with whatever Europe brings down by way of single farm payments. We have to have a payment agency, Department and Ministry that are fit for purpose and will best alleviate the pressures on our industry. I am not sure that we can say that at this time. I am not here to blame the Minister for the weather, although I would let her take the credit for a really great summer. We cannot do anything about the weather. The Minister cannot even do anything about global markets or the price of soya beans and fertilisers, but she must ensure that her Department is fit for purpose and running at full capacity to make sure that any practical measures she can apply that will help the industry are put in place.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. On the point about what the Minister can do, you talked in your opening remarks, speaking as the Chair, about the unprecedented weather we have had. Notwithstanding the problems many families have had with flooding, surely the Minister could make a financial contribution to help those farmers who have suffered poor harvests and who are using next year's supplies already.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for bringing that forward. Something that could be implemented is advance payments. We know the debacle there has been over the years around the single farm payment and how that has been drawn out. Some farmers wait nine months to be paid their single farm payment, which is crucial to the industry. I ask the Minister this: when are we going to be in the position of the Republic of Ireland? We can talk all we like about working in partnership with the Republic and our neighbours, but when are we going to be in a position, as it is, to issue advance payments to the vast bulk of our farming industry? Next week or the week after, farmers in the Republic of Ireland will receive 50% of their payments, which will help them throughout the lean period as we come into the winter. Sinn Féin has had this Ministry since devolution. When are we going to see real benefits and

dividends? When are we going to see a Department that is fit for purpose and fit to react to the pressures and crises that we have now? This might well be a short-term crisis, but the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) must be flexible and agile if it is to deal with the issues and actually make a difference —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close?

Mr Frew: — and assist the farming industry.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. At the end of August, I was invited to attend a meeting of the UFU at its headquarters, along with MLAs, MEPs and reps for the pork producers. It was quite clear from that meeting that there is a crisis in the pig industry. The cost of feed was discussed. The price is tripling, with suppliers being given no credit. The pig producer in England, using the same feed and producing the same finished pork product, is anything from 8p to 10p per pig better off. The Member mentioned the cost of feed stuffs. At the present time, wheat prices for November 2014 have already been agreed at £164 a ton. That is for 2014. The cost of feed, as producers know, is 60% to 70% of the cost of producing, for example, a pig. We talked about the difference between pork prices here and in England, and it is the same for beef. You are talking about 40p a kilo, which equates to about £140 per animal.

Given the present figures, around 8,000 cattle are slaughtered here every week. If you take it that they are 40p per kilo, it equates to a loss of around £1 million per week. The loss to the pig industry on the same differential is £160,000 per week, which equates to roughly £7 million per year. Those are the figures that we need to look at instead of trying to see what everybody can do. Those are the figures that we need to be united against and see whether we can improve.

4.00 pm

Wheat, barley and maize crops are up, and heating and transport costs are up, making the profitability of the industry bleak. The food chain is greatly controlled by major retailers. They control the farm gate price. In some ways, the processors are in the hands of the retailers, and the producers are in the hands of the processors. It is a vicious circle that goes round and round, and the one person who is suffering all the time is the farmer.

In 2008, the Competition Commission completed an inquiry into the UK grocery market, with 93,000 stores and sales totalling over £143 billion. In 2009, it was found that four of the main retail chains — Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's — accounted for two thirds of that total. That is the problem facing the farming industry today.

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

In August 2010, the British Government decided to establish a grocery code adjudicator who would have the authority to protect farmers' contracts, settle disputes and generally regulate the industry. That needs to be put in place as soon as possible.

Last week, we got formal European Commission recognition of the North's freedom from Aujeszky's disease. Pig producers brought that up at the UFU headquarters and said that it would greatly help the industry. I know that the Minister had been very active on

getting that lifted, and we have found out that it has been lifted, and it has also been lifted in the South of Ireland. That will allow pig producers to get their new markets and increase trade throughout the island of Ireland.

This Minister has recognised the plight of the farming industry and the structures and pricing, which is outside the control of DARD. She has involved the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in a supply chain development programme. She set up a red meat subgroup for the beef industry, and she set up a plan to make the industry profitable. At the end of September —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: No, I am nearly finished.

The European Central Bank announced the exchange rate for converting the single farm payment to sterling. *[Interruption.]* Sorry?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: No, I will not. Sit where you are.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that there is to be no correspondence across the Chamber. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr McMullan: The exchange rate in 2011 was 0.86665 overall. That means a reduction here for the farmers in the region £20 million.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr McMullan: The beef industry needs a single farm payment to sustain its business because it is being paid well below production costs.

Mrs Dobson: This debate is extremely important for every farming family in Northern Ireland and for everyone who works in, or is associated with, our agriculture industry. It has been said in this Chamber before, and it is no exaggeration, that the Northern Ireland agriculture industry is a jewel in the crown of our local economy. However, all sections of the industry — the producers, processors and retailers — need to work together in harmony to achieve a healthy and future-proof industry. It is unacceptable that farming families are receiving prices for their produce, which are far below their production costs. This is leading to hardship and threatens the future of farming families in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the vibrancy of our rural way of life.

Farmers are faced with spiralling feed costs caused by climate conditions in other countries, which are far beyond their control, yet they are being left to count the cost. That is especially damaging for pig producers, as almost three quarters of their production costs are feed related. The adverse weather conditions have resulted in an estimated drop of over 60% in fruit growers' crop yield, and I know that representatives of the Northern Ireland Fruit Growers Association are at Stormont today. The crippling effect is also being felt by local beef farmers, who are receiving almost £200 less per head of cattle than those in other regions of the United Kingdom. Recently, farmers have been expressing their anger about low farm gate prices, especially for milk, pork and beef.

The Ulster Farmers' Union held a series of crisis meetings, which I know representatives from political parties across

the House attended. It also held a sale of produce at production costs in protest against supermarket prices. That was aimed at making the public aware of the wide disparity between the cost of production and the price shown on the shelf. Indeed, one constituent recently called at my office to ask when the Ulster Farmers' Union was having its sale again, because she heard how low the prices were. That proves that the strategy worked.

I declare an interest as a beef farmer and as someone who attended the Ulster Farmers' Union meetings in August. The Ulster Farmers' Union is absolutely right to stand up against the clear and present danger that exists and, indeed, threatens the long-term future of the industry. Farmers live with that situation every single day and constantly tell me that it cannot continue. They are clinging on by their fingernails. Farming really is in crisis.

As we know, running a farm is more than just a job; it is a way of life. The work is constant and physically demanding, involving 12-hour days of feeding animals and milking at 6.00 am. Now, more than ever, the job of a farmer is mentally demanding, with the added anguish of knowing that all that hard work is likely to result in a financial loss. How would anyone else cope with that? This spells disaster for the future. Farmers are already concerned about the changes coming to CAP reform. Dairy farmers are worried about the future in a post-quota world, and all farmers are suffering as a result of soaring feed prices. The Department must urgently engage with the industry to ensure a fair distribution of profits for everyone.

The Ulster Farmers' Union welcomed the political willingness of representatives to attend its crisis meetings. However, farmers will now be looking for results and political action.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member agree that one way to resolve the imbalance, as many of us would describe it, in the amount of profit that retailers return to farmers would be for Planning Service to put in place criteria so that major retail stores could not get planning permission unless they gave back a reasonable profit?

Mrs Dobson: I thank my party colleague for that intervention. He is quite correct, and I welcome that suggestion.

As I said, it is critical that farmers see not just a willingness to attend their meetings but a willingness to act.

In response to a recent question for written answer that I tabled on producers receiving a fair farm gate price, the Minister said that she hoped that prices would recover in the coming months. The Minister needs to move beyond the realms of hope and start directing some of DARD's copious resources at finding answers to the farming crisis. I also urge the Minister, when responding to the debate, to detail the lobbying in which she and her Department have engaged to urge the coalition Government to progress legislation to create a groceries code adjudicator. The Ulster Unionist Party has led on this issue since 2007, when we launched a campaign calling for profits to be more equally distributed across the supply chain. I would also like the Minister to tell us whether she will follow Minister Paice's lead and hold negotiations with the industry to work towards a voluntary code of practice. I am aware that the Minister met local fruit growers earlier this year, and I look forward to hearing what initiatives she intends to bring forward to assist the sector.

Farming families across Northern Ireland will be looking to this debate to deliver stability and a return to profitability for the industry. I again urge the Minister to replace hope with action —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mrs Dobson: — and to direct the resources of her Department towards ending the farming crisis before we reap a harvest of devastation for the industry across Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Rogers: I support the motion. Every business will sink or swim depending on cash flow. Margins have been further reduced, with ongoing price increases in fuel, fertilizer and feed. Bank borrowing has become more difficult across the industry. Rightly, the Executive respond when companies such as FG Wilson experience difficulties, but we need a similar response for our biggest industry: that of our farmers.

Members touched on mother nature and the weather, but our cereal farmers have experienced a drop in yields. Many potato fields are flooded and their crop water slain. With the shorter days and less likelihood of good drying, some fields will never be dug. Although potato prices are better, that will not compensate for the losses. With so much rain, the quality and quantity of silage are poor. Silage has to be supplemented with more meal to keep the milk yield up or to finish the beef.

When one reads the headlines in the farming press, one would mistakenly believe that milk producers are OK. However, if you are receiving 29p a litre and it costs 30p a litre to produce, it does not stack up. Other Members spoke about the price differential between here and Britain, which is up to £200 with cattle and £12 for pigs or lambs. It just does not add up.

Beef producers in particular in Down and Armagh are concerned about the future of beef processing in the area. With plans to build a shopping centre on the ABP site in Newry, farmers and, indeed, the entire local economy are depending on that plant to be relocated in the area. I call on DARD to work closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to ensure that that new processing facility is progressed without delay.

The Minister is, no doubt, aware that our white meat sector is stressed financially as a result of soaring production costs. Reports indicate that every pig and poultry unit in the country is so dependent on bought-in feed that the prime outlay in their respective businesses is operating at a loss week by week. Feed costs have risen in the region of 30% in the past 16 weeks alone, and, what is more, they continue to rise. The Minister will, no doubt, agree with me that such a scenario is simply not sustainable. If it is allowed to continue, many pig and poultry producers will cease production, the consequences of which are frightening, and not for them alone.

The warning must go out to not only the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development but the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the entire Executive that, if our pig and poultry producers close their enterprises, what is next for local processors if they have no local produce to work with? Will they keep the plant doors open waiting on a possible recovery in farming lines? I think that we know the answer to that.

It is simple fact that, if the cheque coming through the producer's letter box does not even match the production costs, one does not need a degree in economics to analyse the viability of the business. It must be remembered that, although feed is the prime outlay in pig and poultry production, there are other costs such as labour and energy, which everyone who is interested in household economics knows are continuing to rise at an astronomical rate.

Add to that, as other Members articulated, the problems with DARD, whether that is the countryside management scheme, late single farm payments or the Euro exchange and a loss of £20 million to the farmer. It is my belief that the single farm payment needs to be redistributed at a flat rate, particularly for the hill man.

Mr Elliott: Given his concern for hill farmers, will the Member appreciate that the introduction of a national park could also be detrimental to them?

Mr Rogers: I agree, yes. Thank you for the intervention. So, for the hill man, the countryside management scheme was a regime to manage overgrazing, which resulted in scrub encroachment, under-grazing and decimation of mountain grazing, and forest fire and a £60 million fine. The problem is there, but there are no upland heath experts in DARD to deal with the issue.

I would be totally surprised if the Minister remained unaware of the situation, but, as an elected representative, I wish to hear her give in the Chamber today a fully detailed explanation of the actions that she has taken to date to halt the decline in those key sectors. I am equally anxious to learn of her short- or long-term plans to ensure the recovery of this very important industry and, as another Member said, advanced payments to hard-pressed farmers. Although my anxiety about the matter is borne out of concern for the industry and my constituents who are engaged in farming, I can assure the Minister that there are many producers out there who will be listening and will be deeply interested in what she will tell them today and in how she intends to bring to the Executive our concerns, which are the concerns of Northern Ireland's largest employer, the farming industry.

4.15 pm

Mr McCarthy: I fully support the comments of the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and, indeed, those of other Members who spoke on this very important topic. It really is unfortunate, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Committee has had to bring such a motion to House, but, as you heard, our entire agriculture industry is under severe threat, not because of or through any fault of our farmers or anyone employed in the industry but simply because of outside conditions, including costs, prices, weather, and so on. As a result, the whole farming industry is almost on its knees.

I pay tribute to all our farmers and, indeed, all our people who work and produce on the land. At times, it is not a very pleasant task, as we all know, and involves working unearthly hours, day and night. Everything produced in this country is of 100% excellent quality, and because we have a good clean and green environment, our products are renowned throughout the world. That does not happen just by accident; it takes everyone working together to reach such high standards and, more importantly, to retain and promote all our products.

I pay tribute to all our farming groups, who are out there working and campaigning on behalf of the farmers and the agriculture industry to promote all our products at every opportunity. I cannot let the day pass without congratulating our people in my constituency who provide Comber spuds, which were recently added to the list of specialities. We also have Portavogie prawns, Glastry Farm ice cream and peninsula vegetables. The list goes on and on. They are all top-of-the-range products that are made locally for local people and by local people. To reach that status for all our farming products involves hard work and, at present, very little reward, as other Members said.

This Administration, the Minister and her Department must roll up their sleeves and take action to ensure that we do not lose this major industry. A comment was made to me that the Department is leaderless and lacks direction in providing for and promoting our industry. That may or may not be the case, but it has been said. It may well be the case that little can be done at this time. The weather is certainly totally out of the hands of the Minister and everyone else. World prices and oil —

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: I will.

Mr McMullan: Does the Member agree that the agrifood industry is now a billion pound industry?

Mr McCarthy: I do indeed. Let us hope that we can capitalise on everything that is going on.

I was criticising the price of fertiliser, oil and other commodities, which has reached very high levels. However, prices at the farm gate are not in keeping with the outlay. The Committee Chair mentioned a groceries adjudicator. As I understand it, no one is in place as yet, but it would certainly help if someone were in place to ensure fair and equal treatment of farmers by supermarkets. Concern was expressed at the pressure put on farmers by large supermarkets. Perhaps the adjudicator, when appointed, will ensure a fair price for our excellent products — a fair price for the producer, for the supermarket and, most importantly, for the consumer.

I thank our own people in this Building who prepare the briefing packs. Everything is included, and it is a real help to us and to the Committee. We are all extremely grateful. I also pay tribute to our own officials, who serve the Committee on this very important subject.

I hope that the Minister and her Department acknowledge the seriousness of our agriculture industry and take action immediately to help assist and retain a very valuable industry for everyone in Northern Ireland. I reiterate the call by farming groups for local people to buy local produce. As I said earlier, Northern Irish agriculture products are the best available. For constituents who wish to enjoy good, healthy, nutritional food and the good health of all in their families, it makes sense that the best thing that they can do is to buy locally. They can have a good life while supporting local farmers and producers. Our agrifood business, Mr McMullan, has a fantastic opportunity to lead the way in best quality food production. Let us all support the endeavours of farmers and hope that the Minister and the Department will listen to what has been said today.

Mr Irwin: At the outset, I want to declare an interest as a dairy farmer and someone who has been involved in

farming for many years. As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I welcome wholeheartedly the opportunity to give my views on what is a growing and serious issue in the agriculture sector.

The motion uses the word “crisis”. There is no doubt that we are used to hearing and using terms such as that, perhaps, when, in reality, no crisis may exist. In this instance, however, the word “crisis” describes perfectly the situation in which many farmers find themselves.

The sustained bad weather that we have experienced for what now seems like months on end has served to focus farmers’ minds on just how precarious the situation is for agriculture in Northern Ireland. Indeed, recent Met Office statistics state that the summer of 2012 was the wettest for 100 years. At least that explains why I have not seen a wetter one in my day—I can tell you that.

The biggest concern for farmers is the unfairness in the cycle from the farm gate to the supermarket shelf and the fortress mentality of supermarkets and factories to any reasoned calls to review prices. Of course, the price gap has always been an issue for farmers. However, now, factors that are entering the debate are higher fuel costs, higher feed costs, higher energy costs and, on top of that, the wettest summer for 100 years. There is also cut-throat banking and all of that pitched against the backdrop of intense competition between the big retailers, which forces farmgate prices down. It is vital that pressure is put on banks to give additional credit to farmers in order to help them to get through the winter. I hope that the Minister takes that on board. Supermarkets want to be cheaper than their rivals, but also have big profits. We, therefore, have to look down the chain to see who is bearing the brunt of that ruthlessness. We all know who is bearing the brunt: it is the farmer.

I know that a motion on food banks and the importance of those facilities is to be debated in the Chamber following this debate. However, there is one glaring reality, which is that, when all things are considered, food prices will remain low. When prices are contrasted with the escalating costs to produce food for supermarkets shelves, it shows that that situation is unsustainable. In any other sector of business, the person who produces the goods is able, to an extent, to control their own margins with the other end of the chain, making the necessary adjustments to reflect the realities of escalating input costs and other variables. That is not the case in farming. Farmers are being asked, or, rather, they have no choice, to keep producing while costs rocket. Yet, those who buy the produce continue to take a bigger slice of the profit.

Recently, I met farmers who are involved in the pork and beef sector. There is great concern about their plight. On mainland GB, prices for beef cattle are 30p to 40p a kilogram higher. For finished pigs, the price is 12p to 15p a kilogram higher.

Feed costs are at their highest ever. The cost of soybean meal has increased by 184% in 10 years and a further 66% in the past eight months. Those types of rises are throttling farmers. At recent meetings, farmers laid bare their anger and concern. I have spoken to farmers who are operating at a loss. I share their concern about finding a way out of this downward spiral.

We have heard it said that the agrifood sector is posting the highest recovery and growth rates in the economy.

Yes, food and drink suppliers and retailers are posting profits. We must, however, not be overbuoyed by those reports. The big retailers, to put it bluntly, are trampling the farmer into the muck to ensure that their products are cheaper than their nearest competitor and that they address any decline in profits. That is not death by a thousand cuts for the farming industry; it is death by one big slash.

A few days ago, Tesco posted half-yearly pre-tax profits of £1.66 billion, some 12% down and its biggest decline since 1992. That is a significant profit, and that figure is despite further advancements in Asia, the US and eastern Europe. Farmers will shed few tears for Tesco over a small drop in fortunes, or indeed for any of the big retailers, which make such massive profits and yet fail to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Irwin: — address the widening price gulf between the farmer and the seller. That situation needs to change, and change fast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Irwin: Having spent most of my life in farming, I know that the situation is dire and unlike anything that I have experienced before.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Irwin: The time for action is long overdue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Declan McAleer.

Mr Irwin: I trust that meaningful steps can be taken by the Agriculture Minister and the Executive to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry; your time is up.

Mr Irwin: — address this important issue.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Members who represent rural constituencies will know that the lives and livelihoods of a huge number of families revolve around the farm. It is a way of life for people. This year has been particularly devastating for the local farming industry. I want to be associated with many of the remarks that Members have made. The weather has been atrocious; it has reduced fields to mud tracks and forced farmers to house their cattle much earlier than usual. The cattle, when housed, eat into silage stock that is already depleted because, in many cases, the wet weather prevented second and maybe third cuts from being made.

The combination of wet weather and drought across the world has resulted in the cost of feed and silage going through the roof. Many farmers are, therefore, forced into selling off or slaughtering many of their stock. Faced with the prospect of running out of feed, they have little option. A recent agricultural market report indicates that the delivered price per ton of wheat was £216 for the week ending 11 August. That is a staggering increase of 23.8% from the same time last year, when the delivered price was £174.50 per ton. The farmers’ plight is made worse by the falling strength of the pound against the euro. Although the actual rate is set by the European Central Bank and is beyond local control, it will nevertheless result in a reduction of approximately 8% in the single farm payment awarded to already under pressure farmers. As was said earlier, across the board, that is a £20 million shortfall in single farm payments this year.

On top of that, farmers are faced with very poor farmgate prices. Dairy farmers are regularly forced to accept a price for milk that is lower than its production cost, while the huge supermarket chains can make a profit margin of up to 250% on the very same produce. The innovative initiative taken by the UFU during the summer, which Mrs Dobson referred to earlier, was a stark reminder of what farmers are paid for their long hours of hard toil: 22p for a litre of milk, 42p for a pack of 10 bacon rashers and a whole chicken for £1.19. That was a very effective illustration of just how little farmers receive for their produce, and it was a very commendable exercise by the UFU, as all the profits were donated to the NI Cancer Fund for Children.

Farming communities are also angered by the fact that their counterparts across the water earn in the region of £3.45 per kilo, while, here, they receive just over £3 per kilo. I welcome the fact that, to date, the Minister has worked very closely with the industry. In recent times, she, along with Minister Foster, set up the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which established a red-meat subgroup to develop a strategic plan for the red-meat sector to help to make the industry more profitable and sustainable. I also note and welcome the fact that she regularly engages with rural stakeholders. For example, earlier this afternoon, the Minister met a delegation of rural councillors from the Omagh district who came here to highlight their concerns about the many issues that affect the farming community. Through the Department, CAFRE and AFB, the Minister has prioritised education, training, technical support and research to help to improve efficiency and competitiveness.

Farming is our indigenous industry. It is the backbone of rural communities. Farmers are experiencing crises that are largely due to extreme weather conditions and the global economy. I support the call for initiatives to help to alleviate the pressures on farmers at this very challenging time.

4.30 pm

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

No one around the Chamber can disagree that the agriculture industry is one of the largest economic drivers in Northern Ireland, not least in a rural constituency such as West Tyrone, where it is the main economic driver. It is always said that when the farming community does well everybody else does well, yet, this summer, the future stability of the industry has been seriously affected by extreme weather conditions and reduced margins. Many farmers are struggling to cope with rising fuel, energy and animal feed costs. That is ignored by the retailers and food processors, and many farmers now receive less than the cost of production at the farm gate. No business or industry can survive where the cost of production exceeds the price paid for the final product. Unless something changes in the industry, there is no future for it other than going to the wall.

There is much discontent in the farming community at the way that it is being treated by retailers and food processors, and there is growing anger at the ongoing moves to drop prices at a time when producers are struggling with running costs and difficult conditions. Many farmers in West Tyrone — I come back to West Tyrone again — who normally have a six-month grazing season

for livestock have only had a six-week period this year, and they have been unable to conserve sufficient silage for their winter feed. Indeed, a significant amount of their feed has already been used, leaving them to face a difficult winter, with the need to buy silage and concentrated feeds.

It is deplorable that processors are using the crisis to undermine the agriculture industry. Those folk know that farmers are in a difficult situation and that many have to get rid of their stock. What are they doing? They use the crisis to keep the cost down, get the produce as cheaply as they can and make the farmers suffer. That is what is happening. If the processors and retailers expect an ongoing supply of high-quality produce, it is time they accepted responsibility for ensuring that the prices paid to producers are fair and reflect the current challenges.

Reduced margins as a result of falling prices has squeezed the agriculture industry to its very limits. This summer, we have witnessed milk prices falling to 21p per litre, pig producers losing £20 per pig, lamb prices at 25% less per head than this time last year and beef prices in Northern Ireland significantly less than those received by farmers in GB. Northern Ireland farmers consistently produce to the same high-quality standards and supply the same markets as those in GB, and that situation is totally unacceptable. Something must be done to alleviate that problem, otherwise the agriculture industry we are so proud of in Northern Ireland will not and cannot survive.

That brings us to the final and most important part of the motion which calls on the Minister to:

“acknowledge the crisis and to bring forward initiatives to alleviate the short-term financial pressures on farmers.”

It is all very well calling for the Minister to take action, but what action can she take? There is a cash flow problem, and the Minister must take steps to alleviate that by advancing the single farm payment. When we look back at the single farm payment that was issued for 2011, we can see that the way that some farmers were treated was deplorable. Small farmers in West Tyrone did not get their farm inspection until January and were not paid their single farm payment until late August. Those people were on their knees awaiting that payment, and that process has to be speeded up. Pressure also has to be put on the retail sector, so that it realises the difficulties that are being faced. It is totally unacceptable for small shops to sell milk and bread at —

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with what he says about the practical measures the Department can take that are not being seen to happen at the moment, which include advance payments. However, even if we cannot do that this year, will the Minister give us a timetable for when that will occur? Also, can the cap on farm modernisation schemes be lifted so that businesses can advance in a more productive manner?

Mr Buchanan: Thank you. I trust that the Minister will take that point and bring answers forward in due course.

Small, independent shops need to work with the farming community. It is totally unacceptable that small shops are selling milk and bread as a loss-leader just to attract people in while the farming community is on its knees because of this situation. The Minister also needs to work with the banks. There has to be more flexibility there so

that they can continue to work with the farming community as they did prior to the crisis we find ourselves in.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Buchanan: I look forward to the Minister bringing something positive to the Assembly —

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

Mr Buchanan: — and letting us know exactly what steps she intends to take.

Mr Swann: I often rise in this place when we debate Committee motions. Those debates usually end up with Committee members talking to themselves, reading from the same briefing packs and quoting the same statistics at each other in an endless monotone. I am glad that every Member who has spoken to date has brought forward real and personal experiences, either from their constituency office or their personal involvement.

We are talking about a crisis in farming, and we have already mentioned our reliance on the single farm payment. In considering the threat that is coming from the changes to the common agricultural policy, we ask the Minister what she can do, as the Member who spoke previously said. The Minister knows well that she should concentrate on the UK portion of the Budget that will come forward for agriculture and on making sure that Northern Ireland gets its fair share. I believe that Scotland is already lobbying Westminster to make sure that they receive a larger portion than they did last year. It is important that our industry and our Minister do the same.

A number of Members spoke about advance payments. That is something that the SDLP Deputy Chair of the Committee previously championed, but, although the advanced payment of the single farm payment would be laudable and credible, it is imperative and would be more beneficial if your Department processed payments and got the majority of them out on time. Some of the excuses the Committee has heard for payments not being made are based on bank details not being correct. If your Department was proactive, made phone calls to get those bank details and got those single farm payments processed as soon as possible, that would alleviate the cash flow problems that we are talking about.

I welcome the fact that the motion includes reference to the Republic of Ireland. I urge our agrifood industry to be cautious about getting too wedded to that of the Republic. There is an old saying "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer". That is exactly what they are doing at this time. We must be aware that, in this economy-led industry and retail industry, a Republic of Ireland processor would as quickly steal a Northern Ireland processor's contract as it would anywhere else in the world, so we must see a Northern Ireland-based food promotion strategy come out of the Agri-Food Strategy Board. We have seen the Republic of Ireland's Bord Bia promoting Republic of Ireland produce only and doing it at full tilt. It does not look to promote Northern Ireland produce. When it comes to the Republic of Ireland, that is where we have to be cautious. When looking to its milk industry and asking, as we did last week or the week before, about milk quotas and what will happen in 2015 when those quotas are removed, the Minister said that, unlike Britain, we export most of our

milk. That is exactly what the Republic of Ireland's milk sector is targeting. It is targeting our markets.

Minister, a number of commodities have been mentioned here today. There was representation from the potato sector, which again goes back to the bad weather, which you cannot control —

Mr Elliott: Before the Member leaves the milk issue, does he accept that, if quotas were disbanded, it would allow the Republic of Ireland to increase its milk production significantly? That would put more of a squeeze on to milk producers in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is exactly where the Republic of Ireland's milk industry is going. It is already gearing up for what, I think, is a 15% to 20% increase. It is getting ready to do that now, whereas the Northern Ireland industry is definitely not being supported by the Department in preparing for the quota reduction in 2015. That is what the Minister told me:

"We will continue to work with the industry to make sure that we are prepared for post-2015. That work is ongoing."
— [Official Report, Bound Volume 77, p224, col 1].

We need to see credible evidence of what that will be.

I go back to the potato producers in North Antrim — a very valuable crop. Again, I have met producers and processors. At the start of this year, when we saw how the weather was affecting processors and retailers, I asked the Minister what the Department could do. She answered:

"In these circumstances I have no plans to bring forward additional support measures to the potato sector."

Each sector of our agri-industry needs to look forward to support here in some way.

Poultry is another major agrifood sector in my constituency, North Antrim. We have Moy Park, formerly O'Kanes. The poultry industry directly employs something like 7,000 people in Northern Ireland. If we do not get a credible answer soon about what we are going to do with poultry litter in regard to Rose Energy, we will see an entire industry crippled and on its knees. There are poultry producers out there who are willing and want to expand their business and production, but they cannot at the minute because they do not know what they will do with the poultry litter. The Committee has asked the Department what its plan B is, if Rose Energy does not get off the ground and into development. The only option that seems to be there at the minute is to transport our poultry litter to Scotland. There is another added cost to poultry producers in Northern Ireland. Not only will they pay for increased energy and food, but they will have to pay for their poultry litter to be exported to Scotland.

Minister, what brings this home credibly is the human aspect. You attended the tenth anniversary of Rural Support last Thursday, and some of the case studies that were put forward —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Swann: — showed the real human face of the agrifood crisis at this minute in time.

Mrs Overend: As a Member from Mid Ulster, an area with a high concentration of pig farmers, I want to concentrate

my comments on that industry. I declare an interest, being married to a mid-Ulster businessman who specialises in breeding pedigree and sales of artificial insemination (AI).

The farming crisis affects the whole supply chain. The future existence of producers and processors is important, as they are interdependent. Since the motion became public knowledge, I have received intensive representation from farmers and processors, including the main pig processor in mid-Ulster, Vion, which many across Northern Ireland know better as the Cookstown factory — the one that the late George Best promoted as the “Cookstown sizzle”. Vion currently buys over 22,000 pigs per week. Some 40% of its sales are exported to the likes of Hungary, Germany and the United States of America. As I have said in the House before, with the economy in its current dire state, we need to build on our export markets. It is vital that government builds relationships with other countries, creates the agreements necessary and opens new markets to which we can export our high-quality, superior products.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Would she agree that some producers import a lot of their own stock and that drives down the price to the local farmer to the point where he cannot compete? Would you agree that some producers are taking in their own stock?

Mrs Overend: Sorry, I do not quite understand the point that you are making. If you want me to give way again, I will let you explain that.

So, what can be done to help the current situation? I have specific questions for the Minister. Last week's news that Northern Ireland has achieved Aujeszky's-free status is very welcome. However, if Northern Ireland's interests are truly at the heart of the Agriculture Minister for Northern Ireland, I question the delay in achieving that status for this region. To wait for the status to be awarded to the Republic of Ireland at the same time is seriously questionable. The Minister should learn from her Republic of Ireland counterpart's loyalty to its industry and concentrate her loyalty on this place. I call for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to bring forward immediate action.

4.45 pm

China is the largest pork-eating country in the world. Northern Ireland needs a portion of that market. Can the Minister give categorical assurance that she has made representation to DEFRA with regard to finalising agreement to open up the export market to China and provide a timescale for definitive movement in that area? I would also like to hear if the Minister has made real contacts in China already, in preparation for when those markets open. Russia is another lucrative market that requires additional approval. However, I understand that there is a UK-wide industry and government consensus to prioritise the beef and sheep sectors before they turn to pork, yet the pig industry is a sector that is heavily reliant on expensive feed and is heading towards a particularly difficult winter. There is a dire need to expedite that process.

Something else that the Minister could look at is the important labelling issue. I ask the Minister again where her priority lies. Pigs come up from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland to be slaughtered and have for some time been sold to the Republic of Ireland market through various large supermarkets, the names of which I will not

mention. However, that market has completely closed up due to problems with labelling. Is it not crazy that, while Irish pigs leave the Republic of Ireland to be slaughtered and made into delicious pork chops, sausages, pork fillets etc, in the Republic of Ireland they do not want to buy their own product back again? “Why?”, I hear you ask. Because the labelling officials will not allow the same label to be put on the Republic of Ireland pork. I asked the processors this specific question: is the traceability there so that assurances can be received that pork or pork products can be identified as being from the Republic of Ireland? The answer was yes, yet supermarkets down South will not shelve Republic of Ireland pork processed in Northern Ireland. The strength of the farmers and the IFA has meant that their actions to reject so-called UK products on their shelves have actually resulted in the rejection of Republic of Ireland products from their shelves because of problems with labelling. That, surely, is something that the Minister could take more action on.

The pig industry in Northern Ireland is feed-intensive. The cost of that feed is climbing due to world market conditions, and it is choking our pig farmers across Northern Ireland. I know that it is really good pork, and I want everyone to appreciate its quality and its delicious taste. Moreover, I want China to have some. I believe that Russia should buy it too, as should many other countries across the world. Can the Minister detail to the House her action on these issues? I await her comments with interest.

Mr Allister: Following on from the last contribution, I too would like to begin by setting my remarks in a wider context. Of course it is right that we debate the immediacy of the crisis here in Northern Ireland affecting agriculture, but we have to have regard to the wider setting, particularly going forward, and how it might affect us. One thinks of CAP reform — I will perhaps return to that in a moment — but there is an even bigger picture that affects the future of agriculture, and that is the WTO outcomes and the fact that, for reasons that defy logic and sense, the EU has negotiated an outcome with the WTO that will stagnate European agriculture in the years to come and will cap our production at a time when world population is increasing and, therefore, food demand is increasing. We were perfectly suited to capture much of that market, and what does the EU do for us? It negotiated with the WTO to effectively stagnate and cap our production. That is folly, and it is tying the hands of our industry behind its back.

The other hand may well be tied behind its back by CAP reform. Some of the propositions there will make life in Northern Ireland very difficult for some. There are many priorities in CAP reform, but some of the things that concern me the most relate to our intensive sector — the red meat and the pig meat. The big worry, especially among beef finishers and pig finishers, many of whom do not have the acreage to command a single farm payment of sufficient quantity if it moves exclusively to an area-based formula, is that it is hard to see, for example, our beef sector, which sustains thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland, surviving without some element of headage payment. We have to seek to hold on to that option.

Then, of course, there is the question of where the money will come from to fund CAP reform. As it does, the EU Commission has demanded an inflation-beating increase between 2014 and 2020. Mr Cameron is threatening to veto it. Mr Cameron and the Conservative Party issue a

lot of threats and deliver on very few, so he may or may not. The likely outcome, I suspect, is that we might well see a freeze on CAP funding at the 2013 level. If we see that, it means, effectively, that cuts will roll out over the years. Then it becomes a matter of priorities within that diminishing pot, whether it is single farm payments, rural development or the various competing priorities. There are many things on the wider stage that are reasons for concern.

What of our local Department? As our farming crisis deepens, has it been up to the job? I have to say that, sadly, it has not. It is the supposed champion for farming, but all we get are words, words, words. There is sympathy for the capital dearth throughout the farming industry, but the Department's response is to prioritise its own capital spend on a new headquarters for itself and new, lavish offices for its civil servants. There are sectors in despair, such as the potato sector and the apple sector following the weather, but there is no help from the Minister. Processors are ripping off the pig and beef producers, but there is inaction from DARD and no ministerial summit to thrash out fair play for the producers. No; there is inaction. The dairy sector has been ravaged by bovine TB, but there is feet-dragging from a Department on the patently obvious step of a badger cull.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept then that it is even more important that deliberations start at an early stage in the next round of the rural development programme so that all is not missed out on by the farming community?

Mr Allister: I agree absolutely with that. I will make this point: when a worthwhile fund comes along, such as the farm modernisation scheme, it is starved of meaningful funds so that the payouts are derisory and available only to a few. It does not even cover safety equipment to make slurry handling safer.

The issue of paying out single farm payments expeditiously and even early has been raised. What do we get from the Department? We get more feet-dragging. Constituents who had inspections last January were paid this September. There is continuous feet-dragging from this Department.

We need a poultry litter scheme to rescue the industry from the pressures of Europe, but where is our Agriculture Minister on that? At best sitting on the fence and, probably, more predictably, pursuing the dogma of opposing it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Allister: The unpalatable truth is that we do not have a Department of Agriculture, and —

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

Mr Allister: — certainly not a Department for agriculture.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do gach aon duine atá anseo ag an díospóireacht inniu. I thank the Members who contributed to the debate, and I welcome the fact that the Committee has tabled the motion. We have had a useful discussion today.

I want to say from the outset that I absolutely share the concerns about the increases in production costs, particularly for feedstuffs, and the current market conditions that are being experienced by our farmers. We all have the same interests at heart, and we all want to see a profitable local livestock sector as part of a thriving and sustainable rural economy.

I should also point out that the price paid to producers and the establishment of a pricing structure is a commercial matter and is, therefore, not in my control. I acknowledge that the Chair of the Committee recognised that earlier. However, I want to share the concerns about the current prices that local producers receive. I would like to see our producers receive fair and equitable prices that provide a fair distribution of profits right across the supply chain. As many Members have pointed out in the debate, producer prices across the milk, beef and sheep sectors have fallen in 2012. There is a significant differential in the beef, pig and sheep prices here compared with those in Britain. There is a difference of 34.2p per kilogram for beef, 46.11p per kilogram for sheep and 10.67p per kilogram for pigs.

On the beef and sheep side, in light of recent concerns, the Livestock and Meat Commission has commissioned an independent evaluation of the disparity between beef prices here and in Britain. The LMC also carries out a valuable role in the dissemination of market information, which helps producers to make informed decisions about when and where to market their livestock to receive the best return. My Department will watch that work closely. I hope that I can help to identify and develop plans to address the issues that cause the disparity.

Milk prices have increased over recent months following a severe fall earlier in the year. Obviously, we all hope that that trend continues. When I am out and about meeting farmers, I still continually hear their statement — it is absolutely true — that the cost of production is outstripping the price that they are paid. That is not sustainable for the farming sector in the future.

Members will appreciate that the local industry is highly dependent on external sales and that prices fluctuate depending on market conditions. Our distance from British and mainland European markets means that transport cost is a significant factor in explaining price differentials. Markets take time to adjust, and it takes time for prices to feed through to producers. I understand farmers' frustrations, particularly in these difficult times. I call on the whole supply chain to look critically at the gap that exists between prices here and the destination markets for our produce.

Some Members picked up on the introduction of a groceries code adjudicator, which I support wholeheartedly. We continue to monitor the progress of the Bill as it goes through Westminster. Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I have put our views very strongly to the BIS Minister and DEFRA that we need that adjudicator to have teeth and real powers to intervene and do something to stand up for the rights of our local farmers.

As regards increasing production costs and feed prices, the increase in global cereal protein prices has resulted in significant increases in feed prices in recent months. Those increases come at a time when cereal prices were already high, following a hike in 2010. As the Chair said,

there are fears about further increases due to depressed world cereal harvests caused by the drought in the United States and diminishing harvest prospects in the Black Sea region. Feed is the main input for livestock farming, which predominates here. Feed price increases have an immediate impact on farm profitability unless there is an accompanying increase in farm gate prices. However, the sector's reliance on imported cereals for feed manufacture will inevitably continue to be a key weakness for our livestock sector.

Recent weather conditions are also adding to livestock production costs, as diminished grass supply and reduced silage stocks and forage quality are substituted with more expensive feedstuffs. Poor weather has also affected crop yields and harvesting costs for our arable sector. In addition, global fertiliser and crude oil prices are having an impact on production costs. Producer prices will not always respond immediately to increases in input costs, leaving many farmers in a more difficult situation. However, I hope that, in the longer term, producer prices will adjust to reflect those increased costs. Unfortunately, global market developments cannot be influenced by either producers or my Department. Therefore, the focus has to be on improving efficiency to keep production costs as low as possible.

As I mentioned, I am very aware of and absolutely sympathise with the difficulties being experienced by farmers due to bad weather and the impact on grazing and fodder production for the coming winter. My officials are monitoring the situation. They have provided and will continue to provide practical information and advice to help farmers deal with the impact of the poor summer weather.

Responding to the situation, CAFRE has launched an initiative to assist farmers and growers in the run-up to and during the winter. That will assist locally based workshops to assist farmers with winter feeding decisions across the livestock sectors. It will also include bulletins, press articles and provision of online management tools to calculate the volume of feed stores and estimate livestock requirements. The workshops will be tailored to the needs of local regions and enterprises. I am pleased to report that 220 farmers attended the first three workshops, which were held last week. I encourage all farmers to contact their local CAFRE development adviser to get enrolled in those workshops at an early stage.

Members picked up on the issue of wet weather payments. I wish that it were as simple as that. I am committed to making sure that we provide practical advice and information through the fora that I outlined. The difficulties with wet weather payments are around both EU state aid rules and business case requirements. Those are all factors that we have to take into account.

5.00 pm

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I will give way later in my speech.

The Department has commissioned research into additional measures that farmers can take to mitigate risks associated with extreme weather events, and the findings of this research will be disseminated to farmers through CAFRE when it becomes available. Unfortunately, no financial support measures are available to compensate farmers for their losses or to put towards additional feeding costs

due to the poor weather. Any potential for compensation funding is further severely constrained by business case requirements and compliance with EU state aid rules.

My Department will continue to do what it can to support producers, and it is involved in a range of initiatives to help farmers to produce and market high-quality produce. Under the competitiveness measure of the rural development programme, the Department provided funding of £45 million for a number of measures aimed at improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry through supporting, restructuring, development and innovation. I know that Members are aware of those measures, so I will not go into them in detail. They include the Focus Farm programme, which looks at good practice, mentoring and the benchmarking provided to farmers, which is very important in monitoring input costs and livestock performance. Other measures include the Family Farms Options initiative, the supply chain development programme and the farm modernisation programme, through which almost 3,000 farmers benefited, receiving over £8.4 million of support in the previous tranche. The current tranche is out at present with an increased budget of £5.5 million. I encourage all farmers to make use of the considerable support and schemes that are available through the rural development programme. Farmers can also benefit from the ongoing programme of research undertaken by AFBI and obtain advice on farm management and planning through CAFRE.

In the area of animal health, I am very pleased with the progress being made, which will help to reduce costs for producers and increase trading opportunities. I am delighted that, last week, we achieved formal EU recognition that the whole island of Ireland is now free of Aujeszky's disease (AD). This achievement is testimony to the hard work and commitment of the members of the joint government and industry working group over the past number of years. As we are a region free of Aujeszky's disease, herd owners can now export live pigs to other AD-free regions without the high cost of compulsory isolation, herd surveillance and blood testing. Achieving this free status allows pig producers here to access new markets and increase trading opportunities.

I also welcome the increasing desire in the industry to tackle diseases that have a significant impact on trade and competitiveness at farm level, such as bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) and Johne's disease. A point was made about when we filed for our Aujeszky's disease-free status. It makes sense that we filed for the status across the island at the same time, because, if we had received our disease-free status and the South had not, all sorts of controls and mechanisms would have had to come into play. This way makes sense, and now the whole island has been given that status by Europe, which I very much welcome.

I was also delighted to attend the launch of the new industry organisation, Animal Health and Welfare NI, last month. I remain very keen for my Department to help to get that industry-led initiative off the ground, given the potential to the farming industry. I have agreed in principle, subject to economic appraisal, to support the contributions committed by industry stakeholders during the start-up period. Our active work on tackling animal health issues, in partnership with the industry, is another example of where we can start to make a real impact on the profitability and

competitiveness of our farms, which is crucial in these difficult economic times.

As well as considering all the very real issues that face farmers, we have in place mechanisms to look at prospects for the entire agri-food industry and how we can support its success in the medium to long term. I have told the House on many occasions about the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I have set up. The board is looking at developing a strategic action plan for the industry, in line with the Executive's commitment under the Programme for Government. It looks at all the sectors in the farming industry that Members picked up on. The board's key objectives are to identify growth targets, strategic priorities and actions needed by industry and government to achieve these targets. The board has been appointed for three years, and the development of the strategy is only a part of what we have asked it to do. It will also advise on the action needed to implement the plan and the resources necessary to deliver these strategic outcomes. I am sure that co-operation and communication in the supply chain will be one of the many issues that will be addressed by the board. Any action plan for future growth in the sector will have to underpinned by sustainable, resilient supply chains to have any chance of success.

In addition to the actions that my Department has already taken and what I have just outlined, I announce a new measure that I am taking to support the farming sector. I am pleased to announce to Members that I have decided not to apply a further year of voluntary modulation for the 2013 single farm payment year. This will have the effect of adding €19 million, which is about £15 million at today's exchange rate, to the total funding available for the 2013 single farm payment. That money will go directly into farmers' pockets through next year's single farm payment.

The European Commission has made provision for voluntary modulation to continue for another year in the context of the ongoing discussions on CAP reform. It has said that the money that is taken from the single farm payment can be used in the new round of the rural development programme. I understand that other Administrations in Britain will make use of that provision again. However, given the real challenges that our farmers face now and over the coming years, I have decided not to continue to apply voluntary modulation. That will provide some much-needed additional income for farmers in the 2013 single farm payments and will help to stimulate the rural communities in which farmers live and spend their money. In taking that decision, I have had to balance the opportunity to make extra funding available for our new rural development programme against the very real challenges that are facing our farming community, which we heard about today.

Although significant challenges remain ahead in securing a fair share of the EU rural development budget, and although I cannot rule out, at this stage, the need to make transfers to that budget in the future, I am sure that acting now to make that additional funding available can help to offset some of the additional costs that our farmers face. An additional €19 million in farming incomes will have the effect of pumping money directly into rural communities at a time when our economy needs all the support that it can get. That is why I feel that it is important

to act now to support a sector that the Executive see as having enormous growth potential. I am hopeful that that additional boost to farming will help our farms to remain competitive and will help to stimulate the wider growth that we need in the economy.

I will not get into all the points that were raised during the debate; hopefully, I addressed most of them in the body of the speech. However, numerous Members made calls for advanced payments and staged payments. I think that we can look towards that for the future, and we are working to get to that position. The EU rules dictate that we cannot make a payment until all inspections are complete. As part of the ongoing negotiations on CAP reform, we are asking Europe to look at whether we will be allowed to make payments once the individual inspection is complete. That will be a step forward, and we are looking towards that in the future.

Members talked about people getting their single farm payment in time. We met our targets this year, but if you were outside that group, you were under significant financial stress. So, this week, I am delighted that we have started inspections four weeks early. I think that that will make sure that we speed things up. We have improved maps, and a number of cases are being dealt with through satellite imagery for inspections. So, I believe that all those things will lead to an improved situation next year.

Members mentioned the potential for trade in the future. I am going to China, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is also going to China in November. We are building up those real links. There is lots of potential, and we need to exploit all those markets for the future and use every opportunity that we have to develop trade links and university links. We are very much involved with that.

In closing, I want to take the opportunity to assure Members that I am well aware of the difficult circumstances that farmers face, and I fully support the fair distribution of profits across the supply chain. Unfortunately, a lot of the issues that we discussed today, such as pricing in global markets, are beyond our control, but we have to continue to work with industry to do the best that we can for all those involved. My Department will continue to offer advice and assistance to the sector in these difficult times to ensure that it is operating in the most efficient and cost-effective way that it can.

I want to end on a positive note. I can support the motion. I understand the pressures that are on our farmers, and I want to help. The motion calls for me to take further action to alleviate the financial difficulties that have been expressed by the sector, and I hope that my announcement today on modulation, which will put an additional €19 million directly into farmers' pockets, shows the House that I understand the short-term challenges that are facing the industry and that, where I can act to support the sector, I will.

Mr Byrne (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): First, I welcome the fact that the Speaker allowed the debate to take place. It is very timely and welcome for farming people at this time.

As we all agree, farming is suffering because of the rising cost of feeds, energy and fertiliser. It is also suffering because of compliance costs and, as many people outlined, low farmgate prices. We have the real problem

of bad prices for milk, beef, pig meat, sheep meat, and, indeed, for vegetables and fruit. As we know, all those problems have been compounded by the severe weather conditions over the past number of years. We have problems in harvesting crops, with poor ground conditions and with animals having to be fed winter feed stocks early.

The general uncertainty, however, surrounding CAP reform proposals, as well as pressure from banks, is adding to the difficulties that farmers face. In this region over the past three years, delays and difficulties surrounding the processing of integrated administration and control system forms and single farm payments have caused great annoyance and grievance to many farmers. The whole mapping problem in the Department and the delay in implementing the land parcel identification system for mapping is causing great frustration.

The long-term strategic challenge for farming in the North, however, is centred on how 80% of farm produce can be exported and marketed successfully to realise a decent return for the primary producer. For many years now, farmers have felt powerless, because farmgate prices have a disproportionately low return in comparison with what processors and retailers get in profit. That has been raised by many other Members.

Farmers, unfortunately, are price takers. Can there be any social corporate responsibility in the food chain? That is the real question. Will the groceries code adjudicator deliver any results for the farmers? There has been quite a bit of talk about the groceries adjudicator. The question is this: will the adjudicator have teeth and will that office be relevant and meaningful in what it can deliver for farmers?

Northern Ireland is only part of an island that collectively has to export 80% of its farm produce, so it is crucial that CAP reform be handled delicately to get a decent return for farmers over the medium to long term. That is the real strategic issue.

Mr Swann: Will the Deputy Chairperson give way?

Mr Byrne: Yes, indeed.

Mr Swann: We have already touched on the importance of CAP reform. Does the Deputy Chairperson agree that that is why it was so important that we had the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development over here on 20 September, along with my party colleague Jim Nicholson MEP?

Mr Byrne: I agree with Mr Swann. It was a very timely visit to Northern Ireland, and I hope that the commissioner will listen to the concerns raised about the type of CAP reform proposals that would best meet our needs.

The farming community is looking to the Minister and DARD to recognise the short-term difficulties, as well as to point out a long-term development strategy for agriculture and food processing in the EU context. I very much welcome what the Minister said about moving £15 million extra into the single farm payment scheme and away from the voluntary modulation scheme. I think that that would be a very welcome development for the farming community.

CAP reform for Northern Ireland must be maximised within the context of the British Treasury's budgetary allocations and the EU-determined single farm payment envelope, and other supports such as the less-favoured areas (LFA) scheme and rural development/environmental schemes.

The long-term strategic marketing of food products needs to be delivered in the context of an all-Ireland framework, with Irish-labelled food produce and international marketing. A number of Members raised concerns about animals being brought into Northern Ireland for processing and then difficulties arising in the retailing of the finished product on the shelf in the Republic. That is something that the Minister must take up directly through the North/South Ministerial Council, and let us have the issue debated and worked on.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Deputy Chairperson give way?

Mr Byrne: Yes, indeed.

Mrs O'Neill: I would like to inform the Deputy Chairperson that I have already raised the issue with the relevant Minister in the South, Simon Coveney. We have had a discussion at the North/South Ministerial Council. It is a big issue — one that we must resolve — and we are using every avenue to alleviate it.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has to say on the issue.

The current round of CAP negotiations may culminate during Ireland's EU presidency in 2013. Therefore, it is crucial that the farming case must be maximised. Family farm income supports must be balanced, as must be the environmental considerations conducive to the sustainability of the agrifood sector. The current uncertainty in farming and the agrifood sector must not impede the long-term strategic development and sustainability of the industry in a global marketing context, given the EU CAP reform parameters.

Farming is a native industry that must be protected and sustained. The time is now right for leadership from the Minister and DARD to show the farming community that CAP reform outcomes can be maximised for all concerned. It is crucial that the Department take some steps to deal with farm safety and the cash-flow problems associated with the delayed single farm payments in the current year. I have to say that it is disappointing that the Minister has not recognised the frustration that farmers are experiencing over difficulties surrounding the process of single farm payment applications.

5.15 pm

I pay tribute to Farmers for Action and the Ulster Farmers' Union for the campaign that they have conducted over the past two to three months in Northern Ireland. They have certainly highlighted the great disparity between farmgate prices and the retail prices that the consumer has to pay. Farmers want a fair price for their produce, and that is the challenge for everybody. How can we create an industry where the primary producers — the most important part of the food chain — get a decent and fair price for their products?

A lot of Members took part in the debate, including a lot of colleagues on the Agriculture Committee, and I welcome their comments. At the start of the debate, the Chairman set the scene for the entire issue before us in the farming community. He covered all the key difficulties associated with the current crisis. That is the point: it is a crisis for many farmers, who have the banks breathing down their neck and who are earning low prices. Mrs Dobson, along with others, mentioned the pig farming crisis. Pig farmers,

for example, are selling produce at a loss of as much as £2,000 a week. That is the actual impact and the severity of the crisis that they are facing.

Oliver McMullan talked about the Ulster Farmers' Union crisis meeting on pig meat and beef prices that was arranged for MLAs some weeks ago. He talked about the vicious circle. We hope that the grocery adjudicator — if it happens — can do something about breaking the vicious circle and making sure that the farmer gets a decent return. There is something badly wrong when, as happened last week, bullocks can go from Northern Ireland to Scotland and fetch an average of £180 more there than they would have got in Northern Ireland.

We all know that the single farm payment in Northern Ireland was worth about £267 million two years ago. However, in the current year, with the currency differential, it is now down to about £247 million. We are enjoying about £50 million in total for the other aspects of farm support, be that support for LFAs, countryside management schemes or other rural development programmes.

Tom Elliott talked about the Ulster Farmers' Union shop sale. Over the summer, the Ulster Farmers' Union sold food products at the price that the farmer gets, which very much highlighted the differential.

CAP reform concerns also relate to fruit growers, and they are sometimes forgotten. We talk about pig meat, sheep meat and beef prices, but we do not hear very much about fruit growers. Obviously, an MLA from Armagh would have to mention that issue, and we recognise what Mrs Dobson said.

Sean Rogers talked about the cash flow problem and the pressure from the banks. He also talked about County Down potatoes. Of course, MLAs who represent County Down quite often reflect the problems associated with potato farmers.

The pig and poultry sectors are at a crucial stage. We have many people involved in pig production and poultry production, and they are really up against it with cash flow problems with regard to the cost of feed as opposed to what they are getting for their produce.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Byrne: Mr Deputy Speaker, there are many other points that I could make about what other Members said. It is fair to say that there is a crisis. We welcome the fact that DARD —

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

Mr Byrne: — could be more proactive in speeding up single farm payments. I hope that something can be done about that to relieve the immediate cash flow problems. I welcome all the support for the motion and commend it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the current crisis in farming caused by the failure of the food supply chain to react to rising production costs and feed prices in particular; further notes the lack of transparency within the food supply chain and the existence of a very significant differential between Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Republic of

Ireland producer prices; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to acknowledge the crisis and to bring forward initiatives to alleviate the short-term financial pressures on farmers.

Private Members' Business

Food Banks

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the growth in the number of food banks established by churches, charities and other community organisations; welcomes the positive response by these sectors to the needs of people and families suffering from the ill effects of the economic downturn; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that his Department continues to support and promote the work of food banks.

I thank the Business Committee for affording me the time to move the motion. I thank the Minister for his attendance and, in advance, for his response. It seems that this afternoon's business has been scheduled in an apt way. We had a debate about a crisis in food production, and now we have one about a crisis in which people do not have enough food to eat.

At the outset, I must say that I do not think that there is a need to re-rehearse all the ill-effects of the recession and the economic downturn, even though that is very much the context of this debate. Members know full well what is happening in the communities they represent. Contrary to the perception that some in the world of media would wish to portray, we do not have eight-week holidays over the summer period when we are lying on beaches. We are actually working with our constituents in our constituencies, and we know how people are suffering in our communities as a result of the recession and the downturn. We know that jobs are being lost; we know that incomes are down; we know that more people are claiming benefits and that some people are claiming benefits for the first time in their life. We also know that people are increasingly getting into debt and that, because of that, when unexpected bills arrive, they are having a harder impact on people in our communities.

I think it is fair to say that Governments like our own can, and do, take initiatives to alleviate the worst effects of the downturn. That could be something like Invest Northern Ireland's jobs fund, the social protection fund, the social investment fund, the youth unemployment initiatives, which the Minister for Employment and Learning is taking forward, or even things like social clauses. The Finance Minister was here earlier talking about procurement and such measures as social clauses, which are bringing unemployed people and apprentices into the workforce as a result of procurement contracts. All of those have an impact, but their impact is not quick enough in many cases. That is something that Governments here in Northern Ireland and around the world suffer from; we do not get a quick enough response to many of the problems that we have in society. We see some of those problems manifest in our constituencies in the casework that we do. Help is being offered, but sometimes it is not quick enough to materialise. Somebody may be entitled to benefits, but they may have to wait for a few weeks before that benefit

starts to arrive in their bank account. In the meantime, however, that person and their family need to survive.

I and, I am sure, others have seen that benefits are frequently taken off people in error, or there might be a mix-up with their tax credits, or their income is changing because of changed hours. Suddenly, that has an impact on their housing benefit or other benefits they are in receipt of. There is, therefore, a period in which there is no income coming in and, again, their family needs to continue to survive over that period.

Obviously, there are some mechanisms within the system and the social security system. People could avail themselves of a social fund loan, for instance, but as it was put to me last week by somebody working in the food bank sector, the last thing that somebody who has, perhaps, lost their job may be attracted to is a loan. Even though the social fund loan is there as a system and a means to help those people in those sets of circumstances, taking out what they perceive to be a debt on the first day or in the first couple of days after coming out of work is not what they necessarily want to do. There is, therefore, help in the system, but sometimes it is slow to materialise, and government is not well equipped to deal with short-term and immediate problems like that. Indeed, even if government was able to design and invent something to deal with people who had those short-term gap problems that prevented them from having enough money to pay for the food that they and their family need, I dare say that whatever it would be would be overly bureaucratic, tied up in red tape and not anywhere near as effective or efficient as what the community and voluntary and faith-based sectors are able to supply.

That is where churches, charities and community organisations can, and are, stepping in. We see a growth in the number of food banks right across Northern Ireland. I think that that is, in some ways, an unfortunate development. They should not have to exist, but it is at least a positive response by that sector to a growing problem and to something that the people involved see within the communities in which they live.

I want to highlight the good work that three food banks that I am aware of are doing. Doing so, will show Members and the wider public the good work that they are doing. The first one that I want to touch on is the Newtownards food bank. It was established back in December 2011 as a social franchise under the Trussell Trust model, which has been operating quite successfully on the mainland for a number of years. In fact, junior Minister Mr Bell and I were at the launch of the food bank just before Christmas of last year, and it has gone from strength to strength over that period. It has grown from about 10 volunteers initially to around 100 volunteers today. It handles and receives around 1,000 kilograms of donated food each and every month, and distributes that to approximately 100 people a month. That food comes from about 30 feeder churches, schools and businesses in the community. It also works very closely with the supermarkets. Supermarkets took a bit of a bashing in the previous debate, but there has been no lack of willingness on behalf of the big supermarkets locally to allow that food bank to use their premises to get food donations. On a Saturday, you will frequently see somebody from the food bank handing people a little shopping list as they go into the supermarket. If you have the time and money to be able to purchase one of the

goods off the list, it asks that you donate it, to replenish its stock and allow it to grow. It supplies a three-day emergency supply of food, and gets referrals from people working at the coalface: doctors, social workers and, indeed, even local elected representatives like myself and others. It provides not only that emergency food, but an opportunity for people to come in; people who have perhaps a debt or benefit problem can come in and talk about what is affecting them. Often, that is the first time that they will have had the chance to talk to anybody else about the problem they are facing.

The second one is Storehouse, an independent charity working in the Belfast area. It has been operating now for five years, and has seen its work grow from about 10 cases a week up to helping 100 households a week. It has had 9,000 individual cases, a lot of which have been repeat cases. Therefore, the actual instances of its work are much higher than 9,000 cases. At the end of June, Storehouse opened a premises in Cornmarket in Belfast, and in the short period of time between June and now, has had 310 individual cases and 650 separate sessions with people in need. Storehouse has 30 to 35 churches, of all denominations, helping it to get the food that it needs to pass on to those in need. Some 60 to 70 bodies assist Storehouse by referring to it people who are in need. That is a very good example of where, again in the faith-based sector, organisations have come together positively to work together to try to, across denominations, alleviate the problems in their community.

The third one I want to cite is in Ballynahinch, and is headed up by the First Presbyterian church, working alongside the Baptist and Methodist churches in the town and other Presbyterian churches. Again, people are signposted to the service by social services, the citizens advice bureau and counselling services. From a very small start, it is seeing its workload grow and grow on a weekly basis.

It is quite remarkable what those people are doing, and almost entirely on a voluntary basis. We are seeing large quantities of food being donated and work being done on a non-denominational basis. It is impressive and inspirational what those people are doing. No one, least of all me, would suggest for a second that food banks are a cure for all the ills in society or the recession. However, they are making a vital contribution, even beyond food. I have heard of some cases where the help of the food bank, in taking away that one pressure that a family is facing, has helped to avert marriage breakdown or, in some cases, persuaded people not to self-harm. The help knows no socio-economic boundaries. Food banks are seeing people come to them, not just from the socio-economic backgrounds that you would expect but from wealthier, traditionally middle-class backgrounds.

The question is: what can government do? It is not necessarily about providing additional funding, although I think any sector would appreciate any funding that was there. It is about promoting the work of food banks in partnership with statutory agencies, such as the Social Security Agency, social services, jobs and benefits offices and the Housing Executive. Those agencies can partner with food banks to ensure that no one who is in the sort of need that they are seeing, where people cannot afford to put food on the table for their family, is let slip through the net. Food banks can also help government in a practical way, by providing statistics about the types of groups

of people who are coming in and using their services and the reasons why they are presenting themselves to food banks. Using that information and those statistics, government could then help look at policy. If it is because people are falling through gaps in benefits, government, in the shape of the Minister and his Department, can help to address those problems. In many ways, it is unfortunate that churches and charities feel obliged and driven and that it is their mission to open food banks, but we should be immensely grateful to them —

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

Mr Hamilton: — for what they see as their duty to serve their community in such a positive and purposeful way. Without them, it would undoubtedly be the case that the problems we face socially in Northern Ireland would be much worse than they are.

5.30 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome it being put forward by Members. It is a topical and pertinent subject at this time. While we welcome the positive contributions of churches, charities and other community organisations in the alleviation of immediate hardship, the Minister for Social Development has a statutory responsibility to protect the most vulnerable, tackle poverty and address the lack of affordable homes. There is absolutely no doubt that charities play a very important role in our society, as Mr Hamilton has outlined, but they are not there to take on the statutory role of the Department. While it might support charities, it should not manufacture a situation in which the voluntary sector is left to become the main provider for the most vulnerable.

When the welfare state was introduced in 1948, benefits such as supplementary benefit were designed to be a safety net for those unfortunate enough to fall outside the normal range of benefit provision. Due to a lack of foresight and unwillingness or inability to provide adequate resources, more and more people became dependent on supplementary benefit and, more recently, income support. More and more lip service was paid to resolving these problems, but no real sustained effort was or has been made to alleviate the real hardship suffered by many people in our society. Instead of trying to put in place a system to deal —

Mr F McCann: I was reading something earlier that Simon had mentioned about some of the trusts. One of the articles said that someone had to borrow a tin of soup from their next-door neighbour to stop their 18-month-old daughter going to bed hungry. That is just one of a number of testimonies. Do you believe that, with the onset of severe welfare cuts, we could be dealing not only with food banks but with the setting-up of soup kitchens for people to go to?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. The example that he has given mirrors the reality faced by many people.

Instead of trying to put in place a system to deal with the problem, we have increasingly seen efforts by successive British Governments to ensure that the gap between rich and poor grows increasingly. In Scotland, the CAB reports that changes in benefits are causing increasing numbers of clients to fall through the social security safety net.

Unfortunately, for many of those people, their only way of sourcing food is through a food parcel. Benefit changes are the main reason why there is a growing demand for food parcels. Changes to the social fund in Britain have reduced the number of awards being made. The introduction of the social fund in 1988 was designed to be a safety net for people in need to cover costs such as food and housing and for people who needed emergency financial support through crisis loans. A limit on the number of crisis loans a person can apply for in a fixed period has had an adverse effect. The policy does not address any of the reasons why an individual may need a crisis loan and may well push someone towards other sources of help, such as moneylenders, loan sharks etc.

When we think of food banks and food parcels, we normally think of people who are in dire straits facing extreme poverty or homelessness. Food banks report that most of those accessing the services are low-income families who are experiencing some form of crisis. Interestingly, taking into account all the arguments that we have heard so loudly and so recently about getting people back to work, many of those needing food parcels in increasing numbers are in low-income, working households. There are many factors causing families and individuals to become increasingly dependent on food banks. The cost of food in general continues to rise alarmingly, and benefit and wage increases have simply not kept pace with that. The minimum wage is now approximately £6.18 per hour, having gone up by the huge sum of 11p just two weeks ago.

I recently watched an item on 'Newsnight' on a food bank in Coventry in England. The main reason given by those using the food bank was benefit issues. The use of benefit sanctions played a big role in people having to apply for food parcels. Also, a number of people who were interviewed had to apply because of long delays in processing their benefits — in some cases, from six to eight weeks. When they applied to the social fund looking for a crisis loan, many were turned down without a good reason being given. Again, interestingly, many of those interviewed were working on low incomes and were unable to manage.

In an article in 'The Guardian' in September, the director of the food bank charity, the Trussell Trust, which Mr Hamilton mentioned, was adamant that it will not become an arm of the welfare system. The number of people being fed by the Trussell Trust continues to grow. Some 28,000 were fed in 2008, and 128,000 got food parcels in 2011-12. This year, the figure is expected to rise to 200,000. In Coventry, 43% of the people affected had experienced benefit problems. There is no doubt that the growth of food banks shines an uncomfortable light on the state's retreat from welfare provision. Chris Mould, the director of Trussell, is scathing about how the state can coldly impose benefit penalties on vulnerable individuals while:

"knowing that no one will actually die of starvation because someone else — the voluntary sector — is looking after them".

The Minister needs to stand up and ensure that he takes responsibility for protecting our most vulnerable and that that is effective. Otherwise, it will be food banks today and back to the workhouse tomorrow.

Mr Copeland: I apologise in advance, as I speak under an even more present cloud of cynicism than even I am used to. I could have been unkind, and, in fact, I almost intended to be unkind by remarking initially that the motion, like some others, amounts to two Members calling on a party colleague to do something that he is already doing. I must confess that Mr Hamilton, perhaps unwittingly, covered in his initial address some of the points that were giving me concern. However, I still admit to a sense of frustration that here we are, at this late hour in the day, discussing matters that are relevant to the welfare of people who depend on the welfare state, and yet we are still denied the chance to debate such matters fully. I will say more about that tomorrow — a good deal more in all likelihood. It is, therefore, with a somewhat mollified sense of warmth, that I welcome the motion. On the one hand, I salute the fantastic work being done by those involved in the establishment and progression of these schemes; on the other hand, I cover my face in shame that we — the sixth wealthiest nation on the face of the earth, allegedly — are even contemplating that food banks should be a feature in any of our cities, towns or villages. I asked Mr Brady on the stairs on my way down here whether food banks represented a progression from soup kitchens. Neither of us was really sure what the honest answer to that was.

One of the biggest problems facing us is being addressed by, for example, the Trussell Trust. It is opening four new food banks in the United Kingdom every week to keep up with demand. One of the biggest problems it faces, besides the problem of people without jobs, which we all know about, is people with jobs running out of money before their next pay cheque arrives and those struggling with rising bills and facing the choice of paying bills or eating. It goes without saying that those without a job are in an even more desperate situation, as they find that their benefits and entitlements at the current level do not keep pace with their needs, never mind what the situation will be after the introduction of the proposed changes. We anticipate that those same people will, of course, have their problems compounded by the introduction of welfare reform.

Since April, the Trussell Trust has fed over 50,000 people in the UK, not to mention the fact that many thousands of church and community groups provide independent support through schemes similar to the food bank. I remind the House — not that it needs reminding — that behind every digit, comma and number in the statistics lie people, each with an individual story that, I feel, we all need to pay particular attention to. I think that I can safely say that there is no one in the Chamber or this Building who will not enjoy the benefits of a meal at some stage today, but there are people in the Province and kingdom who enjoy no such benefit.

Northern Ireland's first food bank was launched in Newtownards last December. Since then, there has been a massive increase in demand at the centre. The number of volunteers has risen from six to 90 in less than a year. The church has expressed its shock at the rise in the number of those in need. That is happening in Newtownards, which is not the most depressed place in Northern Ireland. Those affected include people who have a well-paid job but have found themselves in this position. Food banks, of course, are not new in Northern Ireland. Churches and organisations across the country have been operating various forms and sizes of food distribution schemes for several years. However, they undoubtedly rely on the

community's goodwill and support. As an Assembly, we should and must be committed to supporting people on low incomes. In this case, we can lend our support indirectly by encouraging food banks and all associated schemes.

We should hope to see more and more churches working together closely to serve the towns and communities so that no one goes hungry. The most vulnerable in society form a much larger group than they used to. They look to us to protect their interests. I am deeply grateful to those who are involved in these activities, and, as I said, I am deeply ashamed that their actions are necessary.

Mr Durkan: I also welcome the motion. The need for food banks here in the North is apparent now more than ever, with increasing numbers of children — a quarter — living in poverty. The most recent unemployment rate, which covers the quarter from May to July 2012, is estimated to be up by 10,000. Levels of joblessness here are rising above the UK average. There is the continually rising cost of living. Utility bills here are up by £800, and the average cost of a shopping basket has gone up by 18% since 2008. It has been calculated that, compared with four years ago, an average household in Northern Ireland will need to spend an extra £3,500 just to pay the bills. As we all know, however, plenty of families out there do not have anywhere near that.

We acknowledge the increase in the number of food banks that are being established in this region to deal with the demands of the economic downturn. We pay tribute to the excellent response of the charity sector, community and church organisations to this dire situation. Without the work of those three sectors, it would simply not be possible for many of the families concerned to survive.

In 2011-12, the large charitable organisation, the Trussell Trust, which other speakers mentioned, provided almost 130,000 food parcels for people in crisis across the UK. That is double the amount of the previous year, alarmingly pointing to a huge deterioration in the economic situation. CAB's report 'Voices from the frontline ... The rising demand for food parcels' estimates that half a million people will be in receipt of a food parcel by 2016, by which time it aims to have opened 500 food banks. That is a very scary and imminent reality.

As a Government, we must make it a priority to support those organisations, not only via promotion but in funding, given the huge strain that they already face and will face even more in the coming years with increased demand and reduced donations. The SDLP cannot stress enough the value of food banks. They are virtually a lifeline for many people. We must ensure that people have access to food that is nutritious and of good quality. It is a sad reality that we must make provision for such extreme poverty. Unfortunately, that is the situation that the world is plagued with, and we must respond effectively to it.

We cannot, as Mr Brady said, expect voluntary organisations to catch those who have fallen through the ever-growing holes in the safety net of social security. With the welfare reform changes, we will see the abolition of the social fund as we know it, which will mean the loss of community care grants and crisis loans for general living expenses. Many charitable organisations, as well as individuals, rely on those funds to lift people out of crisis and to sustain services such as food banks so that they can provide front line assistance to those in poverty.

Under the expected provisions, individual local authorities will be given the funding and flexibility to redesign services. It is important that the Department encourages local authorities to aid food bank providers and to work with the charitable, faith and community sectors to assess areas of need so that resources can be placed where there is most need. If the Department is seriously to honour the commitments made in the Programme for Government to alleviate child poverty, it should not only support and promote the work of food banks but tackle the real problems that cause the reliance on those services.

The SDLP attempted to table an amendment to the motion. Unfortunately, our amendment was not accepted. We wished to strengthen the Assembly's call to the Minister not only to promote food banks but to oppose the very reforms, as they are called, that will significantly worsen the financial situation of many families here. We want to see a proactive Government working to tackle the issues rather than simply dealing with the aftermath of cuts. We must not simply accept any system that will force —

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

Mr Durkan: — thousands into poverty and inhibit the potential for economic growth in this region.

5.45 pm

Ms Lo: I thank the Members who brought this important issue to the House. Last year, food banks fed nearly 130,000 people across the UK, which was a 100% increase on the previous year. Redundancy, illness, high unemployment, domestic violence, debt, delays in benefits, family breakdown and high fuel costs — we have all heard about the dilemma "To eat or to heat?" — are just some of the reasons why food banks are becoming more vital than ever. Indeed, just last week, jobcentres in England and Wales started to refer people to charity-run food banks that will give them a food parcel. That is the first time in living memory that hungry people will have been passed on to charities in that way.

Food banks not only feed the hungry but have been proven to help prevent crime, homelessness, family breakdown and mental health problems. We now have a number of such food banks in Northern Ireland, which Members who spoke previously mentioned. Storehouse, for example, is a local charity that focuses on donating long-life produce to households across greater Belfast. It currently provides around 100 households with three days' worth of food every week. However, it has had to stop promoting its work as it just does not have enough donations to meet the overwhelming need. Instead, Storehouse works via referrals from 50 to 60 local charities and churches.

Supermarkets throw away tons of perfectly good food every year instead of donating it, because it is cheaper to do so and carries no risk of liability should someone get ill from eating food donated by them. We need to consider ways in which supermarkets can be brought into the charitable process, perhaps by having a donation trolley at the exit of a store and asking shoppers to donate long-life tinned or dried food items to a local food bank. I was at a Sainsbury's branch at the weekend where the retailer has united with FareShare, the food redistribution charity, to run a pilot scheme in which shoppers are urged to buy one and give one free to FareShare. As an enthusiastic supporter of FareShare, I, of course, donated.

A recent survey by the Pennies Foundation found that the economic downturn has resulted in more than one in three people donating less to charities. However, by investing in the community and voluntary sector, we get value for money for front line services, as well as getting more efficiency and less bureaucracy, which, in turn, leads to financial savings for the Government. As unemployment rates continue to rise and with welfare reform changes on the way, there is likely to be an increase in those needing to use food banks and advice services. It is vital that the sector continue to provide such services.

The Minister should provide financial support for our local food banks so that they can meet the overwhelming need that has arisen out of the economic downturn. They have proven how necessary they are, and they already have the systems in place. However, without additional resources, they will be unable to keep up with demand. I support the motion.

Mr Weir: I support this important motion. When we define food banks and their purpose, it is important, in certain regards, to point out what they are not. They are not intended to be a substitute for the state looking after the most vulnerable in our society. It would be wrong if they took on that role. There needs to be, above all, that degree of protection for the most vulnerable in our society. Consequently, whatever charitable help is given, it should not be a substitute. On the flip side of the coin, even if we had a perfect society in which the state looked after everyone who was vulnerable, that would not abrogate our responsibility — that personal responsibility — through Christian, community or social organisations, to look after and give assistance to those in our society who need our help. So, a very important role is played by the food bank movement.

As was indicated, even in the best of systems, any social security system will have to be, by nature, bound by rules and regulations. There is no alternative to that. However, food banks can play a vital role because they have a speed and flexibility of response that can be vital on the ground. There can be occasions when people have fallen on hard times, and there will obviously be a certain delay before any form of social security mechanism can look after them. There could be people who do not fit into the exact set of circumstances to qualify for help. The big advantage for food banks is that they can operate very quickly. Storehouse has three-day packages of food that can be given to people at very short notice. That is a swift response that the state cannot always maintain. There is also a level of flexibility. It is not a one-size-fits-all situation when it comes to food banks. It can be a one-off intervention that lasts for a few days. It can be a situation in which a package can be provided for six weeks or longer. As has been mentioned already, Storehouse can work with people's individual circumstances.

Food banks can cover a multitude of situations, the most obvious being where people or families are suffering economic hardship. Churches can intervene where there are particular circumstances in which the person would not necessarily qualify for state help. That could be through illness in the family. It could be that the person in a couple who normally provides and cooks the food falls ill and their partner is, effectively, stranded. Again, the response of the state is not quick enough to fill that void, so very good work can be done by food banks.

Mention has been made of Storehouse in Belfast and Newtownards. I highlight Storehouse North Down, which, I think, arose through the Bangor inter-church community initiative. A number of churches, including my church — Hamilton Road Presbyterian Church — and Holywood Baptist Church provide services of that nature. For a long period, there was a desire to make a difference. Following a number of meetings of the Bangor inter-church community initiative, it was felt that, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, the best thing was to link with Storehouse. Therefore, Storehouse North Down was born. It has operated out of Kiltonga Christian Centre, which is part of the Oneida factory. It has worked with local churches to provide that for the greater north Down area. It has recently benefited from someone who was effectively on a gap year working with it.

It is important to realise that food banks do not operate in isolation. I am sure that the Minister will refer to that. Whether it is statutory bodies, the Department or shops, food banks will work as part of a partnership. Therefore, they can provide a holistic solution to people's problems and help to break the cycle of poverty. There is a need for the state to protect its citizens, but there is also a need for people to step up to the mark and make that social contribution, whether that is through their church or community organisation. I commend the work of the food bank movement. It is making an amazing difference and a vital contribution to Northern Ireland. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Anderson: I support the motion and congratulate my two party colleagues on tabling the debate on this matter.

Governments and society in general have come to rely more and more on the contribution of the voluntary and community sector. That, in itself, is a subject for debate, but, as the pressure on public finances continues to grow and we face the prospect of a prolonged period of austerity, we will become increasingly dependent on the voluntary and community sector. I never cease to be amazed at the way in which that sector rises to the occasion. It restores my confidence in human nature when I see so many people across the community prepared to give up their time to help with a wide variety of worthwhile causes. I pay tribute to the army of volunteers and charity workers, and I want to praise the generosity of the general public. Even in days of financial pressure, people in Northern Ireland will always go that extra mile in response to appeals for help.

It is vital that such public generosity of spirit is fully supported with the practical support of government, a point highlighted by the motion before us today. The importance of a meaningful partnership between government and the voluntary sector has also been recognised in the concordat between the Executive and voluntary groups.

The motion refers to the growth of the number of food banks run by churches, charities and other community organisations. When the Trussell Trust started in 2004, it had one food bank; five years later, that number was 50. As the recession began to take hold, the number of food banks increased dramatically. The figure now stands at over 250 across the United Kingdom, and it is growing steadily. That is a stark reminder that the financial and economic crisis is having a major impact on an increasing number of people. In the current economic climate, there are many reasons why people find themselves unable to

put food on the table, and people who never thought they would need the help of food banks are now turning to them.

We live in 21st-century Britain. We have a welfare state, and yet in our own nation and Province the grim reality is that ever-increasing numbers of people are dropping below the poverty line and finding it hard to provide for themselves and their family. Government has the primary responsibility to tackle poverty and that must remain the case. However, others play a vital role. The motion commends the charitable and voluntary sector, and, as an active member of my church, I pay a particular tribute to the key contribution of the churches. The Church's first aim must always be to preach the gospel, but it also has a social conscience grounded in the teachings of the bible. It was that conscience that inspired men like Dr Tom Barnardo and William Wilberforce to take steps to address the social issues of their day. That same spirit of concern and compassion motivates a number of churches today that are establishing and promoting food banks. In Northern Ireland, we live in what is still a strongly church-based society, and the Church is a central part of the fabric of community life. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Church's contribution to food banks is crucial.

In June, my party colleague and mayor of Craigavon, Councillor Carla Lockhart, presided over the announcement of the launch of the Craigavon area food bank at the Craigavon Civic Centre, an event that was attended by over 180 people. My church at Drumcree has committed to support that initiative, which we hope will be up and running very soon. Many other churches across Craigavon borough are involved, and I want to thank and encourage them all. I know that the Minister for Social Development does not need to be persuaded about the benefits of church involvement in the food bank initiative. However, I urge him to ensure that his Department gives all possible help and assistance to the many churches, voluntary organisations and individuals who give of their time to help this needy cause.

Mr McGimpsey: I support the motion and commend the individuals who tabled it.

The provision of food banks by churches and voluntary organisations not only is highly beneficial to the individuals who receive food but is an act of charity for which they must be commended.

6.00 pm

The point has already been made that we are in the UK, which is the sixth richest country in the world, and we are distributing food parcels. I come from a generation that talked about people starving in China, Africa or Asia, but since the institution of the welfare state in the UK, we have never been in a position in which individuals and families are relying on this type of charitable work. That is a symptom of the challenges that are facing our society, the Government in the UK and the Executive here. We have a society in which 20% of the population is living in poverty, and 1% of income is earned by 10% of the population. Over the past five years, food prices have risen by 5%, but the minimum wage has risen by some 12%, and people often do not even get those types of rises if they are not on the minimum wage.

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

Oxfam says that we are now living in the perfect storm: falling incomes, rising prices, public service cuts, benefits cuts and a housing crisis. All that is combining to become one of the biggest challenges that our society has had to deal with for generations, and we need to understand exactly what we are facing.

Recipients of food from food banks say that there are three main reasons why they require such support: benefit issues, unemployment and debt. Tomorrow, we will debate the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill and its proposals, and it is inescapable that those three reasons will be magnified, reinforced and will grow. They will continue to fuel the situation.

We are talking about hunger, poverty and want, which is a real challenge. We need to look at the need and then address it. We should not say that we have a certain amount of money and hope that that is enough to do the deal and provide support. In Belfast, for example, some 20% of primary-school children go to school every morning without having eaten breakfast. If children arrive in school hungry, how will they learn? We provide an education to allow children to fulfil their potential in life, and yet we give them that type of challenge.

Let us look at how an ordinary, poor family will deal with those issues. Very often, those families that are in receipt of benefits have some support. However, there has been a massive increase in the number of families who are almost on benefits — in other words, the working poor. A large proportion of our children are living in poverty in homes in which one member of the family is earning a wage, and those who are on the edge are being cut off from benefits. As was mentioned, community care grants are being abolished, so many families are dealing with real difficulties and challenges. We are returning to 2005 funding levels. We are facing enormous challenges, and to deal with the issue, it will need —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will do exactly as you tell me.

Those issues will require flexibility. With the Welfare Reform Bill, we should make as much room to manoeuvre as we possibly can.

Mr Wells: Sometimes we reach the stage where everything that could be said has been said. We are certainly at that stage this evening. I am not going to rise to Mr Brady's bait and get into the whole debate about why we need food banks in this part of the United Kingdom. You can be sincere and support and praise those who are involved in this charitable work without compromising your position on the situation that led to the need for food banks. We need to be careful that we acknowledge —

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Mr Brady: I did in fact, if the Member had been listening, praise the work of the charitable organisations that are providing food banks. The point that I am making is that there is a statutory obligation and that the state has a duty of care. Which has primacy? Is it the duty of care of the

state or that of the charitable organisations? I imagine that it is the duty of care of the state.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Wells: Yes, although I have to say that the tenor of the amendments, which were tabled, and in my opinion rightly rejected, indicated that there seemed to be a hint of criticism of those who, Mr Brady suggested, are taking on the role of the state. Apart from that note, I think that we would all congratulate those who, because of their Christian concern, have decided to do something for the needy in our community.

Food banks have been created in Northern Ireland over the past number of years as a way of helping those who are most vulnerable. The organisations are mostly charities, but they are distinct from the state sector in so far as they do not act as a replacement for food provision for the elderly or for asylum seekers' food vouchers.

It has been interesting to watch the way in which this movement has grown from Newtownards to Belfast and north Down. In listening to the debate, what occurred to me was that there are many rural areas in Northern Ireland, west of the Bann and in the south of the Province, in which this service is not available. Therefore, many people in rural communities would value this type of food bank provision very much. However, it is not there yet. I hope that the organisations that are active in the field will consider expanding to other areas.

Food banks should not be seen as just the work of a small central charity that is trying to put right a problem. They should be viewed as a network of different groups — churches, community groups and interest groups, such as Women's Aid — that deposit into, or withdraw from, food banks on behalf of their clients.

As others have done, I would like to highlight in particular the work of Storehouse — or Stonehouse, as Ms Lo would call it. Storehouse is a Belfast-based food bank founded by the Belfast City Vineyard Church. It works with more than 50 churches and 35 organisations to provide food parcels, furniture and clothing. A point worth mentioning is that this is not simply about food; some "food banks" provide basic clothing and furniture to needy families. Storehouse feeds more than 80 families a week in Belfast and Lisburn. That represents 160 bags of food per week. Unfortunately, that figure is expected to rise in the winter months due to the uncertainty over oil and coal prices.

Storehouse and its partners gather food on a weekly basis and store it in a warehouse in the city. Volunteers sort, pack and deliver the food and toiletries according to the various sizes of families and individuals. None of this would be possible without the activities of volunteers, who do a tremendous amount of good work in providing food for the needy. Indeed, as everyone has admitted, this system could not work without volunteers. If you were paying people to do it, the system would simply collapse. It is, therefore, part of what we see as the big society and the trend of Northern Ireland people giving their time to help those who are more needy.

The food that Storehouse collects is distributed in two ways. First, and most common, the withdrawal partners — it is a big word, but it refers to those who are associated with Storehouse — pick up the food parcels on a weekly basis and distribute them to their clients. Secondly,

Storehouse runs a Belfast City Council centre where referred parties can collect the food themselves and can have up to six bags of food in a six-month period. This is clearly not designed to be a long-term solution for feeding the hungry but a temporary stopgap for those who are having to choose between food and other essentials.

Storehouse also provides donated furniture to those who are referred by its partners, and it provides personal clothing services, whereby an individual or family can choose from clothes, donated to Storehouse by many generous donors, on racks. Furniture is delivered by volunteers from Storehouse using a van generously provided via funding from a private trust grant.

It must be emphasised that Storehouse is a volunteer-run charity that has no paid staff. Pastors from Belfast City Vineyard Church take responsibility for the charity, but they are given only time not payment for their work with Storehouse.

One message coming from the debate is that some form of seed investment could — I have an extra minute, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The extra minute is almost up.

Mr Wells: A bit of core funding could, indeed, allow this to expand quite dramatically and help the poor and needy.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I certainly listened with interest to all that was said, and I thank all those who contributed. I welcome the opportunity to respond now to the debate.

Combating poverty and tackling disadvantage is a complex and difficult challenge. There are many facets to it and many different factors in play, including low incomes, isolation, stigma and low educational attainment. As Minister for Social Development, I am very aware of the scale of the challenge we face in tackling disadvantage, especially in these times of economic hardship and instability. The coming years will require a great deal of hard work to lay the foundations of growth, to support individuals and communities in tackling unemployment and worklessness and to ensure that our most vulnerable citizens are supported and protected.

The Programme for Government commits the Executive to work in partnership with the private sector and the voluntary and community sector to build a better and shared future for all. In support of that, the concordat, which is the agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector, outlines the key values and principles and establishes a set of shared commitments on how they can work together to better serve the people of Northern Ireland. Each of the Executive's five priorities under the Programme for Government will rely on voluntary and community sector input — that includes the faith sector — to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and to encourage social responsibility. That is why my Department is keen to engage with faith-based organisations.

I am very much aware of the good work that is being done on the ground through the operation of food banks, such as that run from the Thriving Life Church in Newtownards. That work depends on a dedicated core of volunteers. I want to take the opportunity to commend the commitment

and dedication of the volunteers who participate in the various programmes.

My Department has lead responsibility for volunteering and, in March this year, published Northern Ireland's first ever volunteering strategy. As I travel across Northern Ireland as Minister for Social Development, I am continually astounded but not surprised by the level of volunteering that takes place. My Department provides funding of approximately £1·7 million annually to support volunteering across the Province, and I fully recognise the contribution of those who give freely of their time, experience and expertise in helping the most disadvantaged in all our communities.

Our new strategy is about getting more people to volunteer and recognising the tremendous and invaluable work that volunteers do. It is also about supporting the development of volunteers' skills and improving volunteering management practice. Implementation of the strategy will present significant opportunities for areas of volunteering that have not been supported traditionally.

I am committed to helping faith-based groups better reflect on the contribution they make to society, and I am committed to having honest dialogue and engagement with that sector. I will seek to champion the cause of faith communities as potential partners for Departments and government agencies as we strive to make Northern Ireland a better place. There is also a need to allow faith-based organisations to raise their concerns directly with government and advise on issues that are emerging at grass roots. The Government also need to facilitate faith communities in identifying ways that they can be more effective in meeting the needs of disadvantaged, marginalised and excluded people in their local communities. Those faith communities should share learning and best practice about the contribution that their groups make in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities and in new, emerging minority communities. Food banks are just one of the many ways that faith-based communities can assist my Department to engage with those hard-to-reach individuals.

6.15 pm

In May 2010, the Department established a community faiths forum that brings together over 20 faith-based community practitioners from different faith backgrounds in Northern Ireland, including ethnic and minority faith groups. I am pleased that that initiative has proved to be successful and that officials from not only my Department but others, as well as voluntary and community representatives, are engaging with the forum members regularly on important policy issues. It is my hope that the forum will continue and develop over the next number of years.

The benefits system, which my Department administers, aims to provide a safety net for people who find themselves needing financial support through no fault of their own. We know that many people who may be entitled to benefits are not receiving them for a variety of reasons. Encouraging benefit uptake is not a statutory requirement, but it has been a key priority for the Department since 2005. It is now a key building block in the 2011-15 Programme for Government under priority 2. The Social Security Agency delivers a benefit uptake programme that is aimed at improving the uptake of benefits. That programme uses a

number of evidence-based approaches, including direct and indirect targeting, as well as advertising and promotion. It also uses community outreach, which includes home visits to assist vulnerable customers with access to benefits. To date, that work has generated over £50 million in additional benefits and arrears for more than 15,000 vulnerable people.

In the past year alone, £13·1 million in additional benefits was paid out. Interestingly, that figure has trebled since the previous year. In the 2010-11 year, £3·9 million was paid out; in 2011-12, the figure was £13·1 million. The real difference is the use of different approaches, such as working with particular groups, to see whether there are other ways that we can increase the awareness of potential benefit uptake or whether there are things that we can do in a different way, including working with different stakeholders to increase the uptake. It has certainly been working, especially when you consider that the figure has trebled since the previous year. I think that that is a good example of what we often speak about: devolution making a difference.

A new benefit uptake programme is under consideration. It will include building on some pilot work that the Social Security Agency has been trialling, and there will be engagement with partners over and above the traditional advice-sector partners. That is being explored and all opportunities optimised, including working with the Churches and faith-based groups, community and sports groups, community development organisations and other civic partners. Through those community and sports connections, as well as through the Churches and the faith-based groups, we can reach people who may not previously have been reached through other methods, whether that is television or other forms of advertising. That is because those groups bring together, whether through sport, faith or whatever, groups of people —

Mr Brady: Thank you for giving way, Minister. When discussing uptake, it was mentioned that social security staff in England have been referring people to food banks. Does the Minister envisage that happening in social security offices here?

Mr McCausland: I will come back to that. That point has been raised, and I will certainly return to it.

I want to see how we can maximise the number of people who are getting the benefits that they are entitled to and to minimise the number of people who are at risk of slipping through the system. I am not talking just about social security benefits, because I have asked my officials to explore how they can use this engagement with the community, voluntary and faith-based sectors to explore opportunities for people to gain access to other benefits that they may be missing out on. It may be something around free school meals, school uniforms or whatever, but I am hopeful that, now that contact has been established, there are opportunities there that we can take to see how we can expand the work that is being done and take that further.

Working closely with non-traditional partners, such as churches and faith-based groups, is a key opportunity to reach those most vulnerable in order to ensure that they are accessing their full entitlement to benefits. Many people are not taking up social security and other benefits. Discussions continue between the Social Security Agency and a wide range of new partner organisations about new,

non-contractual initiatives to better reach and influence decisions about the uptake of benefits by those at risk of poverty. Partnership arrangements will include benefit-uptake promotional material being distributed by, for example, the Thriving Life Church in Newtownards and those involved in the food bank that it operates. That will help to ensure that those at the most vulnerable point are referred from the food bank to the Social Security Agency for a full benefit entitlement check to assess whether they are in receipt of all their benefits and the services and supports that they and their families are entitled to. I believe that faith- and Church-based groups will have an increasing role in helping us to reach those who may have entitlement to new and/or additional benefits, services and supports.

Food banks are not an alternative to a benefits system that is designed to support people in need, especially over the medium and longer term. Although a person presenting in urgent need at a social security office or jobs and benefits office can, where possible, be assisted through a social fund crisis loan, food banks can provide an extra tier of support for people. They can complement the benefits system by providing support for people who find themselves in urgent need and who may not be able, or want, to apply for benefits. They are an effective way for the voluntary and community sector to help to meet the needs in their communities, and they provide an opportunity for us to promote benefit uptake and to get people the benefits that they are entitled to. They can be a valuable tool in our fight to combat poverty and tackle disadvantage.

I will now address a couple of points that were raised during the debate. I think that it was Simon Hamilton who made the point that the benefits system can sometimes be slow to respond, particularly in an emergency situation. A person presenting in crisis will be assisted under the social fund crisis loan or budgeting loan scheme, which will, in fact, end in GB next April, a point that was made recently in regard to the imperative to proceed with the Welfare Reform Bill. However, through the Welfare Reform Bill, I intend to bring forward a new Northern Ireland scheme for discretionary support that will widen the qualifying criteria.

The question was asked whether the role of the food banks is reflective of deficiencies in the benefits system. It is not an alternative. It is not a substitute for the benefits system. It is to be seen as complementary and supplementary. It is not substitutionary but supplementary. Food banks can certainly complement the benefits system, and I think that we see that as their role.

Sydney Anderson spoke about the "army of volunteers" that is committed to this and said that it was good example of social outreach from churches. Peter Weir also made the point about food banks not being a substitute but being supplementary and complementary. Anna Lo talked about people being directed to food banks here. At the moment, it is in fact more a case of my Department working with the food banks so that they have access to the relevant information and can signpost people to benefits that they may not be aware of. In fact, that gives added value: you not only get the direct work of the food bank but the extra value of the linkage to the benefits system.

On Mickey Brady's point about the scale of the social fund, there were 263,427 social fund awards in 2010-11 and almost £82 million was allocated to those in need.

In setting up food banks, is the voluntary sector doing what government should be? No, it is complementing and supplementing the work that government is doing, which I think is the role of the voluntary sector.

Finally, what assistance is the Department giving to support the voluntary and community sector and faith sector in that work? The Department provides funding in the region of £14 million to support the voluntary and community and faith sectors in maximising their contribution to tackling issues such as disadvantage. Some £1.7 million of that is used to promote and support volunteering across Northern Ireland, and funding of £310,000 has just been earmarked to help the faith sector to maximise its contribution to tackling issues such as poverty. There is a pilot scheme there. We want to see how that works, and if it works, we can take that further.

In closing, I commend the good work that is being done by the food banks, and I want to say how much we value it. We value the commitment and dedication of the volunteers, and we are keen to expand the co-operation and take that further. I am sure that people right across the Chamber will join me in hoping that we see that taken forward very successfully.

Mr Douglas: This has been a very good debate so far. Many topics have been covered. The proposer of the motion, Simon Hamilton, clearly stated the impact that food banks are making right across Northern Ireland. I think a number of Members referred to that.

There are a couple of themes coming out of the debate. First, it is clear that many families go hungry because they do not have enough money to make ends meet. I think most Members who spoke referred to that. There are a whole range of reasons for that, including family break-up, mental health issues, people becoming homeless and the fact that many families are in debt at the moment, often through no fault of their own. Others have lost their homes, there are problems for low-income families, and, as Anna Lo mentioned, there is the issue of domestic violence.

Simon Hamilton talked about how encouraging it is that there are those in society who still care and who are willing to give their time. It shows the depth of compassion that exists in our communities. Other Members who spoke referred to that as well. Even with all our difficulties, we still have a caring community out there, caring for people in an arena that is certainly increasing. Some people spoke about the number of food banks increasing from, I think, one in 2004 to 250 today in one particular area. That shows the scale of the problem. People have said that this is not a long-term answer. It is certainly a short-term measure. The whole notion is that those organisations — charities, the voluntary and community sector, churches and faith-based organisations and ethnic minority groups — can respond in a very quick and efficient manner.

Simon Hamilton also highlighted the initiatives that we have taken as an Assembly, including the social investment fund, which is coming down the track, hopefully very soon, youth employment schemes and some of the social care initiatives. Many of those schemes are making an impact. Although the food banks are not a substitute, as the Minister said, in one sense they can be a very necessary intervention because of their pace, because of the local knowledge and because of the commitment of thousands of volunteers right across Northern Ireland.

The importance of volunteering came out in the debate, as did the support for volunteering. The Minister spoke about some of the initiatives that he is involved in to try to encourage skills in that sector.

There was also praise for some of the supermarkets for the work that they are doing. It was also highlighted by, I think, Mickey Brady that some of the larger supermarkets do not want to become involved because of the cost and the health and safety issues. Those are real issues, because the last thing that the supermarkets, or any of us, want to do is to give out food that is past its sell-buy date and cause food poisoning or some other illness.

6.30 pm

Fra McCann's intervention was timely. He talked about welfare cuts, as did a number of Members, and he asked whether we were going to move towards having soup kitchens. The question arose as to the difference between a food bank and a soup kitchen and whether a food bank is a progressive version of a soup kitchen. We did not come to any conclusion on that.

Mr F McCann: I raised that issue because I watched a documentary a couple of months ago about the introduction of welfare reforms in New York. Over a short period, two million people were moved off benefits, and the result was that large factories were opened as food banks and tens of thousands of people totally depended on soup kitchens to survive the daily problems.

Mr Douglas: That was a good intervention, Mr McCann; I appreciate it.

I will move on. Michael Copeland said that we would discuss these matters tomorrow. That will be a very interesting debate, to say the least. He said that we needed to look at people as individuals and not as 100 people here or 200 people there. Our role as an elected Assembly is to protect the most vulnerable in society. Quite a number of Members supported that assertion.

Mark Durkan welcomed the motion. He talked about the 25% of children who live in poverty and about the increase in the cost of shopping and other family bills. He rightly pointed out that food banks are an important lifeline for many families that cannot make ends meet.

A number of Members talked about the Trussell Trust and the 130,000 food parcels that were delivered in 2011. I believe that Citizens Advice said that, by 2015, some 500,000 people will regularly be looking to food parcels.

Anna Lo thanked the Members who tabled the motion, and she highlighted the 100% increase in food parcels in one year, which shows the scale of the problem. She asked how that demand could be managed, because it will continue to increase in the coming years. She also mentioned supermarkets, as I did, which, because of costs and for health and safety reasons, throw away tons of food. Someone else suggested that perhaps they should provide shopping trolleys with "Buy one, get one free" offers. I think that Anna Lo mentioned FareShare, which is an idea that is close to my heart. Some Members suggested that that is already happening in some supermarkets.

Peter Weir said that we were talking not about substitutes but about protection for the most vulnerable. We can all sign up to that. However, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution; there are different needs out there, and we

need different responses. Mr Weir mentioned the role of the faith-based organisations in particular, their local knowledge and the way in which they can react speedily to and identify the people who are most vulnerable. He mentioned north Down, Belfast and Newtownards, and the Stonehouse or Storehouse.

Mr Weir: Stonehouse is a completely different organisation.

Mr Douglas: It is definitely Storehouse. A number of Members mentioned its amazing work. We need to help and support those organisations, and perhaps we should look at mainstreaming their funding.

My colleague Sydney Anderson supported the motion. He said that government and society have come to rely on the community and voluntary sector. Like all of us, he never ceases to be amazed by the generosity of spirit and the commitment right across Northern Ireland among people who give up huge amounts of time and energy. He talked about the importance of the Government and the charitable sector working together. It is not a case of ourselves alone — it is about all the sectors working together. He also paid tribute to the churches and, in particular, Dr Barnardo and Mr Wilberforce, who addressed issues facing the most vulnerable in society.

Michael McGimpsey also supported the motion. He, like someone else, mentioned that we are the sixth richest country in the world and yet we are debating the importance of food banks. Do I have an extra minute?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Douglas: Even the likes of Jim Wells was supportive — Jim Wells was particularly supportive. It was a good debate. There was real consensus that we need to help the most vulnerable and encourage the Minister to do so as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the growth in the number of food banks established by churches, charities and other community organisations; welcomes the positive response by these sectors to the needs of people and families suffering from the ill effects of the economic downturn; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that his Department continues to support and promote the work of food banks.

Economic Recovery

Mr Deputy Speaker: As two amendments have been selected, the Business Committee has allocated up to one hour and 45 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to wind. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes, with concern, the continuing pursuance of austerity measures by the British and Irish Governments and the subsequent detrimental effects on our local economy; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to impress on both Governments the need to follow a path to economic recovery that is based on job creation, progressive taxation, the protection of the most vulnerable and the provision of first-class front-line public services.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an rún a mholadh. The principal reason for bringing this motion to the House this evening is to send out a very clear message that austerity is not working. It did not work when it was tried in 1929, and the IMF has tried it in Asia and Latin America. Each time, it succeeded merely in turning downturns into recessions and recessions into depressions. It appears that we are on that road again. It is time that we sent out a clear message that enough is enough. Austerity is not working. There is a growing acceptance across Europe that the policies of austerity have failed. They have not led to any form of economic growth. They have only perpetuated the problems and resulted in the return of emigration and soaring unemployment. What we need is a change of direction.

The conservative Governments in both London and Dublin are failing the people of these islands. Both Governments claim that they have taken their chosen path to close a Budget deficit, but the actions they have taken have resulted only in a greater problem than the one they started with, with the economies on both islands contracting so far in 2012. It is also very clear that these decisions are a result of their own political ideology rather than any great understanding of economics. The British Government unilaterally took billions from the Executive's block grant. They are attempting to decimate the social welfare budget, with George Osborne today attempting to take a further £10 billion from the least well-off in our society under the guise of welfare reform. They have cut the top rate of tax for high earners and failed to adequately collect tax from multinational companies, which often account for billions of pounds in unpaid taxes. None of these measures is fair or just.

The Dublin Government, elected to office on a platform of change, have simply capitulated to the ECB and the IMF. They continue to pay out billions of euros to unsecured bond holders who have no right to repayment, all the while imposing regressive taxation measures on the least well-off and failing to invest in any kind of job creation measures.

There are now 65,000 people unemployed across the Six Counties and 310,000 people unemployed in the South. That is almost 375,000 people unemployed across the island, 85,000 of whom are under the age of 25. All

indications are that these figures will get worse. At a recent meeting of the Employment and Learning Committee, members were told that Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) statisticians have predicted that unemployment will reach 69,500 by the end of 2013, an increase of around 10% on the current figures. We cannot simply stand back and sleepwalk into this.

Despite the fact that the Executive's hands have been tied by the lack of fiscal or borrowing powers, many positive interventions have been made. The current economic strategy aims to create 25,000 jobs by 2015. The European Council meeting in June requested member states to engage in growth-friendly fiscal policies to curb both youth and long-term unemployment. However, this call is being ignored by both the British and Irish Governments. This is an incredibly difficult time to be young in Ireland. It has been said that for the first time since World War Two this generation of Europeans will be worse off than their parents. This is an intolerable situation.

We need significant investment and stimulus to create jobs. We need investment on an all-island basis. This means an all-island job creation strategy and greater co-operation North and South to realise the potential of the entire island. We need to challenge the austerity measures being introduced by the British and Irish Governments. We need better approaches, and an investment strategy that is based around stimulus and growth needs to be worked on in the North. Today, we saw the launch of that investment strategy, and it is important that the promises and the targets set out in that are delivered.

I will quickly deal with the amendments that have been tabled by the DUP and the SDLP. The DUP amendment comes very close to matching the sentiments that we sought to address, albeit with a substantial change in terminology. Do not let me suggest that anyone in the House is being petty. If the Members speaking to the DUP amendment can convince us that they are calling for a clear change in direction away from the failed policies of austerity, that will leave it much easier for those of us on this side of the House to support that amendment. There is a lack of clarity on that, and we will wait to hear their contributions. It is important to note that the motion and the amendment reflect the agreed Programme for Government from the Executive through a focus on job creation, the protection of the most vulnerable and delivering first-class public services. There is a small dispute about the lack of a reference to progressive taxation, but we are willing to hear what DUP Members have to say. We will make a decision on whether we support the amendment on the basis of that.

The SDLP amendment does not call for an end to austerity, but, given that that party backed the austerity treaty in the South, this should come as no surprise. However, I make the same offer to the proponents of that amendment: if you can make it clear that the amendment calls for a move away from austerity, we will consider supporting the amendment.

Reducing disposable income, coupled with the reduction of spending on infrastructure and capital projects will have the inevitable effect of pushing more and more people into poverty and deprivation. This is further evidence of the need to have maximum fiscal powers transferred away from London to the Assembly, as it is clear that economic

policymakers in Whitehall have no conception of the social and economic conditions that pertain here.

The North has faced significant financial constraints due to a substantial reduction in the block grant, a cut introduced by the Tory Government. This is the backdrop against which we have to operate. The consequences for funding and investment are severe. However, we as an Assembly are committed to mitigating the worst impacts of the imposed cuts and to ensuring that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society are protected. To prevent the Tories from making future cuts to the block grant, we need greater fiscal autonomy. We need a system that gives us full budgetary and fiscal decision-making powers. During these times of austerity, every penny and every cent counts. More importantly, we need greater fiscal autonomy to allow us to be innovative in finding ways of generating revenue without the continual threat of the cut to the block grant coming from the British Government.

Sinn Féin is not a high tax party; it is a fair tax party. Taxing the very wealthy during the good times would have left these islands with the resources needed to cope during the bust. Government policies across these islands place exports as a key to delivering growth, and, from reading through the Executive's economic strategy, that is very clear. For many businesses here, the first steps into a new market are across the border, but both Enterprise Ireland and Invest NI compete with limited resources to promote companies from their respective jurisdictions in the global marketplace. For an island the size of Ireland, there must be a cohesive approach to attracting foreign direct investment. At present, the limited resources of Invest NI and the IDA are spread too thinly in the global marketplace, and they compete for investment in similar sectors.

There is a growing acceptance across Europe that the policies of austerity are failing. I appeal to Members to support the motion and send out a clear message that it is time for a change, a move away from austerity. We need to move towards a path of economic growth that is based on job creation, progressive taxation, protecting the most vulnerable and providing first-class services.

6.45 pm

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"that the UK Government, as well as those in the Republic of Ireland and many other European countries, continue to pursue policies of austerity; expresses its concern about the detrimental effect this is having on the Northern Ireland economy; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge HM Government to reassess their deficit reduction strategy in light of recent evidence and seek to stimulate economic growth by measures such as a short-term increase in capital spending and targeted VAT reductions."

I did not think that I would start by thanking Mr Flanagan, but I do so for his setting the scene so comprehensively. I do not disagree with the sentiment that he expressed or with the ultimate objectives of what he is trying to set out. It is more a matter of detail. If I can, in the nine and a half minutes that remain, convince him to support our

amendment, I will try to do that. If I am able to convince him and his colleagues, I do not know whether he or I should be more worried. I will try to do so nonetheless.

Our amendment recognises that austerity is causing problems to the Northern Ireland economy, as it does to economies across the world, and it tries to do so in what I believe is the proper context. The original motion refers only to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and, as anybody knows, we face a much broader and much more global problem than one that simply affects the British Isles. Decisions taken at Westminster by the UK Government have the most direct effect on Northern Ireland, not least because of the way that that Government have had an impact, continues to have an impact and will, in all likelihood, have an impact in the future on the block grant that the Assembly has to spend on services in Northern Ireland. The UK is our biggest market, both in trade and tourism, and anything that depresses demand, growth and confidence in the UK economy is not good for Northern Ireland. Austerity is certainly doing that.

The Republic of Ireland is having issues as well. On the front of this week's 'Time' magazine, which landed at my door at the weekend, we can read about the Celtic comeback. Perhaps something is happening down there that the rest of us cannot see. I would not be as churlish as some might be and rejoice at the fact that the Irish economy is in the bin. However, the fact that it is helps convince those of us of a unionist persuasion and, perhaps, those of us who are not that our best economic future lies within the Union. The Irish economy is clearly our biggest external market outside the United Kingdom. We see drops in tourist numbers from the South and a drop in cross-border shopping, so it is having an impact on economic growth in Northern Ireland because there is no confidence and less money in the Irish economy, not least because of austerity measures.

As everybody knows, this is a broader problem. Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece and now France are moving towards austerity measures, and there is hardly an EU country that is not. It is happening right across the European Union and beyond, and the amendment tries to set that broader, more European and more global context. I notice that the Chinese are suffering their slowest rate of growth in three years. In the second quarter of this year, they had 7.6% growth. Oh, to have the problems that the Chinese have with just 7.6% growth. Some parts of Europe would settle for 0.6% growth — never mind 7.6% — but it is the slowest rate in three years and illustrates that this is a global problem.

As the Member outlined, a clear effect in Northern Ireland is on unemployment. Austerity is depressing economic growth, and we have poor or low growth at best in Northern Ireland. Its biggest impact is perhaps on public sector spending. In an economy such as ours that is, rightly or wrongly, dominated by public sector spending, that is a bad thing. As the Member mentioned, some £4 billion has been taken out of our Budget in this Budget period, and that represents about 8% to 10% of public spending in Northern Ireland. That is most acutely felt on the capital side, where our budget was reduced by 40%. An ailing construction sector has been hit further by those reductions, and that is a direct result of the austerity measures brought in by the Government in Westminster.

It is always worth noting that we can depress ourselves almost too much in discussing these issues, and it is sometimes worth taking a moment at least to congratulate those who are doing some impressive things for our economy. In the face of a global downturn and severe difficulties, Invest Northern Ireland is still able to attract companies of the calibre of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Cowan and Citigroup, which has expanded in Northern Ireland. Ten, 15 or 20 years ago, those companies would not have looked at Northern Ireland as a place to invest, yet they are now investing and expanding in Northern Ireland. We should also be rightly proud of some of the fantastic tourism events and infrastructure that we have put in place, including the Giant's Causeway visitor centre, Titanic Belfast, the Irish Open and so forth. So, even in very difficult times, good things are going on in Northern Ireland, and we should be proud of the attempts that we are making. In many cases, it is not enough to redress all the problems of the recession, but at least positive things that we can be proud of are happening in Northern Ireland.

The other point of context or detail in which I wanted to set the amendment is an argument that comes from this side of the House rather than the other. We believe that it is not our business to tell the Irish Government what to do, however detrimental the impact of their policies on our economy. We do not believe that it is our job to tell them what to do any more than we would like them to tell us what to do here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: Does he agree that one of the most pointless parts of the motion is the suggestion that this Executive or any other could tell the Republic of Ireland how to adjust its economy? The Republic of Ireland's Government are totally beholden to the EU, cannot make up their own economic policy and are required to follow the diktats of the European Central Bank and the EU. Therefore, whether one wished to or not, it would be a totally futile exercise to try to direct the Irish Government to take a particular direction, which is the plea in the motion.

Mr Hamilton: The Member will, I am sure, agree with me that we should not be telling them what to do anyway. I agree with the point that that section of the motion might be better directed at Brussels, hence the amendment, which tries to set the issue in a broader context.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way very quickly.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. I will just point out a bit of irony. We cannot tell the Dublin Government what to do when it comes to economics, but, when Members across the Chamber seek an apology for something, it is good enough to tell them what to do.

Mr Hamilton: I have only three and a half minutes left, but I can pick that point up at some other stage outside this place. That issue was to do with the internal affairs of Northern Ireland, as my colleague said from a sedentary position.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give away?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not. I do not have enough time. We have plenty of time to discuss those things.

The UK's austerity plans are having a serious impact on Northern Ireland. Even when we listen to what is coming out of Birmingham today, it seems that this is the one-track course that they have set for themselves. Everybody but everybody is pleading with them to look at policies that would stimulate at least some growth in the UK economy, but they are heading down one track and one track alone. That is happening, even though the evidence is that there is a double-dip recession that has been the longest in British history, there is rising unemployment and, for 52 out of the past 58 months, inflation has been above the 2% target. All the evidence suggests that this is not working, yet they will not give any countenance whatever to changing the course that they are on.

Most of us recognised back in 2010 that something had to be done, but, in the opinion of many of us, they went too hard and too fast. I read once that, if you have a toothache, you know that you have to go to the dentist, but, when he puts the drill in your mouth, you do not want to see a smile on his face. So, too much relish was taken in cutting away at the UK economy, and, coupled with issues in the banking sector and lending to businesses, it all became a heady cocktail. The Government have seen us dip into a second recession and prolonged problems when we would have expected, at this stage, to be moving out of recession. People sometimes forget that, in 2010, when the current Government came in, the economy was actually growing. So, this is, in large part, a problem of their making.

My amendment suggests some potential solutions to the problem. It calls for a stimulus in the UK economy, a short-term increase in capital spending to at least plug some of the 40% gap that we, in Northern Ireland, are suffering. It also calls for targeted VAT cuts. At the start of the session, I tabled a motion calling for VAT cuts in the hospitality sector, but equally they can be applied to repairs, maintenance and home improvements. There are different sectors at which they could be targeted so that they could have a positive impact on our economy.

The sad reality is that a Government who have U-turned on everything from pasties to caravans and from railway lines to forest sell-offs are unlikely to avert their course, change direction and go in the way that everyone, including, in all likelihood, this Assembly, will tell them to. If you listen to what is coming out of the Tory party conference this week, you will find that that change seems to be increasingly unlikely. Yet the evidence is global. Look at the US economy, which has gone through a period of stimulus. It seems to be working, and the US now has growth of 1% to 2%. That is not ideal, but at least it is growth and steady growth at that. The unemployment rate there is also falling.

It is not just we who are saying to the Government that they need to change course. The IMF is telling them that they need at least to prepare a plan B. It told them that in May of this year. It accepted that fiscal consolidation was needed but was concerned about the slow pace of spending cuts, and —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Hamilton: It said that the economy needed policies to bolster growth. I hope that what I have said and what colleagues will follow me in saying will be enough to unite

the House around amendment No 1. I will leave others to address the SDLP's amendment, but I hope that the House can at least see that the sentiments and objectives contained in amendment No 1 are something that everyone can unite around.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "economy" and insert

" , including contributing to rising local unemployment levels; calls on the Executive to address these effects by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy; and further calls on the Executive to establish a commission in the style of the Commission on Scottish Devolution to present the British Government with an evidence-based argument on how further devolved powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to encourage job creation, progressive taxation, protection of the most vulnerable and the provision of first-class front-line public services."

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer of amendment No 1 and the proposer of the motion for bringing the debate to the House. I will provide a wee bit of clarity on what the SDLP's amendment proposes. I heard Mr Flanagan speak about promoting job creation, progressive taxation, front line services and protecting the most vulnerable. However, we outline a strategy for doing that, which is to establish a commission in the style of the Commission on Scottish Devolution to present the British Government with an evidence-based argument as to how further devolved powers would achieve that.

Indeed, although today's debate on economic recovery is welcome, it is nonetheless set in the context of an increase in unemployment of 38,500, many of whom were employed in the construction sector. No doubt, many in the Assembly will be sympathetic to all the sentiments in the motion. However, I have outlined the issues that the SDLP has with it, and we would require some further expansion so that a proper strategy could be developed.

The UK economy contracted for five consecutive quarters during 2008-09, and recovery since has been very slow. I have already mentioned the number of jobs that were lost between 2007 and March 2012. There is widespread concern at the British Government's decision to follow an austerity agenda in these circumstances, as there is no trust in a Tory-led Government following such an ideologically driven agenda. We heard the Chancellor outline today how he will further target people on benefits, to the tune of £10 billion. There is also a lack of belief in that agenda being able to deliver a sustainable economic recovery.

The Irish Government's austerity measures owe as much, if not more, to the demands of the IMF and the European Central Bank as they do to any political decisions taken in Dublin. I heard Mr Flanagan say that we needed growth. This is an important point: to whom will we look for growth? We will look to central Europe for growth. We will look to the exact same countries as gave us the EU — the EU that delivered less-favoured areas, major structural projects, major SEUPB and INTERREG projects. All of those came from Europe and through the European Commission, and there are only two parties in the House that say they are

pro-Europe — the Alliance Party and us. It is good enough to take its money and look to it for investment —

Mr Allister: Our money.

Mr McGlone: Well, yes, part of it is our money.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, certainly.

Mr Allister: Is it not indisputable that, since the UK joined the EU, every year we have been a net contributor to the tune of several billion pounds and that that gap is now set to widen even further under the next budgetary arrangements?

Mr McGlone: I take what the Member, Mr Allister, is saying, but let us face facts here. This region is a net beneficiary through all the EU moneys. I am sure that, if the computations were done properly, you would find that out, whether it be INTERREG funding, SEUPB funding, funding for less-favoured areas or major infrastructural projects. That is the case.

We agree that both Governments' chosen paths are having a detrimental effect on the local economy, including contributing to rising local unemployment. However, the motion is flawed, and we seek to address those flaws through our amendment. It is not sufficient for the Assembly to call on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to impress our concerns on the Irish and British Governments. Blaming someone else is always the easier option, particularly when you are not prepared to take on the responsibility of making those decisions yourself. That may be the preferred approach of a party more comfortable opposing government than exercising it, but not this party. For a start, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are the joint chairs of the Executive Committee.

It is the Executive who exercise what powers we have and, as with the investment strategy the Assembly debated earlier today, any plans we make for building a sustainable economy and economic recovery remain at the mercy of decisions made by others elsewhere.

7.00 pm

The Irish and British Governments have more immediate political, economic and electoral concerns to consider, and those concerns will very often be a much higher priority than ours. The pleading of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, however special it might seem to some in the Chamber, has been too easily ignored by the Irish and British Governments. The Executive need to be more proactive if they are to be taken seriously in any debate over the correct path to economic recovery.

Where the Executive have the ability, they should be acting now. That means launching a robust job creation and business support strategy to address the local detrimental effects of the austerity agenda of both those Governments, but the Assembly and the Executive need to take more responsibility for shaping that economic recovery. That requires the maximum possible devolution of economic levers into the hands of locally accountable representatives. To date, the fiscal powers under consideration for devolution have been severely limited and/or unnecessarily delayed. The proposed decrease in the rate of corporation tax is a case in point. There is

general agreement that a reduction in corporation tax will encourage investment and provide a much-needed boost to our economy. We repeatedly hear how Ministers' negotiations with the Treasury are at a critical point, but we have no clear information as to when, or if, the devolution of the power to set corporation tax will take place. Recently, the Assembly debated a reduction of the VAT rate for the hospitality sector and the boost to the tourism industry that that would provide. Currently, we do not have the power to reduce that rate; we can only send our special little pleaders to London on our behalf.

This is not about simply raising more revenue locally; it is about taking responsibility for the impact of our economy on the levels of those rates and taxes. I am sure Members will have their own examples of other areas in which the Executive could act to build sustainable economic recovery, if they had the power to do so. That is why we are proposing that the Executive should follow the example of the Scottish Government and establish a commission to present the British Government with an evidence-based argument on how further devolved powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to encourage job creation, progressive taxation, protection of the most vulnerable and the provision of first-class public services. The British Government could not ignore the recommendations of the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution as easily as they can the pleadings of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Calman commission, assisted by an independent expert group, produced a cautious set of recommendations. They were reluctant to devolve taxes where the tax base was mobile, such as taxes on goods or capital, to avoid creating opportunities for tax avoidance and harmful competition, which could result in the under-provision of public services. They recommended the devolution of income tax, with a Scottish rate applying uniformly to all rates. Other more minor taxes, such as stamp duty, land tax, aggregates levy, landfill tax and air passenger duty were also recommended for devolution.

Since then, the Scottish Bill, which was to be the means of implementing the Calman commission recommendations along with new borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament, has been overshadowed by the Scottish independence referendum. Unionist parties in Scotland, the Conservatives, Lib Dems and Labour have, in the course of the referendum campaign, reloaded Calman to include corporation tax and other taxes. They have also the luxury of seeking a geographic share of oil revenue — something we certainly do not have.

The Devo Plus campaign group leader said:

"With Devo Plus therefore we move to a situation where the Scottish parliament is predominantly responsible for raising the revenue that it spends."

Although, locally, we may be some way short of being able to match that ambition, and there is much work still to be done to rebalance our economy, it is a good starting point for further discussions with the British Government. Underpinning those discussions in Scotland and in London has been the recommendation of the Commission on Scottish Devolution.

If the Assembly is serious about taking responsibility for our economic recovery — this is the point of the SDLP amendment — rather than continually blaming others,

we must be prepared to set out a rational argument for devolving the powers required to set our own policies to suit our own circumstances. The first step in doing that is to establish a commission to present the British Government with an evidence-based argument on how further devolved powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to encourage job creation, progressive taxation, protection of the most vulnerable and the provision of first-class front line public services. I commend the amendment to the Assembly, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat as éisteacht.

Mrs Overend: I will speak first to the motion as proposed by Sinn Féin before looking at the amendments. The motion expresses concern about:

"the continuing pursuance of austerity measures by the British and Irish Governments".

I do not believe that that makes the situation that we are in sufficiently clear. Everyone in the House is well aware that budget cuts in all Northern Ireland Departments have been necessary because of the deficit reduction policies being pursued by the coalition Government at Westminster. We should also be aware of the reasons for that policy: we are seeking to redress the deficit of the UK economy. That was, of course, originally down to problems in the UK banking sector that were compounded by the Labour Government's excessive spending, which has left the UK with a mountain of debt that now has to be repaid. In Europe, the situations in countries such as Greece, Portugal and the Republic of Ireland are telling. IMF bailouts and strict controls over public spending are in place. Those are the circumstances that we are in, and Northern Ireland is not immune to its share of some of the pain.

That said, my party is under no illusion about the vast effect on Northern Ireland from more constrained spending. To be specific, when comparing 2014-15 with 2010-11, there is a decrease in real terms of around 8% in total moneys allocated to the departmental expenditure limit current expenditure, and a decrease in allocations in the region of 40% to DEL capital expenditure. That is concerning for Northern Ireland. However, we should be very clear that a Budget containing those cuts for Northern Ireland was supported by Sinn Féin. The Ulster Unionists and the SDLP could not support that Budget. We did not, and do not, believe that that Budget is fit for purpose. During the Budget debates, we made our reasons clear. All the while, Sinn Féin continues to oppose the austerity measures being put forward in the Republic of Ireland. That irony will not be lost on the people of Northern Ireland or, for that matter, the people in the Republic. That all proves that, when push comes to shove, Sinn Féin is content to implement cuts in Northern Ireland; its approval of that Budget says as much and highlights the divergence of Sinn Féin positions, north and south of the border. The motion is simply political posturing. In that respect, we can easily see through it.

I turn again to the motion, which asks for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to impress the importance of:

"job creation, progressive taxation, the protection of the most vulnerable and the provision of first-class front-line public services."

Although I agree with the importance of each of those issues, we in the House have the power to deal specifically

with some of them. Let us take job creation as an example. The Programme for Government target is to create 25,000 jobs by 2015. Where are we on meeting that target? How many jobs have been lost since that target was put in place? Why has the scenario been allowed to happen in which we have not had a dedicated business start-up programme for over a year? Why have the negotiations on corporation tax led to figures such as £700 million being brought into the public domain, when DFP estimated that the entire corporation tax receipts here, two years ago, amounted to £711 million? What about the protection of the most vulnerable in society, as is mentioned? Why has OFMDFM been unable to administer the social investment fund? Why is there still such disparity in educational underachievement among Protestant working-class boys? We should deal with those questions in the House before we have a debate on impressing things on the UK and Irish Governments.

In conclusion, we support the motion as amended by the DUP as that gives a more accurate reflection of our circumstances. It is good that the DUP supports what the Ulster Unionist Party called for following the job losses at FG Wilson. We set out then that a plan B is needed and believe that increased capital investment in infrastructure is vital. That is backed up by the findings of the Institute for Public Policy Research report into Her Majesty's Government's economic policies. It is good that other parties are coming on board with that. We do not support the SDLP amendment as we believe that there should not be an increase in the costly bureaucracy that a commission is likely to create. I preferred Mr McGlone's comments that we need to take responsibility ourselves. Maybe his colleagues will detail the costs of such a commission in other areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs Overend: I thank you very much.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party supports the main motion, and we are happy to support the DUP amendment. Both highlight the effects of austerity measures and stress the need for relaxation of the pace of rebalancing public finances. Those are views that we can agree with.

There is much that we can identify with in the SDLP amendment. In particular, we have a long and proud record of arguing for tax-varying powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, the call for the creation of a robust job creation and business support strategy ignores the reality that, only earlier this year, the Executive, including all five main parties, agreed a comprehensive economic strategy for Northern Ireland. We have to give that strategy the opportunity to be delivered. The economic strategy should remain at the core of economic policy over the years ahead. However, that does not preclude further consideration of what additional measures can be considered.

The most immediate challenge lies in getting the economy moving again in the short term. The critical issue in that regard is access to finance. That theme was discussed in the economic motion that the Alliance Party brought to the Assembly last week.

Unemployment is an overall problem here, but, within the figures, there is a particular concentration on young people. While unemployment issues are now common

in many other countries and regions, we have a duty to bring forward our own local solutions. In that regard, I will highlight the youth employment scheme that is being taken forward by my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning, who plans to deliver 6,000 work experience and training opportunities for young people by 2015 in priority sectors, including attractive employer subsidies.

We should continue to give particular attention to the tourist sector. We have a wonderful set of new attractions and have seen a boost in visitor numbers. The challenge now is to sustain the growth over the rest of this decade and beyond and, in particular, to attract visitors from new markets, notably those in the Far East, such as China. Tourism also has the potential to create a lot of employment quickly.

Turning to what steps we need to take to rebalance the economy, we should be clear on the overarching vision. We must seek to expand our private sector and, in particular, to increase new markets and exports. We need to develop more in relation to our renewable energy. All these measures will increase not only the levels of employment but the gross value added of our economy.

Perhaps the key driver of change in our economy will be investment in skills. Northern Ireland is coming from a position where we have too many people with low or no skills. By contrast, the main way in which we will be able to compete in the future will be through the skills of our people. It is essential that we drive up skill levels across a broad front and, in particular, in those areas that are most economically relevant.

Leaving aside the current economic difficulties, it is important to recognise that Northern Ireland is forecast to create more and more jobs over this decade. That will be the case even without the devolution of corporation tax, but, obviously, it would be so much better if we had that power.

Mr Ross: There is no doubt that austerity as planned is not working. I listened to the comments from Mrs Overend, and although we need to close the deficit and pay off the debt, the irony is that we are not paying off the debt. By addressing the deficit, we are still borrowing and adding to the debt.

7.15 pm

Nevertheless, this debate happens in the context of a global recession, as other Members said, particularly given the euro zone crisis, with Spain being the latest country to have real difficulties. We in Northern Ireland are not immune from the global downturn. Indeed, it has hit home in my constituency of East Antrim, with job losses at the FG Wilson plants in Larne and Monkstown. Of course, people in the surrounding area who are employed there will feel that as well.

Despite recent job announcements following a successful trip to San Francisco and indications from independent bank research that consumer confidence is rising, forecasters still say that any growth will be very modest. That is something to be concerned about, particularly given the hit that our Budget has taken from Westminster and the 40% cut in our capital budget, as other Members said.

I listened to Mr McGlone's comments when he put forward the argument for the SDLP amendment. It seems that he has not realised that we have an investment strategy, an

economic strategy and a Programme for Government, all of which are aimed at creating jobs. So, for him to say in his amendment that we do not have a strategy for that is, frankly, not paying attention to the sorts of things that we have been doing. At least Mr Flanagan recognised in his opening comments that the Executive have, as far they can, taken measures to help on that front.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will give way in one second.

They have done so through the growth fund and by stepping in where the banks are not lending. The Executive are trying to do that even though that is not the role of government. We have also had the Boosting Business programme, the small business rate relief scheme from the Finance Minister, and even the youth employment strategy from the Employment and Learning Minister.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much indeed for giving way. I just want to expand on my comments. I was talking about a strategy for taxation powers in respect of VAT, corporation tax and the like, which are the very issues that your colleagues raised previously. That is the strategy that is absent, and that is the opportunity that I am seeking as a result of our amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Ross: I am going purely on how the amendment is worded in the Order Paper. It states:

"launching a robust job creation and business support strategy"

That is what I am addressing.

There have been other successes. Ms Lo talked about the tourism successes from the MTV awards and the money generated by that. We have also had a huge number of visitors to the Titanic centre. What is most pleasing about that is the number of out-of-state visitors; around 65%. The work of Invest NI has created jobs, and it is on track with the 25,000 jobs created by the Programme for Government. That, of course, is balanced against the job losses we have had, which present huge challenges.

I want to address one of the issues that Sinn Féin, and the SDLP in particular, mentioned, and it is the argument for taxation powers coming to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The SDLP has said that on numerous occasions, and I must say that its argument has not gained any more leverage with me. Devolving taxation powers to the Assembly would come at a huge cost. The deficit that we run each year would have to be devolved and we would have to forgo the degree of certainty we have in our Budget planning for future years.

If the SDLP wants to have the first-class front line public services that it talks about, presumably it means that it wants to spend additional money on public services. That means that we would have to raise taxes for householders who are already struggling to pay their bills at present. Again, if the party wishes to lower other taxes — and we heard only a matter of months ago that the SDLP wants to lower fuel duty — it has to realise that this comes at a price, which has to be balanced by raising taxes in other areas. That is something that the SDLP has failed to address; how it would pay for those taxation powers.

Mr Weir: We heard evidence last week when we were looking at the issue of air passenger duty, and the Finance Minister indicated in his response that every penny taken off fuel duty costs us somewhere in the region of £30 million. Therefore, we would have to make a very significant reduction in order to have any impact on fuel duty. We could be into hundreds of millions of pounds before we made any dramatic difference, so there is a very real cost to this.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that. The SDLP's argument was lost in the debate a number of months ago, and I think that it was lost again today. The Member made some very good points. My other colleague pointed out that perhaps the SDLP is still hankering after selling off land that it does not own in order to pay for some of that, but I will perhaps be more kind.

We know that there is a degree of hostility from both nationalist parties to any private finance or public/private partnerships. So the SDLP would not be willing to do that to meet the huge cost. It is easy to call for central government to do something or come up with false solutions that will leave us worse off without telling us how they would pay for them or spelling out their consequences.

Our amendment at least outlines some practical measures, such as an increase in capital spend and VAT reductions in certain sectors, which we think will, in the longer term, help to boost our local economy. We call on the House to support our amendment.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and both amendments. I look forward to listening to other contributors outlining the rationale for them.

The proposer of the motion, Phil Flanagan, challenged the proposers of the amendments to outline how they would approach the austerity issue. To be fair, the DUP addressed that, but the SDLP did not accept the invitation to outline its position on the Irish and British Governments' austerity policies. Perhaps the next SDLP Member to speak will address that. However, I was interested in the comments from the Ulster Unionist Party. Its Members said that they agreed with the DUP amendment's urging the British Government:

"to reassess their deficit reduction strategy".

The interesting thing is that it was the Ulster Unionist Party that championed the initial deficit reduction strategy from the British Government, so I do not see how it can ride two horses. As we saw today, the British Government, particularly George Osborne, are intent on continuing that same strategy. A couple of years ago, he had a number of high-profile economists behind him. They are not there any more, and he is still intent on following through on those strategies.

Mr B McCrea: Just today, the Office for Budget Responsibility, an independent body, announced a £15 billion black hole in the Government's finances. From where does the Member suggest that he gets that money? The gap is there, so will we borrow it or raise taxes? Where will you find the money?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKay: The Member does not address the fact that he now wants the Government to reassess their deficit reduction strategy, and, as the DUP outlined, that goes against the political position that you just outlined. So I am a little bit confused about the Ulster Unionist Party's economics.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: In a moment, I will just finish the point. We need to ensure that the wheels keep turning. In Britain, and this partly affects here as well, the wheels are in danger of grinding to a halt. If that happens, it becomes much more difficult, and costs a hell of a lot more money, to get the economy moving again, and the Ulster Unionist Party needs to take that into account.

Mr Ross: Just before the Member moves off the subject of the Ulster Unionist Party, does he agree with me that it is disappointing that that party is now focused on plan B and seems to have given up on plan A, the devolution of corporation tax, which is, perhaps, the biggest tool that we could have to transform our economy?

Mr McKay: Absolutely, I agree with the Member. If we are serious about job creation, which is mentioned in the SDLP amendment, we need a full set of job creation levers, not half a set, as we have now in the Executive. We need the devolution of corporation tax, and I congratulate the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on its progress to date. I listened intently to Alastair Hamilton's comments in the wake of the job losses in east Antrim. He said that thousands upon thousands of jobs were ready to come to the North once that rate is dropped. So the opportunities are there, and they are staring us in the face.

Last week, the Minister briefed the Finance Committee on air passenger duty. PricewaterhouseCoopers has said that the abolition of air passenger duty and the transfer of corporation tax would be equally beneficial to the economy. Coming from a constituency such as North Antrim, I know that the abolition of air passenger duty would be a huge boost for tourism because tourists come here via Dublin. We need a level playing field and a consistent policy across the island to ensure that more tourists arrive here in the North. In the South, the Government are talking about abolishing air passenger duty, and, in the North, the typical rate is £26 per flight so, obviously, airlines and passengers will go to Dublin first. So, we need to be serious about devolving that. It may cost £60 million, and the DUP raised the point about how you would meet those costs, but, I think that, in the greater scheme of things, it is about looking at the wider impact on the economy, how it will benefit businesses, how those businesses will make further profits and how those profits will be returned to the central pot. So, it evens out —

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Thank you very much for giving way. Does the Member agree that the £60 million price tag of devolving air passenger duty would apply only if it were abolished across the board? However, if the Assembly, in its wisdom, decided to select particular routes that were beneficial to the economy and foreign investment, we would, in fact, be talking about a graduated approach that would cost much less and would allow us to test the value and efficacy of removing air passenger duty. I think that doing it on that selective basis would be a planned way forward.

Mr McKay: Absolutely, and I think that we need to consider all the different bands. The initial transfer of the rate, which

affects primarily the Newark route, involves only a small percentage; I think that it is only about 2% or 3% of overall air passenger duty take. So, we need to look at selective routes, particularly when we are talking about getting into the BRIC economies — Brazil, Russia, India and China — and opening up routes to those countries. We need to look at not only direct long haul flights but at those indirect two-tier journeys —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr McKay: — into those economies.

I support the motion and look forward to the comments on the amendments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Newton: I support amendment No 1, which Mr Hamilton, Mr Weir and Mr Ross tabled. I do so because I think that it offers a practical approach to and takes a practical view of the problem. In doing so, I need to accept in my mind that, across the Chamber, there is a genuine concern about addressing the issue. It is an issue that all sections of our economy and community are suffering as a result of; indeed, none more so than the young people who are the lifeblood of this economy for the future. More than 20% of them are unemployed, which is a dreadful situation, and it is going to be a problem for some time for the well-being of the economy.

Mr Hamilton made the point that we are really looking at a global situation and that we are experiencing global problems. Mr Allister, who is no longer here, made a point about the European context. Indeed, the economies of Portugal, Spain and Greece —

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for giving way. You referred to youth unemployment. I was just wondering how exactly a short-term increase in capital spend and a VAT reduction would address youth unemployment, given that 21,000 young people are unemployed in the North alone.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will come to that point later in my remarks.

The point has been made that we are dealing with an economic downturn that is a global situation. It would be remiss of us, obviously, to indicate that we could have any influence on the Republic of Ireland's economy. It would be very high-handed of us even to think that we could affect it in any way. In fact, I suppose if we were to interfere anywhere in this situation in a European context, it would be with Angela Merkel, rather than with any individual country, as it is she who controls the economic levers in Europe.

I think that Mr Ross made the point that the Sinn Féin motion and the SDLP's amendment calls for the provision of first-class front line public services. I do not accept that we have a perfect set of front line services, but I accept that, wherever the SDLP and Sinn Féin see them, they have not spelled out how they would fund them so that they could be improved and taken to another dimension.

7.30 pm

I have said that I believe there to be genuine concerns on the other side of the Chamber, and I do not wish to

be unkind to Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. However, it strikes me that it is somewhat in line with previous motions that it tabled, such as those on mobile roaming charges and the all-Ireland job creation strategy. Those motions are not practical; they are devoid of reality. Sinn Féin knows that, yet it brought them to the House. It certainly brought those two earlier motions with a political basis attached to them rather than trying to deal with them through an economic approach.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: Will I get another minute, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: No.

Mr Newton: I will not give way, then.

I support my colleagues' amendment. It is targeted at VAT reductions in the construction sector in particular. It will allow increased capital spend in that sector. I also include in that the communications area, in which there is huge potential in Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole. In partnership with the private sector, we have the potential to drive forward our economy.

Mr B McCrea: It is a pleasure for me to rise at this late hour to talk on the subject of the economy, which Mrs Overend and I will tackle jointly. I am almost minded to vote for Sinn Féin's various proposals because I would really like to see what it would be like if you were in charge. All the hogwash would immediately become obvious for what it is. I heard an argument from Mr Flanagan about the block grant and how we are going to manage tax-varying powers, and all of that. What he does not understand but which I have explained to his colleagues at different venues is that we spend £21 billion a year on government expenditure, yet we raise only £12 billion in taxes. We have £8.5 billion of money that comes in subvention.

Mr Flanagan: It is £9 billion.

Mr B McCrea: It is £8.5 billion or £9 billion. *[Laughter.]* We can do the rounding up, but the important thing is that I am glad that the Member is listening. When people rail against the austerity measures and say that we do not want to do this or that, they never tell me where the money comes from. There is a hole in the Budget; there is not sufficient money. The point that was made from these Benches in response was that if you are going to cut somewhere, you are going to have to raise somewhere else. This is Mickey Mouse economics. There is simply not the money to do what you want to do. When I look at the —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be very brief. The Member mentioned a £15 billion hole in the Budget. Does it suggest that the current Government's policies are not working if they have not been able to cure that problem? Clearly they have created more holes than they have filled.

Mr B McCrea: I am sort of surprised that a man of Mr Weir's intellect would advance such an argument. It is quite clear that the damage was done under a Labour Government. For 10 years, we spent more than we had. That is what we are trying to fix. People can say that we are not doing it quickly enough or that we are not going to get it resolved until 2018. The simple fact is that we spent far too much. We have huge debts — £1 trillion and rising. The only way in which you are going to fix that is if you

raise taxes or cut spending. You cannot borrow your way out of deficit. That is not the right way to go forward.

I say to Members to my left that we were looking at their amendment with interest to see some of the points. Of course, however, you had to have a dig. You had to come along and say —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No, I will not give way. The Member had his chance. You want capital spending. Do you want to know when the great meeting about corporation tax takes place? On 18 October. The DUP will come back from it and say that corporation tax cannot fix things, and it will then talk about plan B — £200 million or £300 million of capital spending. That is what the amendment means. It has all been worked out. So, whenever I come back round to this issue — *[Interruption.]* If it is news to you, I cannot imagine that the communications —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No; I will not give way.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr B McCrea: I come back round to the ridiculous statements coming from my left as well. Actually, I did not really want to deal with those; I wanted to deal with the SDLP. I am surprised that Mr McGlone would not take an intervention from me, because I normally take his. The figure of £10 billion was mentioned, but the SDLP Members have still not answered the question of where they will raise their £10 billion from. When Mr McGlone or his colleague talked about Europe, it was brought up that there is a £2 billion net contribution from the UK to Europe. Do you know what? During the heyday in the South, when we were getting money from Europe, the maximum amount they got in any one year was only €500 million. That is not the way round.

Mr Newton said that we are speaking to the wrong people and that we should be speaking to Merkel because she is the one who does it all. Wrong. We get our money from the UK Treasury. Those are the people who look after us and who fund our lifestyles. Those are the people who are trying to do the right thing for us, and those are the people who we have to go and stand shoulder to shoulder with when we try to resolve this mess. No amount of playing to the crowd —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone. Sorry, you have an extra minute. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I nearly missed the opportunity to ask the question about taxes. When people say that they want "devo max" and tax-varying powers, are they suggesting that they are going to reduce taxes in this part of the world, or will they put them up? The SDLP and Sinn Féin are tax-increasing parties. They are going to increase the tax burden on hard-pressed families in Northern Ireland at a time when they can least afford it. That is not acceptable.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry. You had your chance; you cannot come in now.

I want to finish by talking about the Alliance Party. Members from that party said that it is about employment laws, skills and science. I agree with those things, but that was what was announced today —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr B McCrea: — and the Alliance Party has the Minister. We will consider our position on whether we will support anybody in this debate. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): I thank everybody for their contributions to the debate. No doubt there will be further contributions after I sit down, and people will, of course, continue to challenge each other on the points that were made.

The local economy has clearly been badly affected by the global downturn, the recession in the Irish and British economies, the crisis in the euro zone and the cuts to public expenditure and the block grant. Unemployment has been rising, job numbers have been falling and output has contracted over the past number of years. As recently as a few weeks ago, we had some very bad news on the economy, with job losses announced in FG Wilson in the same week as the unemployment rate increased to 8.2%. It is a matter of great concern that there are almost 375,000 people unemployed across the island of Ireland, and within those figures are 85,000 young people who have little or no employment opportunities.

It is very clear that government austerity policies in Britain and Ireland, combined with the global downturn and the EU debt crisis, continue to affect growth in our economy. None of us in the Executive or the Assembly can be complacent. We are facing real cuts in our budgets. The spending review has resulted in a real terms reduction to the Executive's current expenditure DEL of 8%, with a more severe reduction in capital investment of 40% by 2014-15. The First Minister and I have protested to the British Government at the highest level and have made our position very clear. What is that position? It is that you cannot cut your way out of a recession.

Obviously, as an Irish republican, I have a particular perspective on how the lack of fiscal powers for the North is hampering our ability to solve our economic problems in a real and meaningful way. My DUP partners in this office have their perspective, and the SDLP amendment suggests another proposal. That is all fair enough, but it is clear that although the motion and the amendments have different emphases, they all have one common theme, which is concern about the real impact that Budget cuts are having on our people and the ability of the Assembly and the Executive to respond in a meaningful way.

As we look to the future, speeches from the British Tory Party conference today indicate that the current British Government intend to continue with their austerity policies and cut even deeper. It is, therefore, important that a clear message goes out from the Assembly tonight that further cuts are not acceptable and are not the way to resolve the economic crisis. Rather, we need investment and growth in our economy for the fightback.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I presume that he will share my astonishment at Basil McCrea's claim that he nearly supported our motion, which would rule him out of his much-rumoured defection to the

Conservatives here. Does the deputy First Minister agree that the current fiscal arrangements with Westminster do not meet the needs of the Assembly and the Executive to tackle our economic crisis adequately?

Mr M McGuinness: I agree, and many Members would also agree. As we have been trying to find solutions to tackle the economic and financial crises, it is a source of great frustration that the Executive and the Assembly are hampered by regulations imposed by Westminster. My view is that fiscal autonomy, including the ability to borrow without penalties on the block grant being imposed by Westminster, would give us the tools to work in the best interests of all our people.

Despite limitations in the Executive, we are not complacent on the need to grow and rebalance the economy, create jobs, tackle disadvantage, protect the most vulnerable and protect front line services. Our economic strategy sets out how we aim to improve economic competitiveness through a focus on export-led economic growth. It also includes a promotion of more than 25,000 new jobs over the next four years and actions to rebuild the local labour market. Key commitments from our Programme for Government are to achieve £1 billion of investment in the economy, which includes £375 million as a result of foreign direct investment; £400 million from indigenous businesses, supported by Invest NI; and £225 million as a result of the jobs fund. We plan to increase visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to £676 million by December 2014.

There have also been some good news stories at an individual project level, including investments by Bombardier in its CSeries wing project, which is the largest inward investment project to date; investment in financial services from the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Group; and investment in R&D from M/A-COM Technology. That highlights the competitiveness of our economy as a location for international investment.

I want to repeat, in spite of some of the criticisms that have been made here today, details of the work in which the First Minister and I have been involved. He and I, working with Arlene Foster and Invest NI over the past three years, have managed to bring more jobs to the North of Ireland than at any other time in the history of the state. We have done that against the backdrop of a worldwide recession, and against the backdrop of some parties in the Assembly saying at the beginning of our journeys to the United States of America that we would not attract one job. We have attracted thousands of new jobs.

We are clearly also having great success on the tourism and events front. According to figures recently announced by Belfast City Council, the MTV Europe music awards in November 2011 generated some £10 million in visitor revenue and had a worldwide audience of more than 1.2 billion people. Recent successes in attracting world-class production companies such as HBO also provide a practical investment in our economy while profiling the North as an excellent location for film and TV production. Keeping HBO in the North to continue making the ongoing series 'Game of Thrones' was an achievement, given that the First Minister and I also engaged with the British Government to ensure appropriate tax incentives to allow companies such as HBO to continue filming and provide employment for up to 700 people, as is currently the case.

Titanic Belfast has had over 300,000 visitors in its first four months of operation, while the Titanic Belfast festival was attended by around 60,000 people and £43 million was generated in PR coverage, including a number of high-profile BBC programmes that were viewed by 12.4 million across Britain.

7.45 pm

Delivering growth and prosperity requires co-ordinated action from all sectors — public, private and third sector, as well as universities and, of course, FE colleges. An enterprise strategy to support the economic strategy is under development. This will focus on promoting enterprise and entrepreneurship and creating the necessary conditions that will enable businesses across all sectors of the economy to start and to grow. In our draft investment strategy, we provide a £5 billion stimulus over the four years to 2014-15 to the construction and related sectors of the economy. Economic research indicates that such a programme will support over 13,000 jobs in the construction industry and more in the related supply chain. The Budget review group has a strategic work programme, which is to examine alternative options for accessing finance, to realise the value of surplus and underutilised assets, to increase the drawdown from competitive European funds and to review arm's-length bodies.

On the issue of corporation tax, once the outcome of the ongoing work on devolving corporation tax powers is known, we will reassess the degree to which we can further strengthen the ambitious nature of our overarching economic goals. A reduction in the rate of corporation tax here would provide a major stimulus to the local economy and is one of our key Programme for Government commitments. We continue to pursue outstanding issues around cost and affordability in negotiations with the British Treasury. We continue to press the British Government hard on the need for this to happen in a way that is beneficial to the Executive and Assembly.

Given some of Patsy McGlone's remarks, it is important to absolutely refute any suggestion whatsoever that there is any negligence on the part of the First Minister and me, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in prosecuting our case for lower corporation tax powers. The blockage is not ours. The delay in taking a decision rests in London and in an ongoing discussion that is obviously being had by politicians at the highest level and the Treasury. Of course, the First Minister and I have had first-hand experience of how difficult that can be. For example, at the outset of this process, it was he and I who witnessed, in the Cabinet Office, almost a stand-up row between politicians and Treasury officials. So, let us scotch the nonsense that there is any delay in our Executive's position in relation to how this is dealt with. The delay, at this moment, rests in London, and we are seeking an answer, and the answer has to be an answer that is affordable for this Executive and for this Assembly.

While we are putting in place the steps that are needed for a successful path to recovery to rebuild, rebalance and grow our economy, we equally need to tackle disadvantage and protect our most vulnerable citizens. The impending welfare reform makes this even more of a priority. Given that we have had more bad news out of Birmingham today, that has never been more relevant than now. Under our

Delivering Social Change programme, we are putting in place effective and responsive cross-departmental working arrangements to tackle poverty and deprivation. These frameworks for action complement the much larger social and economic policies that we have and provide streamlined governance with clear lines of accountability and focus on delivering actions that add real value and measurable improvements.

It is generally recognised that despite significant progress in the past number of years towards peace and stability, certain areas have not fully benefited and suffer from higher levels of unemployment and deprivation. Our social investment fund will be targeted at such areas that can demonstrate and evidence objective need, with a view to improving employment opportunities and making the areas more attractive for investment. It is an £80 million fund, established by the Executive to address poverty, unemployment and dereliction over the period 2011-15. It will operate across nine identified social investment zones and be delivered primarily through strategic area plans. Those are intended to build pathways to employment, tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation, increase community services, address dereliction and promote investment in the physical regeneration of deprived communities.

In closing, I want to reiterate that the Executive are committed to growing our economy, creating jobs and tackling disadvantage and poverty. We are constantly considering how to be more effective and we are clearly not standing helpless while events unfold. Ministers met on 13 September in the wake of the newly published employment statistics and the news about job losses at FG Wilson. Following that meeting, each Department was asked to identify current actions and new initiatives to improve the economy and support job creation and retention. That work is under way, and it will include meetings with representatives of the private sector and the community, voluntary and social economy sectors. Proposals will be discussed at an Executive meeting specially dedicated to the economy at the end of October.

We will continue to work hard as an Executive on growing the economy, tackling deprivation and disadvantage, creating jobs and protecting front line services. As different political parties, we will have different emphases and policies, as, indeed, we are entitled to have. However, I believe that our greatest strength is in working together on areas of agreement. We are clearly agreed that public spending cuts and austerity measures are not the way to solve our present economic crisis, and we should send that message right across these islands.

Mr A Maginness: This evening's debate has been littered with a whole series of deathbed conversions. All the parties — Sinn Féin and the DUP — are converting to the view that austerity is bad. I have not heard that so robustly put forward in the House by the DUP or Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin, of course, is used to deathbed conversions, because it has converted on the fundamental issue of our membership of the European Union. The deputy First Minister can shake his head, but, for many decades, that party put its face against the European Union, in the same way in which it put its face against a reduction in corporation tax rates in the South. It wanted to put up corporation tax in the South and throw away the competitive advantage that the South had in relation to

corporation tax. That was the standard position of Sinn Féin for many years. You cannot deny it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: Now you have converted to the reduction in corporation tax, and we welcome that. The deputy First Minister can smile to his heart's content.

I represent North Belfast, where we suffer from high levels of unemployment and deprivation. The deputy First Minister spoke eloquently about how much work they are doing and how the Executive are not complacent in relation to the economic situation. He talks about the tremendous work that they have done, but the reality is that, between 1993 and 2007, employment in Northern Ireland grew by 188,000. Between 2007 and March 2012, there has been a decrease of 38,500 jobs. That is a result — *[Interruption.]* I see the First Minister chirping in as well. That is a result of economic circumstances — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: — but it is also a result of a lack of co-ordination, a lack of effort, a lack of imagination and a lack of innovation on the part of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. They hold responsibility for that. They can answer to my voters and constituents — those young people who are unemployed at the moment. Youth unemployment in Northern Ireland increased by 5% this year and now stands at 23·5%. That is a shocking statistic. Is that the future that you are giving to young people in North Belfast, Mid Ulster, Derry and elsewhere? You have a serious problem if you think that you are not complacent and that you have been effective. Yes, you have brought jobs from abroad, and I welcome that. I support you in that, and any time that I have had an opportunity to do my bit, I have supported that, as has the SDLP, and we will continue to support efforts to bring employment here.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I am running out of time. I am not running out of steam but I am running out of time.

The SDLP has said that we need a new range of fiscal powers to tackle the situation. Yes, we have a global situation, and, yes, the local economy has been affected, but we need the tools to rebalance the economy. Corporation tax is central to that, and we need those tools to address a wide range of other issues and other taxes and to generate jobs and create a robust job strategy.

We have looked at the Commission on Scottish Devolution, and we believe that that is the right approach. It does not have all the answers for Northern Ireland, but it is the right approach and the right direction.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr A Maginness: For you to turn your face against that is a dereliction of duty. That is why you should support the SDLP amendment.

Mr Weir: At the conclusion of the debate, I welcome the contributions that Members made to it, and in particular those who supported our amendment. I welcome the support of the Alliance Party and one of the two positions of the Ulster Unionist Party on this issue.

I will give Basil McCrea a free piece of advice. If he gets a phone call tomorrow at 9.00 am calling him into a meeting,

I suggest that, perhaps, he should not be there. To be fair to Mr McCrea, whether we are hearing one of the current Ulster Unionist spokesmen on the economy or a future Conservative spokesman on the economy remains to be seen.

Mr Hamilton: Or UKIP.

Mr Weir: I suspect that David McNarry would not have him.

I give a cautious welcome to Mr Flanagan's opening speech in which he mentioned keeping an open mind. I will put two caveats on that: having praised him once already today, I do not want to entirely condemn him to political obscurity in his own party, but I will also reserve judgement because I want to wait to see what position Sinn Féin takes on the motion.

It is clear that the Member opposite who talked about conversions was not listening in 2010 when my party indicated, as did others, that the methods of tackling the recession that were proposed in the Programme for Government established by the Conservative Government cut too deep too soon. That was the basis on which we fought the 2010 election. We issued a warning and, unfortunately, we have been proved correct. Indeed, Mr McCrea referred to a £15 billion black hole. If that is not evidence of the failure of the current Government to deal with those issues, I do not know what is. From that point of view, we can accept that there have been problems, and, indeed, our amendment indicates our concern about austerity. Indeed, had there been greater economic stimulus from the UK Government, we believe that we would not have the level of problems that we have today.

I will turn briefly to the SDLP amendment. The SDLP preaches the establishment of a Calman commission for Northern Ireland. Corporation tax changes and targeted air passenger duty are beneficial where they are done strategically. However, it would be an economic own goal, if, for example, we were given devolution powers to vary income tax or adjust fuel duty. That would produce a swift response from a Government looking to make cuts and more cuts. They will simply say that if we have the power to raise income tax by 3p in the pound, they will cut the block grant, and if we want to make up the difference, we should simply raise taxes. That is the economic own goal that the SDLP is preaching.

The SDLP puts forward a roll of economic disaster rather than economic salvation. *[Interruption.]* The SDLP seems to think that it is OK that we will see the block grant cut and higher taxation. That is the kind of economically illiterate response that has become all too prevalent from the SDLP.

8.00 pm

We tabled our amendment because we felt that there are three inadequacies with the motion, although we believe that the sentiments behind it are correct. First, as Mr Hamilton indicated in proposing our amendment, the context is wider than simply the UK and Ireland; there is a European context. That may be a semantic point, but we feel that it is important that we acknowledge it. Secondly, whereas we can give an indication of how we believe the external affairs of the Irish Republic affect us, we do not believe that it is our place to preach to the Irish Republic how it handles its internal economic affairs. I suspect that that would be a form of British imperialism that, in other

circumstances, some of the Members opposite would rail against. We need to concentrate on what is here. Finally, we believe that it is important to give a number of examples. As regards capital spending, we are actually committed to plan A. I note Mr McCrea decrying that. However, both the Ulster Unionist Party's economic spokesperson, a couple of weeks ago, and Mike Nesbitt, in his conference speech, called for £200 million or £300 million extra capital spend and targeted VAT reductions.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Weir: It may surprise Members to learn that we do not believe that we have a monopoly of wisdom on this corner of the Bench. We are happy to listen to others, but we believe that our amendment improves the motion. Therefore, we appeal to the House to support our amendment.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions to what is, ultimately, a critical debate. I would like to reflect on the fact that the principle of the motion is to state that austerity is not working and that it is a call for a change in direction. As the proposer said, the fact remains that we have 375,000 people unemployed across this island. The consequences of austerity are everywhere. They can be seen in the number of our young people who are unemployed. They can be seen in the thousands of our young people who emigrate. They can be seen in every household that struggles to pay rent, mortgages and bills. They can be seen on every main street, where there is a growing number of vacant shops.

I was particularly interested in Simon Hamilton's explanation of the amendment. He did not necessarily disagree with the sentiment of the motion, but he did not provide the clarity that we requested. He suggested that this issue goes broader than relationships across these islands. However, although the European economic situation is undoubtedly having an impact across these islands, the fact remains that the 375,000 people who are unemployed have been impacted directly by the austerity policies of the Dublin and British Governments.

Interestingly, Patsy McGlone did not talk about austerity. The SDLP amendment does not refer to austerity, and he did not reference it in his comments. He talked about the European impact and the impact of funding streams. I ask Patsy to contact organisations in the border counties that have not have had great success in accessing that list of funding streams. I remind Patsy and the SDLP that our engagement with Europe is critical and is one that we will continue to pursue.

It is also interesting that Robin Newton did not provide any answer when questioned by Megan Fearon on the impact that an increase in capital spending and VAT reduction would have on unemployment among our young people.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I will, if I get an answer.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. I admit that, when I was trying to answer that question, I did myself out of an extra minute. I will not take the extra minute, but I will indicate to the Speaker where the solution to the NEETs problem arises. There are a number of solutions to it, and I am not saying that we can deliver them all. The Programme for Government and the economic strategy,

approved by this House, have developed a strategy based on a number of sectors of industry: telecommunications and ICT; health sciences and life sciences; agrifoods; advanced materials; and advanced engineering. All of those are doing well, and none of those can be criticised for a lack of growth. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Interventions should definitely not become statements.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I am not sure whether the Member was making a winding-up speech or trying to wind everyone up. Thank you for your intervention.

One of the major obstacles facing the building of a vibrant and sustainable economy is that fiscal power, taxation and public expenditure are all still set in London. The fact is that the North's economy is only incidental to British economic decisions, which are made in the interests of the island of Britain. What we need is the capability and capacity to devise economic policies specific to the island of Ireland. Like it or not, the economies of North and South are inextricably linked, which dictates that we take an all-Ireland approach to building a strong and sustainable economy. Forward planning is required to ensure the mobility of workers and the integration of tax and fiscal policies to facilitate business and employment in an island marketplace. As the proposer said, it is a very practical solution that, in an island the size of Ireland, there must be a cohesive approach to attracting foreign direct investment. At present, the limited resources of both INI and IDA are spread too thinly in the global market, and they compete for investment in similar sectors.

As I have already referenced, border regions, in particular, are subject to economic instability as a result of having two economies on such a small island. The policies being pursued by the Tory Government reflect economic considerations in Britain. Our economy does not register in their economic thinking. They have abandoned commitments that they gave at St Andrews, which recognised that the North required specific support as a result of the decades of conflict and the legacy of underinvestment. Sinn Féin believes that our economic destiny should be in the hands of locally accountable Ministers with the power to affect our economy and the flexibility to shape our economic conditions. We need maximum responsibility for economic matters to be transferred to Ministers who understand the island economy and are accountable to the Assembly and to the wider community. Our economic needs do not register with policymakers in London. The biggest impact on our economy is the situation in the South. Our economies are interconnected and interdependent: that is not a political statement but one of economic fact. Greater co-operation across the island will deliver more for all our people than the existing competition between our regions.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that we should, as some have said, look at what further powers should be transferred to the Executive to improve the economy? Will she also agree that the model to look at is not one for which the terms of reference were set by Scottish unionists?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Absolutely. The Member is referring to the piece of work that was very apparent when we looked at the amendment's reference to the

Commission on Scottish Devolution. I thank the Member for his contribution.

Given economic reality, Sinn Féin is calling for a frank, open and objective discussion to develop an all-Ireland strategy. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, we asked for that clarity in the DUP amendment. I have to express our disappointment that we did not receive that clarity from the DUP. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that, if amendment No 1 is made, I will not put the question on amendment No 2, as the wording of the original motion will have been changed to such an extent that it would not be in order for the House to vote on amendment No 2 as well.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 38; Noes 51.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr G Robinson and Mr Spratt

NOES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Flanagan and Ms Maeve McLaughlin

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 11; Noes 78.

AYES

Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Durkan

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Flanagan and Ms Maeve McLaughlin

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 46.

AYES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Flanagan and Ms Maeve McLaughlin

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr G Robinson and Mr Spratt

Main Question accordingly negated.

Adjourned at 8.48 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 October 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting that was held in Armagh on 9 July 2012. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and by Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of state with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a progress report from Mr John Martin, the chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, including the following significant achievements: the provision of 591 metres of additional moorings; the proposed sponsorship of 101 events to promote the awareness of the waterways across all navigations; ongoing maintenance of the waterways, with 97.5% of the waterways remaining open during April and May; two new publications, entitled 'A Taste of the Waterways' and 'What's On', to promote and support the use of the waterways; and continued involvement and engagement with the INTERREG IVc Waterways Forward project.

The Council noted progress on the development of the Waterways Ireland 2012 business plan and budget. It also noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and draft accounts for 2011.

The Council received a progress report on the restoration of the Ulster canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne. Ministers noted that the project is progressing through the planning application process in both jurisdictions and that an interagency group has been set up to examine all possible options to advance the project. Ministers discussed options prepared by Waterways Ireland to progress the Ulster canal project. Those will be explored, taking account of fiscal constraints.

The Council consented to one property disposal, and it has arranged to hold its next inland waterways meeting on 12 December 2012.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): In February, the Minister advised that proposals would be brought forward for a board for Waterways Ireland. Will she give us an update on that? Will she also provide details of the terms of reference for the interagency group that has been set up to advance the restoration of the Ulster canal?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Chairperson for her question. She is right: advice was given in February that a board would be brought forward, and that is happening. There are proposals to bring forward a board for Waterways Ireland. Those are being developed by officials in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and progress on that will be detailed at the next NSMC meeting.

I do not have the terms of reference for the interagency group here, but I will certainly forward them to the Member in writing. The interagency group had its first meeting in Dublin in September. At least that is some progress.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas don Aire as an ráiteas sin. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us a more current position for the planning applications for the Ulster canal? Does she foresee any difficulties in the planning process in either jurisdiction?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an bhall as ucht an cheist. The current position is that the applications are being progressed in both jurisdictions. Monaghan County Council and Clones Town Council requested further information, which was provided by Waterways Ireland. Some objections were lodged by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Department of the Environment (DOE) Roads Service. Waterways Ireland met both in June, and I think that the main concern was around the newt population. Reasonable solutions are being worked out by Waterways Ireland with both planning authorities. We hope to make further progress by mid-October to advance the planning applications in both jurisdictions.

Mr Elliott: As a follow-on from the Ulster canal issue, it is quite interesting that Roads Service is objecting to canal proposals. This place has an unusual way of working.

Minister, will you give us an update on the estimated costs of the Ulster canal project? Is there any indication of where those costs will be met? In other words, who will pay for it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To spare the blushes of the Member's party colleague, it was actually DOE Roads Service that raised the objection. Rather than it being an objection to

the project progressing, the concern was really around the newt population and followed NIEA concerns about indigenous wildlife populations.

The Irish Government have always said that they would meet the full costs of the restoration of the Ulster canal. Obviously, they have raised concerns about the fiscal constraints that have been placed on them. However, what they said they will do — I have repeated it at every opportunity here — is to progress each stage of the restoration programme. The introduction of the interagency group will help to try to meet the full costs of the project. The Member may be aware that the full costs of the project are over £171 million, with a €45 million cost for the Clones to Upper Lough Erne part. The interagency group, which includes the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), the tourist bodies and all the other Departments, will help to look at ways in which we can potentially expedite meeting the costs to advance the restoration of the canal.

Mr Hilditch: The statement indicated that consent was given for one property disposal, yet the communiqué from the meeting that is on the website indicates that consents were given for a number of property disposals. Can I have clarification on which is correct?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There was just one; that information is erroneous and I will have a look at it. There was one property disposal and it was not contentious.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Sorry; my apologies, Mr Speaker — that is not a premonition, I hope.

What is the time frame for the Ulster canal project? If the Irish Government are not going to provide the moneys, are there any other options? Are there European moneys that we can look for in order to move the project forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is similar to the question that the Member's party colleague asked. The whole point of bringing in an interagency group was to try to expedite the timescale. If things go to plan, you could be looking at restoration within anything between eight to 10 years. Design work could take a year to 18 months, and minor construction work could take place two to five years after that. Rather than waiting to get the full budget, we need to make a start. That start is in the planning process at this stage, and the interagency group considered those issues at its first meeting in September. There is huge interest in the restoration of the Ulster canal and we need to do everything we can to ensure that it is achieved.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the information she has provided so far. Will she indicate what level of economic return can be anticipated following significant investment in developing our waterways?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The levels of economic return will vary depending on the type of activities that take place, but that is not lost on any of us. We are not just looking at the restoration of the Ulster canal; the interagency group can, particularly with the expertise of groups such as the SIB, consider how we can enhance, support and further develop our tourism product.

Recently, there was a fishing competition in the Fermanagh lakelands, and, for five days fisherpeople came from all over and spent money in the area, which is well needed. That is the kind of thing that can be of benefit to all the

towns and villages surrounding waterways. I can get more specific figures for the Member if he would like to see me after the debate, but I feel that the tourism product of our lakes and waterways in particular could be better developed. We need to look at more ways to do that, and we need to be creative about it, because, at the end of the day, these towns and villages more often than not rely on the tourism and angling products to help boost the local economy. That is something that we all have to shoulder.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement, and I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. The Minister is quite right that there is a huge interest in the restoration of the Ulster canal, and she mentioned the passage between Clones and upper Lough Erne. Has there been any further discussion about the Ulster canal in Belfast, particularly around Stranmillis? Is money being sought by her Department from Europe to help progress that section?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that I met Belfast City Council on this issue. Members from other parts — Newry, Portadown and Strabane, for example — want the same thing. I want to look at the overall package rather than hold back any one geographical part until we get the money for the rest. However, I am open to keeping the potential for that under review. We are looking at other opportunities, some of which are with local government. In fairness, some local government bodies are more active than others and Belfast City Council is, to its credit, very active. However, we are looking for additional opportunities to provide other sources of funding or even potentially to match the funding that comes from Europe or other sources.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the continuation of her support for the Ulster canal. Is it possible to start work on the Ulster canal from Lough Neagh along the Blackwater and to create a navigation authority for Lough Neagh other than Waterways Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There were two questions there, and I think that the Member knows the answer to both, but he should not let that get in the way of a good story. It is with regret that I confirm I do not have the money for a single navigation authority for Lough Neagh. In fairness, it did not come up in the North/South statement. I will write to the Member with further details, but I do not have the money for a single navigation authority for Lough Neagh. I am looking at the potential to extend the navigation arrangement that is there, and I am doing that in partnership with the Lough Neagh Partnership.

10.45 am

Mrs McKevitt: It is great to see the Minister back on her feet to make statements. In answers to a lot of questions, she has talked about the Ulster canal as a tourism product. In a progress report, the chief executive of Waterways Ireland speaks about significant achievements, one of those being:

"the proposed sponsorship of 101 events to promote the awareness of the waterways across all navigations".

Are any of those promotions there to help encourage the use of our waterways in events such as the World and Police and Fire Games, which will come to Northern Ireland next year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question and, indeed, for her kind thoughts. The World Police and Fire Games is a huge challenge for us all, and we need to exploit every single opportunity and asset that we have to ensure that it is, as its logo states, the friendliest games ever. However, even though Belfast bid for and will host the World Police and Fire Games, many of the activities are outside the city, which I think is proper order. Our waterways are going to be part of that. I will be meeting the World Police and Fire Games company very soon, and this and other potential assets — including our cultural product, which has a lot to offer — will be part of those discussions.

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Mr Speaker, with your permission, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Language Body meeting, which was held in Armagh on the 9 July 2012. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the Language Body and its two constituent agencies, Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch, and Foras na Gaeilge. The Council received progress reports from Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency on collaborative work and other activities of the two agencies. Those included ongoing collaboration on governance and promotion issues, including revision of the equality scheme and participation in joint showcase events and in the Young Ambassadors programme. It was noted that the chairpersons and the CEOs of the agencies are in discussions on a schedule for joint board meetings to focus on and progress joint projects.

The Ulster-Scots Agency completed another very successful run of the 'Pat and Plain' drama series at 11 schools and, in conjunction with the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association, launched the Ulster-Scots foundation certificate for education in Highland piping at Stormont in May this year. In conjunction with the Ulster-Scots Community Network, the Ulster-Scots Agency delivered plantation workshops to over 400 children at 17 schools in Ulster, 14 of which were in the border counties of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal.

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

Foras na Gaeilge developed an online training network for translators and editors, and provided accredited translators and editors with a new edition of the translation memory resource, encompassing both public service terminology and general terminology. Foras na Gaeilge also implemented improvements under its action plan for Áis. For example, orders can now be placed by e-mail and the introduction of an online ordering system is being examined. It continued to build links between Ireland and Scotland through the Colmcille project and Tonnta, which is preparing to link schools in Belfast, Donegal and North Lanarkshire through podcasts.

The Council noted that discussions have taken place at ministerial level on the 2012 budgets with the focus on the delivery of key priorities and the maintenance of front line delivery services. Once the budget allocations have been agreed, and following Finance Ministers' approval, the 2012 business plans and budgets will be brought forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting. The Council also noted that it was the language bodies' intention to lay the 2009 and 2010 accounts in the respective Houses by the end of this year.

The Council received a presentation from Foras na Gaeilge outlining progress on the development of a new funding model. The Council noted that 167 submissions

had been received during the consultation process, which ended in April this year. The Council noted a revised implementation plan prepared by Foras na Gaeilge, and agreed that Foras na Gaeilge would provide final funding proposals at the next NSMC language body meeting.

Ministers noted recent developments in regard to the major new English-Irish dictionary and approved, within the existing budget, a revised timetable whereby the online electronic version will be published by the end of this year and the printed version will be published in 2015. The Council noted that proposals are being developed by the Ulster-Scots Agency to promote and support Ulster-Scots Hairtlan areas. The aim is to preserve, protect and present Ulster-Scots heritage through geographical designations. The agency will, at a future NSMC meeting, present plans to develop and refine the Hairtlan project through partnership with key stakeholders. The Council has arranged to hold its next language body meeting on 12 December 2012.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): The Minister referred to the links that Foras na Gaeilge has and is building with Scotland, yet, strangely, the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency appears to be solely in Northern Ireland and some of the border counties in the Irish Republic. When can we expect some tangible progress in the agency's work in Scotland and America? Further to that, is the Minister confident that the language body reports and accounts for 2009-2010 will be laid by the end of the year, given previous delays?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the last question first. I asked about the 2009-2010 budgets and reports before I came here. It seems almost like a case of *déjà vu* every time we have a report from the language and waterways bodies in relation to budgets and reports. I have been told that things are progressing as anticipated and that they are on target. Even the fortnightly report from both agencies indicates that things are still on target. I will again make it clear, particularly after today, that I expect those reports to be laid as promised and as the commitment was made to me and junior Minister Bell at the last meeting.

In relation to the Chair's first question, there was a delay with the business case to extend the remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency to include visits to Scotland, but that was sorted. Minister Wilson and I had a meeting, and it was sorted. I would like to see progress from the agency and its proposals for progress, because that was the main impediment to things extending. That impediment has been removed, and I will be keeping a careful watch on how those programmes and, indeed, those services and experiences are extended beyond the current remit.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an dara ráiteas a thug sí dúinn inniu. I thank the Minister for her second statement. What is the current position of the review of core funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The current position is that I have not seen the proposals from Foras na Gaeilge yet. I understand that they have been recently submitted. As I outlined in the statement, 167 submissions were made regarding the core funding arrangements. I look forward to seeing what those recommendations are. A commitment was given by me, Jimmy Deenihan and Minister McGinley at the meeting

to make sure that those new funding arrangements are as robust as possible. It was outlined in the statement that support to front line services will be maintained as best as possible, but, rather than speculating on what they are, I will wait until I receive a full report. I will certainly bring a report back to the House based on the progress report that Jimmy Deenihan and I receive. We anticipate that full report being with us well in advance of the next meeting in December.

Mr Swann: Minister, you noted the launch of the Ulster-Scots foundation certificate for education in highland piping. That was done in conjunction with the NI Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association (RSPBA). Recently, the RSPBA NI's piping and drumming school had its budget halved. Will she comment on that cut and on whether any other avenues are being explored so that the school's full budget can be reinstated?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that that issue was not mentioned in the statement. However, as it is a genuine question, I will find out what the situation is and write to him.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis, agus fáiltim roimpi ar ais chuig an Tionól. I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome her back to the House.

An féidir liom an cheist seo a chur ar an Aire? An dtig léi a dheimhniú nach rachaidh an t-eagrán nua maoinithe, nó an dara leagan de, nach rachaidh sé chun dochair eagraíochtaí Gaeilge anseo sa Tuaisceart agus go seasfaidh sí an fód do na heagraíochtaí sin? Will she assure the House that the new version of the funding model will not, in any way, disadvantage Irish-language organisations here in the North?

The Minister probably saw the leaked details of the new model in 'The Irish Times' last week. Will she assure us that she will fight to ensure that Irish-language organisations here get the best possible deal out of it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. I give a 100% assurance that I will fight for the organisations that are based here in the North. Honestly, I did not see the leaked details in 'The Irish Times'; this is the first that I have heard of them. As the Member will be aware, it is not the first leak, and I have no doubt that it will not be the last.

The Member's question is a serious one, and my answer is serious. Given the nature of funding for the Irish language across the island and the commitment, particularly in the Programme for Government, to the strategies for Irish and Ulster Scots — in this instance for Irish — it is imperative that we have robust infrastructure and strong support in the community to meet the needs of that sector. Sometimes, meeting the needs of that sector includes meeting the needs of funded groups, because you cannot deliver a service without the resource on the ground.

I cannot give an assurance about the new funding model at this stage because I have not seen the proposals, nor can I judge what effects they will have. However, I can promise that I will fight the corner for people from this jurisdiction and for the language across the island. I will make sure that the funding arrangements are truly representative, meet the needs of everyone on the island and are not

skewed towards some to the detriment and disadvantage of others.

Mr Hilditch: The aim of the Hairtlan project is to preserve, protect and present Ulster-Scots heritage. The manor house in Whitehead, County Antrim, which is one of the most important buildings in Ulster-Scots heritage, has recently been placed on the market for sale from the private sector. Will the Minister ensure that this crucial property is discussed at some level in the future, especially from the point of view of public access and, perhaps, public ownership?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can assure the Member that I will make enquiries about the property and see whether I can advance those issues. It may, perhaps, involve discussions with local government in conjunction with the Ulster-Scots Agency. It is important that, in bringing projects such as that forward in the area of special heritage protection, they are complementary and sympathetic. I cannot give an assurance other than that because I need to know the details, but I will certainly investigate it.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister. What is the current position on the production of new Irish-language and Ulster-Scots dictionaries?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will see from the statement that a hard copy Irish-language dictionary will be available by 2015, and there will be a presentation on the online version by the end of this year. The ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots is looking at a glossary of spelling and terms to help to agree and bring forward a standard, but there has been no discussion about an Ulster-Scots dictionary at this stage.

11.00 am

Mr Humphrey: The Minister referred to the workshops that the Ulster-Scots Community Network delivers across Ulster. I have attended many of those workshops, which have proven to be very successful, and the children were very receptive to them. Will the Minister make a commitment to the House today that she will make provision for more Ulster-Scots workshops across Northern Ireland? Will she ask the Minister of Education to provide extra resource and funding so that she can do so?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will not ask the Minister of Education to provide resource for something that is my responsibility. I would not pass that on to any Minister. The Minister of Education has met me and the Ulster-Scots Agency, and he seems genuinely committed to trying to help in any way possible, although that does not mean that he will provide funding. I agree that the more workshops that we have and the more widespread the awareness of the agency and its work, the better. We need to look at ways of passing on that legacy and heritage, particularly to children and young people. In fairness, that responsibility is mine in the first instance. If I find that other Departments can assist, I will approach them, but I will do that on the basis of having investigated it first.

Executive Committee Business

Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The regulations were laid before the Assembly on 30 March 2012. They are being introduced so that jobseeker's allowance recipients who have been the victim of actual or threatened domestic violence, as defined in the regulations, can, in some circumstances, receive the benefit without having to meet the requirements to be available for and actively seeking employment and to have a jobseeker's agreement.

The regulations will enable victims of actual or threatened domestic violence by a partner, former partner or certain family members of the claimant to access the easement for an initial period of four weeks, if the incident took place within 26 weeks before the claimant notified their benefit office about it, provided that they are not living at the same address as the perpetrator at the time of the notification. If the claimant then provides written evidence of the kind required by the regulations during the initial four-week period, the easement period will be extended effectively to 13 weeks. Claimants will be able to access the easement once in 12 months.

There is strong evidence to support the amendment. Although no research exists on the impact of domestic violence on benefit recipients in particular, there are data on the incidence of domestic violence in the wider community. Data taken from the Police Service of Northern Ireland's annual bulletin revealed that 9,546 crimes with a domestic abuse motivation were recorded in 2010-11. Of the 9,546 crimes recorded, around 68% of the victims were females aged 18 or over, 21% were males aged 18 or over, and around 10% were persons aged under 18.

The easement is designed to reflect the fact that victims may experience domestic abuse at the hands not just of partners but of other family members. Domestic violence is not restricted to those in intimate relationships. I believe that support should be offered to those victimised by family members, including members of a partner or former partner's family.

For victims on jobseeker's allowance to take advantage of the easement, they need to disclose the abuse. There is consensus in the evidence that domestic abuse is under-reported and that victims may be unwilling to disclose it, particularly to officials. Research on behaviour in abuse cases shows that victims may take two to three years to leave the abusive relationship permanently and that there may be a number of incidents of abuse in that time. Therefore, the victim may need support over a longer period than 13 weeks.

I feel that it is unacceptable to offer longer periods on jobseeker's allowance without the need to meet the job-seeking conditions. Jobseeker's allowance must remain a benefit for those able to seek and undertake work. It is

therefore necessary to limit the time that claimants can be treated as meeting the job-seeking conditions. Those with problems that cannot be resolved within the 13 weeks of the deferral may be able to be treated as available for and actively seeking employment for up to a further 11 weeks under the procedures for claimants experiencing domestic emergencies. The corollary of the change that I have outlined is that anyone who is unable to undertake job-seeking activity after the maximum period that the two deferral periods allow should not be eligible for jobseeker's allowance. Those who have limited capability for work for reasons of illness can claim employment and support allowance.

I am sure that you will agree that the changes are worthwhile and necessary to ensure that victims of domestic violence receive the support that they require to help them achieve financial independence at a time when they are unable to take up work.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for bringing the regulations to the House. As he outlined, they refer to a deferral period for jobseeker's allowance for victims of domestic abuse and violence in which they will be treated as being available for employment and actively seeking work and as having a jobseeker's agreement if they do not have one.

The Committee originally considered the SL1 for the regulations at its meeting on 16 February 2012. At that time, the Committee asked for more information from the Department on the level of consultation that it may have had with organisations that deal with issues of domestic violence and so on, such as Women's Aid. The Department came back quite quickly and indicated that a number of groups had in fact been contacted about the regulations. Although there was still concern about the initial four-week deferral period being perhaps too short, the proposed regulations were generally welcomed. The Committee discussed that issue and ultimately agreed that there was sufficient provision in the initial four-week period for the victim of domestic violence or abuse to produce such evidence as is necessary to have the deferral period extended to the 13 weeks provided for in the regulations.

The Committee therefore agreed on 19 April that the regulations were supportive of victims of domestic violence and were beneficial. They give such victims access to funds in their own right and therefore a level of stability in their life at a very difficult time, thus allowing them to plan their way ahead and deal with the traumatic circumstances in which they live. The Committee supports the Assembly's approval of the regulations.

Mr McCarthy: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to welcome the Minister to the House. Domestic violence and abuse is horrendous and heinous at any time. Anything that the Assembly can do to overcome that and help victims has got to be welcomed. We support the motion.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased with the consensus of support across the Assembly for the regulations. I thank the Chair, Mr Maskey, and the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with the regulations.

The regulations provide that a person who has been subject to domestic violence can be treated as meeting

jobseeker's allowance conditionality for a period of 13 weeks in a 12-month period. That will give victims of domestic violence access to funds in their own right to help them achieve a stable position from which they can begin to look or resume looking for work. In some cases, it will help victims to maintain independence from their abuser in circumstances in which lack of funds may have made them return to the relationship.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I thank Members for their interest in the regulations. I hope that they will back them and agree to the changes that will ensure that victims of domestic violence receive the support that they require to aid their financial independence at a time when they are unable to take up work. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage

Mr Speaker: I asked that Whips be briefed on this important issue, and, yesterday, they were briefed. Under Standing Order 32, a reasoned amendment to the Second Stage of the Bill has been tabled, and it is published on the Marshalled List of Amendments. As this is the first time that there has been a reasoned amendment to the Second Stage of a Bill in the current mandate, I will take the opportunity to remind Members about the effect of one being made. Standing Order 32 allows for an amendment to be proposed that states a reason for the Assembly not to agree to the Second Stage of a Bill. So, if a reasoned amendment is carried at Second Stage, it is fatal to the further progress of the Bill, and the Bill will fall. I remind all Members of the consequences.

Turning to today's procedure, I will shortly call the Minister for Social Development to move the Second Stage, followed by Mr Mickey Brady to move the reasoned amendment, and the normal process of debate will then take place. After the winding-up speeches, the Question will be put that the amendment be made. If the amendment is made, the Second Stage of the Bill cannot be agreed and the Bill will fall. I hope that that is clear for all sides of the House.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] be agreed.

As the Minister for Social Development, I have the duty to introduce what is one of the most substantial pieces of legislation that the Assembly has been asked to implement to date. It is the culmination of the wide-ranging debate that is taking place here and in the wider community about the future of our social welfare system. That debate is about issues that will have a major influence on how we address poverty and disadvantage and how we grow our economy. The two are very much linked. Economic growth is a necessary prerequisite to tackling poverty, and getting people into work is the only way that we will ever succeed in lifting our people out of poverty.

It is not reasonable to argue that the welfare reform programme and the focus on getting people into work must await a time when jobs become available. Implementation of welfare reform needs to take account of our current economic difficulties. In preparing those who are not working with the skills and attitudes to work that will make them ready for work when it becomes available, we need a welfare system that not only works in the good times but, more importantly, is capable of effectively supporting people during periods of recession.

As we discuss the Bill and the regulations that will follow, let us not underestimate the challenges that we face. As a region, we have the highest levels of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom. There are over 120,000 households in Northern Ireland in which no one is working, and over 60,000 children live in a household where no adult is working. There is clear evidence that the incomes of families where no adult is working are heavily skewed towards the bottom of the income distribution, with over six out of 10 families in the bottom quintile and 93% of families in the bottom two quintiles.

If, through the changes included in the Bill, we are successful in getting more people into work, we will have made a start on tackling a root cause of poverty and we can make a contribution to addressing issues such as low educational attainment and high levels of ill health that are often found in areas of multiple deprivation. There are people in our society who have never worked and have no concept of what work means or requires of them, so we have to change systems, behaviours and attitudes, and we have to change fast, without leaving the most vulnerable behind. As Minister for Social Development, I am committed to tackling disadvantage and building strong and vibrant communities across Northern Ireland. So, I give a high priority to measures that will mitigate the negative impacts on individuals, their families, their households and their communities.

11.15 am

Welfare reform is not the only reform that I will bring forward to reduce disadvantage and shield communities. I will shortly bring to the House proposals for the reform of the Housing Executive, together with a new housing strategy. I am also working to develop a range of complementary changes that will benefit poorer people and disadvantaged communities.

The substantial costs of benefits are paid under parity arrangements directly from the Westminster Budget, and I have no doubt that our approach to those parity arrangements will be at the centre of the debate. I say to the House that we have a clear choice. If there are substantial costs involved in changes that we want to make to the Bill, we will have to pay for them. Breaking parity is a choice that we can make, but it will have huge costs that will be met through less money for schools, hospitals and the police, or we will have to find the additional resources by introducing local charges to meet the costs. As Minister for Social Development, I argue in the strongest possible terms that such an approach would be dangerous to our economic position, hugely damaging to our public services and indefensible in terms of the possible consequences for people who are struggling to work and support their family with little or no support from the public purse.

That does not mean, however, that we blindly implement all the changes that were introduced at Westminster under the GB Welfare Reform Act 2012. Together, we must identify and implement changes that take account of our particular needs in Northern Ireland but are consistent with the constraints of parity. Through the Assembly, the Executive and the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform, we can decide on the type of changes that it is within our remit to make, and I will comment on some of those later in the speech. Of course, I am working hard to achieve changes through ongoing discussions with Department for Work and Pensions Ministers. Those meetings with Ministers and officials at Westminster have been going on for a considerable time since I came into the Department, and the next meeting with David Freud is scheduled for next Tuesday.

I present the Bill to you because I believe that, if we are to be successful in tackling poverty, making people's lives better, supporting families and growing a more sustainable economy, the core principle behind universal credit is right: people are always better off by working than not working. Universal credit can help to tackle poverty,

make people's lives better, support families and grow a more sustainable economy. Through universal credit, there is a real opportunity to develop sustainable support through engaging more people in work and economic activity. Grasping the opportunities that the reforms bring, together with the further development of our economic strategy, can contribute to a growing and vibrant Northern Ireland economy that is able to provide better support to households and children. Failure to do that will lead to continued and possibly increased poverty, which will increase stress on those same families and children and give them no possible escape from the poverty trap.

I also suggest that most of us are supportive of the principles underpinning universal credit. We all want to see a welfare system that provides financial support not only for those unable to work due to illness or disability but for those who can work but are unable to find work at a point in time. We also want to see a system that enables and supports, in a practical way, a return to work but, at the same time, challenges those who refuse to work. Therefore, there are aspects of welfare reform that I support, and there are aspects that I am trying to change. Let me say that there are other aspects that I personally do not like, but I know that I cannot change them because of the financial consequences. Translating the core principles into an efficient, fair and responsive system poses challenges for all of us here as we try to achieve the cultural and behavioural changes that these reforms will require.

My party has consistently opposed damaging and ill-considered cuts to the welfare budget. We accept, however, that there are major problems associated with welfare, and those problems must be addressed. Four key principles are central to the policy intent behind the legislation: we need, first, a welfare system that protects the vulnerable; secondly, a welfare system designed in such a way that it provides the maximum support and encouragement to get people involved in economic activity; thirdly, a system that is fair; and, fourthly, a welfare system that promotes personal and social responsibility. In the context of this change, we must ensure that we gain the maximum advantage for Northern Ireland through negotiating areas of operational flexibility and through the delivery of the benefits that are under the direct control of the Executive and the Assembly.

I turn first to a welfare system that protects the vulnerable. I am committed to implementing change that provides more support to those who are most vulnerable. Let me be very clear about this: people who are unable to find work or require support because they are too ill to work will be supported. Part of that support must come about through the better targeting of resources. It must include better assessment of the support claimants need to return to work. In some cases, that will not be possible, and we must ensure that people who are genuinely unable to work are supported and protected. Nevertheless, the default position needs to change from why claimants cannot work to how we support claimants into work.

Although lone parents will be able to claim jobseeker's allowance without having to undergo a work regime until their youngest child reaches the age of five, there will, of course, continue to be safeguards to allow parents to fit their job search requirements with their caring responsibility and childcare availability. Improved childcare provision is an important element of the welfare reform

programme, as it will help to remove artificial barriers to work, and we want to ensure that as many people as possible get the help that they need to engage with the labour market. We already know that about 65% of lone parents are working or would like to work.

I will now briefly outline one area of change under welfare reform that worries me. The Bill will introduce changes in the support offered to those who claim employment and support allowance (ESA) where the claimant is assessed as requiring support but capable of some form of work. ESA will be available for one year and will be paid on the basis of national insurance contributions. I have some concerns that the policy intention here is not solely about getting people back to work, which I support; rather, it is more about cutting the costs of welfare, which I do not support, given the potential vulnerability of those involved.

The Bill also allows for the abolition of disability living allowance for working-age claimants and its replacement with the personal independence payment. Like DLA, it will be available to disabled people both in work and out of work, and it will be non-taxable and non-contributory. This payment is also subject to new assessment procedures.

There is no question that, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in DLA uptake. That has attracted comment on the reasons for the increase and on the robustness of the system for deciding eligibility. Northern Ireland has a very high level of such claims, and, in the past 10 years, the annual cost of DLA has risen by 60%, from just under £500 million to over £800 million. DLA is over 20 years old. Our understanding of many disabilities has changed, and there is a changing environment, with an increasing commitment to enabling disabled people to enter the workplace. This means that we need new mechanisms for assessing and supporting disabled people into work that are consistent with those changes. The key changes will be an end to automatic entitlements based on having a certain health condition or impairment; a more objective assessment; and the introduction of more regular reviews of entitlement to the benefit. Although the reforms are designed to ensure support for those who face the greatest challenges in taking part in everyday life, my focus is on ensuring that its introduction in Northern Ireland is focused on delivering the best possible service to disabled people.

Many people were put on DLA and simply left there, year after year after year, without contact, intervention or support. They have been left languishing on DLA, which is not good for them. My Department is working with a large number of voluntary and community groups on mapping out how disabled people will claim the personal independence payment and how best to support them through that process. We appreciate very much the ongoing partnership with those organisations in the voluntary and community sector as we map out the way forward.

Since coming into office, I have been working to ensure that personal independence assessments are carried out in a way that will properly assess the support that people in Northern Ireland need. I have been consulting on the draft assessment criteria and have tasked my officials with ensuring that Northern Ireland cases are fully reflected in the assessment process. I will continue to work to ensure that the new arrangements provide support to those who have a disability and face the greatest challenges in leading an independent life. I am committed to ensuring

that we make every effort to ensure that disabled people have equal access to taking up employment, thereby making a full contribution to Northern Ireland society.

Over the years, many of the most vulnerable in our society have relied on the social fund for financial support at times of crisis. I am sure that every Member is aware of the importance of that fund through their ongoing work, week by week, in their constituency offices. Although the system has many strengths, it also has drawbacks in that it has been largely restricted to people on benefits. It also led to some people using the system as another form of loan. The abolition of the discretionary elements of the social fund provides the Assembly with the opportunity to create a system of discretionary support for Northern Ireland that retains the fund's key principles but addresses its weaknesses by, for example, making provision for families on a low income to have access to the fund to meet emergency needs.

11.30 am

The Bill proposes two changes to housing benefit. First, it will change the way that housing benefit is uprated from the retail price index (RPI) to the consumer price index (CPI). Secondly, it will introduce size criteria for the social rented sector and existing working-age housing benefit claimants who live in that sector. The size criteria will replicate those that apply to claimants in the private rented sector. That is important, in that it will ensure equal treatment in the application of housing benefit, whether a claimant is renting from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, a registered housing association or a private landlord.

Housing benefit expenditure has increased from £312 million in 2003-04 to £455 million in 2009-2010. Although the measures are intended to control the increasing costs, I have been actively taking practical steps to minimise the most negative impacts of the proposed changes, as well as seeking to put in place long-term solutions to the structural problems that confront the social housing sector in Northern Ireland. I am keen to hear constructive ideas from all parties on practical steps that we can take to alleviate the most negative impacts of the housing benefit changes, and I will bring forward ideas in my forthcoming housing strategy.

One key issue is that, over the years, particularly in recent years, we have not built housing in Northern Ireland that matches up to the nature of the housing demand. A very substantial section of the housing waiting list in Northern Ireland is single people. Yet, time after time, the social housing development programme has ignored that particular need and has simply continued to build various sizes of family home, rather than meeting the needs of singles. That is something that I have taken up very clearly with the Housing Executive with regard to the design of its social housing development programme. It is important that, in the future, as the Housing Executive takes that work forward, it always keeps in mind the changes that welfare reform is bringing. That has not necessarily been the case in the past.

Since coming to office, I have doubled the discretionary housing budget over the SR10 period to help to address a short-term housing cost issue that individuals and families have to meet as a consequence of housing benefit reform. I am reviewing the social housing development

programme, and I am involved in discussions on additional funding to help to secure changes in the types of house that we build in Northern Ireland to ensure that they meet the real needs.

The second issue that I identified was getting people back to work. We have created a highly complex benefits system that discourages some claimants from seeking work and, effectively, penalises those who have the lowest earnings potential when they find work. At present, in excess of 30 benefits and tax credits are available to those on a low income. That often makes the whole process of claiming benefits difficult and unpredictable. Our increasingly complex welfare system is failing to meet people's needs. The system, as it stands, can often force people into making an impossible choice between working or doing their best for their family. Families can often be better off on benefits, rather than working. That cannot be right. I do not want to stigmatise or stereotype those who have to make that choice; rather, I want to put in place a welfare system that supports people in making lifestyle choices. As the system stands, people who want to work often find that they are better off on benefits. People who want to work often do not get the specialist support that they need from the current system. Therefore, I am working with Minister Farry on developing effective solutions to meet the needs of the long-term unemployed. People who want to work are hindered from doing so by the current rules, while the poorest and most vulnerable suffer because the available resources for support are badly targeted.

Let me be clear: in the changes that are proposed, work will pay. As we increase support to make work pay, it is right to ensure that claimants do everything that they reasonably can to find work or prepare for work. We will, therefore, tailor conditionality to individual circumstances and require all claimants to accept what will be called a "claimant commitment". From the outset, they will be asked to sign up to the idea that they will be provided with the necessary support and access to universal credit but will be expected to recognise that there is an applicable sanctions regime.

The toughest sanctions will apply to those who are expected to be seeking work but fail to meet important conditions. They should understand that, if they keep crossing a series of lines, they will eventually invoke the sanctions regime. The problem at present is that the regime is often confusing. When claimants reach the point at which they are about to hit sanctions, it comes as a big surprise to many of them that sanctions will be imposed and that the situation that they face is real and serious. If we let claimants know much earlier and introduce a regime that is easy to understand, with a simple tripwire process, they will know from the word "Go". That should disincentivise people from making the wrong decisions and taking the wrong turns.

Universal credit is at the heart of the changes that the Bill will introduce. It will be a single income replacement benefit for working-age adults. It will be easier to understand and access, and, crucially, it will bring together in-work and out-of-work support, simplifying the current system of benefit payments and tax credits into a single payment for those out of work or on low pay. It will provide a more consistent system of support. For example, universal credit will allow people to see how they are better off in work

because they keep more of the money that they earn from their employment, as well as being topped up with many of the benefits that they receive when they are unemployed. That is making real the promise that work will pay under universal credit.

Similarly, under universal credit, people remain registered with the system for two years after their claim has ended. Someone can get a full-time job and leave universal credit completely, but, if they lose their job or cannot work for a period because of a health condition, they will be able to start payments again almost instantly, ensuring that they do not have to wait for vital support. Delays in the system have been highlighted very often in the past, and that issue will be addressed.

Although the current complex and burdensome system is administered well, it can be slow in delivering, leaving already vulnerable people more vulnerable. I recently visited a food bank run by a church in Newtownards, where it was pointed out to me by the organisers that one of the reasons why some people had to use the service was delays in social security payments. I believe that universal credit, once fully implemented, will provide families with the support when they need it.

Universal credit will also provide support that is flexible enough to meet the needs of different claimants' circumstances. It will deliver a more responsive system based on actual earnings, making the transition between benefits and work much easier. It will remove one of the main barriers preventing people returning to work by providing the security of a minimum income, while retaining and, for many, restoring the financial incentive to work, with universal credit payments gradually being reduced as earnings increase. Even for those at the bottom end of the pay scale who are looking to take on extra hours or perhaps a modestly paid job there will be real financial gain, with the lowest earners retaining 35p of each additional pound earned. That is in contrast with our current system, which traps people in benefit dependency, effectively denying them the opportunity to become economically active through work that pays.

My Department has estimated, through modeling exercises, that universal credit, when fully implemented, will lift 10,000 children out of poverty and put an additional £110 million back into the Northern Ireland economy. Importantly, childcare costs will also be met by an additional element paid as part of the universal credit award. We will invest at least the same amount of money in childcare as we do in the current tax credit system, with additional support being provided to help those making their first moves into work by removing the restriction of childcare costs being payable only to those working more than 16 hours. So, universal credit will allow claimants to adjust their hours of work to suit their childcare responsibilities. It will allow people to set their hours of work more in line with their caring responsibilities, and, more important, it will be available regardless of the number of hours that people plan to work.

Members will be aware that the Executive are developing a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland. The changes to be implemented through universal credit will provide additional resources to complement the wider childcare strategy and, crucially, remove a significant barrier for many families who want to work but are trapped in benefit dependency.

Although growing unemployment is a worrying factor, growth in the economy will only begin to address unemployment, not economic inactivity. During the last period of economic growth in Northern Ireland, there was a substantial decrease in the number of people who were unemployed, but there was actually an increase in the economically inactive through long-term incapacity. The introduction of universal credit will help to remove some of the barriers that undoubtedly led to some people remaining economically inactive when jobs were available. Giving people clear information on the financial benefits they will receive in work as against the moneys they receive on benefit will help families to make real choices about going to work in the medium to long term.

Universal credit will have an important role in helping to address poverty and creating strong role models and stronger communities, but all that will require a change in the way we think about work and benefits. Although universal credit will ensure that work always pays by rewarding those who seek to work or to increase their hours, there is a leadership challenge for all of us in promoting a work ethic culture that will not only promote the well-being of the individual but make a positive contribution to their families and communities. Some time ago, I visited a centre in Londonderry, where I saw the operation of a programme that supported people to make them more employable and help them back into employment. One of the key things that struck me very forcefully was a chart on the wall that emphasised very clearly the benefits to the individual, the family and the wider community of people being supported back into employment. That is crucial, and we need to emphasise that.

I have already mentioned the concerns of those who are working but are on a low income. We need a benefits system that is seen to encourage and motivate those on a low income to continue working and to strive to better themselves. Therefore, the Bill introduces a cap on those in receipt of certain social security benefits. The principle is that people who are unemployed and on benefits should not receive more than average earnings. That is a matter of fairness. Those who work hard, support their family and pay their taxes must be supported to do so. We must not have a benefit system that encourages people not to work and discourages those who are in work. Even though incomes are generally lower in Northern Ireland, the cap will be at the same level as in Great Britain. That is to our claimants' advantage. Members should also be aware that there are significant exemptions in the provisions, in particular for those also receiving disability living allowance, attendance allowance, employment and support allowance, if paid with the support component, working tax credits, war widow's or war widower's pensions or industrial injuries benefit.

11.45 am

I recognise that there must be transitional arrangements. We will work intensively with the families affected once the cap comes in. We will help them to move into work, to change their circumstances so that they are not affected. We will make sure that families who need transitional support receive it. However, the principle in the Bill that we must make work pay must be upheld.

We need also a system that encourages personal and social responsibility. The foundations of the Welfare

Reform Bill are social responsibility; establishing a fair contract between taxpayers and claimants; supporting the vulnerable; people accepting personal responsibility; and requiring claimants to be fully committed to working for their financial independence through work.

The introduction of universal credit will help people back to work, shift the over-reliance on benefits and encourage the assumption of greater personal responsibilities for individuals and families. At the end of the day, universal credit will bring £110 million of additional money into Northern Ireland. We have to make that work and get people back to work.

I began by saying that the only way we could address poverty was through economic growth. The only way we can get public expenditure under control through welfare reform is by making it work, supporting personal responsibility and independence and making work pay.

There are other aspects of the Bill in respect of which it is argued by its architects and advocates in London that reform of how benefits are paid will increase the level of personal responsibility that individuals take for their life. Plans to end direct payments to landlords, limit opportunities for split household payments and introduce monthly instead of fortnightly benefit payments are key characteristics of the new universal credit systems. Those architects argue that those changes are necessary to make the experience of claiming benefits more like that of people who are in work, thereby making easier the transition from benefits to work. In a perfect world, that rationale might work, but none of us lives in that perfect world. I am not aware of any real support for those changes here in Northern Ireland. They could have damaging consequences for landlords not receiving rents and, eventually, tenants being subject to eviction; for children who are not properly fed because their main carer, usually the mother, does not have control over their benefits; and for families who run out of money before the end of the month. Recognising that — it is a recognition shared across the Chamber — I am in intensive discussions with DWP Ministers about the changes we require. However, there are real difficulties for us. All of this is dependent on a DWP IT system that requires flexibilities to meet the needs of Northern Ireland. For the Executive to run their own IT system, it would cost hundreds of millions of pounds, and handling these matters manually would also be punishingly expensive. I am, therefore, making the argument to DWP that it must provide us with an IT system that provides the flexibilities that we require. I have made it clear to DWP Ministers repeatedly that it is not possible to deliver an effective welfare system for Northern Ireland without the flexibilities that we require.

I also believe that the need for changes is not specific to Northern Ireland; rather, they should form part of the core system for the whole of the UK. We must continue to argue for changes here that will meet our particular needs. There is a real danger that the changes that are proposed by GB, if implemented, would make life so difficult for households and families that, rather than encourage personal responsibility, we would destroy all confidence in a reformed welfare system before it had even begun; hence, achieving the flexibilities is our top priority.

We will also provide additional support through the Executive. Earlier, I referred to the opportunities and responsibilities that we, as a devolved Administration,

have to address our own challenges around persistent and growing levels of poverty. Social security provision, significant as it is in this regard, is complemented by a wide range of non-social security welfare provision that is funded from the Northern Ireland block and is contained within departmental budgets. It ranges across many important areas and is aimed at promoting and maintaining health and well-being; supporting education and learning; ensuring access to justice; and promoting accessibility and independence. The funds associated with current non-social security welfare provision amount to approximately £400 million a year. With the exception of the social protection fund, which is centrally administered, the cost of all other non-social security benefits are met and managed within the respective departmental budgets.

As part of the welfare reform changes, the Executive will assume new responsibilities for the provision of discretionary support and domestic rates relief. While some additional resources will accompany these changes, there is likely to be a shortfall in funding. This could amount to a deficit in rates relief of £13 million in the first year — 2013-14 — and that may easily escalate due to inflationary pressures and increased demand in future years, giving rise to an ongoing reduced baseline going into the next spending review. No longer will the Treasury cover developing pressures, and the risk will fall to the Executive.

Through the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform, we have begun discussions about what the Executive's approach may be to these benefits, maximising the impact on those in need and complementing changes that are a result of welfare reform. As our scrutiny of the Bill continues, I suggest that it is important that the delivery of these benefits is considered in the context of the increasing pressures on budgets, targeting resources to those most in need and the outcomes of welfare reform.

In conclusion, as I have reflected to you, I believe there are four principles underpinning this legislation: to protect the vulnerable; to get people back to work; to develop a system that is fair; and to encourage personal and social responsibility. Those four principles must be considered together, and it is on that basis that I support the Bill. The Bill is far from perfect, and I am not saying that what will emerge from the scrutiny at Committee Stage will be perfect. However, I hope that, as part of the scrutiny process, we will identify changes that will not have significant costs but will address some of the Bill's shortcomings and develop a better welfare system for the people of Northern Ireland.

If we do not deliver on the Bill, Northern Ireland and those dependent on welfare support will suffer serious losses. Changes to housing benefit and incapacity benefits are already reducing the social security income paid to Northern Ireland. The measures to deliver these reductions are already in place; they are already happening. When universal credit begins, there will be an opportunity to increase the level of benefit paid into Northern Ireland to provide the additional income that I identified. However, the consequences of not delivering on the Bill are that we would get the negative aspects of welfare reform but not the benefits. Those dependent on welfare would experience real cuts without the potential for increasing their income through progression into work, as supported through various measures in the Bill. That

means that our focus must be on ensuring that the reforms introduced through the Bill complement the work that the Executive are taking forward through the economic strategy.

Undoubtedly, we face hard decisions. Ultimately, however, no one, least of all our poorest households and communities, will thank us if, by our failure to make those decisions, we do not realise the opportunities available to us. Failure to make progress quickly will result in cuts to the incomes of our poorest families and substantial costs to the Executive. As I said, that would leave significantly fewer resources for schools, hospitals and the police or for building the necessary road infrastructure to help us to become more economically efficient.

I encourage Members to help me to progress this matter so that the Social Development Committee can set about finding ways to improve the Bill. I am grateful for the agreement of that Committee to hold many extra meetings over the next number of weeks to progress its scrutiny.

There has been discussion in the media about the possibility of deferment. The truth is that we have run out of road. There is no road left. Members are very well aware that we have a legislative process and that there are procedures and processes to be followed in the Assembly. The result of those is that there is a time frame for getting this or any other legislation through the Assembly. If we defer, there will be no road left and no time left between now and the crucial date of the end of March. There is no time left. Let us be clear about it: if we are to make that date at the end of March, which means getting the Bill through Committee and back to the Assembly and achieving Royal Assent, there is no opportunity for deferral. It is dangerous and foolish for anyone to suggest otherwise. You cannot change the calendar and add extra days, weeks or months. The time is simply not there. The road has run out.

If we do not make the end of March, what are the implications? The first is that, on 31 March, the social fund comes to an end.

Every year, almost a quarter of a million payments are made out of the social fund. Tens of thousands of individuals and families benefit from that social fund. They tend to be — indeed, they are — the most vulnerable in our society. They are the folk who look for help to put shoes on children's feet. They are the folk who come to get help to put clothes on a child's back. They are the people who come to get help to put food on the table. That is what the social fund is about. The people who seek that help are obviously the most vulnerable. Is anyone really suggesting that we should do something in the Assembly that would mean that, when we come to the end of March, we say to those people, "There is no support left for you."? How could anyone, in conscience, go for a deferral that would result in something as appalling as that? The social fund is one of the crucial issues, because it ends at the end of March. If we do not have a replacement in place, there will be no help for those vulnerable people. If someone says to me that they have a concern for the most vulnerable, we need to get legislation through to provide the support for those people.

12.00 noon

We have many people in Northern Ireland whose jobs are dependent on providing welfare reform back-room

services to regions in Great Britain. I think that there are about 1,500 of those jobs altogether in Northern Ireland. We desperately need those jobs at a time of significant unemployment. It is good to have those jobs; people value them here. We are in danger of losing them if we get out of step with Westminster. Quite obviously, when DWP looks at where it gets the work done, it will not look very favourably on a region of the United Kingdom that has gone its own way. People in DWP in London will get cries from constituencies across England, Scotland and Wales that say, "Why can the jobs not come to my region? We are part of the system; those people are out of step." The fact is that those jobs are spread right across the Province. For example, about 150 are up in the north-west in the Londonderry area. Right across Northern Ireland, 1,500 people are working in that sector. Families receive income from those jobs, and breadwinners are reliant on them. I would not want to be the person who says to those 1,500 people, "Sorry if you lose your job. We were deferring, because we just wanted to keep talking about it."

Bear this in mind also: it is an issue not only of hitting the most vulnerable by killing off the social fund and endangering 1,500 jobs in Northern Ireland but of the Northern Ireland exchequer having to bear any extra cost. We are talking about a deficit that would build up to around £200 million. Let us be clear about what that £200 million means: it means that somebody is not going to have a teacher in a classroom; it means that a school that was looking for an extension will not get it; and it means that a hospital ward might be closed down or that nurses might be put out of work. Those are the real practical implications, and people need to grasp that. I heard one of the interviewers say on the radio this morning that this is D-Day. It is decision day. It is a decision about whether you kill off the social fund, put people out of work, close down school classrooms and put teachers, nurses or whomever out of work. Who will thank you for that? I would not want to be the one who has that responsibility laid on me.

Not only is there the practical issue of the £200 million to consider but there is the fact that the DWP IT system that we use operates right across the United Kingdom. If we were put in a position where we had to depart from it, cost would be also involved. We are not in a position in which Northern Ireland is going to start to develop its own IT system. That is simply not possible. Therefore, those are the key implications of any deferral.

A lot of good work has been done by the Executive subcommittee, and all the political parties were asked what they see as being the flexibilities that suit the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. Every political party was around that table; nobody was left out. We asked what the flexibilities are, and, in practical terms, there is a core of three issues. One is direct payments to landlords, which I touched on. It is important, and there are dangers if we do not retain it, owing to the fact that our housing sector and housing practice in Northern Ireland are different from the rest of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, 80% of those who receive housing benefit, whether they are in or out of work, prefer to make direct payments to landlords. That is very different, and it is almost the exact opposite of the situation in GB. We want to retain that, and that is why we need that flexibility built into the IT system right from the start.

We also need to ensure that there is the opportunity for fortnightly and monthly payments. All of us can think of vulnerable people for whom it would not be good to receive twice as much money in one go. There is also the issue of single household payments versus split payments, and the point that, previously, some of the money would have gone into the hands of the mother in the house and probably would have been spent on the children. We need to retain that security and the opportunity for that security.

Those are the things on which everyone is agreed and on which we have been negotiating and continue to negotiate with Westminster. Indeed, there will be a further meeting with David Freud today week as part of that ongoing process. That work is ongoing, and that fight is still being fought. It is important; it is absolutely crucial.

Mr Poots: What part of today's discussion would disable the Minister from engaging in those discussions with David Freud, putting that case and continuing to fight it? How would killing the Bill off today allow us to come back with a stronger or better position? Perhaps the Minister would like to facilitate understanding of that to the House.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. He gets right to the heart of the matter. The way in which to make changes and the time to make changes is at Committee Stage. We all know that that is when it happens. At Committee Stage, we can continue the negotiations that have been ongoing for some time and that, I believe, are coming towards a conclusion.

These are big issues. The IT system that will deliver welfare reform is extremely complex. I took the opportunity of going to England to see some of the design work and was surprised at the complexity and scale of that work. The work to redesign welfare delivery involves one of the biggest IT projects in the world today. It is important that we realise that. It is also important that we realise how to slot in the flexibilities that are specific to and required by Northern Ireland.

As I said, that work is ongoing but is coming to a conclusion, and there will be clarity in a very short time, as the Bill goes through Committee Stage. If, for whatever reason, people seek to defer the Bill today — I cannot read people's minds to know the reasons that they have for that; they will have to give an account themselves — there is absolutely no doubt that there will be serious implications for the Assembly, our Budget, the people in Northern Ireland and, particularly, the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Bell: I thank the Minister for giving way. Is it not the case that some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland are young people? Any social worker working in childcare knows that the social fund is the first port of call. The fact that there have been over 230,000 applications to the social fund over the past year proves how many vulnerable people there are.

Even though we know that the Second Stage of a Bill is about process and that changes are to be made in the Committee Stage, is it not right that the overriding principle of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 — that you always act in the best interests of the child — should be the paramount consideration and should be the one that we use here? We should follow the process and seek to make changes for the most vulnerable where we can at

Committee Stage. That is paramount, and it is in the best interests of vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. The point is well made: our priority must be to secure the interests of the most vulnerable. That is why we are seeking these flexibilities; that is why I am confident we will get flexibility; and that is why we continue to work on that. However, the point at which we get full confirmation of those flexibilities will be in a few weeks' time. We will know exactly where we stand very shortly. At the same time, we cannot defer this matter. If we do, we will miss the deadline at the end of March, and that will have all the attendant consequences I have spelled out.

I am sure that the Speaker will be able to keep us right on this matter: no one should imagine that if this matter is deferred, it will be deferred for a week or two. It is not just a matter of putting this off for a week or two and then coming back to it. The process and procedure in this place would mean that the matter will be put back until well into next year — I think that I have the Speaker's agreement on that point.

We must remember that this is not a matter of deferring the Bill for a week or two so that we can have a bit more thinking about it. We have had months and months of thinking and we have had months and months of discussion. This is decision day; this is the end of the road. The decision has to be made today or we will put ourselves in a position whereby the Bill could not come back to the House until well into next year and we would have even more serious consequences than those I have outlined already.

I have laboured this point because the seriousness of the matter before us and the importance of its proceeding has not yet really dawned on some folk. Whatever reasons people might have for wanting to defer the Bill and seek more time cannot take away from the fact that there are three core flexibilities that people are seeking and that we are working on. We will continue to do so, and we will know very soon where we are going on those. We will soon get an answer from DWP and, in parallel with that, the work can be ongoing regarding the —

Mr P Robinson: Will my friend give way?

Mr McCausland: Sure.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful. I know that he has laboured the point, but I think it would be worthwhile for him to make the point once more. Parties across the House are agreed on the changes that are required. Negotiations are ongoing with the Department in GB in order to get those changes.

There are two options before the House: one is the deferral of the Bill in order to allow negotiations to take place. The consequences of that have been outlined, and they include the loss of jobs; the loss of £220 million from our block grant and the consequence that that will have on Departments; and the closing down of the social fund.

The other option is to allow the negotiations to take place while the Bill is in Committee Stage, with everyone deciding, without prejudice at the end of Committee Stage, what action they will take. So, the same outcomes are possible without any cost. Why on earth would anyone take the option of closing on the worst aspects of the outcome, where people would be out of work, our block grant would be cut and where we would end up shutting down the social fund that exists for the most needy?

Mr McCausland: The First Minister could not have put it any more clearly or more starkly than that. There are only two options, and I think common sense states very clearly which is the right option; to proceed today, to put this legislation through to Committee Stage and let the members of that Committee scrutinise it. I welcome the fact that the Committee is committed to working extra days in the week and to working over the Halloween recess to ensure that the deadline is met. That shows that they know there is a deadline. That is why they are putting in the extra days. That is why they will work over the recess.

12.15 pm

Let us focus on the areas that we can change. Let us ensure that we protect the most vulnerable. Let us not waste time arguing about those matters that we cannot change. Let us work as a collective to mitigate the worst aspects of the planned changes and, at the same time, deliver the best possible welfare services for the people of Northern Ireland. I hope that Members have taken careful note of the arguments put forward, the implications of going down a particular road, and the wisdom of making the right choice on the basis that was so clearly set out by the First Minister.

Mr Brady: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "That" and insert

"the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be not agreed pending further consideration and adjustment to better reflect the specific circumstances, obligations and needs of our people; because, while recognising the need for a simplification of the benefit system and development of work incentives, the Bill's proposals have their origins in austerity policies being pursued at Westminster which are targeted at the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society and which clearly do not adequately address the specific circumstances and needs of our people and will create significant hardship and difficulties for many individuals and families living in socially disadvantaged unionist and nationalist communities; in addition, the payment proposals of universal credit

(a) do not reflect the specifics of our labour market and the prevalence of the weekly wage;

(b) fail to take account of an established pattern of direct payments to landlords; and

(c) in proposing a single household payment, fail to meet specific statutory equality obligations which require social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children;

and furthermore the Bill fails to take account of

(i) the impact of increased punitive measures on jobseekers in a society emerging from conflict and recovering from a legacy of discrimination in employment;

(ii) the fact that there is currently no statutory duty to provide affordable childcare, yet the Bill increases conditionality for lone parents;

(iii) the existing housing stock and the legacy of segregated housing, in relation to the introduction of an underoccupancy penalty;

(iv) the high rate of error in the work capability assessment which is creating hardship and uncertainty amongst many

sick and disabled people who are being wrongly declared fit for work; and

(v) the anomaly of a benefit cap that was primarily devised to address extortionate housing costs in London but has discriminatory consequences for families here with more than the average number of children."

I state at the outset that tabling the reasoned amendment is not about defeating the Bill. The reasoned amendment is about creating an opportunity for further consideration and adjustment; it is not about curtailing the legislative process, but using that process to promote better outcomes.

Every political party in the Assembly has expressed serious concerns about this legislation, and that includes the Social Development Minister and his party. Indeed, members of his own party voted against the Bill in Westminster.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No; I am trying to concentrate. This is not an attack on the DUP or any of our Assembly colleagues. I add that we are not against the simplification of the benefits system. We are not against work incentives. Indeed, we are not against reallocation of social housing to better reflect housing need. But what we are dealing with are Tory policies being pursued at Westminster that are targeting the most vulnerable in our society and do not address the specific circumstances prevailing here in the North.

For Tories, the poor are poor because they are not poor enough. So-called welfare reforms are predicated on the notion that poverty is not the result of too few resources, but too many. According to Iain Duncan Smith, poverty is a delinquent "lifestyle choice", made possible by easy access to "too-generous welfare". This definition of poverty is cultural rather than economic, and has negative implications, including the criminalisation of the unemployed. It is a shift away from job creation as a strategy to tackle worklessness, and, as part of a so-called welfare-to-work programme it enforces unpaid labour, underpinned by the threat of destitution. These changes are not about tackling poverty but about tackling the poor.

There is no doubt that the adverse impact of changes in welfare provision will be felt most harshly here. The vast majority of the richest 2% live in London. The very rich do not live here but a high percentage of the very poor do. The impact on poverty will hit the North hardest. In some of our most deprived areas, where many small businesses rely on the benefits spending power of their customers, cuts in welfare will adversely affect local economies. People spend their benefits where they live, and marginalised communities are likely to experience even greater marginalisation in the wake of these cuts.

Universal credit is the cornerstone of the British Government's plans, the idea being that it will be simpler and more transparent. A whole range of separate benefits become options within universal credit, and diverse ways of administering them collapse into one process. Putting all your eggs in one basket may appear simpler, but the issue is how the process and its outcomes work. People's lives and needs are complex, and the benefits system either reflects that or it risks imposing unfair, one-size-fits-all outcomes.

Universal credit is designed to be a continuous benefit that can be opted in and out of, and it is intended to be administered in real time. However, we still do not know

if the IT system for it will be in place and fit for purpose. The Minister said that it would be one of the largest IT processes in the world. That was also the case in 1993, when we had the biggest computerisation since the NASA space programme. It went £55 million over budget and did not work properly. I think that we need to keep that in mind.

The proposed introduction here of universal credit reflects the nature of the low-paid, insecure labour market that the current British Government are fostering: a market in which people will be forced to accept unsuitable employment, move in and out of work, and work more or less on a week-by-week, day-by-day basis to suit the needs of their employer.

Welfare reform is predicated on the notion that it will provide a pathway to work, but, with too few jobs available, it will not necessarily be waged work. There is no doubt that meaningful work and a living wage remain the best route out of poverty, but welfare reform is not about that. It is about reducing benefits and imposing conditions and sanctions to make people accept any work, regardless of their circumstances or the suitability of the employment being offered.

Universal credit is designed to underpin unskilled, low-paid, part-time, temporary, insecure employment. It is also designed to compel people to take those kinds of jobs, even if it is detrimental to their needs or circumstances. Where no jobs are available, people will be compelled to work for their benefit. That is already happening, particularly to the young unemployed, the most easily branded as work-shy or scroungers and the most vulnerable to official bullying. We should not imagine that most of them are being trained or are gaining meaningful work experience, because all of that costs money and commitment. Many are working under the threat of their benefit being withdrawn.

The changes so that someone under the age of 35 will not be entitled to single occupancy housing benefit and the reductions in that benefit mean that up to 6,000 people could see their benefit reduced by half. For many, that reduction is tantamount to being a notice to quit. The numbers of homeless will undoubtedly increase. It is interesting to point out that 37% of the people who qualify for the single-room rent are working and on low pay. In the last mandate it was accepted that direct payment to landlords was the best solution, and approximately 86% of tenants here are in that category, so it is essential that that is maintained.

The current proposal is that universal credit will be paid to one nominated person in a family. Universal credit will not safeguard personal access to welfare support for women in couples. Here in the North, women comprise 53% of benefit recipients and, given that many more women than men work part time and are on lower wages, they rely more on benefits and tax credits and those make a larger share of their income. It simply means that many of the changes and cuts will disproportionately impact on women. It cannot be assumed that there is equality in the division of household income and financial decision-making in all families.

There is evidence that women readily spend their income on their children and on household essentials. That enhances economic family stability and alleviates child poverty. With benefits being rolled into one, there is concern that women will lose access to any financial

resources. There is also a growing concern that universal credit will create a financial disincentive to the second earner in a family, which, in most cases, is a woman. There is also a great concern that universal credit is to be paid monthly in order to resemble a salary. However, many people here in low-paid jobs are paid weekly or fortnightly. Monthly payments of universal credit will compel low-income families and lone parents to access debt. Monthly payments have the real potential to impact adversely on the emotional and physical health of women and their dependants. In a recent interview, David Freud said that some people could be paid more often for up to two years, so we shall see if that will be considered.

As well as a redefinition of poverty, the sick and disabled are being judged in terms of a discredited test, not primarily on the basis of a medical evaluation of their overall health and physical condition. Those assessments are being carried out by a tick-box exercise, assessing what they can do rather than what they cannot. A person's condition may have stayed the same, worsened or be life threatening, but they could still be awarded no points under the test. Many people facing reassessment are having their benefit reduced or, in some cases, withdrawn. There is no public confidence that the proposed changeover from DLA to the personal independence payment will be handled any better or more sympathetically. It is likely that the same type of test will be applied.

There is no doubt that the underoccupancy penalties will cause great trauma and hardship to many people. We do not have the available housing stock for people to downsize and, because of the nature of the society in which we live, people are willing to move to areas where "suitable housing" may be available. We need to look at the whole issue of underoccupancy in a sensible and constructive way.

I can understand why some working families might question our objection to the benefit cap, but it needs to be realised that it was designed to block extortionate rents in London. A small percentage of those impacted here — about 1% — will be children who are in place with larger families. It would not cost a lot to meet that need. In fact, in his speech yesterday, George Osborne announced a further cut to benefit and the loss of housing benefit to under-25-year-olds, many of whom will have children, it has to be pointed out. These cuts will affect all our constituents.

The Minister mentioned the social fund and talked about shoes and clothing. In my experience — I do not know what it is like in other areas — clothing, shoes and similar items that come under community care grants and the social fund, have been a very low priority, and very few grants have been given. That might be worth checking.

I say again that these cuts will affect all our constituents. Party colleagues and I have met representatives of the four main Churches, disability groups, advice groups, the unions and many others, all of whom expressed grave misgivings about the impending benefit cuts.

I have attended meetings across the North about welfare reform and its potential impact. Last Tuesday, I attended a meeting in a church on the Newtownards Road in east Belfast, and the message from people there was the same, which is that change, mitigation and flexibilities are required.

I urge the Assembly to look seriously at our reasoned amendment. It is a real and serious attempt to focus on legislation that affects all our people. I ask other parties to look at the legislation with us, and let us see what we can do to go forward constructively.

Sinn Féin has been consistent since the initial stages of welfare reform were introduced in 2007, and that is well documented in Hansard.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that question 1 has been withdrawn.

Mr Weir: No, it has not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: My apologies. I call Mr Peter Weir.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The unwithdrawn question 1.

Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre

1. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what additional actions his Department intends to take to alleviate the traffic congestion faced by commuters and business users in the centre of Belfast. (AQO 2613/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I thank the Member for his question. Now for the detailed answer.

The roadworks in Belfast city centre are part of the Belfast on the Move initiative, which aims to provide increased priority for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. The new bus lanes accommodate public transport, emergency vehicles, cycles, motorcycles and permitted taxis, and they are operational from 7.00 am until 7.00 pm. Let me make it clear that there is no war on motorists. It is regrettable that some people have suffered disruption to their journeys during the bedding-in period.

One of the objectives of the project is to persuade people who drive through the city centre without a destination there to travel around the city centre. That will free up street space for more sustainable modes of transport and for people who need to drive into the city centre for shopping, work or leisure. It is designed to make car and bus journeys faster and easier. When new road layouts are introduced, it takes time for everyone to get used to the new arrangements. It is the same for Belfast on the Move, and it will take time before the full benefits are realised.

My Department continually monitors traffic flows, both on the ground and by CCTV, to ensure that buses and other traffic flow as efficiently as possible, minimising delays for all road users. Yesterday, I met representatives of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management who expressed their concern that media coverage was sending out the wrong message. Let me take the opportunity to send out the right message: Belfast is open, Belfast is accessible, and Belfast is a good place to do business. On that point, the Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Belfast City Centre Management and I are agreed.

My Department has introduced park-and-ride facilities at the outer edges of the Belfast metropolitan area —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your two minutes are up.

Mr Kennedy: — and we will continue to expand on those. I reassured the Chamber of Trade and Commerce that we have no plans for city centre roadworks in the pre-Christmas period.

Mr Weir: What assurances can the Minister give that special arrangements will be put in place in the run-up to Christmas to deal with what has been a very problematic situation to ensure that there is a good flow of commuter traffic and that traders are not disadvantaged in the vital seasonal period?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to take the opportunity to say that I had a very productive meeting yesterday with Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management representatives. We are very aware of the need to continually promote Belfast as a destination. We have indicated that we will work together in the run-up to Christmas to provide additional measures to encourage people to travel into Belfast.

Let me stress again that this is not a war on motorists. The rationale for enhancing public transport is a good one that has significantly benefited other cities in the United Kingdom and in other parts of Ireland. The proposals were consulted on, and I believe that, in the longer term, they will show benefit to the travelling public in Belfast.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that Committee members visited Nantes and Dublin in the past year to view the rapid transit systems in those places. The system in Dublin, which transports half a million people morning and evening, is certainly very impressive. Will the Minister assure the House that the minimum six-week bedding-in period will be adhered to, so that the system in Belfast can have a chance? You are aware of, and you alluded to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr Ó hOisín: — the adverse press that there has been. I ask for an assurance that there will be a bedding-in period of at least six weeks.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, for his support and that of the Chairperson and other Committee members who joined me on that visit to Nantes to look at its rapid transit system. It is worth saying that Belfast On The Move is the precursor, if you like, of that. Therefore, it is important that Belfast On The Move be allowed to bed in, settle down and work.

The plan and my expectation and hope is that we can progress to a rapid transit system for the city of Belfast that will help to move people, whatever their business is — work, shopping or leisure visits. My commitment is to enhance the public transport experience in Belfast in line with that of other European cities, such as Nantes. I am grateful for the ongoing support of the Chair and members of the Regional Development Committee.

Mr A Maginness: I accept the Minister's rationale. It is perfectly reasonable and legitimate. However, the experience of the ordinary commuter has been one of shambles, not of "Belfast on the Move". Either I am losing my marbles or the Minister has lost his marbles previously. Minister, this needs to be rethought and rethought quickly.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the supplementary question. I must say to the Member, however, that significant consultation has taken place on the proposals. A full public consultation was launched jointly by the then Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, and the then Lord Mayor and a colleague of the Member, Councillor Pat Convery, in Belfast City Hall on 30 September 2010. That consultation, which included Belfast City Council, Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management, showed broad support for the proposals. Indeed, comments were received on 29 September 2010 from Belfast City Council, of which he is a former member. They were as follows:

"The Council generally supports the 'Belfast on the Move' proposals to promote sustainable transport options for the city centre. The proposal to reduce the amount of unnecessary through traffic in the city centre is welcomed, however, the measures must ensure the city centre remains accessible for leisure, shopping and business use. The increased priority for pedestrians and public transport in the city centre is supported along with the need to provide sufficient dedicated parking spaces for disabled people."

I say, "Amen" to that. I support that. That is the rationale that we seek to implement.

As I said, I regret any inconvenience to travellers, particularly that which happened on a couple of occasions recently. However, there will be an inevitable bedding-in period. We will continue to monitor and work at it. It works in other places, so there is no reason that it should not work in Belfast.

Mr Allister: From time to time, we hear wild talk about the cost to our economy of parades that briefly block our streets. Can the Minister tell us whether he has any idea of the cost to our economy of the mayhem that he has brought to our city centre streets?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for a very helpful contribution. [Laughter.] He will know that I was recently parading on the city centre streets of Belfast. I am sure that that gives him much comfort.

Yesterday, I met the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce. There had been comment and suggestions in the press and in the media generally about losses to business and so forth. I am not in the business of putting Belfast out of business. I have made that abundantly clear. What we will continue to do and what I have asked the Belfast Chamber and Belfast City Centre Management to do is to monitor the situation and to report directly to me on it. Likewise, we will continue to monitor progress and traffic movements in the city centre and continue to improve the system so that we can refine it to a way that makes it work completely at all times of the day. There were other mitigating circumstances in Belfast, particularly last Tuesday. The adverse weather played a part in some of the travel disruption as, indeed, did minor accidents, which always have the capacity to disrupt the flow of traffic. There was also the failure of the synchronisation of the traffic lights. My Department cannot be blamed for that, but, nevertheless, it had an impact. We continue to work at all of the issues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions and, indeed, answers should be relevant to the original question.

A55 Outer Ring, Belfast

2. Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department considered developing a strategy for extending the A55 outer ring in Belfast which would allow for better traffic flows to the north and west of the city. (AQO 2614/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Improvements to the strategic road network, which includes the A55 outer ring road were considered in the development of the Belfast metropolitan transport plan, which was published in 2004. Extension of the A55 in west Belfast beyond the Monagh bypass was not identified as a priority, and, indeed, a scheme linking the top of the Monagh bypass to the Crumlin Road had been formally abandoned in the previous Belfast urban area plan of 2001.

The Member will be aware that I made an announcement on 19 September 2012 that the A55 Knock Road widening scheme between the Glen Road and Kings Road is to proceed, subject to funding. I am mindful of the affordability of the scheme in the current economic climate. Capital funding in this Budget period is already committed to constructing major road improvement projects such as the A5, the A8 and the A2. Timing of the delivery of the A55 Knock Road widening scheme will be determined by subsequent Budget settlements agreed by the Executive. The proposed scheme will help to improve road safety and provide a more appropriate standard of road in this key strategic route.

Dr McDonnell: I am sure that the Minister can make the connection between this and the previous question about how relief around the A55 would help to ease up the city centre. Can he give the House any idea of the extent of the investment needed to provide the greater Belfast area with a transport infrastructure that is fit for purpose, particularly in the light of the city centre changes?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, implicit in that, his support for changes to the overall road infrastructure, not only in Belfast city centre but throughout the wider network. If we had, for instance, £100 million, we could look at a York Street flyover, which would significantly transform some of the travelling habits of our population. If we had £100 million, we could perhaps introduce a rapid transit system without delay. That is the scale of the commitment that the Executive would need to carry forward if they are serious about wholesale and widespread improvement to the strategic road network that would make a positive contribution and improve the flow of traffic both in the city centre and its outer limits.

Mr Spratt: I suggest to the Minister that more people are using the outer ring as a result of what has been happening in the city centre. Will he encourage officials in his Department to publicise the fact that the outer ring could be used more and more by the 60% of commuters who do not stop in Belfast city centre?

Mr Kennedy: The Member makes a very important point, which I gladly welcome and endorse. To ease the flow of traffic in the city centre, there is the opportunity to use alternative routes, be it the A55 or, indeed, the M3

and other opportunities. That is an important message for the travelling public to hear. We need to reduce the volume of traffic that travels through the centre of Belfast simply as a through route. It is of no value to the local economy, particularly to the shops and so on, and it has the capacity to contribute to congestion. Going forward, organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce and city centre management should put greater emphasis on that information, which is very necessary. I welcome the comments of the Chair of the Regional Development Committee and would welcome any ongoing assistance from him and members of the Committee on that issue.

2.15 pm

Bus Station Offices and Depots

3. Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have taken place between his Department and Translink on the future of bus station offices and depots. (AQO 2615/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: With any new proposals for bus station offices or depots, future investment by Translink is always considered by the Department as part of the three-year corporate planning process, which includes the agreement of future capital investment plans. It is important to state that Translink is expected to produce plans in line with the broad strategy set by my Department in the regional development and transportation strategies. All investment opportunities will, of course, be subject to economic appraisal and affordability testing. Over the next two years, a limited bus capital budget is to be provided to Translink, and, as in previous years, we will seek to continue to address pressures on capital budgets through the in-year bidding processes. Those pressures include bus replacement.

Whilst Translink can use its internal resources for bus projects, that is likely to be very difficult because of the revenue deficits that it is projecting over the next two years, and, because of the commercial remit of Translink, it has to consider all these decisions in overall terms. Translink will also contribute to the wider review of depots used or owned across all Northern Ireland Departments that the Strategic Investment Board plans to undertake in liaison with the permanent secretary subgroup on asset management.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware of a meeting that was held with members of Cookstown District Council — I declare an interest as a member — about the decision to close the Cookstown depot office. In light of that, will the Minister give an assurance that, in the case of future decisions on depots or offices, a full consultation will take place with the local authority in the district, borough or whatever they are called before a decision is taken to ensure that people are made aware and it is not just landed on them at the last minute?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, we had a meeting in Cookstown about this. Translink reports that it recently reorganised the facilities at Cookstown following the retirement of one of its officials. It is satisfied that the range of facilities on offer is appropriate to the business needs of the bus station and the local community that it serves. There are no plans to cancel any bus services

to or from Cookstown. The current facilities position on the Cookstown bus depot is that the office is open each Wednesday from 10.00 am until 2.00 pm to deal with anyone who wants to speak face to face with a Translink official. Primarily, that will be for SmartPass applications from senior citizens and those between 60 and 64. The station facilities include the waiting area and toilets, and, as before, they are open to the public from 7.00 am until 6.00 pm. Translink has expanded its service to its customers through SmartPass, and there are 13 PayPoint agents in the Cookstown area, including local shops and filling stations, where Translink customers can get smart card top-ups for purchasing discounted bus journeys. Timetable enquiries from the Cookstown area are now largely managed through the Translink centralised contact centre, which already deals with 95% of such requests Northern Ireland-wide.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In recent times, the Committee for Regional Development has received representation from concerned traders and councils officials in Banbridge. Are there any proposals to provide a bus station for Banbridge?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question, although my recollection is that he is a very long distance from Banbridge. However, his intervention is welcome. The provision of bus facilities in Banbridge has been the subject of much discussion over several years. Following several high-level meetings involving Translink, local councillors, local representatives and me, Translink submitted an economic appraisal for the provision of bus facilities in Banbridge, and this is being considered by the Department.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Keeping to the parochial theme, I would like to know whether he has any indication of when Kilkeel might have a bus station that meets the needs of the travelling public.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The Member is correct in asking when Kilkeel might expect a new bus station. It has an existing facility, which, I know, is not considered to be satisfactory. Indeed, I recently met representatives of Newry and Mourne District Council. I know that the Member has tabled questions for written answer on this. Identifying a site that would be adequate and meet all the requirements has been a challenge, as have the budgetary considerations. We will continue to have conversations as necessary, but my sense is that there has been no early identification of a site that meets all the requirements, and finance remains an issue when it comes to how, when and how quickly it could be funded.

Cycling

4. Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to encourage more people to cycle to places of education and employment. (AQO 2616/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has a range of plans that build on the progress already made. My Travelwise team continues to focus on ways to promote a sustainable travel programme of activities and promotions. This includes school visits, providing promotional material and supporting events such as bike week. The promotion of cycling is part of a series of measures contained

in workplace travel plans developed with employers. Travelwise has been actively involved in administering the tax incentive scheme that enables employees to lease a bike. There has been a very encouraging uptake in Departments this year and growing interest from other employers. Indeed, I trust that the Assembly Commission will make the scheme available to its staff in the near future.

We also collaborate with other Departments and organisations, such as Sustrans and the Cyclists' Touring Club, to promote cycling. The recent cycling skills and cycling safety booklet produced in collaboration with DOE is a good example of that. Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for all users, including cyclists and pedestrians, by utilising a range of measures, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. Infrastructure investment promotes employment, and there are other benefits of incorporating cycling into a fully integrated transport system. An active travel strategy has recently been developed with the assistance of stakeholders. Its key objectives include increasing the number of trips undertaken by cycling by 2020 and facilitating walking and cycling to schools. I will shortly bring the strategy before the Executive and develop a detailed action plan. Although resources need to be secured, the critical issue is that we need to co-operate across Departments more effectively to give the issue the profile that it deserves.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Will he detail the infrastructure that has been put in place in schools to promote cycling? I am, as he is, very committed to this, as it is important to get kids involved early in an active lifestyle.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. Of course, we all remember with fondness the great drama of Harry's arrival in this world and the role that you played in the birth of your second child. It is a bit early for a bicycle, mind you. *[Laughter.]* My Department will continue to liaise with schools wishing to explore the benefits of school travel plans, and we will continue to promote sustainable travel in schools throughout the annual Walk to School week and associated events held in that month. I was surprised at the Education Minister's reply to my Executive paper, when he pointed out that, although his Department previously funded minor works at schools, it could no longer do so because of financial pressure and priorities.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that cycling is a good form of exercise and recreation? Would he encourage cyclists to wear helmets at all times for road safety purposes?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I very much agree that cycling can lead to and improve a very healthy lifestyle. In my role as Minister, I have been playing my part. The Department has lent me a bicycle to cycle the roads and pathways of south Armagh and other places. I always wear a helmet, and I recommend that for everybody.

Mr McDevitt: It is disappointing to hear the news that the Department of Education is not supporting the provision of extra cycle facilities in schools. Can the Minister tell us a bit more about the cycle to work scheme in the Civil Service? Does he expect to reopen it next year? Does he expect the Assembly to definitely follow suit and offer staff here the opportunity to access bikes at a reasonable price?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, we recently met to discuss that very issue, and it was a very helpful exchange. I very much endorse and want to promote the scheme that exists in the Civil Service and to offer staff the opportunity to purchase bicycles. I have the strong view that the staff under the authority of the Assembly Commission should also be given that opportunity. That would also improve the public profile of cycling. Since the recent Olympics and Paralympics, we have seen evidence of how the profile of cycling has significantly improved, and that is all to the good. I would very much welcome an early decision from the Commission on the matter.

Edward Street, Downpatrick

5. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline when Roads Service intends to reimplement the previously trialled one-way system at Edward Street, Downpatrick. (AQO 2617/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service has no immediate plans to introduce a one-way system on Edward Street, Downpatrick. The Member will be aware that the amalgamation of two primary schools during 2011 in the Edward Street area has significantly increased congestion on an already busy residential street, particularly at school opening and closing times. The temporary one-way system on Edward Street referred to by the Member was put in operation for approximately four weeks in late 2011 to accommodate resurfacing works. It was not a trial aimed at resolving traffic concerns in that area of the town. Following the removal of the temporary one-way system, requests were made by elected representatives to introduce that measure on a permanent basis. It was acknowledged that the temporary one-way system demonstrated to local residents the advantages and disadvantages of such a system, if it were to be introduced permanently.

Earlier this year, officials in Roads Service consulted residents of Edward Street and surrounding areas, seeking opinions on a one-way proposal. A number of objections to the proposals were received. The majority of concerns during the operation of the temporary one-way system related to the additional vehicular traffic that was dispersed into surrounding residential streets. Some surrounding roads had difficulty dealing with larger service vehicles and buses.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Given the urgency of this situation — indeed, a young child was knocked down on Friday morning — did the emergency services, including the PSNI, Ambulance Service and the fire agencies, consult Roads Service on the issue?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Roads Service officials would, as a matter of course, consult the various agencies, and, of course, we will continue to monitor traffic issues at that location in Downpatrick. A number of options and mitigating measures are being considered. Those include the widening of adjacent streets, principally St Dillons Avenue, and the implementation of an area-wide traffic-calming scheme in an attempt to deter traffic from the area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before we move on to questions for the Minister for Social Development, I remind Members

that private conversations should take place outside the Chamber.

2.30 pm

Social Development

Social Enterprise

1. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made with delivering on his Department's commitment to invest in social enterprise growth to increase sustainability in the broad community sector. (AQO 2627/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

We have made significant progress on delivery against that Programme for Government commitment. Work has commenced on developing a policy framework for community asset transfer. We have appointed a delivery partner, Development Trusts NI, to build capacity in the voluntary and community sector to ensure that the sector is in a position to take advantage of future opportunities. We have initiated a pilot social enterprise growth project in a disadvantaged area of Lisburn, through the Resurgam Trust, and a further pilot will be taken forward in 2013 and onwards. A joint mapping exercise with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is under way. That will be finalised by the end of December 2012 and will identify opportunities for future growth in the social economy sector.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. Will the Minister assure the House that his Department will maintain extensive engagement with the sector so that the relevant stakeholders will be allowed to shape the policy?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member that that will indeed be the case. We want to learn from good practice that is already out there and happening. That is why we are working with, for example, Development Trusts NI, which has considerable expertise in this area. In this, as, indeed, in all other areas, we are very keen to engage with stakeholders.

Mrs Hale: Will the Minister tell the House what role Development Trusts NI has in the delivery of the Programme for Government commitment?

Mr McCausland: Development Trusts NI has a key role to play as a delivery partner with government in developing and implementing the community asset transfer policy framework. My Department has invested £247,000 in the organisation over the next two-and-a-half years to enable it to develop capacity in the voluntary and community sector and to ensure that organisations are ready to take advantage of opportunities that will arise. The partner organisation in GB, Locality, has extensive experience in that work, and I am confident that the organisation can make a real impact in transforming communities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Copeland: Social enterprises are bucking the economic trend, with many growing faster than the economy in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister believe

that the Executive's economic strategy includes enough direct measures to further boost the social sector?

Mr McCausland: I am sure that the Member is aware that the primary responsibility in that area resides with DETI. That having been said, we have a particular role to play in the more disadvantaged areas through neighbourhood renewal, and we support a number of enterprises through that. I am very conscious of that, because I have been talking to and hearing from a number of them in recent days. We will certainly continue to do all that we can to support the development of social enterprises and to sustain them in those most disadvantaged areas.

Ms Lo: Tendering for public contracts can be a very daunting experience for social enterprises. What has the Minister done to help the sector to gain contracts from the public sector?

Mr McCausland: I am sure that the Member will be aware that there are requirements and legal statutory obligations in tendering processes. Those arise sometimes from the Treasury and sometimes from Europe and beyond. The encouraging thing is that there are examples of local social economy projects tendering successfully, which shows that it can be done. We need to make sure that others have access to the expertise and experience so that they can replicate what has already been achieved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should have informed the House at the beginning that question 6 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Town Centres: Investment

2. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister for Social Development if his Department has explored any options for assisting local businesses with start-up costs associated with the establishment of business improvement districts. (AQO 2628/11-15)

9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to halt the continued closure of shops on the high street. (AQO 2635/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I will take questions 2 and 9 together, because they both relate to town centres. I am very concerned about the upward trend in shop vacancies in Northern Ireland, which is being experienced not only here but across the rest of the UK. My Department employs a range of actions to encourage investment in our town and city centres. In the past five years, we have invested in the region of £100 million on urban development grants, comprehensive development schemes and public realm schemes.

In addition to those programmes, I initiated the Department for Social Development (DSD) High Streets Task Force, which was tasked with reviewing the support provided by DSD and gathering the views of high street traders on what could be done to help them. I introduced legislation to allow for business improvement districts (BIDs) in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to say that the BIDs Bill is progressing well and is with the Social Development Committee for consideration.

The issue of assisting local businesses with start-up costs for BIDs was raised during the consultation and, more recently, at the Bill's Second Stage. I have undertaken to look closely at what is happening in other areas before

finalising the arrangements here. The amount of funding available in other jurisdictions is not large. In England and Wales, a fund of half a million pounds has been made available to provide loans for setting up BIDs. In Scotland, grant funding is available for amounts of up to £20,000, but BID proposers are required to complete a number of preparatory tasks before being eligible to apply for funding. Furthermore, the application form highlights that the pot of money for grants is limited, so every BID may not secure a grant.

That is not just a matter of the Government putting money in but about businesses seeing the benefit of it for their own area, taking the initiative and driving it forward. It is about businesses helping themselves and having control over how their money is spent.

Mr McDevitt: I listened very carefully to the Minister's reply. Does the Minister acknowledge that there will often be a need to stimulate a business improvement district? Therefore, can he confirm that he is minded to explore positively, during this short period, how, when necessary, the state in this jurisdiction will be able to support business improvement districts, which need a little bit of help to get off the ground?

Mr McCausland: If the Member reflects on what I have already said, I made it absolutely clear that we are looking at what is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom. I set out the situation in Scotland and England, and we will reflect on that. We are talking to folk in different towns across the Province who are interested in developing BIDs. I have met people in Ballymena and talked to traders in Belfast as well. Those are just two examples. Public realm work is an issue that often arises in the course of conversation. Therefore, we are talking to people, we are listening to them, and we are reflecting on what happens elsewhere. It would be wrong to prejudge, and I am sure that the Member would not expect me to do that.

Mr McClarty: When does the Minister plan to implement any of the opportunities identified in the Coleraine town centre master plan, which he launched in May, in order to reverse the decline in local businesses on Coleraine's high street and, indeed, on any other high street in Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: Across Northern Ireland, the Department is making interventions, which are generally appreciated by traders. I have been in Coleraine, and the Member has been at events at which we have looked at the way forward for Coleraine town centre. For example, there are urban development grants, comprehensive development grants, public realm schemes and master plans. The task force is looking at the high street and what makes for a healthy high street today. We are in a different situation altogether, and what will work today is not the same as worked 10 or 20 years ago.

I am encouraged by the work that has been undertaken. I am also encouraged by the task force's engagement with traders and by the things that they are suggesting and we are responding to. As regards Coleraine, we are keen to move ahead as quickly as possible, depending on the market and other factors that the Member is only too well aware of.

Mr Hilditch: Does the Minister have any plans to extend the Living over the Shop (LOTS) programme?

Mr McCausland: The Department's new urban regeneration and community development policy framework, which is currently out for public consideration and consultation, establishes town and city centre regeneration as a key policy priority. I believe that one way to safeguard the future of our town centres is to make better use of the empty space above retail and office units for housing.

Support for the LOTS scheme was voiced at a series of task force meetings. In the past, the Housing Executive delivered a limited number of successful Living over the Shop schemes. I believe that more can be achieved, and I intend to revitalise the Living over the Shop initiative as part of the broader package of town and city centre regeneration.

Housing: Dungannon

3. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the declaration of unfitness of 14 homes by the Housing Executive in Dungannon district. (AQO 2629/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The 14 homes in the Dungannon district that were declared unfit by the Housing Executive are all houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). The Housing Executive is responsible for the registration of HMOs, which are private rented properties, and for ensuring that they meet certain standards. It is disappointing that so many properties have been found to be unfit. However, the fact that notices have been served indicates that the Housing Executive continues to fulfil its responsibilities in this area.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. What is the timescale for making those properties right for people? Have any checks been carried out on other houses in the Dungannon area?

Mr McCausland: As I pointed out, the total number of properties was 14. Two properties were found to be unfit for human habitation; specifically, they were deemed not to meet the minimum fitness standards for a dwelling. Both failed the standard due to inadequate provision of light and ventilation to a habitable room in each property. Eleven properties failed the HMO standard due to the number of occupants living in the dwellings. The properties are classed as HMOs and are, therefore, required to meet minimum fire and amenity standards. Each property failed to meet those minimum standards. Another property failed to meet the HMO standard due to neglect in the management of the property, and it requires substantial repairs and maintenance. So, 13 of the 14 properties were deemed to be unfit due to shortcomings in their configuration and in the number of occupants living in them. Those are things that can be addressed by the people who own the properties, so I encourage them to take that forward.

Mr Campbell: I know that the Minister takes a keen interest in vacant dwellings owned by the Housing Executive and housing associations. In the past year, he has been to Ballysally in Coleraine, where he would have seen vacant dwellings under the auspices of SHAC. Will he reassure the people living close to those properties and those on the waiting list that everything that can be done will be done to ensure that they are brought back to a habitable state?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question. I know that he is very conscious of the issue in Ballysally, because he has raised it with me on various occasions, as have a number of his colleagues. The fact is that a number — but not the entire number — of those vacant properties are about to be brought back into use by the housing association. My one reservation in all this is that if you do only part, there is still a certain element of blight there, which can make it a little bit more difficult to fill the properties even though they are brought up to a very good specification. I think that we need to keep watch on that over the next while.

I am very keen to get empty homes back into use. We have housing and accommodation needs across Northern Ireland. One contribution to addressing that need is the Living over the Shop initiative, and the other is to get empty homes back into use.

Mr Rogers: Following on from that, empty homes are not always unfit homes. What action is the Minister's Department taking to bring all homes that are declared unfit up to a satisfactory standard?

Mr McCausland: The fitness standard for houses varies from area to area, and as the Member says, no two situations are exactly the same. Unfitness levels in social housing, for example, are, by and large, very low. There are still some pockets that we must not ignore; I acknowledge that. I have asked the board of the Housing Executive to bring forward a number of possible stock transfers to start to tackle those small pockets of unfit social homes.

2.45 pm

The recent successful pilot at Rinmore in Londonderry, if replicated in other areas, could offer a way forward for many residents who have been waiting many years for important improvement work. I have been pressing the Housing Executive very strongly to make sure that it steps up to the challenge and addresses that issue. It worked in one case and there is no reason why it cannot work in others. The Housing Executive has identified a number of areas. We gave it a target for social homes to be passed over to housing associations to be brought up to standard. I want to see that target met.

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the selection criteria and process used for all themed bids for the regional infrastructure support programme. (AQO 2630/11-15)

Mr McCausland: For each of the themes, the Department adopted a two-stage process in putting the new arrangements in place. The first stage involved expressions of interest and applications from interested parties, with those deemed best placed to deliver the new arrangements progressing to stage two, which was the normal economic appraisal and decision-making process. As is the norm with all the Department's funding arrangements, no commitment to provide funding is made until the decision-making process is complete and a formal contract for funding issued. The selection criteria for each theme are available on request.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Did his Department complete an economic appraisal for the Women's Consortium bid, which had been given preferred bidder status? Will he outline the main conclusions of that appraisal?

Mr McCausland: The Member raised the issue of women in disadvantaged areas. The concern was whether the necessary level of co-operation was in place among the larger regional women's sector organisations, and whether the new arrangements would work if there were not that level of co-operation. That led to the conclusion that it was best not to proceed. That decision was not taken lightly. Given the substantial sum of money involved, I need to be absolutely sure that the arrangements will work. There was a concern there.

There were two areas of the five in which it was decided not to proceed. One was the women's sector in disadvantaged areas and the other was volunteering. There was also a decision to delay and reflect further on that one, but that was the reason with regard to the women's sector. There were issues internally in the sector.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How is the programme planned to proceed after March 2013?

Mr McCausland: We are looking carefully at both areas I mentioned: volunteering and the women's sector in disadvantaged and rural areas. We will reflect on those, and it will take some time for us to consider all reasonable options. However, we will be looking at the options for the period after March 2013. There is a need for support. It is important that it is done in a way that is viable, sustainable and effective. That is why we are taking the time to reflect.

Fuel Poverty

5. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made on his Department's commitment to introduce and support a range of initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty, including preventative measures. (AQO 2631/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Tackling fuel poverty remains a key priority for my Department. Alongside continuing to deliver mainstream schemes such as the warm homes scheme, the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme, a benefits uptake campaign, and winter fuel and cold weather payments, my Department is working on a number of exciting new pilot schemes.

I recently launched a boiler replacement scheme, which offers a grant of up to £1,000 towards the cost of replacing old, inefficient boilers if a family has an income of less than £40,000. The Housing Executive received over 14,000 expressions of interest in the scheme and is sending out application forms. A total of £12 million has been allocated to the scheme over the next three years, with £4 million available for grants before the end of March 2013.

My Department is working with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the University of Ulster, the Housing Executive and a number of local councils to deliver energy efficiency improvements to homes in small, concentrated areas. The University of Ulster has developed a sophisticated targeting methodology that can identify areas of poor housing and low incomes and could indicate a high prevalence of fuel poverty.

A pay-as-you-go pilot scheme for oil was launched in February this year, and the results have been extremely positive. I am keen for that technology to be rolled out, and my officials are having discussions with Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services. I asked officials to progress that important initiative as quickly as possible as I believe that the installation of pay-as-you-go systems for oil would significantly help households struggling to pay for a fill.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response, which was particularly important given some of the initiatives that he rightly outlined. Will he accept and implement the recommendations of the fuel poverty report, which was approved by the House?

Mr McCausland: We will certainly look at every piece of documentation and every proposal that emerges. We will consider anything that we think is viable and will help the situation. If it is practical and it works, we will certainly give it good consideration.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister's Department recently undertaken any research to determine the most up-to-date figures for people considered to be in fuel poverty?

Mr McCausland: Yes, indeed, and I referred to that in my initial answer when I spoke about the work being undertaken by the University of Ulster. Its sophisticated targeting methodology can identify areas of poor housing and low incomes, which might indicate a high prevalence of fuel poverty. We have been working closely with experts through the University of Ulster; indeed, that work is quite innovative, and I am very encouraged by that. There is, therefore, academic rigour. Anything that we do in future will be evidence based, which I think is the point that the Member was making.

Ms Brown: Is the Minister aware of any new technologies that will improve the energy efficiency of homes?

Mr McCausland: I am always open to new and innovative ways to improve the domestic energy efficiency of households in fuel poverty. Glen Dimplex, for example, which is based in Portadown, has developed a quantum system that is being trialled in Scotland. The quantum project is an electric heating system that uses surplus renewable energy from wind farms to heat dwellings. The Housing Executive received a copy of a University of Strathclyde report on the system's performance, and that report is being considered. That, in addition to my previous answer, highlights the fact that we are keen to make advances on this important issue.

Supported Living Schemes

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on supportive living schemes being developed within the East Antrim constituency. (AQO 2633/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive is working with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and housing associations to progress a number of supported accommodation projects in the East Antrim area. These include 19 units of supported accommodation for adults with a learning disability in the Larne area, the development of supported accommodation for eight people with a learning disability in the Newtownabbey area, and a business case has been developed for supported accommodation for frail older people in the Greenisland

area. In addition, a need for additional supported accommodation for older people with dementia in the Newtownabbey area has been identified, and work is under way to include that service in the programme.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. There is a growing need to support the elderly and the disabled in the community. When does he expect a housing association to be appointed to take forward these plans and develop further concrete plans and proposals to ensure that there is a facility in the Greenisland area?

Mr McCausland: I do not have to hand the full details of the timetable for the scheme in Greenisland. I will, therefore, come back to the Member with those details. I assure him that we want the matter to be taken forward as quickly as possible.

Mr Eastwood: What is the Minister's assessment of the success and future of supported living schemes in Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: There is clearly a need for schemes. It is hard to answer such a very broad question; different people may reach different conclusions. We are keen that more is done in a number of areas. For example, key targets were laid down in the Bamford report, and, sadly, we have not been meeting those targets.

At the end of 2011-12, 96 Bamford units had started, against the target of 200 starts. No Bamford units have started on site during 2012 to date. However, a number of scheme proposals are business-case approved. In the light of that level of progress, the securing of starts on 850 units of supported-housing accommodation during the years 2011-12 to 2014-15 is indeed a challenging target. Our concern about the Housing Executive meeting its targets in regard to the Bamford report reflects concerns that we have had about it reaching targets in a number of other areas. So, it is not unique to that particular issue.

Housing Associations

8. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Social Development how his Department holds a housing association accountable for the development and management of its housing developments. (AQO 2634/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The social housing development programme delivered by housing associations is managed on my behalf by the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive monitors all aspects of delivery, including assessment and approval of each individual housing project and payment of grant on completion of each key stage. The main tool for regulating the development and management of registered housing association schemes is the 'Housing Association Guide'. The guide covers aspects around development, finance, procurement, governance and housing management. The Department's inspection team carries out a rolling programme of inspections to determine each housing association's compliance with all aspects of the 'Housing Association Guide'.

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Minister for the response. I may need to come to him with regard to a particular case, a housing association in my constituency that, so far, has failed to address an antisocial behaviour problem. I am not at that point yet, but I hope that the Minister will be able to assist me if I need to come to him.

The Minister will be aware of how the Clanmil Housing Association conducted itself in taking forward the Redwoods development. Can the Minister tell us how he was able to assist in holding Clanmil to account for that particular scheme?

Mr McCausland: It is clear that mistakes were made by the Clanmil Housing Association in that case.

The background is that Clanmil opted to purchase already-completed private sector apartments for social housing in an area of high housing need. The expectation was that the apartments would remain private. That was the nub of the problem.

A key condition of funding from my Department is that a housing association must first undertake community consultation before entering into any agreement to purchase. When concerns were raised by the local community, I asked for the facts, and it was obvious to me that the consultation had been inadequate. Clearly, it had not fully addressed community concerns. The consultation was carried out over too short a period, and it was conducted over a public holiday period when many residents were away from home. I insisted that the consultation period be extended to allow for a more inclusive and meaningful engagement with local residents and elected representatives. As a result, we were able to reach an accommodation, and the apartments have now been secured for social housing for the over-55s. It is my view that the plans are now wholly appropriate in a context of housing need and mixed-tenure development.

Since then, I have also introduced new procedures for consultation that set out in more detail my expectations for more meaningful, genuine consultation, including a defined timeline to allow for proper engagement. That community consultation should include not just the general community but also the area's public representatives, who have a particular knowledge of the situation and the issues that may arise.

3.00 pm

Ministerial Statement

Health: 'Transforming Your Care'

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on 'Transforming Your Care', the report of the review of health and social care services in Northern Ireland, and my plans for public consultation on changes arising from proposals in the report. Members will recall that 'Transforming Your Care' was presented to the Assembly on 13 December 2011. The report outlined a compelling case for the reform of health and social care services, and it proposed a new model of care built around the individual patient and service user, not institutions.

I have said many times that my aim is to have a health and social care system that is safe, resilient and sustainable into the future. For that to be the case, it is essential that we take decisions that will ensure that our services are fit for purpose for the challenges that lie ahead. My vision is to build a health and social care system that improves care, ensures better outcomes for patients and clients and enhances the experience of health and social care for all our service users. To achieve that vision, we need to look at how we can improve our health and social care and, in so doing, reshape how we interact with all those who use our services. I am convinced that that aim is shared by the people who deliver services daily throughout our health and social care system.

I have set out, on a number of occasions, the inescapable context for change. Our society is changing; we have a growing and ageing population, with people living longer. That, of course, is something to celebrate, but it also means that there are more people with long-term conditions. That, inevitably, places more demands on our health and social care services, including our hospitals and other resources. The treatment and care of citizens is also changing. We have increasingly specialised services, with technology driving many improvements in how we can design and deliver care. Therefore, changing how our services are provided is an inevitability. I want to ensure that those changes are planned and managed so that they will bring optimum benefits to patients, service users, staff and the wider community.

We need to recognise fully the implications of the demographic changes and the demands and pressures that they bring. 'Transforming Your Care' indicated that demand for services could grow by around 4% a year by 2015. We need to improve services, but we need to do it in a way that secures improved productivity and value for money. We need to think differently about health and social care and about how we use and deliver services in response to changing circumstances. What has not changed is a belief in the core principles of the NHS, which are that health services are generally free at the point of delivery and are based on individual need, not ability to pay; that they are funded by taxation; and that they are available without prior restriction on which cost-effective treatments or therapies individuals should receive. Thus, the best available cost-effective services will be provided

for all citizens. Those principles remain fundamental to the delivery of our health and social care services.

The proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' set out at a strategic level how we might effectively meet the challenges through a new model for the delivery of integrated health and social care services in Northern Ireland. The new model of care is focused on ensuring that more services are provided in the community, closer to people's homes where possible. It is about prevention, earlier interventions, promoting health and well-being and having more personalised care that is planned and delivered around the needs of the individual and is tailored, as far as possible, to suit them.

A key early objective in the delivery of reform was the development of population plans for each of the five local commissioning groups by the end of June 2012. The population plans identify the needs of the local population on the basis of demographics and population health trends and identify how those needs should be met in future. In my statement to the House on 3 July, I advised Members that I had taken delivery of the five draft plans and published them on the departmental website. The plans are complemented by an overarching strategic implementation plan that draws together the key elements of the population plans, including cross-cutting regional aspects. The strategic plan is to provide a coherent framework for the planning and delivery of health and social care services over the coming years. I also advised that, over the summer period, the draft plans would be subject to quality assurance work and, once approved by me, would form the basis of formal consultation. The quality assurance stage has now been completed, and the revised strategic implementation plan and population plans have been forwarded to me by the Health and Social Care Board. I have agreed that the revised plans should form the basis of the public consultation that will start today and close on 15 January 2013.

I want to outline to Members the key proposals that have been developed as a response to 'Transforming Your Care' and form the basis of the consultation process. The draft population plans and strategic implementation plan set out proposals for how our health and social care services can be shaped over the next three to five years. The consultation that I am launching today will ask patients, service users and the wider public for their views on the proposals. A consultation document entitled 'From Vision to Action' summarises the main services covered in the implementation plan and population plans and the changes being proposed. It includes questions to prompt consideration and responses on the proposals — proposals that affect all of us who use our health service. It is available on the website www.TYCconsultation.hscni.net.

A fundamental principle within TYC is the shift in service provision: moving treatment and care out of the hospital sector and into the community, closer to people's homes. A key vehicle for facilitating that is the development of integrated care partnerships (ICPs) across Northern Ireland. ICPs will bring together health and social care professionals across the secondary, primary and community sectors to work in collaborative networks to deliver a more complete range of services for people in their local communities. They are to be based on multidisciplinary working, with general practitioners playing

a leading role but with clinical leadership also available from other health and social care professionals. In the main, ICPs would focus initially on supporting frail older people to maintain their independence and on people with certain long-term conditions, namely diabetes, stroke and respiratory conditions. That would include a focus on improving how treatment and care is delivered and the provision of an environment for new ideas and innovations, with a stronger emphasis on prevention and early intervention. ICPs would also put in place arrangements to identify those who are most at risk of having to go into hospital unexpectedly and to develop plans and actions to prevent the need to go to hospital. ICPs are a new approach and should play an important role in reducing emergency admissions to hospital and supporting the movement of services out of the hospital sector and into the community. In so doing, ICPs would involve strong collaboration with providers in the voluntary and community sector and independent healthcare providers.

With a growing and ageing population, it is essential that we support older people through the prevention of ill health and a focus on health and well-being. Among those over the age of 70, rates of ill health and disability increase significantly. Many excellent services are provided for older people. However, there is still much that can be done to improve the care they receive. The model being proposed would help to do just that.

'Transforming Your Care' also highlights the benefits to patient care of new technology, in the form of telehealth and telemonitoring, in helping to support people in their own home and to identify potential problems or a deterioration more quickly to allow earlier interventions to be made. I have promoted strongly the use of connected health to improve patient and client care. It provides significant opportunities for doing so and will help to mitigate the demands on our resources. Northern Ireland is well placed to lead the way in developing connected health solutions to overcome the challenges we face.

The consultation document includes proposals around the provision of statutory residential care. With more people being supported to live independently in their own home, the model of care would change to reflect a fall in demand for residential care for older people. The statutory sector currently provides around a quarter of all residential care homes. In many trust-provided homes, more than half the beds are currently unoccupied, due in part to the efforts of trusts to support more people in their own community. It is expected that demand will continue to fall. Likewise, a number of homes are in need of significant investment.

During the next three to five years, the current number of statutory residential homes would be reduced by at least 50% across Northern Ireland, as we support increasing numbers of people to live in non-institutional settings. That does not necessarily mean a reduction in residential homes provided by the independent sector — where there continues to be a demand for those services, they will continue to be provided — nor does that targeted reduction include homes that provide services for older people who are mentally infirm, including those with dementia, or those in nursing homes. It is crucial, however, that safe, suitable and better alternatives to residential care, such as supported living, self-directed support and more respite care, are in place for those who need it. In that respect, closures would be taken forward in a planned and

phased way, with residents, families and local communities involved in the local consultation process. That raises the issue of whether the statutory sector should be involved in the provision of residential home places, and I do not envisage over the longer term that it should be. It is proposed, therefore, to restrict new admissions to statutory care homes.

The review of mental health and learning disability, which is referred to as the Bamford review, provides the context for proposals for services for people with mental health issues or learning disabilities. The proposals focus on the continued implementation of the Bamford action plan, including raising awareness of mental health issues and reducing the stigma associated with mental ill health; continuing to extend the care provided in the community rather than in hospitals; and ending long-term residency in institutional care. The proposals being consulted on include reducing the number of people in institutional care and inpatient beds by moving existing residents into community living through intensive home support alternatives that are based in the community, supported living arrangements, individual budgets or nursing or residential home care where appropriate. We will work towards ensuring that no one will be a long-stay resident in a mental health or learning disability hospital by 2015, with people moving instead to alternative community-based living arrangements. Changing how we support and care for people with mental health issues or learning disabilities would inevitably lead to changes to the long-stay units, with some closing or being used to provide more immediate or short-term care.

The proposals for mental health care also include the development of six inpatient acute mental health units for those aged 18 and over. To reduce stigma and ensure access to acute elective care, it is desirable to locate mental health hospitals close to acute hospital provision where possible. There would be one site in each of the Northern, Southern, South Eastern and Belfast Trust areas, with two in the Western Trust area, suggesting that those should be located in proximity to Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the South West Acute Hospital. It is also important to recognise the key roles that carers play and to improve access to the respite and short-break services that are so vital to improving their quality of life.

We need to ensure both the future sustainability of our hospital configurations and that acute services adhere to best practice in quality outcomes, infrastructure and staffing. The TYC report concluded that it is likely that it will be possible to sustain only five to seven major acute hospital networks in the future. Creating hospital networks and reorganising acute services would mean that hospitals would not work in isolation. Hospitals of different sizes would work with each other to deliver the fullest range of specialist and acute services. That would mean that, for the majority, each acute hospital network would serve a resident population of 400,000, but, in the case of very specialist services, it would serve the whole of Northern Ireland.

It is imperative that hospital services are provided in a safe and sustainable way. There is evidence that, where the volumes of activity for a speciality are relatively low compared with the norm, there is greater potential for higher mortality rates. There are also implications for the skills of specialist staff in circumstances where they do not

see enough cases regularly to keep their skills up to date. Specialist posts in hospitals with relatively low volumes of activity also have implications for recruitment, with a resultant over-reliance on locum staff.

The consultation includes proposals for the reconfiguration of acute services. Those are based on criteria that have been developed to provide a consistent basis against which our hospital services will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. The criteria, which are outlined in the consultation document, are these: safety and quality; deliverability and sustainability; effective use of resources; local access; and stakeholder support. The consultation invites views on those criteria. The consultation document also sets out options for how the acute hospital networks would develop and how services would be configured. The four hospitals in Belfast — the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast City Hospital, Mater Hospital and Musgrave Park Hospital — would operate as one network, with clinical services dispersed across the sites in the best available configuration. Emergency department configuration across the network will be consulted on separately.

I am well aware of the local population's concerns about the reconfiguration of services in the Northern Trust area. We cannot ignore that significant change would need to occur at the Causeway Hospital. The community in that area needs to be able to access quality services over the coming years, and it is important that we plan carefully to deliver on that objective. The consultation seeks views on three potential options for addressing the fragility issues at the Causeway Hospital. I am clear that there is merit in examining the benefits of strengthened networks between the Northern and Western Trusts or by possibly transferring responsibility to the Western Trust, if that were to work better. As with all the proposals, my concern is the service for the patient. Following the completion of the consultation exercise, decisions would need to be made quickly on the way forward to ensure that sustainable services are in place for the long term.

3.15 pm

In the Southern Trust area, the existing networking between Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospitals would be built on, with further changes to maximise effectiveness in line with the acute care criteria. In the South Eastern Trust area, the proposal is for a network of the Ulster, Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals, with links with Belfast. The GP out-of-hours care model for urgent care at Downe Hospital would be extended to Lagan Valley Hospital. In the Western Trust area, the new South West Acute Hospital would network with Altnagelvin and Craigavon hospitals. Altnagelvin would provide a wider range of services in future, including cancer services and enhanced orthopaedics and cardiology. There is also scope to develop our links with the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain to improve healthcare for citizens here and to be able to offer services to those from other jurisdictions. The consultation will seek views on developing those links.

Population health and well-being are crucial elements of TYC and support the Department's proposed framework for public health, Fit and Well — Changing Lives, which is currently the subject of public consultation. I encourage responses to that exercise.

On maternity and child health, the proposals reflect a commitment to the implementation of the objectives in my

Department's maternity strategy, published in July this year. That means promoting the normalisation of birth and increasing the number of women having their antenatal care in the community rather than attending hospital. The proposals in the consultation document will also seek to support healthy pregnancies and promote good parent/child relationships in a child's crucial early years, as well as supporting child health through the prevention of ill health and promoting health and well-being.

It is essential that children be given the best possible start in life. That includes a focus on early intervention and a multiagency approach in family and child care, preventing children having to be separated from their family and enabling some children to remain safely with their family. Where that is not possible, we want to ensure that alternative arrangements can be put in place to bring permanency in the best interests of the child.

The consultation document also includes proposals for how people are treated at the end of life, to ensure that there is choice in how and where care is provided. People must be treated with compassion and dignity through palliative and end-of-life care, with the aim of reducing the number of people admitted to hospital inappropriately.

My aim is to ensure the safety of all patients and clients and the quality and sustainability of our services. I know that that aim is shared by all who provide that care. It is vital that we continue to take decisions and pursue actions that are necessary to improve outcomes for the population. The proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' and the response to them focus on how we plan and deliver services to support the reform and modernisation of our health and social care system. Where, following this consultation exercise, it is concluded that specific major changes in services should be progressed, further public consultations will be undertaken for those specific services.

This exercise is not about cost cutting but about improving service delivery and making better use of the available resources. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the resources allocated to health and social care are used in the best possible way for the benefit of all citizens in Northern Ireland.

As with any major change in delivery of services, there will inevitably be impacts for our workforce. We need to ensure the best possible deployment of staff in delivering services in the future. It is also anticipated that there would be reductions in our overall workforce of around 3% over the next three to five years. The changes proposed with the shift in services into the community may mean some staff working in a slightly different way or in a different place. Some staff may choose not to make the change, and they will be supported in their decisions.

The consultation exercise seeks your views as patients, clients, services users, service providers and citizens about how we respond to the proposals set out in 'Transforming Your Care'. During the consultation process, there will be a series of public engagement events. We will aim to ensure that everyone is informed and involved in the process and has opportunities to make their views known. I therefore encourage you to engage with this important consultation, let us know your views and be part of the delivery of change. I have also agreed that an information leaflet should be provided for every household in Northern

Ireland to inform citizens about Transforming Your Care and advise them on how to be involved in the consultation process. The leaflet will be issued next month.

We have an opportunity now — one that does not come along too often — to reshape our health and social care system to improve care and the outcomes for users. We should build on the excellent practices that already exist to help make improvements across the system. I believe that there is broad consensus in our community and among those who deliver health and social care on the need to make change. I want everyone to contribute to that change so that we move in the right direction and in the interests of the quality of care for our community and the sustainability of our services. I commend the statement to the House.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the briefing that he provided to me and the Deputy Chair this morning. It is a long statement, and there are a lot of issues that people need to take hold of in it. I agree with the Minister that everybody should get involved in the consultation exercise. If we want to make change, we need to make sure that everybody is part of that change.

Minister, I have a couple of questions. Your statement referred to the proposal to close at least 50% of statutory residential homes, but that does not necessarily mean a reduction in the number of private residential homes. Can you provide assurances today that the Transforming Your Care strategy does not represent the privatisation of elderly care? There is also the issue of GPs being central to everything in primary care. We are talking about moving people from the acute sector into the community. Will you outline whether all GPs are signed up to this at the moment? If they are not, what could be the impact of that on communities? Finally, did the equality screening exercise that you carried out identify any groups that would be adversely affected by the proposals?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. First, with respect to the closure of residential homes, there is less demand for residential care. Throughout the Transforming Your Care process, we have identified a greater desire among the public, as there is among young people who become incapacitated, to spend their later years in a real home — the home of their choice — as opposed to a residential home. In that respect, we need to observe and honour the wishes of the public, and we seek to do that. Providing more respite care for carers and more support for people in their own home is one aspect of that. However, it will be demonstrated by a reduced demand for residential care homes.

Secondly, many of our residential care homes were built in the quite distant past. Many do not meet the standards for room sizes, overhead hoists and so forth that would be available in many other facilities. I cannot ask members of the public to use a facility owned by the public that is perhaps not as good as a facility that is available in the private sector. Therefore, if the private sector is doing its job well in that respect, it will continue to receive support to carry out that work.

With respect to GPs and their support for the process, we have set up integrated care partnerships. Although people will focus on a range of things today, I encourage them

strongly to focus on integrated care partnerships, because that is the area in which we will drive the change needed to move people from secondary care to primary care. In general, GPs are getting involved in that, are supportive of the consultation that is happening and are working with us on a lot of the issues. There are a few who are not.

A primary equality screening exercise was carried out on the draft strategic implementation plan. That took place over the summer period. The screening exercise has not highlighted adverse impact on any of the section 75 groups.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have one of the longest lists of Members wishing to ask a question. I therefore ask you to be brief in your question and allow as many Members as possible to question the Minister on this important document.

Mr Wells: The Minister outlined a series of clinical networks of hospitals. Does he have any plans to reconfigure the boundaries of the local commissioning groups and/or the trusts?

Mr Poots: We are looking at stronger networking at the moment, and there are some fairly obvious opportunities for that between the likes of the South West Acute Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital, as well as Altnagelvin Hospital. There will be a gravity pull towards Altnagelvin Hospital for many of its services, because the new radiotherapy centre will be open by 2016. I expect that people will prefer to go to Altnagelvin as opposed to Belfast. The orthopaedics unit at Altnagelvin Hospital will be enhanced, and, as there is no fracture clinic or orthopaedics unit in the Northern Trust area, I suspect that people in that part of Northern Ireland will want to go to Altnagelvin. We are introducing 24-hour cath labs in Belfast and in Altnagelvin Hospital, which will be a huge step forward in the treatment of people who suffer heart attacks. That will be a superb service that will be readily accessible to people in the Northern Trust area at Altnagelvin. In addition, there is already a strong urology services network between the Causeway Hospital and Altnagelvin. In all this, there may be the opportunity to strengthen that network and have more consultants available to work at Altnagelvin and the Causeway Hospital, thereby helping to deal with some of the fragility issues at the Causeway Hospital.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. He will know — I have mentioned it before — that one of the most difficult things he has to do under Transforming Your Care is to move money from the acute side to the community side. There is much to be welcomed in his statement, but there is no reference to the money or to the progress that he is making on shifting that financial responsibility. Why not, and will he update us on that?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. I wish him well as he moves on from being health spokesman for his party. We had a good working relationship, and I trust that that will continue to be the case with Mr Beggs as he assumes that position.

The situation is that we had planned to move around 5% of the funding from secondary care to primary care. That is a crucial role, and, as I indicated in my response to the Chair of the Committee, the integrated care partnerships would have that very important role. The GPs will be closely involved in developing the systems and mechanisms

whereby work that was once carried out in hospitals can be carried out in the community.

Some of that work will involve shifting allied health professionals who are available in the hospital setting into community settings, so that they are available in a local health clinic rather than a hospital that may be further away. The shift in funding that we are looking for by 2014-15 amounts to £83 million. The Health and Social Care Board and others who are working with integrated care partnerships will put immense pressure on them to deliver that change.

Mr McDevitt: I commend what is a very comprehensive statement. There appears to be a shift towards a totally privatised residential care sector. That sector is currently well regulated from the point of view of standards in the homes, but there is no financial regulation around the robustness of the businesses that are responsible for those homes. Therefore, there is no safety net if something goes wrong. How will the Minister assure us that those homes are underwritten properly if we go down that road?

Mr Poots: I did not raise that issue today because I thought that it had been dealt with when we first brought forward 'Transforming Your Care'. We are looking at nursing homes and residential homes having to apply for a bond in the first place and lay down a bond, just as builders who start developments do with Roads Service, for example, to ensure that they are sustainable, so that we do not have a situation in Northern Ireland such as happened in GB with Southern Cross. That recommendation is in the 'Transforming Your Care' document, and I refer the Member to it.

Mr McCarthy: The headlines in this morning's 'Belfast Telegraph' tell us how the majority of our nursing profession are under extreme pressure and are dissatisfied.

Staffing levels are poor, the workload is increasing, and nursing care is being delivered by less-qualified staff. Given those depressing facts, is the Minister satisfied that patient care remains genuinely paramount as he pushes ahead with Transforming Your Care, or is what we are hearing just empty rhetoric?

3.30 pm

Mr Poots: I would never say that what you read in the 'Belfast Telegraph' is empty rhetoric. I disassociate myself from such a view — that paper occasionally gets it right. However, if it is talking about the standards of care, I suspect that it is not getting it right. In spite of all the damning news put out by a number of media and press outlets, people whom I do not know regularly approach me in the street. They tell me that they were in hospital and received excellent care; that a relative was in hospital and received excellent care; or that an elderly relative who had fallen received care that was second to none when undergoing an operation and then getting back on their feet. I hear that all the time.

I get fed up with Members who want to come here and denigrate our health service. It is one of the best in the world, and I am very proud of it. I am very proud of our nursing staff, as they make an excellent contribution. I welcome the survey that received responses from 14% of the qualified nursing workforce across Northern Ireland. It is important that we listen to the concerns of nurses who take the time to participate in surveys. However, the

numbers represented here are very low, and I suspect that many of the nurses who did not respond are very satisfied with the work that they carry out. I may have some insight into that issue.

Ms P Bradley: I also thank the Minister for a very comprehensive statement. Will he outline the opportunities that Transforming Your Care offers to the voluntary and community sector and to social enterprises?

Mr Poots: Social enterprises and the voluntary and community sector will provide very exciting opportunities in the future. Healthcare is an area in which we can support communities. We can create more jobs there, and we can create opportunities for people, particularly the long-term unemployed, to get into useful, viable work. The wide range of services provided by the voluntary and community sector will be vital in ensuring that proposals in the 'Transforming Your Care' report are realised. It is likely that there will be significant additional demands on that sector and that it will help to sustain and develop services.

I am committed to a mixed economy for the provision of care. We talked about the private sector earlier. The community sector can do an awful lot in, for example, domiciliary care. The voluntary sector does excellent work in mental health and learning disability care. It is very important that we use those people — I mean "use" purely in a kind way — to maximise the delivery of health and social care. In doing so, we can provide the best possible health and social care to the people who need it, whether they are patients or people who have a learning disability or mental health issue.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I am pleased that networking between Daisy Hill and Craigavon will be built on. The 'Transforming Your Care' report came out in 13 December 2011, and a leaflet will be issued to the public next month, almost a year later. After a lot of general information on the report, we are now getting some of the specifics. Is the Minister happy that the leaflet will provide enough information to enable people to make a qualified and measured response to the consultation?

Mr Poots: I want the public to be as well informed as possible so that I will be made aware of any genuine concerns at an early point. Sometimes, politicians and others get a little exercised about an issue but do not really reflect the views of the public. I want to hear from the public. If the public think that this is the correct trajectory, that is good. If they think that we are on completely the wrong course, I need to hear that, change course and seek to amend. We have sought to take as wide a view as possible in the drawing up of those reports thus far. However, I think that this is the most crystallised opportunity yet for the public to get involved in the consultation process and make their views known.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. What would the introduction of a 111 number mean for Transforming Your Care?

Mr Poots: The 111 number is currently being piloted in parts of England and is due to be rolled out in spring 2013. It is being introduced there to make it easier for the public to access healthcare services when they require medical help quickly but their condition is not life-threatening. The introduction of a 111 number has the potential to drive improvements in the way in which health and social care

delivers care. It would provide the opportunity for aligning call-handling and triage processes with other urgent care services, including the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS). A single number would assist in ensuring that patients would have access to better information and more help and understanding on how to access the best care, especially urgent care, when they need it, with patients being referred to a service that has appropriate skills and resources to meet their needs.

My Department and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and NIAS colleagues are monitoring the development of the 111 service to ensure that we learn from experiences in England and add value to any service that may be developed here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his statement. When the report was published, he said that he would need £70 million to see it through, including £25 million for 2012. Will he provide an update on his efforts to obtain that money?

Mr Poots: Thankfully, I can. The HSCB has undertaken work to consider the financial implications of TYC and its linkage to quality improvement and cost-reduction work. The financial modelling exercise has been conducted at a high level. It has concluded that there still remains an affordability gap for 2014-15. However, that is not unusual at this stage.

Normal processes will follow with the HSCB to understand more fully the financial gap and how it will be resolved. In addition, the shift left into primary and community care and other investment proposals in the strategic investment programme and population plans have to be taken forward with the budget allocations that are available.

I am grateful for additional funding from Sammy Wilson and the Department of Finance and Personnel. My Department made a bid of £90 million through the Executive's invest-to-save programme in 2012-13 to support the implementation of TYC and other health and social care proposals. We believe that it is a well-considered proposal. We hope for a positive outcome on it.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I refer him to the Bamford review. He mentioned continuing to extend care that is provided in the community. He may not be aware that during Question Time, his party colleague the Minister for Social Development said that the Housing Executive was not meeting its Bamford targets. How does the Minister propose to implement fully the Bamford action plan?

Mr Poots: We intend to meet Bamford targets by delivering, by 2015, on moving people out of hospital care into the community. I pay tribute to my colleagues in the Department for Social Development. Perhaps they have been more capable of delivering on that than the Department of Health and have been in a slightly better position. They have worked closely with us thus far. I look forward to working with them over the next two to three years. I made a strong commitment, today and over the past number of months, that my Department would, indeed, want to deliver that by 2015. DSD is a crucial partner in ensuring that that happens.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. Where is the proof that there are safer and better alternatives to statutory residential care? My colleagues and I in South

Down know that places such as Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel offer an A1 service in statutory residential care. In passing, the Minister mentioned the private sector doing its job well enough. Can he reassure me that the private sector would provide the same level of care?

Mr Poots: Reassurance comes from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) and the regulation of residential and nursing homes. A very rigorous regulation process takes place, and I welcome that because the stronger the regulation, the better the outcomes for the people who we are providing care for. However, if the Member is of the view that homes that were built 30 or 40 years ago and which would cost a huge amount of money to renovate are better than homes that are newly built, I can tell him about Blair House, which I recently opened in Newtownards. Mr McCarthy, Mr Hamilton, Mr Bell, Miss McIlveen and others were present at that opening. I do not hear any of those Members saying that that is a poorer service or poorer care than we are offering in the public sector. It is a brand new facility that has been built to be fit for purpose. The unfortunate reality is that not all of our facilities are fit for purpose, and to bring them up to that quality of service would cost many millions of pounds. I believe that that money would be better spent elsewhere in the health and social care sector.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, can you outline the benefits of transferring the responsibilities of the Causeway Hospital from the Northern Trust to the Western Trust?

Mr Poots: We already have evidence of how networks can work well, and I point strongly to the existing Daisy Hill/Craigavon network. I had the privilege of going to the high dependency unit in Daisy Hill Hospital, where I saw how new technology can assist. Through a robot, an intensive care consultant talked face to face with the individual at Daisy Hill, and the consultant, who was in Craigavon, could analyse that individual and work closely with the doctors there and provide that added experience and skill set without being on site.

I can see opportunities for Causeway Hospital, where it is perhaps more difficult to get consultants, to get consultant support through new technology advances, which will enable us to sustain services in a better way than might otherwise be the case at Causeway.

I outlined how Altnagelvin will be developing radiotherapy services, a 24-hour cath lab and wider orthopaedic services. All of those will be hugely beneficial to the people in the Causeway area. The networking between the hospitals is important in that, if you have a consultant who is based in Altnagelvin, it is much easier to get that consultant to travel to Causeway to carry out work. A lot of the consultants who are based in Antrim live in Belfast, so it is more of an issue to get those consultants to work at the Causeway Hospital. As a result of networking with Altnagelvin, there are greater opportunities to have more consultants with the specialist expertise to work in that facility.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, you touched on part of the question that I was going to ask in your answer to the Member who asked the previous question. Can we be guaranteed by you that the Northern Trust will remain and that this will not, in some way, lead to the future demise of the Northern

Trust because of the public problems that it is having? Given the rural area that we cover here, I take it that the Ambulance Service comes under the same vein of thinking.

Mr Poots: There are no proposals to do away with the Northern Trust.

Mr G Robinson: Will stronger networking arrangements for the Causeway Hospital, either with Altnagelvin or with Antrim, make it a more attractive place for specialist doctors to work in? I thank the Minister for his statement.

Mr Poots: As I said to Mr McQuillan, I do think that. It is a much more attractive option for a doctor to be living somewhere between Causeway and Altnagelvin, which is a particularly beautiful part of the world with good schools available. The scale of work there will test all the skills of a young, go-getter consultant and allow them to expand their skills. They get all of that, and they also get a very pleasant area to live in with good schools and so forth. So, it is a much more attractive option to consultants than is currently the case to have that facility available. We all need to recognise that there is an issue with consultants at the Causeway Hospital. We are operating with too many locums, and we need to fix that.

3.45 pm

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister. Minister, will you agree with me that you have an uphill struggle in selling your plans to what is effectively a sceptical public? I look forward to the analysis of the consultation process. The public are particularly sceptical about elderly care and the care packages that are proposed. Do they not, in reality, create a great deal of social isolation among elderly people? Do you not share my serious concerns about the closure of trust homes?

Mr Poots: Social isolation will not be resolved by taking people from their own homes and placing them in nursing or residential homes. If that is Alliance Party policy, the public would be truly sceptical of it. I am not sure whether that is the party's policy as Mr Dickson is not the health spokesperson.

Elderly people, generally, want to be in their own home where they have been for all of their life. To deal with social isolation, we need to look at the opportunities and to work, particularly with the voluntary and community sector, on how we bring people together with other people to enjoy a bit of fun and conversation. However, that does not mean putting them into residential homes or nursing homes. Mr Dickson is coming out with a flawed policy.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement and put on record my appreciation of the nurses and doctors at Antrim hospital who treated me for a minor injury during the summer.

From family experience, I am aware of two elderly people who were returned to their homes following hospital treatment with very limited independence and mobility. Within a short time, GPs had to be called and ambulances returned those people to hospital before both were successfully rehabilitated at Clonmore residential home. If, as is the case in the draft plan, Clonmore, Lisgarell and Joymount residential homes were to close, how would such patients be successfully rehabilitated? How are the existing patients to be cared for?

Mr Poots: It is very important that, first, people do not stay in hospital longer than is required, because hospital is not a place to be if you do not need to be there. Secondly, we must have appropriate discharge so that, at the same time, we do not discharge people who are not ready to go home or, indeed, to intermediate care. An intermediate care facility has been developed right beside Antrim hospital. It is a brand new private sector facility. So, those facilities can be offered to people. Whilst we may not deliver the service, it will not stop us from buying that service.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his statement, and we look forward to engaging in the consultation process over the next number of months. The Minister rightly makes reference to a focus on early intervention and a multiagency approach to family and children's care. With my education hat on, I want to ask him this: what plans are there to extend the Roots of Empathy programme for schoolchildren?

Mr Poots: The Roots of Empathy programme is excellent value for money and is a programme that I support strongly. A high level of interest has been shown by stakeholders, including staff at primary schools and early year providers, in the Roots of Empathy programme. The Public Health Agency is examining the possible scale and pace of expansion of the programme, and a major benefit of it is the legacy of skilled staff who represent a major resource and support to schools. In 2013-14, over 100 schools across Northern Ireland will run the programme to the benefit of over 1,500 children. Schools are being selected to reflect higher levels of disadvantage, albeit that school populations cannot always be identified so precisely.

Our early years interventions and interventions in the primary school years have to continue because they are absolutely critical if we are to get better educational outcomes. If we get better educational outcomes, we also get better health outcomes, better job prospects and have less trouble with young people getting involved in the juvenile justice system.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. He used the words "compassion and dignity", which are two words that, unfortunately, cannot be used for the many patients who wait for hours on end in the A&E at Antrim. Will the Minister assure me that he is determined to improve the A&E services at Antrim and that there is the capacity in the Northern Trust to return that compassion and dignity to those patients? Will he also comment on how he sees the importance of the minor injuries unit at the Mid Ulster Hospital?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Unfortunately, we are where we are with Antrim Area Hospital. I will still go back to the fact that two hospitals closed consecutively — the Mid Ulster and the Whiteabbey emergency units — but we did not have the capacity at that time to absorb all that. The decision that was made was unfortunate, but, nonetheless, we have to live with the consequences of it. We are working our way through it in Antrim, and a new facility is being developed. I am dissatisfied with where we are with reducing the waiting times, so I am not satisfied that we have reached a stage that is acceptable either to me or the public. So, more work needs to be done there. Staff in the HSCB know that we are dissatisfied, and staff in the Northern Trust know that we are dissatisfied. The pressure will continue to be piled on those organisations

to ensure that we get a service in the Antrim Area Hospital that is considerably better than that that has been experienced since the closure of the Mid Ulster and Whiteabbey hospitals. The minor injuries unit in the Mid Ulster provides a very important service. I encourage people to use it, as it is an excellent facility.

Mr Allister: The Minister is going to consultation. Is he listening, or is this just a process that has to be gone through so that we can get to the predetermined outcomes that already exist? Certainly, where the Causeway Hospital is concerned, the omens are not good, because any of the hospital meetings that I have attended would not accord, for those stakeholders, with the Minister's vision of the hospital as a satellite outpost of Altnagelvin. What acute services does he anticipate retaining in that satellite outpost of the Causeway, and what about the rump of the Northern Board? Will it ultimately be rolled into Belfast, where some people seem to think Antrim exists to serve in any event?

Mr Poots: The Member can put labels on particular facilities and run those facilities down if he so desires. I happen to think that the Causeway Hospital provides a good service, and I wish to continue with most, if not all, the services that are provided at that hospital, if that is possible. However, if the Member thinks that the current situation, where you have nine consultant positions, with six covered by locum doctors because the posts have not been filled, is sustainable, he truly is on a different satellite from the rest of the Assembly.

The truth is that we need to ensure that there is real and true sustainability, and we need to think somewhat differently about how we achieve that. If there is a lack of consultants taking up the positions that exist in the Causeway, it is because what has happened and what has passed heretofore clearly has not worked. So, we need to have that full-time, sustainable service at the Causeway. That is what we are working towards. I hope that the Member will work with us, as opposed to against us.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He alluded to the impact on the workforce and the possible reduction of 3% in the next three to five years. Has he had any discussions with the unions on possible workforce reductions?

Mr Poots: Yes, my officials met the unions today to discuss the outworkings. Over the course of each year, there is around 2% staff turnover in the health and social care system, so, over three to five years, there will be 6% to 10% of a staff turnover. For us to lose 3% of staff should not involve compulsory redundancies. There may be some specialist areas in which there is the occasional voluntary redundancy, but I suspect that that would be quite limited. Most will be found through people who are retiring or moving on and through reassigning positions. In all of this, we will still be employing and taking on new people to come and work in the health and social care system over the next three to five years, but we will not be under as much pressure to recruit as many.

Mr Dunne: Minister, as you are aware, there is considerable interest from GPs in such areas as Bangor and Lurgan in the provision of hub well-being centres. How can such proposals be forwarded under Transforming Your Care.

Mr Poots: Transforming your Care does see the way forward. We have identified 27 areas for hub centres,

and that process will be moving ahead. As I indicated previously, we are taking forward two pilot projects at present. What I will say, and say very clearly, is this: for the centres to work, I believe that we need the GPs under the same roof as the specialist nurses and allied health professionals, providing that multidisciplinary team. If GPs do not want to do it, they will damage the prospects of achieving this. Therefore, where we have areas where general practitioners are keen to get involved in the development of new hubs and put their name to the paper as being a key player in that, the centres will be delivered much more quickly. They will deliver considerably better services for the public, because a GP, linked with a podiatrist, a physiotherapist, a senior diabetic nurse, and all of that, will be able to provide the range of skills under the one roof that will avoid hospital admissions. I encourage the primary care practitioners to help us and to come together with us to ensure that that is the case, because it will dramatically change the care that we provide for the wider public.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] be agreed. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “That” and insert

“the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be not agreed pending further consideration and adjustment to better reflect the specific circumstances, obligations and needs of our people; because, while recognising the need for a simplification of the benefit system and development of work incentives, the Bill’s proposals have their origins in austerity policies being pursued at Westminster which are targeted at the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society and which clearly do not adequately address the specific circumstances and needs of our people and will create significant hardship and difficulties for many individuals and families living in socially disadvantaged unionist and nationalist communities; in addition, the payment proposals of universal credit

(a) do not reflect the specifics of our labour market and the prevalence of the weekly wage;

(b) fail to take account of an established pattern of direct payments to landlords; and

(c) in proposing a single household payment, fail to meet specific statutory equality obligations which require social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children;

and furthermore the Bill fails to take account of

(i) the impact of increased punitive measures on jobseekers in a society emerging from conflict and recovering from a legacy of discrimination in employment;

(ii) the fact that there is currently no statutory duty to provide affordable childcare, yet the Bill increases conditionality for lone parents;

(iii) the existing housing stock and the legacy of segregated housing, in relation to the introduction of an underoccupancy penalty;

(iv) the high rate of error in the work capability assessment which is creating hardship and uncertainty amongst many sick and disabled people who are being wrongly declared fit for work; and

(v) the anomaly of a benefit cap that was primarily devised to address extortionate housing costs in London but has discriminatory consequences for families here with more than the average number of children.”— [Mr Brady.]

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In speaking as the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, I wish to make the following points in response to what the Minister said this morning.

I want to make it clear to the House that the Committee has not had the opportunity to consider the reasoned amendment, so there is no Committee decision on that. Therefore, I will not be making any comment on it in my role as Chairperson. Nor has the Committee formally decided its view on the Bill, so I intend to reflect its general views on the Bill to date, and those are based on issues that have been raised through discussions with departmental officials and stakeholders over a fairly lengthy period. I hope to record faithfully the views of Committee members across all of the parties from those discussions.

Despite the Bill being introduced in the Assembly only last week, I advise Members that the Committee for Social Development has been proactive over the past year or so. In fact, it had seven pre-legislative briefings from departmental officials on the Welfare Reform Bill as introduced at Westminster.

The Committee has also been briefed by key stakeholders on the flexibilities required in the implementation of the Bill to address the specific circumstances that we have to deal with in the North.

4.00 pm

The Deputy Chairperson and I, along with the Committee Clerk and in the company of the Minister, met Lord David Freud on 18 May to put the case for the need for flexibilities to reflect those specific circumstances and to highlight concerns on behalf of the Committee’s stakeholders. We reported the detail of that discussion back to the Committee. I make it very clear that, at the meeting on 18 May, as a matter of record, Mr Freud agreed that the situation here was more grave than elsewhere. On that basis, he accepted the need for greater flexibility in how the Bill is administered. As I said, it was reported back to the Social Development Committee that the Minister responsible for this in Westminster agreed with us that our circumstances were worse than those elsewhere. To his credit — I want to be honest about this — he also said that he did not accept that our circumstances were as bad as some stakeholders were arguing. We did not have to agree or disagree on that; the point I am making is that, on behalf of the Social Development Committee, we got from that Minister an understanding that our circumstances were worse than elsewhere and that we were entitled to some flexibilities. The Minister then committed to considering what flexibilities may be appropriate. I will come back to that in a few moments.

Furthermore, over the time of our deliberations on the Bill, there have been numerous seminars that have informed people about the changes that the Bill would introduce. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of our stakeholders in being proactive in holding the seminars, discussing the reforms and producing reports. That has been a positive contribution in trying to move forward the debate on flexibility. I thank those stakeholders for inviting members of our Committee to participate in a number of those events.

A number of superlatives have been used to describe the Bill, but, suffice it to say, it is undoubtedly the most comprehensive change to the benefits system in perhaps a generation. Because of that, it has engendered strong opinion among stakeholders. That has also been reflected in the Committee’s discussions on the issues. It is a

large and contentious piece of legislation, no matter what way we look at it, with 134 clauses and 12 schedules. I recognise that now is not the time to comment in detail on all of them; rather, on behalf of the Committee, I will concentrate on the key principles and highlight the opinion of the Committee.

To begin on perhaps a positive note, it is fair to say that streamlining administrative or bureaucratic processes is something that we can all welcome. There are currently more than 30 different benefits, and the system itself is considered to be difficult to understand, particularly for a range of claimants. On the face of it, therefore, a simpler system that replaces the complex system of working-age benefits and credits with a single set of rules would be welcomed by the Committee. The new system is referred to as universal credit. As I will indicate in due course, although the proposed system is theoretically simpler, serious concerns are shared by members of the Committee on the detail of how universal credit will be administered.

In addition, the Committee welcomes incentives to encourage and assist people back into work and supports the principle that work should always pay. Indeed, the Department advised the Committee that many people in work would receive substantially more support than under the current benefit system. If that is the case, that would be welcomed.

We are advised that universal credit will be paid once a month to a nominated person in the household. Stakeholder groups have told us repeatedly that the capacity of many people to budget over a month, when they have been used to receiving payments at different times of the month, is a serious issue that has not been properly addressed. The Committee shares those concerns.

On direct payments, the Minister himself has told the House that over 80% of those in receipt of housing benefit opt to have that payment made directly to the landlord. That provides assurance for those people and for all of us that people will not fall into rent arrears and will at least have a roof over their head, despite any other financial pressures that they might have. However, under the universal credit proposals, this will be paid directly to the claimant, except in particularly exclusive circumstances. The Housing Executive and housing associations, as well as representatives of the private rented sector, have expressed concern that this could lead to increased arrears and possibly increased evictions. The prospect of increased homelessness as a result of this payment option under universal credit is of concern to the Committee.

The issue of underoccupancy for working-age claimants in the social rented sector is a serious concern for the Committee. Under the Bill, if a house is underoccupied by one room, housing benefit will be reduced by 14%. If two rooms or more are unoccupied, housing benefit will be reduced by 25%. There are high levels of underoccupancy in the North, with the Housing Executive estimating that up to 40,000 of its tenants will be affected. The options for tenants are to make up the shortfall in the rent or move to a dwelling that they can afford. However, as we heard from the Department — the Minister also mentioned this — such one- and two-bedroom houses are in very short supply here, and, for a person on benefits, making up the shortfall may simply not be an option.

The proportion of people of working age who are in receipt of DLA in the North is approximately twice the level in Britain. There are a lot of reasons for that. It seems certain that fewer disabled people will qualify for PIP than currently qualify for DLA, and those who do may qualify for a shorter period or receive reduced support. The Committee heard that that had the potential to impact on personal mobility, independent life in the community and adequate standards of life. Also, assessment for personal independence payments will be carried out by a third-party provider. Again, there are a lot of concerns around that. The Committee has concerns about that, given that the assessment process of a third-party provider for the work capability assessment is, going by some opinion and, indeed, going by the latest report from the Department, in many ways seriously flawed. The potential for that to be repeated with the PIP process is causing concern.

The Committee received briefings from women's groups and organisations, including the Commissioner for Children and Young People, on the impact of many of the reforms on women and children. Claims will be made on the basis of households rather than individuals, so it will be necessary for one person to be nominated to receive the payment. There are concerns that the main caregivers, even in this day and age, are usually women. Therefore, women could find themselves without the necessary financial access or control of the money to ensure that children are properly provided for. The Committee acknowledged that flexibility on how and to whom such payments are made should be further investigated.

One of the key concerns that the Committee had was in relation to the lone parent conditionality provision, which requires lone parents to be available for work when their child reaches the age of five. The Committee voiced concern that the absence of a childcare strategy and the necessary resources and infrastructure to underpin such a strategy may restrict a claimant's ability to seek education and training opportunities.

Concern was also expressed about the proposal to limit the contribution-based ESA to one year. Again, the Minister referred to that this morning. This has the potential to adversely impact on older people, who are more likely to have built up a long record of national insurance contributions. This was seen as a fundamental change to the national insurance scheme and raised the question of where the rest of the money goes from individual contributions paid over 20 or even 40 years.

The sanctions regime is also being overhauled in the Bill. While a simpler regime, in principle, is to be welcomed, there are still serious concerns. For example, should a claimant fill in a form incorrectly, that person will face a financial penalty. Given that it is anticipated that forms will be filled in online and some people are likely to be very vulnerable and have difficulty filling in forms in any format, this is a cause of concern. It is also worthwhile pointing out that the current administrative penalty and cautions will be replaced by a new minimum administrative financial penalty for benefit fraud or 50% of the amount overpaid — whichever is greater — up to a maximum of £2,000. In addition to that, they will have a loss of benefit for up to four weeks. That is two sanctions for one contravention of the rules, and many members of the Committee thought that it was important to have a closer look at that.

This is an enabling Bill, which has been a cause of angst for Committee members, as much of the detail on its implementation will be provided to the Committee and the Assembly by way of regulations. At last week's meeting, the Department was still unable to give any real detail on the regulations because the regulations in Britain, on which ours will, undoubtedly, be based, will not be finalised or published until 10 December. Again, that is of concern, given that, as I have said before in the House, promises made at the primary legislation stage often fail to materialise in the secondary legislation. In other words, people have been told that, if they wanted to make some change to a Bill, they did not need to do so at the primary legislation stage because they could do it in the secondary legislation. However, as we have often discovered, primary legislation sets narrow parameters within which secondary legislation must deal with issues of concern.

The Committee, of course, acknowledges the arguments for maintaining parity, and there are many views across the Committee on that. However, it also recognises the need to try to do things differently here because of our particularly difficult and different circumstances. Unfortunately, to date, there has been little indication from the Department that it will be able to achieve the required flexibility through regulations. That makes real scrutiny of the Bill difficult.

Today, in my role as Chairperson, I have attempted to highlight the range of key concerns expressed by Committee members on the basis of discussions with departmental officials and stakeholders over the past year. It is important to place it on record that the Committee has been speaking with virtually one voice on all these issues. Although the Committee can support certain principles of the Bill, the detail of the proposed operation and implementation of the Bill is such that it makes it very contentious. With that in mind, I will, in a couple of minutes, depart from speaking as Chair of the Committee to speak as an individual Member.

I want to make this point clear: the Committee has taken its responsibilities very seriously in listening to all the views and all the parties. As I outlined, we had extensive engagement with a range of stakeholders and the Department, including, on more than one occasion, the Minister. We have made it abundantly clear that we intend to fully facilitate scrutiny of the Bill in the time ahead. In fact, we have allowed for three days a week over the next number of weeks to do so. So, whatever happens this afternoon, the Bill will be given full and maximum scrutiny. In fact, we have already gone looking for evidence. We have said that we want to ensure that all stakeholders who expressed opinions and had a range of views will have the opportunity, in the coming weeks and months, to make those views known again. Hopefully, that will help the Committee and the Assembly to make the Bill better, which is what we are all determined to do. In our discussions, we will endeavour to make sure that we deal with the range of equality and human rights issues that the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission formally brought to the attention of the Committee and of individual members and, indeed, parties on the Committee.

With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I will now finish speaking as Chairperson of the Committee. I hope that I have faithfully represented the Committee's views. As I said, the Committee has not had

the opportunity to deal with the reasoned amendment and has not taken a formal view on the Bill. Invariably, however, members from all parties expressed a range of concerns about certain aspects of the Bill and made clear their determination to make it better and reflect the circumstances that endure here in the North as opposed to those in England, London or elsewhere, which are not our concern.

I would like to make a few points as a party representative. My colleague Mickey Brady has tabled a reasoned amendment and has spoken to it, and, obviously, I support it. I would like to make a few points on that. I do not want to rehearse all the arguments and issues raised by Mickey Brady. Some of my party colleagues will return to some of the detail in the course of the debate. The Minister, when introducing the Bill's Second Stage this morning, referred to his duty. I urge the Minister and all of us to remind ourselves that it is our collective duty, across all parties, to help to protect the most vulnerable. They are not the preserve of one party. There are people who are vulnerable, unemployed, sick or on a low income across all communities — nationalist, unionist or whatever community — who, in many cases, rely on some form of support from the welfare system. That is as it should be.

4.15 pm

Over the past year or more, there has been much talk, across the range of stakeholders we have met, about flexibility and mitigation. Speaking from a party point of view — I think that Mickey Brady referred to this point earlier — we have met a wide range of organisations, from all the Church leaders, trade unions and the major charitable organisations to people in the community and voluntary sector with relevant and specific expertise across a range of these issues, not least the disability advocate organisations. We have engaged with a wide range of organisations, some of which I alluded to earlier. I think that I can say, hand on heart, that at every one of those engagements people urged us to make sure that we gave full scrutiny to the Bill to try to make sure that even within the parameters of parity, whatever they may be, we get the Bill as flexible as we can to reflect the circumstances that pertain here. Then the other side of that, of course, is that the Executive would look at whatever mitigation measures they could introduce if there are people who we believe are so vulnerable that the Executive have to step in. I think that the Minister alluded to some of that.

I am pleased to understand that, over the past several months, the Executive have been examining what the consequences of the implementation of the Bill may be and how that may read across the Departments, including Health, Education and other Departments. I understand also that Ministers, including the Finance Minister, have been looking at what the cost to the Executive may be if the Executive or Assembly decide to take measures to mitigate some of the most adverse impacts of the Bill and how those measures may be taken. However, that is a discussion for another day.

What I am pleased to say is that there are people from the Executive right through the Assembly parties who have been working on this for a considerable time. They have been putting their shoulders to the wheel in examining the consequences of the Bill. Some of them may even be good

and beneficial, but others that are more negative have to be addressed. I am pleased that the Executive have done work to identify what those needs may be and what the Executive may do by way of interventions. We will have to deal with that down the line.

As a party, our approach from day one has been that we have a Welfare Reform Bill coming down the line, and it is now with us. We said to people from the outset in all our engagements that we have to deal with the issue of parity. We cannot and do not ignore that. As a party, we are saying that we are governed to a large extent by the issue of parity in how we dispense welfare. We all know that, in many respects, the benefit levels set in London are supposed to pertain here and in other regions of what they would call the UK. What we are faced with then is how we make a Bill more applicable to the needs of the people that all the parties in the Chamber represent. I stress that, when we met David Freud here in Belfast, he made it clear that he understood. I will not in any way misrepresent his views. He shared our opinion that the circumstances pertaining here are worse than elsewhere. He said that he would look at the types of flexibilities that we may have to introduce. Interestingly, he also referred specifically to the IT system and made it clear that he felt that the IT system would not be a barrier to allowing for some flexibilities here. In fact, if one looks at the Hansard report from, I think, the beginning of January of this year in Westminster, one sees that David Freud made it clear that the ability to allow for flexibilities was being designed into the IT system. So, I do not accept that there is an absolute barrier in relation to the IT system delivering flexibilities for people here.

Our approach as a party has been to have discussion at Executive level on this, and I outlined some of that discussion. We had discussions directly with the DUP. We met the Minister and David Freud. I and party colleagues met Theresa Villiers, the Secretary of State, just a week ago. Martin McGuinness, on our behalf, several months ago made representations to her predecessor, Owen Paterson, on exactly the same issue. British Ministers have told us at all times that our stark circumstances as they prevail in the North of Ireland mean that we should have flexibility in the way in which the Bill and the system will be administered. We are looking for the colour of their money. We have not seen one of those flexibilities agreed to yet.

I want to put it on record that I and my party colleagues Paul Maskey MP and Louise Ferguson, who is one of our colleagues in the Assembly, met Theresa Villiers just a couple of weeks back. Coming away from that meeting, I was rightly concerned, because she made it clear — again, I do not want to misrepresent her — that issues around even the monthly payment were fundamental. That is her word, not mine. She made it very clear that these are fundamental issues that people such as Iain Duncan Smith are determined to see through, because they believe that that is the right way to do business. I said to her that that underlined the need for us to have that meeting with her, because, on the one hand, British Government Ministers are telling us that they need to agree to the flexibilities, but, when we talked to the Secretary of State, she said, “But hold on, these are fundamental issues”. Either they are fundamental issues from which they will not depart or agree to flexibility on, or we have a reasonable case here to shape the Welfare Reform Bill so that it better reflects the needs of the people we represent. We then get the

flexibilities or we do not. The problem for us is that, at this moment, we are being asked to pass the Second Stage and agree to the principles of a Bill that will continue to narrow our ability to change its details as we move forward in the months ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I am not giving way at the moment. Thank you, Dolores, but you have plenty of time to speak. I just want to make my points. Every Member will have their opportunity to speak.

In my view, we as a party are on the record as having diligently tried to work with the other parties and the British Government to change the Bill in what we believe to be fairly modest ways to reflect our particular circumstances. However, as yet, there has been no direct result from any of those discussions.

When this was dealt with at the Executive in recent weeks, we made it very clear that, as the Bill stands, we would not as a party support it. I want to deal with some of the public arguments on this, though I do not want to dwell on them. We have heard people say that, if Sinn Féin were serious, it would veto the Bill, table a petition of concern and so on. I will make it clear that, as a party, we considered all those options. However, we took the view that we are not looking to kill the Bill, block it or forget about it. We take the view that there will be a welfare reform Bill. There may even be positive aspects to it. We took the view that we wanted to be responsible and did not want to create a crisis in the Executive by simply saying that we were going to veto the Bill. However, we did, in fact, veto the Bill coming before the Executive for months. We did not say that publicly, advertise it or grandstand on the issue. The fact of the matter is that the Bill was not introduced until very recently. We made our position clear, because we wanted to deal with the Bill in a responsible way. We want all the parties to stand shoulder to shoulder. However, we made it clear that, in letting the Bill into the Assembly, we were not supporting it as it stands.

As I said, because we have not yet received any firm commitments from the British Government to amend the Bill as appropriate for the people we collectively represent, we are taking this step today with what we call a reasoned amendment. We think that it is actually a very reasonable amendment. It sets out the stall, and I call for support from all parties in the House to send a clear message to David Freud and his colleagues in London. We all heard George Osborne and David Cameron yesterday extolling the virtues of billions of pounds more coming off the welfare system in the next number of years.

I remind people that there are people in our society who are frightened about losing their job. Weeks ago in the Assembly, Members were decrying the fact that a lot of people in FG Wilson and other places had lost their job. So, on the one hand, we are going to decry the fact that they have lost their job and will perhaps be thrown on the dole queue, but, in the next breath, a week or so later, we are prepared to simply endorse legislation coming from Westminster that will, in effect, make the plight of those people worse once they are thrown on the dole. We cannot ignore that contradiction.

As I said before and as I will say again, maybe we will not be able to get any major changes to the legislation agreed with the British Government. However, if we do not try,

we should be ashamed of ourselves, and rightly so. I say that because, collectively, as parties, we represent a lot of people out there who look to us for support in a time of need and, unfortunately, in a growing recession. I call on the parties to support the reasoned amendment, which will defer the Bill for as long as it takes.

I want to deal with the issue of a petition of concern and vetoing the Bill. We chose not to veto the Bill, because we are not interested in causing a crisis in the Executive. I do not believe that people in our communities would thank any of us for creating a sense of crisis. We take our responsibilities seriously, so we want to try to amend the Bill. We considered a petition of concern, an option that is open to us at any point in the legislative process. Therefore, a petition of concern is not off the table. However, what we are trying to do is to say to parties, "Let us defer the Bill. Let us stop its Second Stage and go collectively to David Freud and his ministerial colleagues in London to get the changes that, he readily says, we are entitled to have". Therefore, these are entitlements and not a wish list that someone has drawn up. These are things that, we believe, better meet the needs of the people we collectively represent.

The reasoned amendment is not one that seeks to work out what is different or what parties disagree on. This morning, we heard the Minister cite a number of examples on which he shares the concerns that we have highlighted. No doubt we will hear from other parties this afternoon that share those same concerns. We share those concerns, so let us find a way of dealing with them in a manner in which we can change the Bill. We believe that that is very doable.

We do not accept the argument that, for some reason or another, we will end up facing a bill for £200 million. That figure was plucked out of the air yesterday. There is no reason why the Bill needs to be deferred indefinitely. The Assembly has not yet dealt with a successful reasoned amendment. The Assembly will set its own precedent when it wants to reintroduce a Bill. That is for this Assembly to decide, not Westminster or — dare I say it — Dublin. The Bill Office has told Members what precedents have been set in Westminster and Dublin, but we are supposed to set our own precedents.

We could have this agreement with the British Government settled in a fortnight. The Minister for Social Development is meeting the Minister next week; my party is meeting him the following week. Therefore, we could have agreements tied down very quickly, and the Bill could then complete its passage. All of that is very possible. Bear this in mind: if the Bill is not passed within a particular legislative time frame for some reason or another, current legislation remains in place, so we would not move into a void or a vacuum.

Furthermore, the social fund has been raised quite a bit. This Assembly decides how the social fund is disbursed. Power has now been devolved to it to design a social fund and disburse it in a way in which we believe is appropriate to our circumstances. Incidentally, until this month, that would have been a breach of parity. We have discussed that with departmental officials. Until very recently, we could not touch the social fund because of parity. We had to accept that we could not discuss it. However, now the British Government have decided to devolve the social fund — that is a breach of parity.

I referred to this earlier, but thankfully the Executive have been looking at perhaps taking mitigating measures. Some of those mitigating measures would also breach parity and would mean that the Executive would have to foot the bill for any breach. That is a judgement and decision for the Executive to make. I do not know what the outcome or their final decision will be, but the Executive have certainly considered it as an option, and I am glad that they have done. It means that the Assembly and the Executive have to take decisions.

Yesterday, in the Chamber, Members argued for more money for the farming community because of the specific circumstances of the agricultural community. The Minister was asked, because of those special circumstances, to provide additional support, and she came up with £15 million. Let me remind Members that that £15 million comes out of the education or health budget. Those are choices that parties and Executive Ministers are making, and rightly so, because that is what we are here to do. Unfortunately, choices have to be made at times. I am glad that other Ministers and DUP colleagues have made it clear over the past number of days that some of the changes that we seek to make to the Bill are about process and administration, not about money. Some of them would cost no money at all. Some of them are about changing how the system works and some are about perhaps reducing the level of sanctions that we are talking about imposing on some people.

None of that has to cost money; all of it is about the process and how we administer the system. We have been told repeatedly by British Ministers that we are entitled to some flexibility in our system because of our circumstances. I simply want to hold them to that.

4.30 pm

I do not want to go in to all the issues, but our reasoned amendment refers to issues such as the monthly payment. As we know, the monthly payment, under universal credit, is designed to be paid to a single person in the home. If we are all honest about it, we know that the big fear is that that is a regressive step. It means that, for the most part, a lot of women will once again be brought back to the position in which they will be dependent on somebody for every single penny that they might need to spend on their household. Is that what we want? Maybe some people do. Some of my best friends are men, but some men are not very fair when it comes to money in their household. That has been a traditional problem that we have dealt with. I am old enough to have grown up in Belfast when the done thing was that the man got the money and the woman waited until she got her money from the man. Sometimes, it was not an awful lot. I do not want to see that type of regressive social policy being reintroduced.

People like Iain Duncan Smith are mega-millionaires. It is all right for those people to say that people can budget their money over months; they can budget every decade because of the money that they have. The evidence that we have is that people do not budget their money on the basis of how often they get paid; they budget on their income. A lot of people in our society are on low incomes that do not stretch very well month to month. A lot of people in our workplace are on low incomes to the point at which they get paid weekly or fortnightly. Universal credit has to provide for those people who want

to have more regular payments. It should not be left to officials with discretion in very limited circumstances to say that a person cannot budget. You are going to have to go into debt to prove that you may fall into debt. Is that what we want to do? I remember the Simon Community's advertisements about people being four pay packets away from homelessness. Is that what we want? Universal credit will pay people in arrears to start with. Then, we are going to put them in another three months' arrears and work out that they cannot budget their money. They will be in debt; they will have started on that slippery slope. Is that what we want to do? I do not think so. It is not unreasonable for us to ask the British Government to make and agree that commitment. They could do it after a phone call from Nelson McCausland; he does not have to go to London to get that response. He could get that response from the Minister in London very quickly if they were minded to do that. Despite their rhetoric about us needing flexibilities and that they are prepared to give them, they have not granted any yet.

There are issues around direct payments to landlords. The Minister has repeatedly reported to the House in recent weeks that 86% of people who are in receipt of housing benefit opt to have their money paid directly to the landlord because they do not want to go into debt. They know that, if they had that money over a month and they are on a very low amount of money, they are likely to spend it or dip into it. Again, that is setting them into a spiral of debt. It is setting them into the situation in which they are not going to have enough money to pay their rent. That is a slippery slope to people being homeless.

On the work capability assessment, the departmental officials were at the Social Development Committee perhaps a week ago and reported on how the process around that is not very good. I have been diplomatic in my reference to the Department; most people think that the system is very flawed. That is what will transfer across from the reassessment of people on DLA to PIP. We, as a party, have no difficulty whatsoever with having a system in which people who claim sickness or disability payments are routinely reassessed. However, the primacy of medical evidence has to be at the heart of that process; not people who tick boxes and ask people whether they can move this way and that way. Those assessors are not properly trained. We have argued that with the Department, and we have not yet received a satisfactory response. People are assessing people without taking medical evidence into consideration. In a lot of cases, people who were disqualified from their payments have won their cases on appeal. Some people will tell you that they do not appeal because they are afraid of appealing or think that there is no point because they have lost their case. Is that what we want? I do not think so. I think that we are entitled to a system of assessment that is based on the primacy of medical evidence. It is no good officials telling me that the problem is that doctors will not provide evidence unless claimants pay the money. I do not care about that. The Health Department should take that up with the doctors. GPs are probably paid enough, and they are probably on a reasonably good salary and remuneration package that they can help people who are sick or disabled in some way. We should have a system in which a person's medical evidence is taken into consideration when their ability to work is assessed. A lot of people go to work, but a lot of people are in receipt of that benefit. We are saying that

medical evidence needs to be given primacy when people are assessed for that benefit. As yet, we do not have a process that people are confident in, and we are saying, reasonably, that we should fix the process. However, we keep talking about it and we keep getting reports. Professor Harrington is into his third year of producing reports, yet he has not set foot in the North of Ireland. In Britain, he has gone into local offices on spec and at short notice, carried out inspections and saw how claimants, or customers as we like to call them these days, have been treated in the process. He has not set foot in the North of Ireland and, yet and all, we are supposed to take reports from Professor Harrington that he is happy enough with the way the system is. I am sorry, no later than two or three months ago, Members from all parties in the Chamber were talking about this process. Lord Morrow and many other Members from the opposite Benches complained about people from their constituencies who were treated badly during the process of reassessment. That is what we are saying. Let us get it fixed. It is not too much to ask. Let us deal with the concerns we have.

Underoccupancy is another issue. To his credit, the Minister referred to the fact that we do not have the same housing stock flexibility here. We can blame the Housing Executive or successive Ministers for that all we want. However, that will not matter to the person who lives in a wee terrace house on the Shankill Road, Tiger's Bay, north Belfast or Dungannon, and who, in six months' or a year's time, might be told that, although it is not a Tory mansion, their house is a three-bedroom house and they will have to pay more for it than they can afford. If they cannot pay, they will have to move out. Where are they going to move to? We have things here called segregated housing and intimidation, and there is not a week goes by here that someone is intimidated out of a house somewhere on the basis of their race or religion. Are we going to tell those people that there is a house on the other side of the peace line and they should move to that house? You might say that is a special circumstance and that we will subsidise it. Does that mean that the Executive will subsidise that person? Theoretically, that person is able to live on the other side of the peace wall, but is not allowed to live there because of their colour or creed. Will we pick up the tab? Will the Executive pick up the bill for that? The British Government are going to want their money. Will we tell those people that that is, actually, suitable accommodation? It is actually not, because they will not be able to live there for 24 hours. Is the choice going to be that they move out or get put out, or will the Executive take the political decision that we will pay for that? Will that mean that we will pay for discrimination and intimidation? Those are big questions that we need to address. What we are saying is that, until there is the housing infrastructure that enables us to reallocate people through social housing to more appropriate accommodation, the provisions on underoccupancy cannot be passed. We would love and welcome the provision of more social and affordable housing, so that people will have those flexibilities. We will discuss with the Minister how we can provide that, and that will be our focus in the time ahead. However, how can we expect to introduce a Bill that provides that, even though there is not appropriate accommodation, if people, theoretically, have more rooms than they are entitled to, they will have to pay or get out? I do not think that that is the type of society we want.

Lone parents' conditionality is another very important issue. We do not have the same infrastructure here. In England, local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide childcare, but we do not have that here. Are we going to pass a Bill at Second Stage that will mean that lone parents will have to go to interviews or take up jobs within 48 hours — we do not really care where they get their childcare from — or they will be put on a sanction. Do you know what? The sanctions run from 91 days to three years. We think that they are quite draconian sanctions for people. We are expected to pass a piece of legislation sending out the message that we will impose this on people even though we will not give them the facilities, infrastructure or support to see that they get into work, yet this Bill is supposed to be all about getting people into work. I would like to see jobs being created in the first place, but leaving that to one side, placing sanctions on people and cutting their money will not exactly make their lives any easier. It will not get them more skilled-up, nor will it give them any more opportunities, and not providing childcare is another issue that means more lone parents will not be able to avail themselves of education. I know a lot of lone parents who are not only desperately willing to work, but would love to be able to go to work tomorrow morning, but they cannot get childcare that is affordable. Members in this Chamber have raised that issue more times than enough, so we know there is a problem: we are saying let us deal with it, and let us do so reasonably.

As I said earlier, we think there are reasonable requests for change and flexibility in the reasoned amendment. I could raise a lot of other specific issues, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, but I will leave that to other Members. All I want to do today is to say that we can shout and disagree as much as we want, and I suppose that is what people do in these places, but, at the end of the day, none of that will amount to anything more than hot air unless we collectively decide that we will work together, when the dust settles, in order to tackle the differences that we believe need to be enshrined in a piece of legislation.

I am very concerned, and I will use the Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations (NI) 2012 that we have been dealing with for the past few months by way of an example. That was going through in the last mandate. I read the relevant Hansard reports and spoke with party colleagues, because I had an issue as a South Belfast representative having had problems with some landlords in that area, particularly those in charge of HMOs. I am not talking about all landlords — far from it — but, nevertheless, we were told that the landlord registration scheme would be very effective. We were told that it would do A, B and C, and that big sanctions would be placed on that small number of landlords who misbehave in how they treat their tenants. Members were then told not to worry about it because it would be dealt with by way of secondary legislation, through a statutory rule.

What do we have now? We have a statutory rule — that we passed here the other week on that basis — and we were then told, “sorry, you cannot go that far; the primary legislation does not allow you to do that”. Now, that surprised members of the Social Development Committee from all parties. People from all parties said that they did not think that to be the case. We had been told that we could come up with a very good registration scheme, but we were then told that it falls well short because the primary legislation does not provide for it.

Our concern is that we are being asked to pass a Bill that is a piece of enabling legislation that will be followed by subordinate legislation for up to another year. There will be regulation after regulation, and this Department lays more statutory rules than any other Department, perhaps more than all the Assembly Committees put together, I do not know. It is probably close to that. We are being asked to pass this particular Bill, and then to try to get changes by way of a statutory rule, as I said, yet we are always told that we cannot really make such changes. At every meeting, officials will say, “Sorry; it is an issue of parity”. I have explored this very patiently, I believe, although I know that I can sometimes be quite curt at meetings, but I have tried to do my job diligently in the Social Development Committee. I have asked officials not to just tell me it is a parity issue and shut me down from thinking about it. I have asked them to tell me what the statutory rule or piece of legislation is designed to do, and what it might cost if I decide to do something different. We can then make decisions as to whether we want to go down that road.

My party and I are not prepared to accept an argument stating that “it’s parity, dear; forget about it”. We do not accept that. Parity has never properly been explored. Dealing with flexibility in the system does not have to mean breaking parity. As I said, I am glad to hear that the Executive have considered mitigating measures that might break parity and that they are prepared to pay for it, even for short periods. Thankfully, the principle has been broken, and rightfully so, I think, because all parties across the Chamber still have to do their best to help those people out there who are vulnerable.

What we are simply saying, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, and I say this to all Members, is that although we all have our different views, this is not about grandstanding, it is about us trying to get a better Bill. The easy way to grandstand would be to veto the Bill and to let Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness fight out the row on ‘Spotlight’ or something like that. That would be easily done and that is not going to solve the problem, because we would still have to come back to a welfare reform Bill.

4.45 pm

So, we are saying: “Let’s roll our sleeves up. Identify what the issues are. See what we agree on — and we have actually all agreed on quite a lot — and let’s take those talks directly with the British Government in short-shift time and get the changes to this Bill, which they actually acknowledge that we are entitled to have”. So, we are looking only for what we are entitled to; that is all. We are not looking for any more than that. We are not looking to kill the Bill. We are not looking to kick this into touch. We want to deal with it quickly. We set our own precedence in this House. We will come to the Bill as quickly as we possibly can. We believe that the changes that we require to the Bill are not that difficult to deliver. We are saying let us work together and deliver those changes, and we believe that we can do that quickly. I rest my case on that for the moment.

Ms P Bradley: My constituency of North Belfast has some of the most economically deprived, and, as such, I am committed to addressing poverty and worklessness, and their effects on our communities. Nevertheless, I am a firm believer in a hand-up and not a handout principle. I also believe firmly that the welfare system should be there as a

short-term measure for those who need it most. I find that constituents who contact my surgeries regarding benefit advice are often completely confused and frustrated by the maze of benefits that they are expected to navigate, as well as being unsure of the various regulations around each benefit. I believe that moving to universal credit will help to ease the process for those who find themselves in the unfortunate position of having to ask our society for support. I also believe that moving to this credit will allow for work to be more attractive, for many of the people that I speak to tell me that they simply cannot afford to work; it is simply financially better to be on benefits. As the Minister stated, we need to make work pay.

As a member of the Social Development Committee, I, like the rest of my colleagues, have made a firm commitment to examine all aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill. We, as a Committee, unanimously decided to devote what equates to — as the Chair stated — an extra two days a week to discuss and debate the Bill, clause by clause. At Committee Stage, we will also have the opportunity to hear from the Department and the many lobby groups. All the Sinn Féin amendments will be discussed fully at that Committee Stage, which is exactly where they should be debated. At no time have I heard from anyone that we have a perfect system in place. Most people here today would agree that our current welfare system is in need of a major overhaul.

I would like to address some of the issues in the amendment, and, as the Minister stated, there are core concerns from all parties. In the Chamber, only recently, we debated the issue of direct payments to landlords. My amendment called for the necessary systems to be put in place to allow for choice of payment, because we realise that it would prove financially detrimental for some if direct payment was not in place. I also believe that the move to monthly payments will benefit some of those who wish to return to work, as often people express concern about how they will support themselves and their family if they take up a monthly paid job. However, I also recognise that for others monthly payments would not be a viable option, and I support the Minister's endeavour to bring about flexibility to allow — within the administration of the reform — an option of biweekly payments.

For those in our society who have a genuine disability or illness, there should be no fear. As has been stated, we must protect the most vulnerable. The only people who should fear the changes are those who really are fit and able to work, even if that work is different from what they have done before. In Northern Ireland society, we are often inflexible when it comes to work. We identify one career path and tend to stick rigidly to it. The current global economic situation means that we have to be more flexible, and I believe that the changes in the Bill will help people become more flexible.

Let us be clear: we are a devolved Administration, which means that we are extremely limited in how far from Westminster policy we can afford to deviate, and we have an obligation to maintain parity with the United Kingdom. In previous debates and from the Minister in this debate, we have heard of the potential financial costs of breaking parity. The Minister and his Department have worked to ensure that the Bill takes account of our situation in Northern Ireland, while ensuring that parity is maintained.

I, therefore, believe that we have the potential to improve on the implementation of the Bill.

I am a realist at heart, and when I was elected to the House, it was with the realisation that some of the decisions that I could be making could possibly be unpopular with some people, but realism and common sense must prevail. We cannot afford to break parity and we cannot afford our current welfare bill indefinitely. What I find most alarming is that we have been developing, at the core of our society, a generation that does not see employment as an option and that views welfare as its right. None of that is good for Northern Ireland as a whole or for our citizens. I, therefore, support the Bill and oppose the tabled amendment.

Mr Copeland: First of all, I apologise to you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and to the Minister and, indeed, Mr Mickey Brady, for missing their opening remarks. I was unavoidably absent from the Chamber this morning due to constituency business, which had been previously notified to the Speaker.

With your permission, sir, I will speak about the general principles of the Bill shortly. However, I would like to make a few comments in regard to the timing of this debate. As I rise to speak today, I look back with a sense of frustration at recent events, not only since last Thursday evening, but throughout the progress — or not, as the case may be — that the legislation has made. It is, in my view, an indictment of the two main partners in the Executive, having dangerously delayed the Bill for so long, that there is now not only a genuine danger of it not receiving Royal Assent in time but a question about whether it will pass the stages that it needs to in this House.

This piece of legislation, the biggest reform of our social security system in generations, has, as has been said, the potential to encourage thousands of our people to move from welfare dependency into employment, to make the failing system fairer and to save billions of taxpayers' pounds. However, it also has the potential, if implemented wrongly, to destroy lives, to take away support from people who cannot afford to lose anything else and to leave behind many of the most vulnerable in this society, whom this Assembly has a moral obligation to protect.

Although I will talk on the reasoned amendment and the Bill together, I would like to make a number of preliminary remarks at this stage. I look across the Chamber at the Sinn Féin Benches and I see, obviously, an Assembly group that is not at ease with the Bill. I have no doubt that they have major concerns. I look at their amendments and, honestly, can agree with many, if not all, of their points. However, I also see a party in danger of neglecting its legislative and governance responsibilities. Their proposal to delay would be understandable if this was April or May, but it is not; it is October. Thanks to their track record on the issue, both in the Executive and behind closed doors, they must at least share some of the blame, as well as their partner, for the farce of only managing to bring the Bill to the House at such a late stage. I ask them one simple question: why have you, as lead partners in the Executive, left it so late? The Bill is so important to so many people that we quite simply cannot afford to get it wrong. Every Executive meeting at which they and their colleagues refused to get this on to the agenda meant, in reality, less and less time for the House to put right the obvious failings that will flow from this flawed legislation. It is the same for the regulations. Indeed, they make the very point at the

beginning that flexibility and consideration of Northern Ireland are crucial to the foundation of the entire Bill.

This Bill — these words that we are meant to be having a so-called high level discussion about today — was not drafted here in Northern Ireland, does not reflect Northern Ireland and shows absolutely no compassion for Northern Ireland. Where, Minister, are the differences between this Bill today and the Welfare Reform Act that received Royal Assent in March? Show us the flexibility that, you have said, Northern Ireland should exploit. If that flexibility lies within the regulations, tell us exactly which ones they are and what you intend to do about it. Your officials have had seven months. I ask you, Minister, to explain how they used them.

Of course, you could forgive us for knowing why Sinn Féin may have tabled this so-called reasoned amendment. The dogs in the street have a view; they can see it and they believe that it is a game of political brinksmanship, which it may or may not be. Sinn Féin thinks that waiting until now will allow it to send out hard-hitting statements so that its base will suddenly realise how anti-welfare reform it has been the whole time. I doubt whether the electorate in Northern Ireland likes being taken for fools. We have, thank God, put behind us what was once called an acceptable level of violence. Now, we are in danger of developing an acceptable level of political brinksmanship. Both are wrong. Both create casualties and neither represents good governance.

On that point, no matter what Sinn Féin says, there are some questions that will require further answers. Mr Maskey, cleverly, has predicted one of those questions and has gone some way towards addressing it. My first question is quite simple; why now? I apologise for repeating myself on this point, but it needs to be said. This Bill has been trapped in the corridors of Stormont Castle for months. Surely they should have used this time to put right what they considered to be the Bill's main failings. Would a delay now be a sign that they can complain about the passage of the Bill as much as they like but are, perhaps, resigned to seeing what may be its inevitable passage?

Perhaps the Sinn Féin leadership has suddenly realised that although it quite happily sits in the Northern Ireland Executive, which I welcome, overseeing what could be perceived as slashed services and depriving Departments such as Health of adequate funding, it sits in Dáil Éireann in the city of Dublin and, effectively accuses that Government of treachery for doing something very similar to what has had to be done here.

Secondly, for how long does it want to delay this Bill? Is it for an hour, a week, a fortnight, a month? It cannot be for a month, as we know, because there simply is not time.

My final question to Sinn Féin is the one that it may find most difficult to answer. If it is so diametrically opposed to the Bill in its current form, why was it not blocked in the Executive before it got here? On that latter point, even though it would appear —

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: Sir, I will follow your example.

On that latter point, even though it would appear that the Department for Social Development got up to even less work over the summer than everyone was expecting, Sinn Féin and the SDLP must realise that they can effectively

kill off this Bill and all of the little original work that has gone into it.

Nevertheless, my criticisms of Sinn Féin's actions on this issue are all the more frustrating for me, given the fact that the points that it raises in its reasoned amendment strike a chord. The reasoned amendment rightfully talks about the need to consider Northern Ireland's special circumstances. Neither I nor the Ulster Unionist Party want to be accused of being particularly parochial on welfare reform across the United Kingdom. As I have said, we recognise the need for change, but we must remember that, first and foremost, we are elected here in Northern Ireland to protect its citizens and address their needs.

Had this Bill been introduced before the summer recess with some, even primitive, detail on the regulations, as should have been the case, I would have had no difficulty in supporting Sinn Féin its efforts. However, as it knows, as well as everyone else, with the Bill coming forward at this late stage, we cannot easily allow its proposal to succeed. That is all the more upsetting, given that I and my party firmly believe that this Bill, as currently set in front of us today, is a bad deal.

In fact, I would go as far as to call it a rotten deal. I respectfully challenge the Minister to acknowledge that he has thus far been unable to make any even remotely substantive changes to the Bill.

5.00 pm

Now that I have made a few preliminary remarks on the delay, and before the Minister assumes that I or my party is calling for an outright breach of parity, I assure him that we are not. I have heard the word "parity" used more often in the past 18 months than I did in the first half-century of my life. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, parity means:

"the state or condition of being equal, especially as regards status or pay".

The Ulster Unionist Party understands parity. We often accept it, but we believe that Northern Ireland should not be entirely bound by it. Where room for flexibility exists, we should at the very least explore it, if not outrightly exploit it. On that point, as has been said, parity is often about much more than just financial matters. It is as much about operational matters.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Bill is about more than how much benefit a person is entitled to. Instead, it is a fundamental overhaul of the system. It is not only the amounts of money that are changing. So too is almost every other aspect. There is the scrappage — if that is the right word — of so many benefits and changes to entitlement and even simple administrative issues such as the frequency of payment. Whereas I do not dispute for one moment that there are currently far too many benefits with far too much complexity, I have to express a little bit of scepticism about the motivation behind this reform. The reasoned amendment also touches on that issue.

The coalition Government in Westminster has gone to great lengths to dismiss the notion that the whole welfare reform agenda is centred on cost-cutting. When I look at the current Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, I see a man who I believe is possessed

of compassion and genuine belief in what he is doing. Nevertheless, I cannot help but listen to other Cabinet Ministers and leading party figures and fear that the current pressures on spending are being used as cover to attack a system that some people are ideologically opposed to.

We must remember that the measures contained in the Bill and the changes to the social security system were announced as part of the coalition Government's June 2010 Budget and October 2010 spending review. Comments in recent days have done little to reduce my fear. Indeed, I have heard it said directly in the media that the sole purpose behind the latest raft of proposals is cost-cutting.

Do not get me wrong. I recognise the financial situation that the United Kingdom Government is in. As a nation, we are spending more than we are collecting through tax receipts. As of last month, our national debt stood at a staggering £1.04 trillion, which represents 66.1% of national income and £41,500 for each and every household in the country. Think about that for a moment; £41,500 for every single front door in the country.

Of course, some people may say that it is a bit rich for an Ulsterman to complain about spending more than is raised through taxes. However, I can quite happily refer them to the days when the city of Belfast contributed 20% of the United Kingdom's GDP. I tell them that I look forward to the day when we get ourselves through these current economic crises — which we will — and when we, in this part of the Kingdom, become net contributors once again.

Social security is a huge expenditure for the Treasury. Overall, the UK will spend well over £90 billion on welfare, excluding the state pension. In this financial year, £5.4 billion will be expended in Northern Ireland. It is said that the Westminster Government wants to cut that spending by £18 billion by 2015. However, that plan factored in economic recovery, which has not happened as yet.

The Bill contains 54,000 words. It is estimated that it will slice £317.9 million off the welfare bill in Northern Ireland over the next three years. That equates to £5,800 a word, and let us not forget that this money is above and separate from the block grant. Let us not forget that this money supports the poor, the needy, the sick and the disabled. The proposed legislation is, essentially, a matter of mathematics, and, as we all know, mathematics is a very unforgiving science. To quote — or misquote — Charles Dickens in 'David Copperfield':

"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen pounds and six shillings, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds and six shillings, result misery."

Mr Speaker, I will take a few more moments to go through a number of issues in the Bill, or, as you may prefer to have them called, the general principles of the Bill. I will start with Part 1. Not only does the Bill overhaul benefits but it wipes many of them out completely and starts from scratch with the introduction of universal credit. The scrapping of so many central benefits such as income support and child tax credits could, in theory, make what has always been a complex field more straightforward. We have no choice but to listen to the Department for Work and Pensions because the Department for Social Development has yet to demonstrate a shred of independent thought. DWP tells us that the overall objective of universal credit is to address

poverty by tackling worklessness and benefit dependency. I agree with the Prime Minister, as does probably everyone else in the Assembly, when he says that people should always be better off in work.

It is on this point that I will briefly make reference to the invisible half of welfare reform. You do not represent a constituency like East Belfast — I assume it is much like anywhere else in Northern Ireland — and not frequently hear of the concerns of the people who go out to work day after day and manage, but only just, to pay their bills. They do so without so much of a thank you from the Government, never mind being given support. People are struggling out there.

We can express real shock and real distress at occasional large-scale job losses, and the Executive Departments can call all the economic summits they like. However, all the while, it makes little immediate impact on the ordinary man or woman who receives no support from the Government. Effectively, as much is spent in Northern Ireland on social security as on the health service. I do not know many working people who would begrudge anyone their entitlements but they, rightly, need reassurance from us here and the Department that no one is taking the system for a ride. This welfare Bill should be as much about equality for them as it is about ensuring provision for those who will benefit from it.

Getting back to the issue of universal credit, I suppose that, of late, the benefits system has come to reflect the stereotype of government: complex, unwieldy and intolerant to learn from its own mistakes. The welfare system has more than 30 benefits, each with their own rules and criteria. I think that the idea of a single benefit is preferable. Without wanting to go into too much depth, I have concerns about a number of issues that surround universal credit. You would not think from reading Part 1 of the Bill that it is, effectively, setting in stone a complete overhaul of our benefits system. Despite the fact that the Bill runs to 133 clauses, seven parts and 12 schedules, it is, in many ways, purely enabling legislation. It broadly lays out the parameters of reform, and the real detail on the hardest hitting proposals and the deepest cutting thrusts will actually come in the form of the regulations.

The most concerning aspect of this whole debate is that the Assembly is being asked to walk blindly into the unknown. I recognise that the overall regulations are still out to consultation, but we are being expected to approve the creation of a new benefit without even knowing the amount of money and the rates of money that will be paid under it.

A mountain of research on universal credit has been conducted over recent months. We are all aware of the frequently quoted findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which are that, initially, welfare reform will affect all parts of Northern Ireland society equally but will increasingly have a harder impact on those on lower incomes.

I will go a little further on that point. Save the Children stated that single parents working longer hours on low pay will be substantially worse off under universal credit. It is hardly the new wonderful benefit that some would have us believe. I heard the Minister state that the introduction of universal credit will lift 10,000 children out of poverty. How many children will it push over the edge and into poverty? We must also remember that the latest figures from the

households below average income measure show that 21% of children in Northern Ireland live in relative poverty. The fact that 50,000 children live in what is termed as severe poverty is a shocking statistic and one that we all should be truly ashamed of.

The previous Programme for Government contained a target to reduce severe child poverty, and the Executive agreed a definition. However, the current Programme for Government appears to have dropped such a target. Why? To me, that looks like an admission of defeat before even trying. Of course, it is no surprise that even when there are government targets, as vague and unbinding as they are, such as the target to reduce fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, this Executive appear blasé about missing them. It is important that we remember that more than half of the children designated as living in poverty are part of a family in which a parent is in work.

As the Bill is seemingly just a copy of the one debated in Westminster at the beginning of the year, I am disappointed that the Minister has not been able to put forward his view and ask for it to be taken into account that Northern Ireland is completely lacking when it comes to a fully operational childcare infrastructure. I respectfully suggest that that needs to be addressed. This major factor means that Northern Ireland's lone parents will face a disproportionate share of pain through changes to universal credit and the additional conditionality and sanctions.

Another issue, one of many still to be laid out in public, is the major shift in the payment of benefits. I have concerns, for example, about the frequency of payments. The coalition Government have often stated their idyllic vision of monthly payments helping people to budget more appropriately and adapt to working conditions more smoothly. One small difference in Northern Ireland, however, is that the majority of people, even among those of us lucky enough to enjoy work, are not paid monthly.

I will give a very simplistic example of what could happen: a family or household receives a monthly entitlement but, within the first week, is forced by circumstances to spend a significant proportion of that filling their oil tank. How does the Department propose that this family will manage for the remainder of the month? The cynical observer may say that the family should have demonstrated more sense than spending too much on one utility. However, if the same observer realised the trauma that the family would, no doubt, have gone through when deciding whether to enjoy the benefit of heat or food, I am sure that he or she would understand why peace of mind on this issue is preferable. That was, I admit, an unsophisticated case, but it is one that I am sure will be encountered far too often if monthly payments are forced on the system here. It is the first change that the Ulster Unionist Party will seek to reverse, and we hope that the Department will be able to demonstrate some of the much talked about flexibility.

I also have concerns about regulations flowing from the Bill dictating that payments will go only to a single recipient in a household. Where a couple makes a joint claim, they will have to decide who receives the single payment. Very few of us know exactly what goes on behind the closed doors of any home, apart from our own. Giving total control over what may be, in some cases, significant amounts of money to a single individual would, to me, raise concerns about the welfare and vulnerability of other persons in the same household but also dependent on the same money. I ask

the Minister to detail what research has been done, either here or across the water, to determine how, in households where there may be domestic violence, a fair and reasonable method of payment can be retained. I accept that this, again, may be a hypothetical issue, but it is one that the Department must surely be considering.

5.15 pm

Of course, there is the issue of direct payments. I believe that it has taken such prominence during the discussion on welfare reform because, to me anyway, it makes absolutely no sense at all. Again, the Government may look towards the ideal scenario of a family on universal credit hurriedly searching for jobs, budgeting well with their monthly payments and always making sure to keep enough aside to pay the rent. That is idealism and, unfortunately, it very seldom imitates reality. The Consumer Council has interesting research that shows that Northern Ireland comes bottom of the UK league of financial capability — a damning indictment. Indeed, it found that one in five people here feel that it is not important to keep up to date with financial matters.

Direct payments are genuinely an issue that baffles me. No one — and I mean no one — with any sense wants this, apart from officials. I could maybe understand if tenants were crying out for it to be built into the Bill and the regulations, but they are not. In fact, for those tenants who would like to avail themselves of direct payments, the option is already there. Very few take it up. The Department for Work and Pensions and maybe even the Department for Social Development might think that empowering people with the responsibility to pay their rent to their landlord may be a positive step but, to me, forcing such a move is totally contradictory to what any responsible Government should even consider doing. Over the past months, I have heard countless welfare and advocacy organisations pleading for direct payments to be avoided. They fear that personal debt will rocket and that, for many, rent arrears will spiral out of control and homelessness may then, unfortunately, become an even greater problem.

On top of that, we must also be aware of social and private landlords. The latter is a group of people whom I am not afraid to criticise when things go wrong, but, in this case, they will be faced with significantly reduced financial security that comes from direct payments. The housing associations that the Executive are dependent on to meet housing targets have, up to now, been able to secure borrowings at highly competitive rates, maximising their capital resources and subsequently delivering a good deal for the taxpayer. Any change to the current system could dramatically scale back the availability of necessary private finance.

The Minister will, no doubt, be aware of the five demonstration projects that the Department for Work and Pensions has announced in order to prepare for the changes. These demonstration projects will run from June 2012 to June 2013. Will the Minister detail whether Northern Ireland will be running similar demonstration projects, and if not, why not?

I will make one last point on direct payments and then move on. Tenants already avail themselves of direct payments. In some cases, up to 20% of tenants do that, and that is welcome. Therefore, when the Minister inevitably stands up later and makes excuses about IT

systems not being capable or gives explanations about IT systems not being capable, he may even be able to use the excuses of DWP about personal responsibility. Either way, I urge him, on this particular issue, to show some compassion for the people whom he is charged with looking after. There is a very simple answer to this. Rather than simply having direct payments or none, why is the Department not offering a choice? If people continue to insist on it, the Department could gently nudge them towards accepting and taking up that responsibility, if it believes that they can handle it. Indeed, DWP has already announced such flexibility for lone parents.

I suppose that the benefits cap has been one of the more interesting aspects of the whole debate on welfare, with many people coming down on one or other side of the argument. At first glance, the proposal to limit the level of entitlement to welfare benefits to £500 a week for a couple and £350 a week for a single household makes sense to me. If we are serious when we say that work should always pay, the only way to truly ensure that is the introduction of a cap. Interestingly, the benefits cap is an issue through which strict parity will benefit Northern Ireland, as it will effectively be set to correspond with the level of earnings in Great Britain. For clarification, will the Minister detail exactly how many households will be affected in Northern Ireland? I have sought that information from the Minister previously, but, as yet, I have not received a definitive answer.

I do not need to reiterate all the points that other Members and I made on the changes to housing benefit, many of which have already been enforced in Northern Ireland. We all know the issues — an increasing housing benefit budget being slashed by unsympathetic means.

Given our lack of appropriate housing, I sought guarantees from the Minister previously on the safeguards arising from the changes to the shared room rate. I ask him again today whether he can tell me what he has done. Can he tell me that Northern Ireland's housing stock will be able to adapt to the changes to housing benefit now and in what is yet to come?

I will now move to a wider issue. If made law, many of the requirements that are laid out in this legislation will place significant requirements on claimants, and they will be expected to meet those requirements to receive benefits.

I do not want to stray from the debate too widely, but I remind the Minister that the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits stood at 63,100 in August. Sadly, if recent events are anything to go by, that is heading in only one direction. I am sure that, until recently, even the Minister looked on appreciatively when he noted that Northern Ireland's unemployment level was below the UK average. I am sorry, but with a rate of 8.2%, we are now on the wrong side of average, and we are significantly off-message with our economic inactivity rate of 26.9%, which is the highest among the 12 UK regions.

We must also remember that young people who are growing up in workless households are much more likely to struggle to find stable employment. The point that I am making, Mr Speaker, is that, as I skim through Part 2 of the Bill, I can see all the new glossy clauses on conditionality and sanction. I have seen and heard little over recent months about how the Department expects people to move from benefits to jobs when so few jobs are available.

I am in no doubt that welfare reform must work in tandem with a revitalised economy, improving our education system and increasing early intervention. There is a clear link between long-term unemployment, cycles of deprivation and health, and Northern Ireland must begin to tackle the plight of those people who are becoming trapped in a web of dependency. Today's proposals do nothing to answer those questions.

Although it is not fair to blame only the Department for Social Development, which, after all, appears to have taken its usual unwavering direction from DWP, I find it sadly characteristic that, even in the biggest shake-up of welfare in generations, it has found the time to devote enough energy to reviewing its counter-fraud and error capability.

Officials and the Minister are keen to detail that, under the Bill, claimants who fail to report or are negligent with their claims will face strict financial penalties. I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that, although his Department administers around £5 billion each year on benefits, it incurred losses of only £54 million in 2011 to error and fraud. Any right-thinking people will say that £54 million is still too much, and I agree, but it must be taken in context. That accounted for 1.1% of total expenditure, and it compares very favourably with estimates of over 2% for the Department for Work and Pensions. Of course, like any good Department in Northern Ireland, DSD distances itself from the blame for supposed failings. I make the point that, of the 1% loss, 0.4% is fraud, 0.3% is customer error and the other 0.3% remains official and departmental error.

Another major element of the Bill is the introduction of the personal independence payment (PIP), which will, beginning in June 2013, replace disability living allowance. Of course, it is emblematic of the way in which the process has been conducted that, even now, we have very little idea of what the detailed design of PIP will look like. Although I hope that there will be a simplification of the process, I hope even more that the Department is aware of what it is letting itself in for by taking this on at the same time as the introduction of universal credit.

The Department claims, quite rightly in my opinion, that DLA is in dire need of review. It has not been looked at since its introduction 20 years ago. Again, DLA is a benefit about which there is quite a degree of genuine public concern. Every year, the Department administers three quarters of a billion pounds of Treasury money on that benefit alone, which is a sum bigger than many of our Executive budgets put together. The need for disability living allowance and personal independence payments, when introduced, is comprehensive, but we need to ensure that it is targeted at those who need and deserve it. With over 10% of our population — 180,000 people — currently in receipt of DLA, I hope that the Department is fully prepared for the body of work that it, and its staff on the ground, is about to embark on.

I wait patiently for the regulations coming forward — the details, the final rules — on what constitutes "daily living" and "mobility" activities when assessing entitlement to PIP. I cannot emphasise to the Minister enough the sheer importance of getting that particular aspect of welfare reform right. People, whether they be on the mobility component or the daily living component, will be subsequently judged, and for many other schemes, using that determination. For example, what about

members of victims' groups in Northern Ireland and their eligibility for funding through channels such as the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund? I plead with the Minister to give a commitment that such individuals will not be disadvantaged through the reforms.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to raise my concerns about the overall assessment process of the new payment. I urge the Minister to look at the work capability assessment and everything that has gone wrong there, and learn, sir, please, from those mistakes. There is a justifiable concern that a private company involved in that travesty will now be in a prime position to secure the bid for assessing personal independence payment applicants. If that happens, all that I will say is that the Minister needs to think long and hard about the performance-related measures that he builds into that particular contract.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: No. Mr Maskey did not give way, so I do not think that I will either.

Finally on PIP, if I could make one request of the Minister, it would be this: be understanding of Northern Ireland's individual need. The small Province that we all jointly call home is but a small dot on the global map and has emerged out of 40 years of murder and mayhem, something that continues to contribute to the fact that the current main disabling condition for disability living allowance recipients here is mental health problems. That is over 40,000 people, many of whom already believe that this world can be a scary enough place, and who are now to run the gauntlet of being forced through new assessments. If people on disability living allowance are not successful in their applications for PIP, that will have a far greater impact than just the immediate financial loss, for it will affect their entitlement to other forms of support. If they decide to appeal, they will face even further costs, in the tribunals. Some, I have no doubt, can and should be removed off this benefit. However, those about whom I am most concerned are the silent majority who will remain too afraid to speak up and have no one to speak for them and claim what they are entitled to.

5.30 pm

I urge the Minister to ensure that there remains an appropriate level of support and information for people during this entire process. Given that there will be huge numbers of people involved in the adoption of universal credit, not to mention the transfer to PIP, it is vital that appropriate provisions are put in place to ensure that the process runs as smoothly as possible. As elected representatives, we all know the value of independent advice services in our constituencies. Without them, I doubt that anyone in the House believes that the current social security system would be able to cope currently, never mind after the reforms are brought in.

Throughout my time in Castlereagh and east Belfast, I have worked closely with organisations such as Advice NI, and I cannot stress enough the role that those organisations play. Therefore, I make a specific request of the Minister to support the inclusion of a new clause in the Bill, which gives people a statutory right to independent advice and support.

Another huge issue facing all of us here today, especially if the amendment is successful, is the future of the social fund in Northern Ireland. Unless today's legislation proceeds through all the necessary channels correctly, there is a risk — and I do not think it is a bluff or a threat — that all the crucial support that this offers may disappear. It is highly regrettable that we now find ourselves in the situation of needing to make haste or rush. We must bear in mind the hundreds of thousands of people who benefit from this fund each year. Surely, Minister, there are safeguards that you could put in place so that this situation cannot come to fruition if we find ourselves out of sync with the current timetable.

Given that welfare reform has now come to the fore, it is important that the Executive as a collective body come to agreement on the future of passported benefits in Northern Ireland. From what I can see, the problem is the same as it is with every other issue, which is that every Department administers its own individual benefits. Until the Departments can put that silo mentality to the side, the argument is over even before it has begun.

It will be necessary for Departments here to develop new solutions to enable them to have new criteria in place for the introduction of universal credit. I am glad that there appears to have been at least some planning for this, given that Departments across the water are in discussions with officials here. Of course, much like everything else in the Bill, these efforts look to me to be too little, too late. It is unsurprising that I have been told that the Department for Work and Pensions is currently, and, allegedly, desperately, trying to pull together an interim IT system to buy a little time.

The Minister may not have wanted it raised here today, but I am sure that he has yet to receive one willing participant. However, the issue of introducing income thresholds for eligibility for these passported benefits must be confronted and addressed. I am led to believe that the Executive subgroup on welfare reform, which my colleague Danny Kennedy has been faithfully attending for months on end, was recently debating this issue. Just on that point, given the situation that we see here today, with the Bill being introduced so late that it is right on the wire, and, to some, the subsequent grandstanding Sinn Féin amendment, what does the Minister for Social Development actually believe that the subgroup achieved? One thing is for sure: it certainly was not political consensus. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide an update on his intentions for this group now that the Bill has finally been introduced.

I have raised a number of specific issues in the Bill and the regulations that may flow from it. There is no doubt that the proposed legislation places upon us a heavy responsibility, as these changes will impact on a great many of our citizens. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that each of us is aware and takes into account the things that may, and will, flow from our actions here today.

At this point, I would like to mention the level of public awareness about what is coming down the line. If you asked people in the street whether they know about imminent welfare reform, I am sure that many of them would say that they do. However, if you then asked them to explain it, they would be stumped. That is not their fault; rather it is a failure of the Department to adequately inform the public about what is coming.

We all know about the digital television switch-over and have done so for years. However, for the past number of months, we have not been able to go anywhere — even the Great Hall — without being confronted by messages about the digital switch-over date. Those messages are everywhere: on the radio, on billboards and even on the television itself. Yet there are huge gaps in public awareness about the most radical shake-up of social welfare in the past 50 or 60 years. Of course, the rationale behind the TV switch-over campaign was to avoid a surge of people turning on their televisions to see blank screens, but surely people getting letters saying that their benefit has gone or has been scrapped will have an even more daunting effect. Therefore, all I say is this: the Department needs to consider getting its act together on this and start clearly communicating the message to the public that big changes are coming and that the support that people may be receiving now could be very much reduced and significantly difficult to obtain in years to come.

It may surprise people outside the Chamber who are listening to this debate that we are speaking in such a methodical tone, but that, unfortunately, is the manner of the Bill. It was clearly drafted with little compassion or understanding. It is all the more disappointing that Northern Ireland had an opportunity to make its points but that it has, so far, been unsuccessful. I fear that the ship may have already sailed on many of these issues. The failure of Northern Ireland to adequately get safeguards built into the Bill here and in London means that we all face an uphill battle.

The burden that is about to descend on us here and on the Committee for Social Development is unique because, out of the three devolved Assemblies and Parliaments that serve the United Kingdom, we alone accepted the devolution of these responsibilities. We will consider, discuss and eventually arrive at the dreaded moment when politics become real and we are required to make judgements and take a decision in the sure and certain knowledge that we will bring misery to so many of our people.

As I approach the end — you will be glad to hear — I wonder, to misquote Winston Churchill, what is the good of all this. The only guide to a man or, indeed, a political party is their actions; the only shield to their memory is their conscience and the rectitude of their actions. Without this shield, it is very unwise to go down any path as we are so often let down by the failure of our calculations and the unforeseen outcomes of our actions. With this shield, however, we will walk always in the legions of the righteous.

The Bill in its current form will, in effect, remove money from the Northern Ireland economy that is not currently included in the block grant. The overwhelming majority who benefit in the current legislation from those payments do not have any real disposable income after the essentials of shelter, food, heat, light, power and clothing have been apportioned. The Minister referred to claimants moving to work. However, he is negating the fact that Northern Ireland has a low-wage economy, and, unfortunately, too many people find themselves in the position of needing to almost subsidise their wages with benefits. Although the Bill and the subsequent regulations may have a cost saving, I genuinely fear that they will inevitably force already struggling families to rein in their spending that

little bit extra, and an immediate knock-on effect will be felt by local businesses.

I hope that today's debate and even some of what I said will be of some benefit to the Minister, even if it is the case that Committee members reiterated what many of us have held as long-term concerns. Unfortunately, the Minister has yet to indicate that he has listened.

The truth behind all the numbers and rhetoric is that the legislation will impact on people. It will impact on people regardless of their age, race, religion, colour or gender — many of them, to our shame, among the most vulnerable and helpless. I think of the former UDR soldier awaiting an ESA appeal. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder having witnessed his comrade being blown in half in front of him. A few years later, he came home to find his partner in the act of taking her own life. He held her limp body, calling for help, but no help came. He broke down at the last appeal hearing and, on the advice of a doctor, it had to be abandoned.

I think of the young woman with whom I attended court this morning in a last-ditch attempt to prevent her from acquiring a criminal record. Expelled from school in her early teens and currently at tech learning basic literacy and numeracy skills, her daily medication list would baffle most pharmacists. Those medications are an attempt to treat ADD, ADHD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, threatened schizophrenia, self-harm, mild spectrum autism and personality disorder. That is a lot to carry in a 20-year-old head.

I think of the young woman who recently had a meeting with my party leader and me. Her legs, from her knees to her waist, are scarred with razor cuts like railroad tracks after she desperately tried to eradicate the memory of years of sexual abuse at the hands of her brother. Her ESA appeal, and it should never have got to that stage, had to be abandoned, and the process was tantamount to cruelty and torture. I know because I was there.

Those are among the people who will find that the amount of money that currently allows them to subsist at the lowest levels of society is cut to the point at which subsistence is impossible. There are difficult decisions coming down the line, and the Committee, under the guidance of Mr Maskey, faces many long days of work. Admittedly, because of the short timescale, we will not, in my view, be able to dedicate the appropriate time that each of those people deserve.

The Bill will affect every demographic in every constituency. Therefore, no political party should ever believe that it should be awarded anything but the maximum scrutiny. When we consider this legislation, as we must, word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph and clause by clause, we must ask ourselves several questions. What happens if we support this? What happens if we do not? Who will benefit and enjoy advantage? Who will not benefit and endure disadvantage? What will it cost? Finally, perhaps for me most importantly, can another way be found?

Today's debate, which has plenty of words but little in the way of detail, will be followed by regulations that we have yet to see. However, that, I fear, will be the most painful part and where there is least room for amendment. This is all the more frustrating given the fear that many of the regulations may, by necessity or design, be brought in through confirmatory resolution. How is the Assembly meant to demonstrate total scrutiny of these proposals

when Members' chance to vote for them comes six months after they have been introduced? I ask the Minister to detail by what procedures he envisages each of these regulations coming through.

Drawing my remarks to a close — there will be a cheer now — I reiterate the Ulster Unionist Party belief that there are too many benefits with too many differing criteria. To do nothing is not an option. Inaction would only make things worse in future years as welfare expenditure starts to cripple public spending. When something is starting to fail, you fix it. However unpalatable these proposals may be, we are faced with the reality of a coalition Government seemingly unprepared to listen and a Social Development Department that has yet to make its voice heard.

Nothing that I said should be taken as support for the Bill. However, the reasoned amendment takes us all into uncharted and dangerous waters. On balance, to enable the Committee to do its work, we will allow the Bill to pass Second Stage. I must warn the two main parties that this is not a blank cheque and that we reserve the right, in future, to follow our conscience and, if necessary, withdraw support for this flawed, compassionless, soulless mathematical calculation that does not put people first.

5.45 pm

It is the responsibility of everyone in the House to ensure that what we do now, we do right. I will leave you with one final quote, which is from a film called 'Forrest Gump':

"That's all I have to say about that."

Mr Durkan: I find that, when Mr Copeland starts to speak:

"You never know what you're gonna get."

I oppose the Bill and support the reasoned amendment. It will be hard to follow what was quite possibly the best and certainly the longest speech I have ever heard in opposition to legislation.

In the event that the amendment falls, we wish to go further. We in the SDLP accept, indeed welcome, the need for a simple, more accessible benefit system, but we will not accept the Bill, which, as it stands, is a shameful attack on the vulnerable in our society. We will not swallow the Tories' peddling of cuts dressed as reform, nor will we accept the demonisation of people on benefits.

This Assembly must do what it was elected to do. We must represent the people of Northern Ireland, and we must, in this case, defend them. In its current form, the Welfare Reform Bill does not recognise any specific circumstances of Northern Ireland. We are not oblivious to the implications and the constraints of breaking parity. We hear loudly the threatening noises from Westminster and their echoes in this Chamber and over the airwaves, but we cannot and will not accept any legislation that will force thousands of our citizens into poverty.

We previously said that we would not accept the Bill without some concessions and flexibilities, some of which are rightly identified in the amendment, which I will speak about in more detail later. We have been patient in waiting for the Minister to secure the concessions. I do not dispute the effort of the Minister or his officials, but we must examine the results to date. Despite ongoing meetings and negotiations with DWP and Lord Freud, we have not been

presented with anything that takes specific account of our circumstances. Is DWP leading DSD a merry dance? We need to see real evidence of its commitment if we are to let this Bill pass even to its next stage. We are not prepared to just rubber-stamp Tory legislation. The Minister will argue today that we have no choice and that we simply cannot afford to sustain our own welfare system. I agree and understand. However, the ball is in the Minister's court, where it has been for some time.

We have received continual assurances that work is ongoing and progress is being made in securing a better system for the North. The specific circumstances of this region have been acknowledged time and again, yet here we are today with what is basically a blueprint of a Tory Bill. It is not working in England, and it will most certainly not work here.

The legislation is an insult to the people of the North, and it is insulting to this institution as a law-making body. We are meant to be a devolved Government. We are bound to legislate in a manner that serves our people best, but allowing the Bill to pass as it is certainly does not do that. That is why we support the reasoned amendment and why, should it fall, we are prepared to explore triggering a petition of concern to prevent the passage of this attack on our people.

While the amendment is not exhaustive, it certainly encompasses the real concerns we all, I am sure, share relating to the Bill. Yesterday, our party, through our Executive Minister Alex Attwood, explored the utilisation of Standing Order 35. Its utilisation would instigate the creation of an ad hoc Committee to deal with equality and human rights issues in new legislation. We recognise the consequences of dumping parity, but it would be weakness to allow our people to be dumped on by parity. Our idea with this Committee is to stretch parity, not to break it, so that welfare law and administration can be formed, and informed, by the rights and equality protections that are promised to all our people. Those are duties with which this Assembly is corporately charged.

Specific issues relating to women and children are covered under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and such a Committee would thrash those out fully. We must use our constitutional tools to make a better job of what is clearly a bad cross-over Bill. If we do not, we are guilty of a dereliction of a dramatic capacity and of indifference to the Bill's serious implications for vulnerable people.

Furthermore, Standing Order 35 makes the Bill an issue about Assembly responsibility. We have already heard about the Minister's discussions with Freud. Alex Maskey, the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, spoke of a meeting with Lord Freud in the near future. My own party, the SDLP, has also made representations and has had meetings in that manner. At one of those meetings, we were given assurances on direct payments and on the possibility of retaining fortnightly payments.

However, this privatisation of parties going separately suits DWP. We need to work together on this as an Assembly. This Committee would be a tool for us to do so in an open and transparent manner. It would flag up the gross inequalities in the Bill and prove our need for concessions to Westminster. It transpires that the Standing Order can be invoked only by a Minister acting with Executive approval or by the relevant Committee

Chairperson. I appeal in both directions that that be given serious consideration. It would give an outworking to the very pertinent points that have been made in the reasoned amendment. It would not have a massive impact time wise, and it can only strengthen the Minister's hand in his ongoing negotiations.

The SDLP has been consistent and vociferous in its concerns about and opposition to welfare cuts. We have a strong track record on welfare reform at Westminster, in the Executive, and in the Assembly. Indeed, several months ago, I tabled a motion calling for the mitigation of the negative impact of this Bill on vulnerable people to be escalated to the highest political priority of the Executive.

In the past, we have seen the prioritisation of other issues, such as the devolution of policing and justice, the Presbyterian Mutual Society, and, more recently, corporation tax. However, the House rejected our calls. Now, it looks as though this issue has become a very high political priority, and we firmly believe that any threat or prospect of impasse could have been ameliorated by earlier decisive action.

Another strand of our proposal incorporated the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee to work on the Bill, and, today, we renew that call with reference to Standing Order 35. Such pre-legislative scrutiny may have staved off the need for brinkmanship now.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Sorry. No other Members have given way today, and I will not do so either. Thank you. I will be here for quite some time; if I need a break, I will come back to you. *[Laughter.]* Where the Bill is concerned, we have always agreed that our welfare system needs reform. However, we cannot stand by and see it completely dismantled. The rationale given by the Tories, which has been regurgitated here in the past and again today, is that the Bill is about making work pay and helping people into work. That is an admirable sentiment; however, it is also false. The real motivation here is clear: it is about cutting costs, and those who are on welfare are evidently a much easier target than big business and tax dodgers. Further evidence of that came out of the Conservative conference yesterday: there are to be further cuts, to the tune of £10 billion, and policies on child benefit that would not be out of place in some dystopian fantasy. It is easy to come up with those policies from the comfort of an ivory tower in Whitehall. The approval and implementation of them here — for us and by us — is a completely different proposition. I do not doubt for a second that every MLA in here has serious concerns about the impact of the legislation in their constituency and on their constituents, friends and family. We must, as I said, work together to make the Bill, which none of us can deny is an odious piece of legislation, less damaging. However, as it stands, we cannot accept it. The SDLP cannot and will not vote to let it pass.

Although what we know about the Bill is terrifying, and what it will enable is even worse, the real devil is in the lack of detail. Passing the Bill in its current form without regulations is inviting even further cuts and hardship. We have seen the appetite of the coalition Government for attacking the vulnerable. Who is to say what a single Tory Government might do in the future? The Bill enables them not so much to move the goalposts as make them portable so that they can be moved over and over again.

Let us look at what we know: the Bill will have a major impact on people's incomes, their housing, their mental and physical health and their independence, and on the lives of men, women and children. It will have major repercussions across society as a whole, not just on benefit claimants. Millions and millions of pounds will be lost from our local economy, and that will inevitably result in further job losses and shop closures.

Should the Bill progress to its next stage, we as a party and I as an individual, along with my colleagues on the Social Development Committee, will work tirelessly to identify, craft and table positive, realistic and achievable amendments to it. The areas that need improved are manifold. My party colleagues will elaborate on them later, but I will give an overview of what we see as the major problems. The proposal for a single household payment to one nominated person has caused great consternation, particularly among those in the women's and children's sectors, who correctly view it as a highly retrograde step that will inevitably lead to an increase in financial abuse and, more than likely, physical abuse and family breakdown. We should enable split payments under equality grounds.

Universal credit is to be a digital self-service — I am not going to talk about the digital switch-over, so do not worry. People will be expected to make their claims online. I want to know exactly how it is intended that that will be managed, given people's lack of access to computers and their lack of confidence and computer literacy. The Committee was presented with research from Ipsos MORI on the matter. Despite what I felt was clever manipulation of statistics to disguise it, the research indicated that that could and will be a real nightmare. The Government say that they will assist people, but I have concerns over the time frame and the amount of money that it will take to get people, particularly older people, digitally ready. Furthermore, what are the implications for our many rural dwellers here, where broadband connectivity is patchy, to say the least?

The move towards universal credit, we are told, is also about teaching responsibility. The household payment will be monthly, and claimants who have little or no experience of budgeting will be expected to learn the hard way.

We fear that this monthly payment is fraught with danger. It maximises the risk of families running out of money weeks before their next payment and having to rely on charities or, much worse, on loan sharks to survive. I believe that an increase in real poverty and debt is inevitable. The policy has been defended as mirroring the experience of working households, all of which, we are told, are paid monthly. From Westminster, this displays a complete lack of knowledge, lack of research and, indeed, a lack of interest. We know that the vast majority of households here comprise people who are on low incomes and are still paid weekly. Iain Duncan Smith recently spoke about ensuring that the IT system has the capacity to retain fortnightly payments for vulnerable people and families. Who defines "vulnerable"? If the IT system can differentiate for a few, surely it can differentiate for many.

6.00 pm

Universal credit will streamline existing benefits. We have seen the commencement of this streamlining with the migration of claimants from incapacity benefit

to employment and support allowance, prior to its subsumption into universal credit. This process has been traumatic for thousands of claimants, particularly here in the North where we have higher levels of incapacity, especially through mental health conditions, which have been attributed to the legacy of the Troubles. These circumstances were not recognised when this regulation was introduced, and its impact has been disastrous. We have a fitness-for-work assessment that is not itself fit for purpose. People's lives have been wrecked, and people's conditions seriously worsened. The Department has been unable to handle the huge number of appeals, many of which have been successful following erroneous assessments. We must ensure that lessons are learnt. We must address this mess and, of course, be certain that the new personal independence payment test for DLA claimants is fair and robust.

Universal credit is not only for those out of work or unable to work. Some 200,000 people here are on tax credits, many of whom have very specific circumstances. Streamlining the system treats people as numbers, with little or no regard for circumstances. We need further clarification of what circumstances might, would or could be considered, especially for caring responsibilities and for those caring for severely disabled persons.

The introduction of, and increase in, sanctions on people on universal credit deemed fit to work is very worrying. Where are the people who dreamt this up from?

Mr Hamilton: I will give the Member his answer as to who dreamt this up. We know where the legislation was dreamt up. Like all legislation, it came from across the water, but it was implemented in Northern Ireland. The Minister who introduced the primary legislation was the Member's party colleague Alex Attwood.

Mr Durkan: Thank you for the intervention. I asked where the legislation was dreamt up. As the Member said, we know where it was dreamt up. It was certainly not dreamt up here either by my party colleague or by your party colleague the current Minister. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: The Member has the Floor.

Mr Durkan: That is not where it was dreamt up. It was not dreamt up here, but we have to live with it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Durkan: Was that another intervention?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: With the unemployment rate here in the North so high, and there being so little in the way of job creation and opportunities, this is not so much helping people into work as taking money off people for not being able to find work, or, given the flaws in the work capability assessment, people who are physically incapable of work.

We need to focus more on job creation. Not only are we incapable of creating jobs for our people but we are imposing draconian measures that will force more and more of our young people to leave their families and take their chances in Australia or wherever.

There are also issues around the imposition of sanctions on an individual when there is a single household benefit and the impact that such sanctions will have on children in that household. The single household payment, or rather

the nominated person provision, is also likely to cause confusion when one partner reaches pensionable age. For example, will a couple's eligibility for exemption be determined by the age of the older or younger partner?

The implications of this Bill for housing here cannot be overstated. We have already debated some aspects of this in the Chamber, most recently when we brought forward a motion, two weeks ago, calling for the retention of direct payment of housing benefit to landlords. Under universal credit, it is proposed that these direct payments are abolished, and that can lead only to debt, hardship and homelessness. Housing benefit requirements here are very different to those elsewhere in the UK. Given that the majority of claimants in Northern Ireland have never had to budget for rent on any basis, it will be much more difficult for individuals and families to adjust to the universal credit system as a whole. It is also accepted that people here are less financially capable than their counterparts in the other regions. People here will require much more support and training to learn the skills needed to manage their financial affairs. In Northern Ireland, there is a reliance on Post Office accounts that is not prevalent in other jurisdictions. This will increase the difficulty for tenants to make payments to landlords on time, as the accounts do not allow for outward payments.

Underoccupancy is another aspect of the Bill that is hugely punitive and draconian. Tenants will see their housing benefit drastically reduced and will have to make up the difference from other components of their universal credit, which is already based on subsistence levels. Given the segregated nature of our housing stock and our very limited number of smaller housing units, this policy will be unworkable here.

The Bill deals with the development of personalised support through the personal independence payment. We are in favour of the aim to support disabled people to exercise choice and control and to lead independent lives. However, we have genuine concerns, which are shared by people with disabilities, their carers and their advocates. Although we appreciate the need for reform to create a simple and efficient system, we worry that, in practice, the changes to DLA will do just the opposite. We have a duty to protect and support the most vulnerable, and we will only accept a reform of DLA that is able to support disabled people and their families and enable them to deal with the additional costs associated with their needs. We have major concerns that, under PIP, differences will be based on age rather than on severity of disability. Another huge worry is the suspension of PIP within two weeks of a claimant's hospitalisation. The prevalence of mental illness here in the North is, in itself, grounds for us to be considered a special case, and the failures of the work capability assessment, to which I referred earlier, do not give us confidence that the PIP assessment will be thorough and take proper account of these considerations.

The extension of the qualifying period to six months will hinder those in need of urgent help or with short-term but serious conditions. We welcome the inclusion of special rules for those who are terminally ill, but we are worried that the removal of the automatic benefit entitlement for certain groups will have a devastating impact. Existing categories, such as blindness, deafness and severe mental impairment, must be protected and retained.

The impact of the Bill will be particularly harsh on women, and my colleague Dolores Kelly will elaborate on that later.

One aspect that I will touch on, though, is the benefit cap. Last week, the Committee received a high-level briefing on universal credit. I explicitly asked whether child benefit would be included in the benefit cap and was eventually told by departmental officials that it would not be. I welcomed that and was going to laud it today as a beneficial breach of parity, as well as a very surprising one given the DUP's opposition to the exclusion of child benefit at Westminster. However, at lunchtime, I discovered that child benefit is, in fact, included. That means that we were misled by departmental officials in Committee, although I do not for one second assume that that was deliberate. It is most unsatisfactory that we are today being asked to pass a Bill that is devoid of detail, with huge question marks over what is actually in it.

More disturbing is the fact that the inclusion of child benefit in the cap flies in the face of Programme for Government pledges to reduce child poverty, an area that is obviously close to Mr Bell's heart as he intervened to comment on it earlier. Squeezing the cap, using regulations along with child benefit, will play a big part in the further £10 billion of cuts that the Tories seek. What clause of the Bill, as it stands, prevents such a move from being extended to here? Most of the detail that effects the key aims behind the Government's intentions for welfare reform — for example, simplicity and improving work incentives — is left to the regulations. We are concerned that the regulations will not be subject to effective scrutiny. We need the Minister to be clear on this issue. Indeed, a future Assembly and a future Minister, from whatever party, should be able to see some effort being made to protect them and, more importantly, families from such obvious prospects.

In conclusion —

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Attwood: I wanted to let you finish your remarks before I asked you to give way. I wonder whether the Member would agree with me that Mr Hamilton made a very curious point when he mentioned my name in dispatches as a former Social Development Minister. Would the Member agree that it was a curious point? His point was as follows: it was an SDLP Minister who legislated for welfare reform. Does he agree that that demonstrates that the SDLP certainly accepts that there is an obligation on the House to legislate for welfare and welfare reform? The point, however, is this: when the House legislated for welfare reform, I made sure that the sanctions regime that Mr Hamilton referred to was neutered. How was it neutered? It was because we were able to put into the body of law a different regime for parents here given the different childcare arrangements. We put into the body of law that childcare circumstances in the North were different from those in Britain, which meant that the law here would be different from the law in Britain. Yet Mr Hamilton would pretend to the House today that he is to legislate today on the basis of the second draft, which does not reflect the different childcare arrangements in the North. More than that, would the Member agree with me —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have listened to the Member and given him quite a bit of latitude. As he will know, I continually say to all sides of the House that interventions

should be short. They certainly should not be statements. I think that this afternoon, we have had a statement. Mr Durkan, please carry on.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention, and I think that I do agree. *[Laughter.]* Some of the points raised by previous Members who spoke were even more curious, believe me.

For the reasons outlined — *[Interruption.]*

6.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: — the SDLP will oppose the passage of the Bill. We have talked a lot and heard a lot about operational flexibilities, but in the continued absence of any, we cannot support the Bill. Let me be clear. We are not opposed to welfare reform, but we are opposed to unfair reform. We support the reasoned amendment and believe that our proposal to use Standing Order 35 to establish a new, dedicated Committee could help to work through the points raised in the amendment and, indeed, the other parties' problems with it. We believe that there is time to work this out, but passing the Second Stage of the Bill today with no resolutions will reduce that time. It is for that reason that, should the amendment fall and should our calls go unheeded, we are prepared to activate a petition of concern. That is not —

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Bell: Earlier, you praised the IT skills of the House. You talk about the sham fight of a petition of concern, but, from the IT in front of me, I can see that Patsy McGlone — he is sitting in front of you — has tweeted that Sinn Féin will not support your petition of concern. You are too small a party for it to have any effectiveness whatsoever. So, can we get on with the real business of dealing with the Bill in Committee and dealing with the real issues that matter to people? Those are the social fund and keeping jobs, particularly the hundreds of jobs in the north-west. Your constituents are going to lose their jobs if we do not put this through, and you know that we have no option. Let us not have any more of this sham fight — *[Interruption.]* Your Member knows that it is nothing other than a sham fight, and you are mistaking the real business of the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. If we are to have interventions, let us have short interventions. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Member to carry on. Order.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is great to hear a member of the Executive talking about jobs in the north-west. I would love to hear them talk about creating jobs, never mind protecting them.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: It has been reported — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat. Let us have all remarks made through the Chair. Furthermore, some Members are addressing other Members across the Floor as "you". They should not do that. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Durkan: If the Member had let me finish — it has been reported to me that Sinn Féin has chosen not to support

our petition of concern. That is a matter of great regret but not of great surprise to me. It begs the question of whether its opposition to welfare reform is real or rhetorical. Let me be clear: this is not about playing politics; this is about protecting people. That is why the SDLP was formed and what it is all about.

Mrs Cochrane: There are aspects of the Bill that the Alliance Party supports, but there are also considerable parts with which it has deep concern. However, I speak in support of the Bill. I also agree with a lot of the points that Sinn Féin raised in its amendment, but we do not think that the amendment is the best mechanism to deal with them.

The Alliance Party knows that the place to make significant changes to the Bill was at Westminster. Although that leaves us in a difficult situation, we need to acknowledge that our duty now is to progress with the Bill and make changes that are in our power at Consideration Stage. Delaying the process is not the answer, and the costs of delay are considerable, including, as the Minister highlighted, the risk that Northern Ireland residents who deliver social security services on a UK-wide basis could lose their jobs. Although I would have liked the Bill to come forward much sooner to allow us more time, I see no reason why we should delay it and why we cannot seek to tackle the issues in Sinn Féin's amendment through continued negotiations with the UK Government over the coming weeks, as well as making amendments to the Bill through the Committee Stage.

Although the social security system is devolved to the Assembly, it is in the interests of our constituents to follow parity with the rest of the UK. We do not have the tax base to sustain our own local system or to pay for deviations from what happens in the rest of the UK. Parity, therefore, works in our favour, in that it ensures a level of provision that we could not otherwise afford. The Alliance Party does not believe that it is feasible for us to breach parity for benefits and qualifying thresholds, but we can work to push administrative and operational matters to fit with local circumstances. That is where our focus now needs to be. We should also ensure that the Executive are prioritising other factors that can mitigate some of the changes, including progressing affordable childcare and creating jobs.

When talking about our welfare system, I think that there is often a myth that people are divided into two distinct groups: hard-working taxpayers and those who are on benefits. A person may fall into either or both of those categories at some point in their life. Hard-working taxpayers can become seriously ill or lose their job or home, especially in the current economic climate, so we need to ensure that we have a system that provides support when someone needs it most.

It seems that all parties agree that we want to push the boundaries of parity as much as possible for our constituents, but we need to be realistic. It would be irresponsible for us as elected representatives to get people's hopes up that we can make vast changes to the Bill's operation here, given that the real place to debate and make significant changes to it was Westminster. Indeed, my colleague Naomi Long MP consistently voted against the Government's proposals for welfare reform at every stage in Westminster, and she supported a number of amendments that the House of Lords proposed that aimed to lessen the worst effects of the Act.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: No, I will not, given some of the comments that were made.

She supported amendments that would extend contributory ESA to 24 months, exempt cancer patients from the new rules and reject the Government's moves to stop young disabled people who have never worked from receiving contributory ESA. Unfortunately, the Government defeated those amendments. She also objected to the Government's confusing proposals on cuts to child benefit and to a cap on benefits. She voted against the Bill at its Second and Third Readings in Parliament.

There are countless provisions in the Bill, and I will focus on a few specific points where I think that we could approach things differently in Northern Ireland while still working within the realms of parity. A completely different IT system is out of the question, for example, but making more frequent or split payments of universal credit to those who want it should be possible. Choice is key, and we need to appreciate that not everyone is comfortable with budgeting on a monthly basis. Indeed, many who work in retail or construction are paid fortnightly. On the other hand, there are those who have been used to receiving a monthly salary but who have since lost their job and struggle to manage their budget when various payments come in at different times. It may not be completely clear what their total monthly income is. I, therefore, welcome that the Minister is seeking confirmation that the IT system can meet that purpose so that choice can be offered.

Another issue that I have previously spoken on is the underoccupation penalty. Although we will not be able to ignore the penalties, we need to recognise that there are not nearly enough one bedroom properties in Northern Ireland to cope with demand. So, we need to consider that the penalty will affect those who were allocated a property with more bedrooms than they require, often through no fault or choice of their own. Any social housing tenants who are deemed to be underoccupying their home by one bedroom stand to lose 14% of their housing benefit entitlement, with those underoccupying by two or more bedrooms losing 25% of that benefit. I understand that the Housing Executive and housing associations are trying to pre-empt those changes coming into force and have been taking steps to identify those tenants who will be affected. However, we need to ensure that everything that can be done is being done to prevent mass upheaval when those changes come in. We do not want to end up with more reposessions, rent arrears or people presenting as homeless.

I welcome the Minister's comments on housing stock, and I ask that he ensures that his Department will prioritise the review of all social housing stock and take a strategic and holistic approach to the construction of future housing. Of course, we in Northern Ireland have the added difficulty of having deeply segregated housing pockets. Often, the options for people moving house are even more complex in comparison with those for people in Great Britain. It will come as no surprise to Members to hear that I believe that shared housing could be an integral concept in the housing strategy and could help to alleviate some of the proposed changes in the Welfare Reform Bill.

We should also be cognisant of the fact that applications for universal credit and PIP will predominantly need to be

made online and that the community and voluntary sector will, therefore, have a more important role than ever to play. We must ensure that enough fully trained staff are placed in jobs and benefits offices across Northern Ireland to assist claimants with filling in forms both in person and through helplines. I am sure that the Minister is well aware that, by investing in the community and voluntary sector, we gain value for money in front line advice services, which inevitably leads to financial savings for government. To curb the effects of the changes to our social security system, we should be investing in and using the advice sector to its full capacity.

Lessons also need to be learned from the staggering employment and support allowance appeal rates, with around 38% of appeals decided in favour of claimants. The work capability assessment carried out in the UK by Atos has caused significant concern. We need to ensure that the personal independence payment medical assessments are better thought out and that medical evidence will take precedence when decisions are made.

Another issue of concern is that over 133,000 people in Northern Ireland have a direct payment of housing benefit set up with their landlord, which ensures that their accommodation is never in jeopardy and helps to reduce the risk of personal debt. That system not only protects tenants but gives financial security to social landlords, enabling them to secure private investment at highly competitive rates, thereby maximising their capacity to deliver much-needed affordable homes to the taxpayer. Landlords who receive direct payments are, in turn, able to keep down the cost of rent. That is one feature that I would be extremely keen to retain, perhaps by having an opt-out scheme.

In conclusion, welfare reform should not be about reducing spend year on year. It should be about creating a welfare system that protects and provides for those who need it most. The Bill does not make easy reading for any of us who deal daily with constituents in real need. However, our duty to them is to seek to make amendments at Committee Stage in the coming weeks. I support the motion but not the amendment.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Speaker, you will be well aware of the criticism that you hear from time to time in the media that this House does not debate serious issues. I think that that criticism is sometimes fair. However, it could not be said today that this very serious issue — described by a couple of Members as the biggest change in welfare legislation for a generation — is not being given serious care and attention by the Assembly.

I listened carefully, as, I am sure, did everybody, to the Minister's opening statement, and I took a couple of things from it. In the first instance, it is very clear that there are some positive principles in the Welfare Reform Bill. Certainly, there is a lot wrong with it, and I will come to that in a minute. However, in the cloud of the debate, you sometimes forget that there are positive principles, which the Minister highlighted in his contribution, such as getting people back into work and ending generations of unemployment. We know all about that in Northern Ireland. There are communities in Northern Ireland in which there are people who have not worked, and their families have not seen work for generations. That is not a good thing. We should not take any pride in having the worst record of economic activity in the United Kingdom. That is not

something that we want to see continuing in Northern Ireland. In fact, that is something that we are trying to tackle, and we have agreed as a House on an economic strategy and on a Programme for Government that is deliberately tackling those problems and wants to get people away from being on welfare and into work. That is something that I hope that we are all united on.

The principle of giving people clearer information about what benefits they will remain on and what they will receive if they go into work versus what they would be in receipt of if they were purely on benefits is a sensible one. How many times have any of us heard from people in our constituencies who have said, "There's a job there for me, but if I take it, I lose this benefit and that benefit, and I will actually be worse off." We have all seen cases like that. We all know of people who have been in those circumstances. That is not good. Any principle in the Bill that will change that and make it clearer for people so that they know what benefits they will receive when they go into work is a good thing, and that should be welcomed and supported by the House.

We all know that making work pay is a good thing. There is a dignity in work. Even Mickey Brady, in moving his reasoned — I have to be careful not to call it reasonable — amendment talked about work being the best route out of poverty. It is not just for the fun of it or for a laugh that we have a target in the Programme for Government of creating 25,000 jobs; it is because we all agree and appreciate that getting people who are out of work into work is the best way out of poverty. As other Members have said, far too many people in Northern Ireland are caught in poverty for generations. Getting them into employment may be difficult in the current economic circumstances. It may be difficult because of the lack of skills and the attitude that they have towards work, but it is the right thing to do nonetheless.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Poots: On his point about getting people back into work, does the Member agree with me that almost all the reports that have been done recognise that children who are brought up in homes in which you have generational unemployment are much more likely to have suicidal tendencies in their teenage years?

They have poorer educational and health outcomes. In general, the families of people who are in employment have better outcomes. Should we not be putting more of our efforts into bolstering the working poor and ensuring that they have higher levels of income? That crosses a broad field in Northern Ireland, and we really need to apply ourselves to that course of work.

6.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: I agree entirely with the Member. Given the position that he holds, he will know more acutely than some of the rest of us that employment is good not only because it puts money in people's pockets and gives them independence but because it has positive social impacts. A raft of research shows that those who are out of work have poorer health outcomes and higher incidences of psychological disorders. As the Member said, there is an increased incidence of suicide in those who are unemployed, and, concerning, psychiatric disorders in children are more common in households in which nobody

is in work. It is not merely a question of getting people into work simply for the sake of it so that they have more money in their pockets. If more people are in work and those who have been out of work generationally can be encouraged to get into the workplace, we will all see the benefits of that here in Northern Ireland, socially and economically.

The Bill contains principles that everyone could agree on, and there is some unity on those. Indeed, Mr Maskey said that he supports the principle that work should always pay, and I share some of Mr Brady's sentiments. There is also unity in the House that we do not support every aspect of the Bill. Lots of things about the Bill are not positive. It is not the Bill that many of us would have designed had we had a blank sheet of paper to do so. It is not the Bill that would have come out of such a discussion. If the legislation had been entirely in the domain of the Assembly, it is not the Bill that we would have drafted. That is why DUP colleagues, along with others who attend Westminster — where they should be, representing the people who vote for them — voted against some of the worst aspects of the Bill.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Hamilton for giving way. He is right to point out that the DUP had been consistent in its opposition to this type of legislation up to this point. Why are we not having a serious debate tonight about triggering the provision under Standing Order 35? That provision would strengthen the Minister's hand because it would allow a dedicated piece of work to be done by the House, over a 30-day period, specifically on the equality and human rights implications of the Bill. Surely that would make it easier for the Minister to go back and point out specifically not only where the Bill fails to meet the needs of the people of this region but where it potentially goes against the equality legislation by which we are all bound in this region.

Mr Hamilton: I was going to come to that very point at a later stage in my contribution. There are many things about the SDLP that I find bewildering and bizarre, but I cannot quite get my head around why its preferred tactic tonight is, instead of letting the Bill move through Second Stage into Committee Stage, to move it to another Committee. That seems bizarre to me. The SDLP does not want to put the Bill in Committee; it wants to put it in another Committee. There is ample time, and I have heard members of the Social Development Committee, including the Chairman, say that the Committee has cleared its diary and agreed to meet for three days a week — more if necessary. I am sure that members were overjoyed to hear that. The Committee has ample time to debate all the issues that the Member mentioned — all the issues that, we are all agreed, are imperfect — and, indeed, anything else that comes out of the consultation in which they will engage. Members cannot say that they do not want the Bill to go to a Committee that has cleared its diary and said that it will work three days a week to consider all the issues. The Committee is still not sure about all the issues that will be discussed, because it still has to go out to consultation with the public, so a raft of other issues could be raised that the Committee has not thought of or looked at previously. There is ample time for the Committee to discuss all the Member's issues.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate it, because this is an important point. The job of a Statutory Committee of this Assembly is to consider a Bill as presented, clause by clause. The provision under Standing Order 35 is separate; it is to consider whether the Bill meets the requirements of the equality legislation and the equality and human rights standards that are somewhat unique to this jurisdiction. I know that Mr Hamilton understands that they are two different things, and it is for that reason that I still do not understand why, if his party is so confident that this is a competent Bill according to equality and human rights standards, it would not allow it to be put to a legitimate test by an appropriate organ in this House.

Mr Hamilton: There is no debate with an individual who thinks that the Committee, which is constituted by the Assembly to scrutinise the Bill line by line, cannot also look at the issues that the Member has raised. The Member's party is represented on the Committee — *[Interruption.]* I am not sure; I think that one of them has disappeared.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Durkan, who scurried off after his contribution, probably rightly so, is, I understand, a member of that Committee. Is he not competent to raise those issues? There is a terrible lack of faith — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr Hamilton: There is a terrible lack of faith from the Member in his own colleague, although after his colleague's contribution, perhaps it is a lack of faith that is well justified.

If the Member and his party have concerns of the nature or variety that he raises, the Committee of this Assembly, which is statutorily empowered to look at all the issues around the Bill and other issues that will be raised by stakeholders when they submit evidence to the Committee's consultation, is the place to do that. It has cleared its diary and is able to do that. It is more than capable of doing that.

I will go back to the point that I was making before I was interrupted. DUP Members of Parliament, along with others, were in Westminster, where they rightly should have been, to represent the people who put them there in the first place, and they opposed the worst bits of this Bill. They opposed negative impacts on the most vulnerable in society —

Mr McCartney: To no avail.

Mr Hamilton: To no avail, the Member says.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr Hamilton: I am not going to dispute the parliamentary arithmetic of the House of Commons, but — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Hamilton: Sinn Féin obviously has a policy of not going to Westminster. It fails every time to represent —

Mr Humphrey: At the moment.

Mr Hamilton: At the moment; that is right. Plenty of things have changed with Sinn Féin down through the years; it is probably only a matter of time. It fails each and every

time to represent its people, but now that the Bill has come here, it is doing a lot of complaining. Sinn Féin does not do anything where it actually matters, which is in the House of Commons, on pieces of welfare legislation.

Indeed, changes were made, and the benefit cap is a prime example of that. With pressure that was put on during Committee Stage at Westminster, the benefit cap now excludes a lot of people on disability and pensioner benefits as well. That was something that the Government did not want initially, but because pressure was put on at Westminster, those people were excluded from the benefit cap. I cannot deny the parliamentary arithmetic of the House of Commons, but impacts and changes can be made.

If the Member does not want to represent his people, that is fine; that is his mandate and his choice not to do that. Nonetheless, he and his party are failing —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Hold on a second. His party is, nonetheless, failing the people who vote for it to represent them on issues like this.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member outline what other changes his party wanted introduced at Westminster that are now contained in the Bill that is in front of us?

Mr Hamilton: The Member knows the answer to the question. Colleagues and others — not from the Member's party — opposed changes, or, rather, supported amendments that came from the House of Lords, where the Government were defeated, on disability benefits or changes that affected disabled people and people suffering from cancer. Sadly, none of those amendments made it into the Bill, but that does not take away from the fact that the Member's constituents voted — I am pointing at the Member, but, of course, he is not a Member of Parliament. However, colleagues of his who were elected to represent some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland were not there at the Houses of Parliament to make any arguments in favour of those people at all. They let down their people each and every time and they offer no representation where it is required. We have the opposition to those points at Westminster. However, the Minister also highlighted three other issues: direct payments, split payments and frequency of payments. It is interesting that there has been a commonality among all contributors to the debate so far that those are key problems with the legislation. They are not legislative changes but administrative or operational issues contained in the Bill. It is not legislative flexibility but operational flexibility, and that is permitted.

We have operational flexibility. In fact, the former Social Development Minister highlighted that there is flexibility on childcare. It is recognised at Westminster that our childcare system in Northern Ireland is not as sophisticated as that on the mainland. We have operational flexibility to take that into account. A consensus and commonality of position across all parties has been demonstrated here tonight and also in the Executive subgroup on welfare reform. Indeed, those issues are the subject of ongoing efforts by the Social Development Minister to get further concessions from the Government.

There are a lot of problems with the Bill. However, as much as we dislike those problems, our room for manoeuvre is severely limited by the principle of parity. The principle

of parity is paramount. A lot of Members who stood up tonight and encouraged us to breach parity are zealots of the Belfast Agreement. Yet, section 87 of the 1998 Act that gave effect to the Belfast Agreement states that we must have:

"single systems of social security, child support and pensions".

Those Members, who are still zealots of the Belfast Agreement to this day, even after people have rejected it, want to breach a key principle of that Agreement; that is a slightly odd position. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Hamilton: Let me go on. We can breach parity if we wish, but it is not a pain-free or cost-free option. There would be consequences of breaching parity, if we were to go down that very foolish route. It is not that we cannot breach parity. We can breach parity, but we simply cannot afford to breach parity. Therefore, we should not breach parity.

There are serious consequences of not passing the Bill today. The first is the cost to the Northern Ireland Budget. If we failed to legislate for it, around £220 million would be lost to the Northern Ireland Budget in the remainder of this Budget period. We would also lose out on the £150 million of additional money that, as the Minister outlined, we would receive from changes to universal credit. However, first and foremost, we would lose over £200 million from our Budget in Northern Ireland at a time when we need it most. We do not have £200 million to fritter away by failing to maintain parity on social security. We do not have that money lying around, or down the back of a sofa in Stormont Castle, in DFP or wherever, just to give it back. We do not have it.

The situation will get worse, because the gap will increase the further you go on. If we fail to pass this legislation, the impact in the next Budget period will be not £200 million but £1 billion. This is at a time when, as we heard from the Tory conference in Birmingham this week, they are looking at cutting budgets even more and continuing to follow a path of austerity. If people think that we can play fast and loose with £1 billion as if it does not matter, quite frankly, they need their heads seen to.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Ross: Does the Member agree that the position of the nationalist parties is actually even worse than that? If we were to follow their ideas of devolving a whole range of taxation powers to the Assembly and reducing fuel duty, the cost to public spending in Northern Ireland would be even bigger and the effect on the most vulnerable even greater.

Mr Hamilton: It is hard to envisage a situation that would be worse than taking a further £1 billion out of the Northern Ireland Budget over a Budget period, but the Member is right. If we were to follow some of the folly that is sometimes promulgated here by nationalist parties, the public spending situation in Northern Ireland would be far, far worse. The impact on service delivery here would be £200 million in the first instance and £1 billion in a future Budget period. The health service delivered by the Health Minister and the education service delivered by the Education Minister would be decimated by cuts like that.

6.45 pm

Secondly, it has been mentioned by the Minister and by Mr Copeland and others that if we do not pass this legislation, the social fund will stop. Even its very name suggests what the social fund does: it helps those worst off in society with their urgent needs, which, in many cases, come into their lives unexpectedly. There have been 250,000 cases annually in Northern Ireland, with tens of thousands of people going to the social fund to get the help that they urgently need. In the past year, some £82 million has been dispensed to people via the social fund. If the Bill is not passed, that money will simply stop dead. At a time when people are preaching about protecting the vulnerable, how is stopping the social fund protecting the vulnerable? It would do quite the contrary. We should maintain a system that supports the most vulnerable people in society.

The third serious consequence has also been mentioned by others. It is the impact on jobs. Around 1,500 people are employed in Northern Ireland on contracts where they administer benefits on behalf of people in England. Northern Ireland has the contract not only because of the competitiveness and skill of the people who do the jobs but because they are administering exactly the same benefits system as there is in England, Wales and Scotland. If they were not operating the same system, it would be unlikely that they would be able to continue to do that work. I am sure that there are countless Tory MPs in England who would be happy to stand up and say that because staff in Northern Ireland are not under the same system that they are administering, the jobs should be brought to their constituencies in whatever shire in England where there are people who are out of work and hard pressed.

We would not only be hitting services by taking £200 million now, and £1 billion later, from the block grant, harming vulnerable people as a result, and dispensing with the social fund, we would be potentially putting 1,500 people out of work and creating more vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. People are preaching to us that we should be protecting vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, but deferral and defeat of the legislation would create more vulnerable people in Northern Ireland and harm those who are already vulnerable. That is not something that any of us on this side of the House wants to see happening.

The question has to be asked: for what? Is it so that Sinn Féin Members can stand up and grandstand and say that they have opposed this terrible, awful legislation and pretend that they are the tough guys? That is all it is. It is a sham fight. Some of us on this side of the House have seen plenty of sham fights and know a sham fight when we see one. That is what it is.

This has been debated for months. A common view on areas of concern has been agreed. It was agreed in the Executive that the Bill come to the Second Stage. When Sinn Féin Ministers in the Executive agreed for the Bill to be published and introduced by the Minister, what did they think was happening when it appeared in their pigeon holes on the second floor? Did they not think that it would come to this stage in the House? What were they agreeing to and accepting at that time? What has changed in a matter of weeks, other than a decision to put up some sort of great show that they are the great opponents of welfare reform and the great protectors of the vulnerable? In fact, what they are doing will do anything but protect the vulnerable. Some of us would be forgiven for thinking

that we are seeing a Southern-driven agenda. There is a bearded gentleman who used to frequent these parts, albeit infrequently, who is sitting in the —

Mr Spratt: Francie.

Mr Hamilton: It is not Francie. He is sitting in the Dáil, castigating Fine Gael and Labour for implementing austerity measures, tax cuts and cuts to welfare in the Irish Republic. We can now get RTÉ up here and watch the news programmes. You have probably had it in your own house for ever, Mr Speaker, in the north-west. We can see —

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Hold on a second. We can see the programmes in which Sinn Féin members debate these issues and are lambasted by people from Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour and everywhere else because, while they are opposing cuts in the South, they are implementing Tory cuts in the North.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for giving way. If the Member cares to read the Hansard report from June 2007, when his colleague Mr Campbell was Chair of the Committee for Social Development, he will find that Sinn Féin was opposing the initial stages of welfare reform then. We were not grandstanding then, and we are not grandstanding now. Do not try to divert the issue, please.

Mr Hamilton: If you are not grandstanding now and you have been consistent on this issue since 2007, why did you not pull a stunt like this back then? Welfare reform Bills have gone through this House since then and you never did anything like this. Forgive us for thinking that you are now simply grandstanding and putting up a straw man.

Mr Speaker: The Member should speak through the Chair.

Mr Hamilton: Sorry, Mr Speaker. I got carried away.

The Member needs to answer the question, and I will let him come in again if he can explain himself. He castigated the work capability assessments brought in through the previous Welfare Reform Bill introduced by Mr Attwood when he was Minister for Social Development. You castigated that, yet you did not do anything like this about that Bill and you let it glide on through. You did not put up any sham fight against that Bill and did not do anything for the optics. There is no explanation for that other than that you are grandstanding now.

The truth is that it is a Southern-driven agenda from Sinn Féin. It is trying to mask and paint over the problems it has in doing one thing in the Irish Republic and another in Northern Ireland. The truth is that they secretly want us to pass the Bill this evening and want it to move through Second Stage. In fact, that is probably not even a secret. It is pretty transparent that they want that because, if the Bill is so terrible and awful and the worst thing ever, and they really want to stop it this evening, they can stop it dead right now. They can get 30 signatures. There are some signatures from Members from other parties, I understand, and you can muster a few yourselves, I am sure. They can put a petition of concern into your office, Mr Speaker, and kill the Bill dead, right now, but that is not what they have done, because they are grandstanding against the Bill. It is sham fight.

They are being careless and reckless with vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. They are playing Russian roulette with some of the most vulnerable people in our

society by proposing that we take a risk and delay this. Mr Speaker, you made it very clear, as the Minister said, that time is running out. Indeed, time has run out. Sinn Féin contributed to the delay that got us to this position. It entirely created the delay, and that is why we are so late in coming to this and why we have run out of time. You have made it clear, Mr Speaker, that it is not simply a matter of putting it back a week or a fortnight. In effect, if we defer it this evening, the Bill will be killed. I presume, too, that if we were to defer it for a week or a couple of weeks, DSD will not be in a position to start to plan for things because it simply does not know what the Bill will eventually be. It does not have a clue what the ultimate legislation will be and so any planning would be a waste of money and time. Some of us are incredibly sceptical about the reasons that have been put forward by Sinn Féin for its opposition to this. If it were entirely credible, it would be doing something else.

I will turn to other contributions. I have already dealt with the SDLP and its dwindling numbers.

Mrs D Kelly: Quality, not quantity.

Mr Hamilton: I shall let others judge. It is difficult to stomach some of the criticism and the encouragement being offered to us to breach parity from a party that held DSD for the previous four years and introduced lots of welfare reforms. In fact, it did not just introduce welfare reform but introduced some of the hardest-hitting welfare reforms, such as cutting mortgage rate relief and the aforementioned moving of people from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance. Furthermore, people who should never be failing the work capability assessments are failing them, and any of us who are doing work in our constituencies see caseloads of an increase in appeals and in the number of people who should never be turned down getting turned down. That all came through on the watch of an SDLP Minister for Social Development, yet it now lectures a DUP one for doing exactly what it did.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Poots: I know that the SDLP was once very keen on DSD. Was it not the case that it had the choice of DSD and chose DOE because it was running away from the very issue that we are talking about today? It was not prepared to do welfare reform, and it failed to make any significant changes when it was doing welfare reform.

Mr Hamilton: Yes. My colleague Mr Bell mentioned Twitter earlier, and I remember watching that evening as parties selected Departments. After listening to the SDLP preaching time and time again about welfare reform, I thought that it would surely pick DSD when its turn came. What did the SDLP take? It copped out and took DOE.

Mrs D Kelly: I am pleased that the Member will give way. Will he acknowledge that when SDLP Members were Ministers for Social Development, they set precedents for parity differentials? As for picking DOE, perhaps that was because we had to clear up the mess left by previous Ministers in some Departments.

Mr Hamilton: With the SDLP's current level of electoral success, it will be a long time before it cleans up anybody's mess in any Department. The Member talked about the operational flexibilities that her Ministers were able to put into Bills. It will be interesting to hear the long list of those

flexibilities. Maybe she will have an opportunity to list them later.

The point is that this is not the end of the Bill. I heard a couple of Members — indeed, even an SDLP contributor — say that we were agreeing the Bill here this evening. This evening is not the end of the Bill. There is time for those flexibilities to be put into the Bill, if that is where they need to be, and that is what the Minister is working on with his counterparts in DWP.

I turn to the Ulster Unionist Party. After witnessing the situation last night, with one UUP Member saying that they were in favour of an amendment, the next to speak saying that they were not sure and the party eventually voting against it, we are never entirely sure what its position is. However, I think that I welcome the UUP's opposition, at least to the reasoned amendment, although I have the same difficulty with that as with stomaching what the SDLP said about what its Ministers had done in the past, given that they introduced some of the worst welfare reforms that we have seen over the past number of years. It is difficult to listen to anybody from the Ulster Unionist Party talk about a "rotten deal".

Mr Copeland said that the Bill had been drafted with "little compassion" only minutes after saying that Iain Duncan Smith was a man of compassion. As he made those statements, and as he branded it a rotten deal, he was surrounded by no fewer than five colleagues who ran in the 2010 general election on a Tory manifesto. Their manifesto was the Tory manifesto. Where does the Member's party think that the welfare reforms in the Bill came from? Did they drop from the sky? No, their genesis was the Tory Party manifesto that was shared by the Ulster Unionist Party in 2010. If any of the five sitting round him now had been elected — if people had not seen sense and decided not to vote for them — they would have been whipped in the House of Commons in Westminster to vote for the very Welfare Reform Bill that is before us now and which the Member called rotten. That is the truth of it, Michael. You know that that is the case.

Mr Copeland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way. I will let you in.

Mr Copeland: I fully accept that, and I listened to what you said. However, there are a good number of people in the Chamber now, as there have been in the past, whose past links are a good deal more noxious than that affair. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue. Order.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Speaker, I have been had. I hereby declare my former membership of the Ulster Unionist Party. *[Laughter.]* I honestly do not doubt the Member's sincerity, and he knows that. However, he speaks about the cases of people whom he sees, I see, and other Members see. These are people who are already affected, and will continue to be affected, by welfare legislation. He asked whether another way could be found, but he asked that only this evening. A better time to have asked those questions was back in 2010 when his party and the five colleagues sitting round him were entering into an electoral pact with the Conservative Party at Westminster.

There are lectures that we can take and, sometimes, accept, but that is not one, Mr Copeland, that we can take here this evening.

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

Let us not have any more of this tonight, from those who are putting forward spurious arguments. We are not agreeing the Bill this evening. The passage of the Second Stage does not agree the Bill. Let it go to the Committee, where it should go, where the issues that have been raised this evening and the issues that will be raised with the Committee when it goes into its consultation can be debated and where amendments can be suggested, discussed and potentially agreed, if needs be. The consequences of not proceeding are far, far, far, far, far too grave for us to contemplate. Let the Bill get through its Second Stage, warts and all, into the Committee, where members of the Committee can work away at it and make the amendments that are required, if needs be, and the Minister can negotiate those with his counterparts in DWP.

7.00 pm

Mr Campbell: In rising to speak in the debate, I think that it is accurate to say that the one thing that unites Members across the Floor is that all of us accept that there are no easy choices. Anyone who does not accept that is living in a fool's paradise. There are no easy choices. If each of us individually and each of our parties collectively are doing the job we ought to be doing or even half doing the job we ought to be doing in our constituencies, we will have people coming into our offices, every day of every week, who are in need of assistance and help and who are claimants or attempting to be claimants of various entitlements because of the economic straits we find ourselves in. As all of us work to represent those people, we come to the point that we have arrived at today. Since there are no easy solutions, we have the exceptionally difficult position that we are in this evening.

As has been pointed out by a range of Members, there are good parts and, like the curate's egg, not so good parts in the Welfare Reform Bill. Most people — not all — accept that Iain Duncan Smith is manfully trying to come to terms with a burgeoning welfare bill that the Conservative Government want to curtail. The difficulty that we all have — hopefully, we all accept this — is that there is a constraint in respect of where the wriggle room that the Assembly has is. The Minister referred to the flexibility that he has been trying to and continues to try to extract from the Whitehall Minister. Because there is a restriction in that wriggle room, we know roughly where the benefits will lie if he is successful. He has outlined several times today, on radio and in the Chamber, that he is meeting the Minister, yet again, this day week in order to pursue that issue further.

The problem is that, if we do not proceed to the next stage in this legislation, we will face a number of problems that the communities that we seek to represent will have to face. We can use a fig leaf or a pretence of a fight and an argument and a debate to say to those people, "This is what we are doing on your behalf". However, as has been outlined by a number of Members, the cold, hard reality is that, in the first case, the block grant will suffer initially to the tune of £220 million. That is the first tranche of the suffering that all our constituents will have to face as we attempt to pick up the pieces for the price being paid for our refusing to move today. No one has said where they expect to make those £220 million savings. As the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton outlined, £220 million is just

the start, because we then escalate to £1 billion. Just as no one was brave or, perhaps, foolish enough to explain where the £220 million savings were to be made, no one would even dream of saying where they were going to get £1 billion of savings from.

Then we move beyond the initial £220 million and come to the fact that there are approximately 1,500 people — our constituents — employed in administering welfare benefits across the UK. Just over 1,300 of those people are in the greater Belfast area, and almost 200 are in the Londonderry area. Which of our MLAs, in whatever party, will go to those 1,500 people and say, "Because I voted in a particular way, your job is on the line"? I have done a little research into where those 1,500 people come from. They come from areas of very high unemployment. If they become unemployed, those areas will become areas of even higher unemployment, because we will have just voted in a particular way. Who will explain to those people, "I have put your job on the line because I voted in a particular way on an issue that we have very little wriggle room with — very, very little wriggle room"? In addition to the £220 million that will go to £1 billion and in addition to the 1,500 jobs that could be at stake, we have the issue of — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Campbell: We have the issue of the £80 million social fund. At lunchtime today, as the debate was about to get under way, I heard on the radio a person from the social and voluntary sector who deals with claimants on an hourly and daily basis. They were not going to get into whether it was right or wrong to proceed with the Bill, but they did say this: the social fund is the lifeblood of thousands of people in Northern Ireland. What will happen if we vote to stop the Bill in its tracks tonight? That £80 million lifeblood will be cut off. Cut off. Let us get this on the nail so that people know exactly what they are doing when they vote. We have a threefold attack — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that we have one Member speaking at a time and that all comments go through the Chair, please.

Mr Campbell: We have a threefold attack on the vulnerable in our society. If we go in the direction that the parties on the opposite Benches want us to, there will be a £220 million initial cut in the block grant and 1,500 potential job losses among our constituents who come from areas with many socio-economic problems. We will have to tell them that they face the dole queue, and we will have to tell the people who depend on the £80 million social fund as a lifeblood that that lifeblood has just been disconnected. That is the threefold attack on vulnerable people that the parties on the opposite Benches have to address.

Unfortunately, we had some comments today on how people voted in the past. Some were accurate, and some were less than accurate. I noticed that, in his contribution towards the beginning of the debate, the Deputy Chairman of the Social Development Committee, Mr Brady, commended the DUP for voting in the House of Commons earlier in the year against the greater excesses of welfare reform. Unfortunately, at the time, when we did so, he did not commend us. I have a quotation from the 'Belfast Telegraph' in which the DUP said that it did not think it was fair and reasonable to penalise cancer patients, the disabled or children. We also criticised

the lack of time given to discuss the changes in welfare reform. Sinn Féin's party spokesman on benefit reform, Mickey Brady, said that the DUP would be better fighting to protect and enhance those who are most vulnerable in our society, after we had voted to do just that in the House of Commons, while his Members absented themselves from the vote. His Members could have come to the House of Commons and spoken and voted in favour of the most vulnerable, but they chose not to. Then the spokesperson on welfare reform, who commends us today, attacked us when we voted in favour of the most vulnerable in society. There is a cue here for people to get real.

As the Minister has said several times on radio and in the Chamber, we have reached the end of the road. People can use fig leaves. People used fig leaves in the past, but they did not work. We have reached the end of the road, and it is time to man up. It is time to face the real picture. If people want to vote in a way that will hurt the people whom they say they represent, they have to own up to those consequences. The consequences are here; they are stark, and they are real. The people whom we say we represent will suffer if we do not take the steps that we have to take tonight for the lesser of two evils.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the reasoned amendment. It is clear, it is logical, and it is necessary. Many people in our society are hurting. They are living below the poverty line and struggling to survive on very modest incomes, and many of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society are women. I mo óráid inniu ba mhaith liom díriú ar inscne agus ar an tionchur dí-réireach a bheadh ag na laghduithe seo ar mhná. In my contribution, I will focus on gender and the disproportionate impact that the cuts would have on women. Let us look at a few statistics: women comprise 53% of benefit recipients in the North of Ireland, yet they are more likely to work part-time, they are on lower wages and they rely more on tax credits, which make up a larger share of their income.

In a recent editorial in 'The Observer', it was claimed that one fifth of female wages consists of benefits and tax credits to compensate for low wages, while benefits make up only one tenth of male wages. Some people might want to talk about manning up. I want to talk about the need to woman up. Women are more likely to suffer violence in the home, and, in many cases, are forced to leave the family home and seek alternative accommodation.

In 1995, I attended the UN conference on women in Beijing. I, along with thousands of women from all over the world, from Governments and non-governmental organisations, debated, discussed and agreed targets to deal with poverty, inequality, women's rights and how Governments should respond. Governments signed up to that.

Alex Maskey, the Cathaoirleach — the Chairperson of the Committee — talked eloquently about the way in which women were treated in the past. Those days are gone, and gone for ever. Women fought hard for equality, along with many of our progressive male comrades, and women will continue to fight hard for equality. We will not allow backward steps. We will not allow inequality, and we certainly will not allow people to diminish women's rights.

Cad é freagra na dTóraithe? Níl siad seachtain fhlíuch i gcumhacht ach tá siad ag iarraidh moltaí a bhrú isteach — ar scáth leasuithe — atá ag cur in éadan na n-athruithe

i dTiomantais Beijing. What is the Tory Party response in Britain? It is hardly in government a wet week, and, under the guise of reform, it is trying to railroad through proposals that fly in the face of the changes and commitments in Beijing. No one should be under any illusion about the agenda that is at play here, and no one should be under any illusion about what women will or will not accept. The Tory Party is trying to pit workers against those who are on benefit and conveniently ignore that many of those who are working are so badly paid that, if they did not receive benefits, they would be well below the poverty line. We heard the comments about childcare and about draconian, punitive measures. The Tories are trying to impose their outdated definition of a family and their way of looking at the world through the prism of a male head of a household.

7.15 pm

The Tories are attempting to punish women for having more than one child by threatening to cut their benefits if they have a second child. They talk about taxpayers having to pay so-called enormous amounts while such people sit on their couches etc, etc. We have heard it all before. However, they conveniently forget that they lobby and legislate for private education for their children — note the plural; there are no restrictions on the number of children they have — for tax breaks and for bonuses, you name it.

Tiomáineann siad thart ina ngluaisteáin gháifeacha, téann siad ar laetha saoire thar lear, cuireann siad a gcuid páistí go scoileanna príobháideacha, téann siad go hospidéal phríobháideacha nuair a bhuaileann tinneas iad, agus saothraíonn siad na múrtha airgid.

They drive around in their lovely cars, go on wonderful foreign holidays, educate their children in so-called public schools, have access to private healthcare when they get sick and earn huge amounts of money. They would not last one day as a single parent without proper childcare living in substandard housing on a modest income. They do not even realise that rearing children is work. Any woman or good father will tell you the work involved in rearing a child. That is very important work, and it needs to be acknowledged as work. One of the things that I find most offensive is the fact that they talk about the children of other people, especially those on benefits, only in terms of how much they cost them in taxes. They do that for other people's children but not their own.

Glacann sé sráidbhaile le leanbh a thógáil — is iad ár dtodhchaí iad ár leanaí, agus ní foláir don stát gach leanbh a chothú, a oiliúint agus a chosaint; agus ní foláir don stát a chinntiú go bhfuil tacú ag gach leanbh a lán-chumas a bhaint amach. Ní hé sochair leasa shóisialaigh agus creidmheasanna cánach a ghearradh an dóigh le sin a dhéanamh.

It takes a village to rear a child. Children are our future, so the state must support, nurture, safeguard and protect them as well as ensuring that every child has the opportunity to reach their potential. Cutting benefits and tax credits is not the way to do that.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No. The Member had plenty of time to speak. We heard him speaking loads of times today.

The question I have for the Tories is this: where are the jobs that they talk about? There are no jobs because of their policies in this part of Ireland over many years. They have plenty of money to pour into the military and into wars all over the world, but they do not have money for the most vulnerable. The question for us is this: do we as an Assembly blindly follow them, or do we make laws that are good for here? I say that we make laws that are good for here.

The Bill proposes that a single payment to cover everyone's entitlement in a family go to one nominated person in the household. That sounds like a simpler and administratively cheaper way, but it is generally agreed that it represents a transfer from purse to wallet, with control of the family budget passing mostly to men. As Alex Maskey said, some of his best friends are men, but it is women, when they get money in their hand, who are much more likely to spend it on important things for themselves and their children. It is estimated that, in 80% of cases, universal credit will be paid to the male partner. What does that do for women's equality? That is in sharp contrast to the current position whereby 80% of tax credits are typically paid to the main carer who, in 80% of cases, is the mother.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No. The Member had plenty of time to speak. We have listened patiently to everybody.

This reverses progressive social policy that has specifically sought to put money into the hands of women and, ultimately, children. Research shows that money paid directly to women results in greater benefit to children and a better standard of living in the home. A single household payment will lead to greater financial dependency for women in the family. Women's economic autonomy is fundamental to equality. It is in everyone's interest — men, women and children — that women are equal in our society. While reducing women's status in the family, greater financial dependency increases the risk of domestic violence. Gender difference in the distribution of money in a household matters. Research shows that money going to women is targeted more effectively, particularly in meeting children's needs. Section 75 of the NI Act specifically requires social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children. I welcome the comments by the Chairperson of the Committee, Alex Maskey, that he and his Committee will scrutinise the Bill in relation to equality and human rights and that there will be a role for the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

The British Government have said that splitting payments between a couple is compatible with the universal credit technology. Lord Freud, in Hansard on 23 January 2012, said:

"if we find that we need to make more splits than anticipated the computer system will allow us to do that. We are designing that in."

So, why can we not do it? The British Government recognise that:

"particularly in low-income households ... men sometimes benefit at the expense of women from shared household income".

That is a quote from Hansard on 14 March 2011, column 126. On Report in the House of Lords on 23 January 2012, the Minister made it clear that the British Government were prepared to consider expanding choice in terms of couples splitting payments by percentages rather than dividing universal credit into its elements. So, 50:50 is more of a possibility than the child element being paid to the main carer. The Minister confirmed that the technology did not prevent that, so why can we not have it?

Our society has a choice. We can move forward on the basis of the survival of the fittest, dog eat dog and a *mé féin* attitude, or we can ensure that we have an inclusive society and look after our elderly, sick and vulnerable. We should ensure that we have supports in place to help people during difficult times in their life and that our system provides them with a fair chance, educational opportunities and a way out of the poverty trap. Demonising single parents and those on benefits or tax credits, which is what the Bill would do, is not the way to go. Pitting low-paid workers against the unemployed is not the way to go. Our Bill needs to reflect the needs of society. The Tory agenda is not the way to go. Parties in this House should not follow the Tory agenda willy-nilly.

Sinn Féin wants to work constructively with all parties. We want unity because Sinn Féin has confidence in our powers as negotiators. We understand that all of us together can bring about changes.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No, the Member has plenty of time to talk. I have listened carefully. The reality is that a subcommittee was established, there were major discussions, yet the Bill here tonight is the same Bill with no revisions. The Bill has not been revised. The points that were made have not been taken on board. We have heard all sorts of figures thrown out: £400 million, £200 million, £1 billion. My God, if we had a penny for every time we hear all that.

Maybe a good starting point, if people really want to save money, is to stop double-jobbing. They could attend one Parliament. If people are really serious about saving the Exchequer and the Executive money, maybe we should stop bonuses for our senior civil servants, senior police and all the rest. Yet, at the Committees and the Policing Board that I am on, I see other parties not supporting our motions to stop all those payments.

Let us get real about this. Yes, there are costs to implementing and bringing about changes. Equally, there are costs if we accept willy-nilly Tory Party policies. I will tell you how there are. My colleagues said it; Mickey Brady and Alex Maskey said it. How many people will be homeless because of this? How many single parents will be in very difficult circumstances because of this? I will tell you. There is not proper childcare in this part of Ireland. We will be demonising single parents, and that is simply not acceptable. We need to make sure that our single parents have support in place and that we get them out of the poverty trap, not put them in deeper and deeper and deeper. That is what the Bill would do.

The Minister asked us to help him. All of us. We will help him. The best way to help the Minister is to defer the Bill and to bring about the changes that we need. The Minister said that we did not have time to go down that road. Yes, we do; yes, we can; and yes, we have to. If we do not, we will have a bad Bill. We will have a Bill that is not good for

our people. We will have a Bill that will see many of our people spiralling into poverty.

Many people here talked about the parity arguments. I have heard the parity arguments; we all have. Do you know what is very interesting here? Parity is used when people do not want change, yet the minute they want to change things or to do something because it suits them, suddenly parity does not matter.

Lord Morrow: Like what?

Ms Ruane: Like Winsor 1 and 2 and special priority payments, which the DUP voted for last week. *[Interruption.]* In the Policing Board, I am on the human resources committee. There have been loads of times. In England, Scotland and Wales, we do not have an 11-plus, transfer tests or academic selection, yet some parties want to break parity when they think that it suits them, but, in reality, it does not suit them.

What we need to do is make laws that are good for the people in this part of Ireland. Some people are trying to say that Sinn Féin is somehow not doing its job by making good laws and fighting for good laws in the South of Ireland. We make no apology for fighting for good laws, North and South, to protect the vulnerable.

We need to be responsible. We need to move away from scaremongering. One example of scaremongering is the social fund. My colleague Mickey Brady tells me that the social fund is going to go to local authorities in England, so we will have to legislate for it anyway here, yet some Members —

Mr Hamilton: Will you give way on that?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not give way. We have already heard, for an endless time, from some Members. What we need to do — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: We are capable of legislating for what we want here and to protect our citizens. We do not need to follow willy-nilly what happens across the water. Let us make the best of it and work together. I support my colleague Alex Maskey, who said that we should work together and have confidence in our negotiating skills.

People asked why we did not present a petition of concern today. I will tell you why. We could have, and we did not. The reason why we did not is that we wanted to be responsible in this debate — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: We want to make sure that we get changes. We want to make sure that we work with the DUP, the UUP, the Alliance Party, the Greens and the SDLP. Together, in a powerful way, we can go to England and say to them that, in the North of Ireland, we will not accept this. In the South of Ireland, we will not accept cuts either. So, folks, in conclusion — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: You do not begin negotiations by saying that we have no wriggle room. A bad negotiator would do that. What you do is begin by saying, "This is what we want. This is what we expect. We will fight for our constituents, and we will ensure that we get the best deal for everyone in our society". Sinn Féin is ready to do that. We are ready

to work with you all to do that. We have a very competent team who know this inside out. So, join the rest of us, and let us really make change and not be browbeaten by a Government in London.

The Scottish and Welsh voted against this. So let us do what is good for this part of Ireland. Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you.

7.30 pm

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

My party welcomes the appearance of the Welfare Reform Bill in the Assembly and the opportunity to debate its shortcomings. We also welcome the proposed amendment, even if some of the proposers seem to be in opposition to the Ministers and the Executive.

Indeed, it is a wide-ranging Bill with huge implications for many in the North. In view of its detail, its heavy reliance on regulation is a concern, particularly given the short time frame before implementation and the seriousness of these reforms. There must be much more detail provided, as quickly as possible, on the regulations. It will be important to ensure that proper time is given to scrutiny. The lack of detail around a number of the proposals in the Bill is very worrying, again, especially because of the tight turnaround. A number of these measures will take effect prior to and during the introduction of universal credit. As much information must be provided to elected Members as they need for scrutiny of the Bill.

Ms Ruane — and I have to be fair to her as she is not here the moment — said that figures are being bandied about all over the place. The one reality that we know is that cutbacks are trundling down the line at us. We are not going to see that people are £600 million better off. In fact, the established best estimates are that the benefit bill in Northern Ireland will reduce by approximately £400 million, with around £30 million of that reduction relating to housing benefit. For many households, that means that they will find it extremely difficult to discharge their financial obligations, with significant shortfalls in the amounts of money they receive to pay their rent. Discretionary housing payments will not meet all of these shortfalls and, as we know, they are time limited. We will come to that in more detail.

It is my duty to speak about the reforms as they relate principally to housing. Research has shown that secure households provide community benefit by increasing the ability of individuals to enter into, and remain in, the workforce.

I mentioned the absence of detail. It is worthwhile looking at our counterparts in Scotland to see how they have evaluated welfare reform to date. It is important that this is read into the record. These are researches carried out by the Scottish Government's communities analytical services division. Councils responded to a pro forma asking about the effects of housing benefit reform to date and any key actions taken to mitigate them. The researches include: housing benefit changes, Scottish impact assessment; welfare reform, under-occupancy provision; evidence of supply of shared accommodation; evidence of impact of increased shared accommodation; modelling impact of benefit changes on 2012 homelessness commitments, impact of the changes coming into force; modelling impact of benefit changes on

those of working age under-occupying a socially-rented property; estimated availability of shared accommodation; assessing the impact of the benefit changes on councils' capacity — that is the local authority which has charge of housing — to meet the 2012 homelessness commitment; proportion of shared private rented accommodation occupied by students; and a breakdown of individual constituencies' housing benefit claims related to passport benefits. I hear no mention of that detail today.

This Assembly, on a nod and a wink, is expected to charge this Bill through, accepting it as it is, without the full details and without full and rigorous scrutiny, before we even move to the equality implications, as my colleague Mr McDevitt outlined earlier. And this is happening in a society that has been charged with equality issues and equality problems since the inception of the state.

There are a number of issues. As I said, most of my remarks on the Bill relate to housing. Currently in Northern Ireland, housing benefit is paid directly to social landlords at the request of the claimant. Social landlords, in this instance, refers to any landlord who rents to tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit. We need to know how many people will be affected by the issues around the underoccupancy penalties. What is the average amount that tenants will have to make up in NIHE and housing association properties? Has an impact assessment been carried out to determine what the measure will mean and where it should be directed to mitigate and manage the changes? Are the levels of segregation in social housing in the North a factor in disproportionate impacts on tenants who will need to find smaller properties?

We will come to this in more detail, but there is a failure to exempt disabled people — I am talking especially about people with profound mental health issues. They are being forced into situations in which, financially, they will not be able to live in their home if it has two or three bedrooms and has extra capacity, à la Tory welfare reform. Forcing people with profound mental health issues into a situation in which they will be worse off financially will lead to increased anxieties. I do not mind saying that I have had a number of people on to me already; they are worried about where they are going to get the money from, because they have to rely on ESA, as it currently is, and a wee bit of a top-up from DLA. They are afraid because their one place of solace is their home. Many of them, because of the nature of their mental health problems, cannot live with other people; they prefer to have the solace of their home. The increase in anxiety that the financial stress brings, before we even move on to what is brought about by the changes in DLA, will, unfortunately, result in one thing: they will go back to institutional care. That is a very major issue that we must look at in the Assembly. Aside from the help and treatment of that person as they move to recovery, this will not only inhibit recovery but will be retrograde for them as they seek to cope with their mental health issues.

Another issue that has been drawn my attention — the Department is aware of this — is where an access-to-children issue arises for parents. Perhaps the parents live in separate homes. People could, by the inevitability of the legislation, be forced into shared accommodation. Parental access for the mother and father will be crucial in that regard. The forced shared environment into which those children may come could contain people with criminal

records. That creates major issues around childcare and around where the thrust of the Bill is going.

The SDLP supports the retention of the current system of payments to social landlords. It allows tenants who believe that they are financially capable to have the money paid directly to them, and those who worry about budgeting can have the safety net of having the payment paid directly to their landlord. Although housing benefit allows for that choice, the majority of social tenants who are housed by the Housing Executive are bound by the tenancy contract to have whatever rent that is being paid by housing benefit to be paid directly to the Housing Executive. The intention is to protect not only the wishes of tenants in Northern Ireland but the needs and sustainability of the likes of the Housing Executive, housing associations and, indeed, good private landlords. In the North, 75% of housing benefit payments are made directly to landlords; in England, 80% of housing benefit payments are paid to claimants. We operate very different systems.

During Question Time, the Minister said that the benefit of devolution is that we can look at things, pick out the good, learn from others and make sure that we do it right. This is certainly one case of, if it ain't broke, why fix it? If it can be enhanced, that is well and good. However, changing it to what is being proposed or suggested would create a plethora of problems. It would not only add to debt problems for tenants but cause arrears problems for the various social and private landlords.

According to the National Housing Federation, nine out of ten social housing residents want their housing benefit paid directly to landlords. The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations believes that it is only fair on claimants and on housing associations that claimants can elect to have housing benefit paid directly. The continuation of that system would help to ease the huge fears across the housing sector that the reform has the potential to lead to an increase in homelessness. Among housing associations, homelessness charities and across the advice sector, worries are mounting on that issue in particular. Those organisations are anxious that the removal of the option to allow direct payments will lead to a massive increase in rent arrears, along with the associated increase in court actions, evictions and homelessness. That impact is a very real and imminent prospect and could lead to very serious consequences for society as a whole.

Welfare reform proposes an overhaul of housing benefit when we are struggling with a housing crisis in this region. The removal of almost guaranteed rents paid directly from the housing benefit stream will also hit how financial institutions and capital markets perceive the sector. Currently, reliable rental income assists housing associations in particular to borrow from financial institutions, thereby contributing to the development of more social rented homes at less cost to the Department and the taxpayer. It is well known and established that, because of the economic crisis that we are working our way through, the need for social renting is particularly, and unfortunately, on the increase, as more and more people lose their homes through lack of income.

I will turn now to the provision for a nominated person. Paying housing benefit directly to tenants as part of a single household benefit would not only cause budgeting problems for families but could lead to family breakdowns. Numerous issues surround the payment of universal credit,

with, perhaps, the usual rent being paid by two members of the household directly to the landlord. Under universal credit as drafted, a non-responsible family member could be the individual in receipt of universal credit, and they may not make rental payments as well as others. There is also the issue of the nominated person having an addiction or health problem. All those concerns will directly impact on how rents could be paid, or not paid, as we, potentially, view these changes in isolation from one other. We cannot hide behind parity as an excuse; our hands are not particularly tied in this case.

The clauses on housing costs provide for regulations that specify the basis of the amount to be paid. However, the Bill does not provide for benefit entitlement to be related to actual rents in the local housing market. That means that there is the potential for a future disconnect between the housing cost calculated as part of universal credit and the actual rents. I suggest that the Bill should include provision for annual reviews to ensure a strong correlation between the housing costs in universal credit and actual rents in Northern Ireland. That will ensure that, where necessary, housing cost provision can be amended. In particular, it will ensure that the lowest thirtieth percentile of proprietries in the private rented sector are affordable.

7.45 pm

Some Members have dwelt to some degree on the fact that we have different circumstances in the North. Housing benefit requirements are different here from anywhere else in England, Scotland or Wales, and, given that the majority of claimants in Northern Ireland have never had to budget for rent payments on any basis, it would be much more difficult for individuals and families to adjust to the universal credit system as a whole. The Consumer Council has noted that people in Northern Ireland are less financially capable than their counterparts in the UK. According to its research, people here require more support and training in order to learn the skills needed to manage financial affairs.

Another issue raised is that of Post Office accounts and the problems of reliance on direct debits. It has been widely reported that more than 15% of local authority tenants and 13% of housing association tenants do not have bank accounts, thus making it extremely difficult for tenants to make payments to landlords directly and on time, if they were even to get there. Post Office accounts do not allow for outward payments. Therefore, a tenant would have to withdraw their benefit and take it directly to the landlord. In responding to these issues, at the end of September, DWP called on financial organisations to make the Government aware of what products are available to assist claimants in budgeting and in making these payments. Although we welcome those attempts to assist with budgeting skills, it simply is not fair to expect individuals to change from using the institutions they have grown used to and trusted with their finances over a long period, whether post offices or banks, to move to another bank or suitable financial institution, especially given the current reputation of the banking system.

Wearing another hat, I say that representatives from the Ulster Bank will be before the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee on Thursday. Members know what problems there have been. Imagine what would happen if tenants had to pay rent from their banks and a crash such

as that occurred. Think how that would impact not only on landlords — social and private — but on people's financial affairs. Increasingly within the private sector, landlords are reluctant to consent to leases that do not have direct debits or standing orders as payment methods; that is yet another obstacle to housing benefit claimants. This will no doubt add to the increased burden on the Housing Executive to house those unable to find accommodation in the private sector, as — I pointed this out earlier — lists grow longer if housing benefit tenants cannot meet the requirements posed by the private sector.

On the issue of flexibility as regards overall welfare reform, Lord Freud has acknowledged that, although we are bound to operate a closely aligned social security system, if a case can be made for having individual circumstances for the North, we will have the opportunity to avail ourselves of those flexibilities. I look forward to hearing and seeing what those flexibilities might be. The SDLP feels strongly that the retention of direct payments is one area in which that flexibility should be exercised, and I heard the Minister acknowledge that.

There will need to be changes in the operating system for universal credit. However, one advantage is that we have an IT system that already allows for direct payments. In fact, it allows for both and is based on choice. We also have concerns about the timing of payments of universal credit as a whole, namely the fact that individuals will struggle to adapt from weekly or fortnightly payments to monthly payments. This issue is much wider than that of the payment of housing benefits, which some of my colleagues will cover.

In reference to the Social Market Foundation's (SMF) report of September 2012, while the DWP — I nearly said DUP, there. Freudian slip. *[Interruption.]* I am just checking that you are all awake.

While DWP continues to uphold universal credit as some sort of back-to-work scheme that can only result in the betterment of society, the reality is that people will struggle to adapt to monthly payments. As the Social Market Foundation reported, only half of those earning under £10,000 are paid through monthly pay packets.

It would be useful to look at the number of people in Northern Ireland who are paid monthly. If we did, I think that we would conclude that, similar to the SMF, there is little evidence that moving to monthly payments would help to prepare claimants for going to work.

Although the retention of the current IT system to allow the direct payments of housing benefits to social landlords will not solve the anticipated problems that are associated with universal credit, it would represent one step towards a more stable and supportive system.

We need to look at underoccupancy in a lot of detail. Tenants would see their housing benefit payment reduced by 14% of their rent for underoccupation by one bedroom and by 25% for underoccupation by two or more bedrooms. Indeed, all working-age claimants who are deemed to have one spare bedroom will be affected. As I pointed out — it is important to emphasise this — that will include separated parents who share the care of their children and who may have been allocated an extra bedroom in their housing arrangement to reflect that situation, which is the natural and most pragmatic thing to do. Benefit rules will mean that there must be a

designated main carer for children who receives the child benefit, and the secondary carer will have to pay for the child's bedroom out of their universal credit payment. That could be between 5% and 10% of their weekly income. It will also affect couples who choose to use their spare bedroom when recovering from an illness or operation; foster-carers, because foster-children are not counted as part of the household for benefit purposes; parents whose children visit but are not part of the household; families with disabled children; and disabled people, including those living in adapted or specially designed properties.

Again, the house itself can be the focal point of the recovery for many disabled people, especially mentally disabled people. Indeed, we heard the Minister of Health speak earlier about how the thrust of healthcare will be to reduce the number of people who are in hospitals by moving them into community care, making that part of their recovery package. I have seen figures for the likes of Holywell Hospital. These housing benefit proposals will work against that. They will work against vulnerable people on their pathway to recovery. As they hope to move into the community and to move home, the first thing that they will be hit with is a financial penalty that is a consequence of the reforms. It is crucial that the Assembly takes note of that and, more importantly, that it does something about it.

Based on the current average rent of £58.76, a tenant who receives full housing benefit but who is underoccupying by one bedroom would see their housing benefit reduced by about £8.25 a week. A tenant who is underoccupying by two or more bedrooms would see a reduction of about £14.70 a week. If their housing benefit is cut, a tenant will, inevitably, have to pay the landlord the difference between the housing benefit that is received and the rent, or else they can get out. That would put people back in homelessness or back on the streets. I really do not think that that is where we want to go.

Given the vast changes to the system and the severe shortage of social housing stock to which underoccupying families can transfer, the SDLP feels that the Welfare Reform Bill would force people into an impossible position. The reality is that, when individuals cannot make ends meet, there will be forced evictions and increased homelessness. Coupled with the absence of direct payments, we feel that these provisions will mean that we are heading for disaster. More and more people who are being forced out of homes that are too large for their needs will turn to the private sector, where the traditionally higher rents will not prove to be an answer. They will fall deeper into debt until they can no longer pay, and then they will be out on the streets through evictions.

The Government have said that discretionary payments are there to help with the transition and that direct house swaps and transfers will be available. However, we still do not know how many discretionary payments will be available or how often they will be made, and, given the small stock of one bedroom and two bedroom homes across the sector, it is extremely difficult to believe that transfers will be a viable option for the majority of people.

The Housing Rights Service has recommended to the Minister a number of changes to the Welfare Reform Bill to avoid an adverse differential impact on any particular groups here. It is concerned that the universal benefit cap will have a differential adverse effect on families with dependants, particularly larger families with several

children, who require larger accommodation. Some 21% of our children live in persistent child poverty, and almost 10%, or 40,000 children, in severe child poverty. There is a serious concern that the cap could drive those children deeper into poverty and potentially into homelessness.

With a limited supply of smaller social housing units, particularly in high-demand areas and rural locations, the Housing Rights Service has called for the introduction of greater options and incentives for current under-occupiers to downsize and for discretion to be permitted to allow for circumstances in which occupiers are able to access suitably sized accommodation. The HRS also recorded its objection to the policy of uprating local housing allowance by the consumer price index (CPI). It argued that that measure would shrink the 30% of the market that is currently available to claimants in the private rented sector. It predicts that the policy will increase hardship, could lead to home loss, and that landlords could be less prepared to accept benefit claimants as tenants, given the security of income that they might not see.

In conclusion, as I said earlier, the SDLP is not opposed to the reform of the welfare system, but that reform must be appropriate and fair to all. We do not believe that the Bill in its current form is either appropriate or fair. I outlined the scale of detail that the Scottish devolved Assembly has gone into to make sure that, whatever it introduced, it was well informed and was not contributing further to disadvantage, homelessness and even increasing hardship for the people that it represents. I trust that the Assembly will adopt a similar course.

Ms Brown: I also rise as a member of a Social Development Committee to support the Bill at Second Stage. I reject the amendment and support the passage of the Bill in order to meet the deadline of April 2013, the time at which the Bill and its contents are due to come into place. It is vital that the Bill be allowed to pass on to the next stage, where it can be looked at in greater detail in Committee.

We have all heard the arguments about how Northern Ireland is a special case and how, as a legacy of the Troubles, we need special treatment. Of course, in certain circumstances, that is a valid argument, but I do not believe that welfare reform necessarily falls into that category, even though there are those in receipt of benefits as a result of incidents in the past.

Welfare reform is necessary because the system needs fixed. The parties opposite are not the only ones that have concerns about the Bill, even if they did not express those at the Executive. The place to address those concerns is through further discussions and scrutiny in Committee. We are all aware that people want the Assembly to take decisions, offer leadership and make Northern Ireland a better place. To do that, we must deal with difficult issues that impact on real people and real families. That is why we are here — not to ignore the vulnerable and needy, but to ensure that fairness and compassion are shown to those who are in need. That is how we will be judged as an Assembly and as a society.

It is wrong to use derogatory language about benefit claimants and apply that with a broad brush to all who claim. We do that far too often in Northern Ireland. We label people and make generalised statements as if they were fact, without taking time to discover the reality of what lies behind a headline or statistic. People who claim

benefits are, by and large, real people with genuine needs. Many would much rather be fit, well and in work. They do not choose to be ill, unemployed or dependent on the state. However, sadly, there are those people who see benefits as a lifestyle choice. Can anyone say that it is wrong to challenge that? Is there anyone who seriously believes that keeping families and individuals contained in an endless cycle of benefits without any aspiration towards work or responsibility is a real solution?

Yesterday, the House debated the economy and jobs. Is it really credible that, although all parties in the House agree that more has to be done on job creation, we can tolerate those who refuse to work and choose to remain on benefits instead?

This is not about removing support from the vulnerable and needy. No individual in the House would willingly sign up for that. This is about reform and restructuring to ensure that the system works better and does what it was designed to do in the first place.

8.00 pm

I want to work with the parties on the opposite Benches in Committee to ensure that all our concerns are addressed, but I have confidence that we can make our case without relying on clichéd statements about the past. The Westminster Government have demonstrated that they will talk and negotiate on matters that have real consequences in Northern Ireland.

The Treasury has engaged on corporation tax and air passenger duty. We must have the confidence to make the arguments, either here or at Westminster, and take the Bill to the next stage. We may not win every argument or we may fail to achieve every objective, but that is what politics and leadership is about. It is about recognising need and doing something about it.

I am not averse to making a case for additional revenues or measures to promote jobs and build the economy for all those who want to play their part in shaping the future of our economy and society. I am, however, averse to those who offer only delaying tactics without realising the full implications of such delays for our communities.

The nature of politics in the Assembly is that we sometimes lapse into "whataboutery" and pantomime politics. We may sometimes get away with it, but I want to see an end to that. Welfare reform is an issue that gives us an opportunity to demonstrate to the electorate and to Westminster that we are coming of age and that we can work together on difficult issues.

I am not against change, nor am I against amendments being tabled if they serve a purpose and can add something meaningful. The reasoned amendment does neither. The Bill should pass Second Stage and the debate should continue in Committee. In taking it forward, we are giving assurance to all those who are legitimately claiming benefits that they will not be cast aside. We must demonstrate to them that, in the Assembly, it does not matter who you are, which party you vote for or where you live. If you are in need, we will support you and your family.

I support the motion and reject the amendment.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak in favour of Sinn Féin's reasoned amendment. The austerity measures that are being pursued by the

British Government will be extremely detrimental as they continue to attempt to cut their way to recovery. As usual, those who are hardest hit will be the most vulnerable in our society: the unemployed, the sick, low-income families and, in particular, the youth.

This can be blatantly seen in the reform of housing benefits. In fact, just yesterday, at the Tory Party conference, it was announced that a further £10 billion would be cut from welfare. Yet again, it will be young people and children who will bear the burden, a burden that is supposedly necessary because of the current economic circumstances, which we, the youth, played no part in creating.

We have already lost access to housing benefits for one-bedroom flats for single people under 35. Now young single people will be pushed into shared accommodation. I wonder, for example, what the difference is between a single 22-year-old and a single, unemployed 40-year-old. The shared accommodation proposals will also have specific and potentially very dangerous implications for young single women.

Just yesterday, George Osborne said:

"How can we justify giving flats to young people who have never worked".

He does not seem to realise that it is not that young people do not want to work; it is that they cannot, because the jobs simply are not there. The Tories want to reform how housing benefit should work. If they want to do that, it should be done on a needs-assessed basis rather than simply cutting off young people. The measure will leave an estimated 6,000 young people a year homeless. Already, 22% of the homeless people who present themselves to the Housing Executive are under the age of 25. How can George Osborne or anyone else justify that?

It is not as easy as simply sending someone back home to their parents. For some people, that is simply not an option. This is another huge blow to young people who are trying to set up a life and whose options for education and employment are already limited. A further financial blockage will be placed on young people and their independence.

The imposition of these harsher sanctions will target the young and unemployed. However, there is absolutely no evidence that any of the sanctions that will be imposed will reduce the levels of joblessness among young people. Unemployment can be addressed only by increasing opportunities and by having a job creation strategy that works. I appreciate the work that the Executive have already done in that regard, given the resources that they have.

As Sinn Féin's spokesperson for families, children and young people, I am especially concerned about the impact that certain aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill will have on families. The single household payment of universal credit is a worrying prospect, as it essentially represents a transfer from the purse to the wallet. It is estimated that 80% of payments go to the male partner in a household. By increasing the dependency of women in the family unit, we are leaving women and children vulnerable. Research clearly shows that money that goes to the female in the home is more effectively spent and will be spent, first and foremost, to target the needs of children.

Another worrying aspect of the Bill as it stands is that single parents who have a child aged five or over must be actively seeking work and must take a job if offered one. I am sure that many people in that situation are doing so. However, unlike in Britain, there is no statutory duty in relation to childcare here just yet. Many do not have a support system around them. This could be particularly difficult given that the cost of childcare can outweigh the financial benefit of working. If a job is not accepted, further sanctions will be imposed, meaning a further loss of benefits to the single parent. Creating opportunities, not punishment or discipline, is the key to addressing poverty.

The most vulnerable in our society will be the most adversely affected by the Bill. We have to have an understanding of what the unemployed and low-income families go through daily just to feed their children. We have to have an understanding of the despair that young people feel in searching for jobs, in leaving home to find work, and in just trying to make ends meet. Yesterday in the Assembly, we discussed two motions. One was on the importance of, and growing need for, food banks, and in the debate on austerity, we heard about the importance of our young people. Without considering our amendment, we can do nothing to alleviate the pressures on the people we discussed at length yesterday. Suicide rates are soaring, and we know that this Bill will only worsen people's circumstances. Therefore, how can we in the Assembly agree to the Bill as it stands? I urge everyone in the Assembly to support the amendment and to consider the needs of the constituents we represent.

Mr Poots: It is useful to get the opportunity to speak on this matter. That said, it is quite astonishing that we are in the position of having this reasoned amendment. Indeed, reasoned amendment is a rather curious, perhaps spurious, name for it. It is a wholly unreasonable amendment. There is no reason, logic or sense to what the party opposite is proposing. Members come to the House and go to radio and television stations telling people that they are doing this so that they can have more time to negotiate and ask others to take things into consideration. Sorry; this is the Second Stage. We have quite a lot of time to go through the Committee Stage, and those negotiations can go on while we undertake that work. So, there is absolutely no logic or reason to the reasoned amendment.

I do not understand what part of the issue the parties opposite do not understand. Why are they prepared to sacrifice the social fund, which is used by 250 million people who are in need? The parties opposite are prepared to sacrifice that by April next year and throw it away. They would deny that social fund to the people who are in the most difficult of situations, the most need and the most dire circumstances and who turned to that fund in those circumstances. The folks opposite, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, are prepared to throw those people into a situation of having to go without. That is very dangerous activity.

Those parties are not demonstrating responsibility for the people who work in the social care system. It has been identified that many jobs are carried out in Northern Ireland to administer welfare on a UK-wide basis. They are putting those jobs at risk. Those are jobs right across the Province, including in the Foyle constituency.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Poots giving way. Earlier, he made a statement to the House on 'Transforming Your

Care' and announced that all state-run residential nursing homes would effectively be shut down over the next few years. How many jobs has he put at risk today? Those jobs are definitively at risk. Can he come clean and tell the House how many people in those care homes will lose their jobs? That is a fact. As far as I can see, everything else that he says is either speculation or scaremongering. I will let the rest of the House make the best judgement on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to return to the scope of the Bill.

Mr Poots: That is not about people losing their jobs. It is about people changing jobs, people doing more domiciliary care, and the creation of more opportunities in the private sector. So, the Member is wrong, and it is not about saving money or cutting jobs but about providing a service.

The Member and the Members beside him are prepared to put jobs at risk. The loss of £220 million causes all of us great concern, because £220 million is money that this Province can ill afford to throw away, yet the Members opposite are prepared to take that risk. I sat in meetings where people were talking about testing the British Government. Last week, when they were talking about testing the Government, the cuts were £18 billion. This week, they are £28 billion. I do not believe that any SDLP notion of testing the British Government will bring one extra penny to Northern Ireland's Budget. I do not believe that the SDLP believes that it will bring one extra penny to Northern Ireland, but it is in some ludicrous competition with Sinn Féin. While Sinn Féin is grandstanding, the SDLP is delivering stunts. I remember very well that, when I was a little younger, there used to be a TV programme that had as its theme tune 'Unknown Stuntman'. There are plenty of unknown stuntmen in the SDLP. We cannot afford to engage in stunts. We cannot afford to grandstand.

The truth is that two thirds of our Budget is taken up by education and health. That is just a fact. If we have to find £220 million, it is likely that two thirds of that would come from education and health.

Mrs D Kelly: I appreciate the Member giving way. From his ministerial portfolio, I am sure that the Member will acknowledge the fact that poverty is a key cause of ill health. Therefore, will the Minister not join us in opposing these welfare reform cuts?

Mr Poots: I hear what the Member says about welfare reform cuts, but it is not entirely about welfare reform cuts, is it? It is about getting people into employment and about taking 10,000 children out of poverty. Perhaps the Member wishes those 10,000 children to stay in poverty. I would certainly be happier to take those children out of poverty and give them a better chance in life. That is what this party is about, not about keeping children in poverty.

I happen to think that getting people into employment is a good thing. Mr Hamilton talked about research that will identify where children are being brought up in homes where unemployment exists generation after generation. All the public health outcomes are worse, all the educational outcomes are worse and all the issues around justice are worse. Therefore, I am very supportive of working hard to get people into employment and to give them opportunities.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: I will give way in a moment.

If we are going to do that, we need to invest in supporting the private sector in particular to create job opportunities and get those people off the dole and into employment.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate the work that he has done on occasions. Recently, I met him about Holywell Hospital. I have a very serious point on the consequences of the welfare reform changes in housing benefit, and I hope that it is treated seriously. As we discussed previously, the thrust of your policy has been to reduce the number of beds in hospitals and move people from hospital to live in the community. We will take that first of all. That will require accommodation. In some cases, given the nature of particularly sensitive mental health problems, that will require special accommodation. The fact is that the legislation, by its very nature, will cause additional financial hardship for many people who live in the community, and that can add to their stress and anxiety. With their mental health problems, that could result in them arriving back in hospital again. In his capacity as Minister, has Mr Poots —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that Mr Poots is here in his capacity as a Member, not in his capacity as a Minister.

8.15 pm

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much. Perhaps he could convey that to the Minister then. *[Laughter.]* My point is that very serious work needs to be carried out between the housing benefit people and the health people, particularly where there are those with serious mental health vulnerabilities, and we need to see the implications of the proposals on housing benefit. This is a very serious issue, and detailed work needs to be carried out.

Mr Poots: Being in employment helps to raise people's self-esteem and gives them a purpose to live. Getting up in the morning to go out to work gives people and families dignity and respect. Therefore, I am very pleased to support something that will give dignity, respect, self-esteem and opportunity to people.

Our task is to work very hard to create employment and to support those who are creating employment. We will not do that by continuing with the welfare system that we have ad infinitum. Members may be saying that this welfare system is perfect, but, I am sorry, it is not. I was doing doors on Friday and one lady came to the door and said that she has a very good friend who is an alcoholic and gets x pounds every week. He says that that money does him no good because he can never break off the alcoholism because that money is always available. Members may think that that is good, but I do not, the public do not and, sometimes, even the recipients do not.

We need to address issues with the welfare system that are clearly wrong. It is, without doubt, flawed and has become damaged over the years. What is proposed is not necessarily perfect, and that is why we need to give the Minister the opportunity to continue with his negotiations and why we do not need to collapse the Bill and let it fall flat on its face. That will hurt those people who need the social fund money, put employment in danger and take £220 million out of our Budget.

I will identify the implications for Members, because I was somewhat distracted when I mentioned education and health. The implications are quite brutal. Around £100

million of the £220 million would come from the health budget. What would £100 million buy? It would buy us 10,000 coronary bypass operations. Who wants to say to people who require coronary bypass operations that they cannot have them because we did not put welfare reform through? It would pay for about two and a half million treatments by physiotherapists in the community. It is very necessary for physiotherapists to treat people in the community. It would buy over 15,000 inpatient hip operations. Do you want to keep people in pain waiting on hip operations? It would buy almost 20,000 knee operations. It would account for almost our entire spend on physical and sensory disability, and, indeed, £100 million would be approximately our entire spend on public health.

So, if the parties opposite are saying that public health is not as important as welfare reform and that we should drop cervical cancer screening, breast cancer screening and bowel cancer screening because welfare reform is much more important, I challenge you to tell that to your constituents. Go and tell them that you want to do that and that it is much more important because you want to grandstand and pretend that you are playing for some additional time on this issue while jeopardising our budgets in the process.

Close to half of our mental health care costs around £100 million. We talked about mental health outside today, and World Mental Health Day takes place this week. Close to half of the money that we spend on mental health, which a Member referred to earlier, is £100 million. Outside, I saw Members pushing their marbles around. I think that if the people opposite vote for the proposals, they will have lost their marbles big style. Close to half of our annual learning disability budget is £100 million. Do you not want to look after the learning-disabled and provide care and support for them? That is just the brutal reality, folks.

We cannot have a situation where we jeopardise our funding in this way: where we engage in grandstanding to try to make some political point or allow others to drive the agenda. As far as I can see, if a party in government has difficult decisions to take, it needs to step up to the mark and take them. Life is not always about making easy decisions. It is not always about easy options. Very often, we have to make decisions on difficult options.

Sinn Féin is the leading party in the nationalist community, and the challenge has come to it. You are a party of government now, and you are supposed to be a responsible party. However, here we have Sinn Féin — I have seen this — facing the poodle of the SDLP coming forward dressed in a Rottweiler suit, and Sinn Féin is running scared. Sinn Féin, as a responsible party of government, needs to do the right thing. It cannot afford to be jeopardising our health services, our education system or our justice system by throwing money away because of grandstanding on this issue. It needs to show some courage, because the SDLP has been an opposition party for a long time, and it appears that it will continue to be an opposition party for a long time. Sinn Féin does not really have to be scared of the SDLP. It can safely vote this through without having to fear the SDLP on this issue. Nonetheless, that is the position that we find ourselves in.

We need to go forward from tonight on this legislation and allow it to move forward through its various stages. The notion that we will have the reasoned amendment or, indeed, the other unreasonable amendment from the

SDLP, will not move things forward one iota, and it will not bring one additional penny to Northern Ireland. All it will do is jeopardise the funding that we have, the jobs that we have, and funding that goes to the most deprived people through the social fund. That may be the irresponsible position that others wish to adopt, but it is not the position that this party will adopt. We take our role in government seriously, we take our role in delivering for the poor seriously, and we take our role in addressing the causes of poverty seriously.

I would really like to see a real impetus, particularly from Sinn Féin, on the issues and causes of poverty. I am very clear in my mind that if we are to tackle poverty seriously, we need to do it at the earliest stages of life, with early intervention, going right through the primary system, and into our secondary schools. I do not see the same impetus coming from Sinn Féin. I would love to see Sinn Féin step up to the mark when it comes to those early interventions and ensure that children get a good start in life; ensure that children get a good education; and ensure that, where there is that gap and where, in many places, children are not ready to start school, additional work is done to prepare them for school, and additional support is provided to them in school. That support can make a real difference when it comes to getting qualifications and, therefore, jobs and opportunities. I have not seen that impetus coming from Sinn Féin. I have seen officials in the Department being obdurate, being allowed to be obdurate, and nothing being done about it. So if Sinn Féin is really serious about tackling poverty, it needs to tackle the causes of poverty and identify those causes. It needs to step up to the mark, and I look forward to that, because I have not seen it yet.

The other issue that I want to touch on is this: the system has been subject to abuse over the years. Welfare has been subject to abuse, and we all know it. We had the rather shameful situation where a Member of the House drove up and down to this facility in a DLA vehicle that belonged to someone else. What an embarrassment to the party involved and, indeed, to other Members in the House. I see that his chair is empty. That case was a shame. Unfortunately, it is not the only one, as the case has been replicated a thousand times. The truth is that if we have 8% unemployment, we have 92% employment. The 92% of people getting up in the morning and travelling to work, whether they get a bus or a train, get into a car or walk to work, do not need to be paying for people to defraud the system. People should take a look at themselves and consider how we can ensure that we can clamp down on fraud. We can ensure that people who get money, deserve to get it and that those who do not deserve to get money, do not get it. I have no problem with Members intervening: if they want to do so, they can. People who do not deserve money should not receive it. The truth is that if we do not challenge the current system, that abuse will continue. I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the 92% do not have any time whatsoever for those who take money out of the system undeservedly. While others get up early in the morning to go to work, they, perhaps, do not and may have no intention of doing so.

Many people who are unemployed do not wish to be unemployed. There are many young people who do not wish to be unemployed. We need to give those young people a chance. We do not need to encourage them to stay in the welfare system for the rest of their life. That is not giving them a chance. We need to create employment

opportunities for them, and we need to think clever.

Minister Farry, along with our Enterprise Minister, has a very significant role to play in all that. That work has to be done to ensure that those young people do not fall into the trap of welfare benefits becoming a way of life and asking themselves how they can milk the system. That is not the way forward.

Therefore, moving forward on welfare reform is essential and critical. If we step back from it tonight, we will be doing a huge disservice to the House, the public and, most of all, to the poorest who are most in need. In some ways, I am not surprised that some Members will put their political ambitions before the welfare of the people whom they are supposed to serve.

Mr Dickson: As my colleague Mrs Cochrane said earlier in the debate, we will support the passage of the Bill and oppose the reasoned amendment. That is because halting the passage of the Bill would not cause the content to change, nor would it cause any worry or have any impact in the corridors of the Department for Work and Pensions in Westminster. Rather, it would further impact on those whom we represent.

Although we support the passage of the Bill, that does not mean that we support everything in it. However, the House must be clear that this is not where the fight is. The fight over the Bill should have been fought, and has already occurred, in Westminster. As has been referred to, my colleague Naomi Long MP voted against the majority of the proposals brought forward by the Government and gave her support to amendments suggested by the House of Lords.

I note, as recorded here before but worth repeating, that none of the five Sinn Féin MPs took the opportunity to oppose or amend the legislation in the House of Commons. Perhaps they will now attempt to constructively engage in Committee Stage and do what they are supposed to do in the House, which is to scrutinise it line by line and, where practical, make appropriate changes for all our constituents. That, however, does not mean that we simply roll over and implement exactly the same changes in Northern Ireland. We have the opportunity, through the Social Development Committee, to carefully scrutinise the Bill, as I said, line by line and clause by clause. I welcome that the Committee is committed to doing so and to seeking changes where they are possible and where parity can be pushed to its limits, stretched and tested. Deferring the progress of the Bill today would only delay the Committee's opportunity to do that, and I do not think that any Member could or should argue that that would be good for the Committee, the House, those whom we represent or those who will be affected by the Bill.

8.30 pm

While I can agree with many of the points made in the Sinn Féin amendment, I can see no compelling cause to delay the passage of the legislation further. I believe that its late introduction, coupled with the timetable, already make it difficult enough to ensure that the Bill is passed on time. When considering each of the points made, I see no reason why they cannot be pursued at the same time as the passage of the Bill. The challenge is that it is up to you to do that through continued negotiation with the Government at Westminster, scrutiny at Committee and amendments at each stage of the Bill.

As my colleague has already pointed out, Alliance does not believe it feasible that we can breach parity on benefits and qualifying thresholds. However, we can push administrative and operational matters to fit with local circumstances. That is where all the members of the Committee should best put their efforts. My colleague Judith Cochrane will, I am sure, work alongside her fellow Committee members to identify those areas where that can be done, and be done to the benefit of all our citizens in Northern Ireland.

Alliance does not believe in providing any kind of false hope to our constituents, but there seem to be plenty in the Chamber who do. To support the amendment and block the passage of the Bill would do exactly that. Halting the progress of the Bill is not a good idea. Come 1 April, our constituents who work delivering social security services on a UK-wide basis will be at risk of losing their jobs, jobs that are scarce enough. There will be a huge hole to plug in our Budget, where we will seek to fund the breaches caused by breaking parity. All Members know that Northern Ireland does not have the appropriate tax base to sustain our local benefits system or to pay for large divergences from what happens in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the plain, cold fact of the matter. Therefore, although some Members may claim victory if the progress of the Bill is delayed, or even blocked, I believe that we would be merely storing up trouble for the future and delaying the ability of this House to get on with doing its job, which is to realistically amend the Bill as appropriate. For that reason, Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the passage of the Bill to Committee Stage, where I genuinely hope that Members will get down and do the real work, on behalf of all our constituents, to identify reasoned changes that can be made.

Mr Ross: This has been a long debate on a substantial piece of legislation, but it is exactly the type of legislation that Members from all sides of the House argued that we wanted to deal with when we talked about devolution being restored to Northern Ireland. Members from all parties talked about wanting to make the tough decisions here in Northern Ireland that affect local people. Today's legislation is a real test of that will. It is a test to see whether political parties and individual Members are up to the job of making tough decisions. Unfortunately, although we have heard some impassioned speeches today, and I am quite sure that most of them were entirely genuine, the tactics from two parties in particular mean that they are failing the test of responsibility in the Chamber.

Two fundamental issues are at stake in the debate. The first is the Second Stage of a Bill. Members have been here long enough to know that Second Stage is about the general principles of a Bill. However, a second issue has been brought into this, because of the amendment Sinn Féin has tabled. That has perhaps changed the nature of the debate. They call it the reasoned amendment and want to delay the implementation of the Bill. I listened carefully to Mr Maskey's remarks at the beginning of the debate. He was at pains to say that the purpose of the amendment was not to kill the Bill. However, listening to the comments of Ms Ruane, some hours later, it would seem that she did not get that memo. Very little she said would suggest that Sinn Féin is intent on doing anything other than killing the Bill.

I wish to talk about some of the general principles of the Welfare Reform Bill, and I will then talk specifically

about the amendment tabled. My colleague Pam Brown mentioned the fact that, in recent days, weeks and months, we have had a series of debates in the House on the challenges facing our economy. Only yesterday, we had a debate on how we could help to boost the economy, help businesses to invest more in Northern Ireland and create more job opportunities for people. The difficulties in the global economy, the euro zone and the impact that those have had mean that we all face those challenges in our constituencies. I said yesterday that Northern Ireland was not immune to the difficulties.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I will know as well as anybody that the recent job losses in FG Wilson have had a devastating impact. Many people, young and old, who worked in FG Wilson have lost their jobs for the first time in their lives, and they have now found that, through no fault of their own, they are relying on welfare, because they have lost their jobs or cannot find jobs. Other young people have been in and out of work because of the economic circumstances, and they have found themselves having to rely on welfare at various stages.

The responsibility of government is to help the most vulnerable. It is important that we have a fit-for-purpose welfare system that will support individuals who are out of work or seeking work or individuals who cannot work due to health problems or disabilities. However, my colleague Mr Poots posed this question to the Assembly previously: is the current welfare system working? Does it have the right balance between ensuring that there is an incentive for people to get into work and ensuring that those who cannot work or who are out of work and are looking for jobs have the right level of support?

We can look at some statistics about the spending on welfare reform over the past 10 or 15 years. Between 1997 and 2007, welfare spending went up by some 48%, but the number of individuals who were living in severe poverty did not decrease; that figure increased over that same period. So, we are spending more money on welfare, and fewer people are benefiting from it. I think that that shows that the system as it is at the moment is in need of reform. I think that most Members will argue that changes are needed in welfare and that the system needs to be reformed. We may differ in how we do that, but the case for reform is one that very few people could argue against.

Who should the system help? As I said before, we need a welfare system that supports those who are looking for work and those who cannot work because of ill health or disability. However, we cannot shy away from the challenge. There is a perception out there among not just those who are in work but those who are genuine recipients of welfare that plenty of people are milking the system or are in receipt of welfare that they do not deserve. We cannot shy away from that point, which Mr Poots made.

There are levels of fraud going on. There are also those who refuse to work. I am pleased that there are measures in the Bill to tackle fraud. There will be an investigation service, tougher penalties for those who are found ripping off the system and a faster method for those individuals having to repay money to the state. That is something that everybody in the House should welcome and support. Anybody who is a taxpayer should support it, as should anybody who is a genuine recipient of welfare. I commend the Department for the progress that has been made on

this issue over the past decade. We were in a position where £61 million was being lost from the system because of fraud, but that has reduced to £20 million. I think that further progress should be made on that, and I would certainly welcome that.

Another part of the Bill is about incentivising work and ensuring that we have a fairer system that means that people who are in work are always better off than those who are not. We heard at length from Mr Hamilton, and, latterly, Mr Poots, about the benefits for people who are in work not just for their health but for their self-esteem, their dignity, their reason to live and everything about their general health and state of mind about how good it is for people to work.

I have heard various individuals talk about universal credit, and, largely, they have been very supportive of it. In my short time on the Committee, I have recognised that Members from all parties talked about the overcomplexity of the current system. Members will welcome anything that can help to simplify that. It will ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay. It will help the most vulnerable, and, importantly, it will help to improve the levels of benefit uptake from those who require it and those who are entitled to it. That is important, because having an overly complex system can often be scary for individuals who are not confident about how to apply for benefits. The bureaucracy involved in claiming different benefits can also be off-putting for people. Therefore, I think that people will welcome the simpler form that is a single benefit. Of course, if there are further efficiencies in the system, more money will hopefully be available to filter down to those in most need.

The Minister began today's debate by outlining the Bill's four key aims, which are to protect the most vulnerable; to maximise support for people to get back into work; to ensure that the system is fair; and to promote personal and social responsibility. Again, I do not think that anyone in the House can argue with those aims and objectives. What is not to support in those general principles?

Is that to say that the Bill is perfect? Of course it is not. We have heard Members from every single party outline their concerns and difficulties with the Bill and talk about the elements that they would change. Of course that was going to happen, because the Bill was not drafted in Northern Ireland; its genesis was at Westminster. Therefore, of course we would seek to change certain elements of the Bill. However, it is not as simple as saying to the coalition Government, "We do not like this. Forget about it. We are not going to implement that." That is what Ms Ruane seemed to suggest that we say, but we do not have that luxury, and any Member who argues that we do is simply deluded. There are consequences from taking that sort of action. It may be easy to do it, and it may gain some short-term popularity among a particular party's voting base, but it is not responsible and will have severe consequences for everyone in Northern Ireland.

As other Members said, major changes to the legislation are not possible, but there are changes and flexibilities that we can and should be seeking. One of those areas is personal responsibility. I must say that I understand the rationale behind the Government bringing forward some elements of personal responsibility. I understand the rationale behind ensuring that people are able to manage their finances in order to prepare them for the move into

work. I am a big believer in individual responsibility and in the need for government to promote that. However, I am also acutely aware that there is huge opposition to that and that there are concerns about how payments are received, about who those payments are made to, about getting rid of the direct payments to landlords, and about the potential consequences of that for many vulnerable families and individuals across Northern Ireland. I think that there is agreement, not just in the Committee but, after listening to comments today, among Members across the House, about implementing certain flexibilities in the Bill and making those changes in order to make sure that we protect the most vulnerable in our society.

The place to make those changes is at Committee Stage. As with any other Bill that passes through the House, you have a Second Stage at which you discuss the general principles, and you have a Committee Stage at which you get into the detail of the Bill; investigate the elements that you are perhaps not as comfortable with; take evidence; hear from stakeholders who will be directly impacted by the legislation; examine the impact that the legislation will have on those stakeholders; look at the consequences of the legislation and any amendments tabled thereafter; and test the changes and any possible amendments that an individual or party wants to table.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Certainly.

Mr Poots: It appears that the Member is suggesting that fairly extensive scrutiny will take place. What additional scrutiny can the SDLP proposal bring to the Bill that cannot be delivered by the Social Development Committee? What is the logic of creating another Committee to supersede the good work that is done by the Social Development Committee? Is the Member more confident in his party colleagues to carry out that work than the SDLP is in Mr Durkan in this instance?

Mr Ross: I, too, am confused by the fact that the SDLP feels that there is a need to have a Committee that is not a Committee, particularly given that the Social Development Committee has already cleared its workload and scheduled extra Committee meetings to ensure that it gives the Bill the scrutiny that it deserves. I think that the Social Development Committee should be applauded for taking that action to ensure that it can give the Bill the scrutiny that it deserves. I do not understand the SDLP's position and why it does not have the same level of confidence in its Committee members as we do in ours.

8.45 pm

Those parties that argue that they are uncomfortable with the Bill seem to talk about it as if it is in its complete form, and it is not. We know that Bills change over time. I remember a Sinn Féin Bill, a private Member's Bill, in the last mandate that changed not only its entire contents but its name as well. Bills change as they progress through an Assembly or Parliament. That is the normal legislative process. If, at the end of Committee Stage, at Consideration Stage, Further Consideration Stage or even Final Stage, the parties opposite are that uncomfortable with how the Bill looks, they will still be able to block it then. So, what is the point of trying to delay or block a Bill at Second Stage before we have had the opportunity to put amendments forward and test some of its contents?

Surely, sensible people would believe that, as long as the option is still there to block the Bill by putting down a petition of concern, which Mr McGlone tweeted about earlier, they can do that at a later stage. Again, that is normal process.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member very much for giving way. What does sleepwalking our way to job losses in the region of 1,500 say about the socialist principles of the Benches opposite?

Mr Ross: What is remarkable is that those on the Benches opposite talked about wanting to protect the most vulnerable in our society, yet the actions that they are taking today will hit the most vulnerable the hardest. We heard from various Members about the job losses that will be incurred, the 250,000 individuals who will lose access to the social fund and the £200 million that comes out of the block grant. The Member is absolutely right; it is the most vulnerable who will suffer most from the actions of the parties opposite.

What makes it even more remarkable is that Sinn Féin has supported this Bill through its Executive stages. On the Welfare Reform Committee that was established, there were a number of areas that all parties identified as being potentially problematical or areas where they would seek to have changes. So, why not allow the normal legislative process to continue to Committee Stage, when those parties can then seek to make those changes? That is how Bills progress through this House, yet it is not the procedure that the two parties opposite wish to follow today.

As was asked before of Sinn Féin, if it is that opposed to the Bill that it wants to block it, why did it not seek to block it at Executive level or work with the SDLP to put down a petition of concern today? The answer is very simple: it is because today's stunt from the Benches opposite is about optics and not opposition. They both know the consequences of this legislation not going through and they know that the Bill has to go through, but they want other parties to do the heavy lifting and take the tough decision. That is a lack of leadership.

Mr Bell: I thank the honourable Member for East Antrim for giving way. Will he agree that one of the optics put out today was that women would suffer most if the Bill was allowed to go to Committee Stage? However, is it not the case that women would suffer most if this was not allowed to go to Committee Stage? Is it not the purse more than the wallet that would be hit? Certainly in my 20 years as a social worker, I found that it was mainly women who were applying to the social fund. *[Interruption.]* Members from the Ulster Unionist Benches may laugh, but they stood with David Cameron in the La Mon House Hotel in 2010 after, I believe, he had gone on 'Newsnight' to say that Northern Ireland would be targeted specifically for cuts. So, they can laugh at women applying to the social fund if they wish, but they will get their — *[Interruption.]* Well, they got their answer in 2010.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions should be brief. *[Interruption.]* Order, order. I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Mr Bell: Would the Member agree —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: How can I give way? *[Laughter.]* The Minister should be aware that I cannot give way when I am making an intervention myself.

The point I am making and the point that should be made, which I will make briefly, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that, of the 230,000 people who were applying to the social fund, the majority were women and children. The 1,500 jobs losses will affect women and families, and the £220 million that will be taken out of the economy will impact on women and families most when it comes to schools and hospitals. The point that I am making to the Member is that it will be women who will suffer if we were to follow the policies of the two parties opposite.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that intervention. I also thank the Deputy Speaker —

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Form an orderly queue, folks, we will get round everyone. I also thank the Deputy Speaker for allowing for latitude during the interventions.

The Member was absolutely right in the point he made. I know that he was a social worker for 20 years and that he has a level of experience on this matter that many Members do not have.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: It is not just women, of course, who would be impacted upon; it is men, women and children who would be impacted upon by the measures that the parties opposite want to implement. I will give way to Mrs Kelly, then to Mr Kennedy, who also wanted me to give way.

Mrs D Kelly: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. He referred to junior Minister Bell. I am sure that he will be somewhat surprised to learn that junior Minister Bell is a former member of the Tory Party. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mrs Kelly, you have the Floor. *[Interruption.]* There should be only one Member on their feet at a time. Everything should be done through the Chair.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I refer to what Mrs Kelly said. In 1989, I was a member of a Conservative student association; I was not a member of the party. So, in this, as in so much else, she finds that she is wrong. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That was clearly not a point of order.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It would be very helpful if Mr Bell outlined whether he was a conservative student or a member of the Tory Party. Was that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: Was that during any part of the 20 years for which he was a social worker? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we come back to the debate, please? I call Mrs Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The one piece of advice I can give to the junior Minister is that, when you are in a hole, stop digging.

I will refer to the issue of leadership that Mr Ross spoke about. Would it not have demonstrated better leadership to

have brought forward the Welfare Reform Bill, rather than doing a deal with Sinn Féin over the Education Bill, which seems to us to have included choreography between Sinn Féin and the DUP, which was not in the best interests of the people whom they claim to represent.

Mr Ross: I never thought that, when I started my speech, it would cause such excitement.

I will deal with the issue that was raised first. Plenty of Members have changed political parties over the years, or have had associations that have changed over the years. I am glad that he is where he is now and came to his senses. I know that Members to my right had a flirtation with another political party only a number of years ago. Perhaps that puts them in a more embarrassing position.

Mr Kennedy: We were glad to get rid of him, too. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ross: I am quite sure they were, and I am quite sure that it is causing embarrassment during today's debate.

Mrs Kelly can deflect as much as she wants, but the fact remains that the position that Sinn Féin and the SDLP have adopted today will be bad for people in Northern Ireland. It will be bad for vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, including men, women and children. Those facts are there, and I think that everybody now understands that they are there.

The arguments about parity have been well rehearsed; I do not think that there is any need to go over them again. Although exact parity of timing was not possible, largely because of Sinn Féin's delaying tactics and foot-dragging in the Executive, it is important that the time gap remains as small as possible to ensure that we do not have to foot a huge Bill. Northern Ireland cannot afford to breach parity or to delay the Bill. The reasons why we cannot afford to delay the Bill were mentioned by various Members, but I think that they are worth going over again, for Mrs Kelly if nobody else, because she seemed confused about the impact that delaying the Bill will have.

It will impact upon our welfare recipients, civil servants and public spending across Departments. If the Bill is not in place in April, as other Members said, some 250,000 people in Northern Ireland who benefit each year from the social fund will find themselves without any support. That is one of the impacts of the position of Sinn Féin and the SDLP today.

There will also be job losses for the civil servants who administer benefit payments across the United Kingdom if we were to break away from the single benefits system. That is one of the impacts that would come from the position of Sinn Féin and the SDLP. If welfare changes remain unimplemented over the next two years, the Executive will face a bill of over £200 million, to make up the difference between the money that would have been paid by the Westminster Government for the new system rather than for the existing one. The £200 million will come out of our block grant, if we are to follow the course promoted by Sinn Féin and the SDLP. From where would they seek to take that money? Would it be from health, education, roads or what else? Those are the real impacts of the politics are being played opposite.

That is not to mention some of the other things that the Executive is trying to do in order to help boost our economy. There are negotiations ongoing about the potential cost of devolving corporation tax. It would, of

course, be even more difficult for the Executive if we had to make up a £200 million bill because of the party politics played opposite and the delay of this Welfare Reform Bill at second stage level. As was said by Mr McIlveen earlier, the tactic that is being used in the name of protecting the most vulnerable in society will impact upon them hardest. I think that that is shameful.

However, it should not surprise us. In the debate yesterday, both of the nationalist parties pursued this idea that they wanted to have a full suite of tax-raising powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly. They did not recognise the cost of that. The cost is that there would also be devolved the deficit that we run each year from subvention. The SDLP, in particular, talks about wanting to lower the rate of fuel duty. They do not tell us how much that would cost, or what other elements of public spending they would reduce in order to pay for it. It is the same story today. They do not tell us where they would make up the £200 million bill that we would be hit with.

Some Members: Sell the airport.

Mr Ross: Yes, I have heard Members from various positions talk about selling land that they do not own. We have heard that before in this Chamber.

The only conclusion that you can come to about the £200 million shortfall that we would have if they were to delay this Bill, and the money they would have to make up if they want tax-raising powers devolved to the Assembly, is that they would only be able to achieve it by taxing households more heavily. We know that they are not going to do it from public spending, because they want the first-class public services that they talk about. At a time when households suffer as it is, is taxing those individuals more heavily really a policy worth promoting? That is the position of both nationalist parties and, again, I think it shameful.

I conclude by echoing the comments of the First Minister, in his intervention to the Social Development Minister during the opening comments. The Assembly has two options; a choice to make. It is a test of the maturity of political parties and of individuals. Members can back the Sinn Féin amendment and negotiate with Lord Freud, but incur the job losses and the £200 million hit on the block grant. It will mean that those who are reliant upon the social fund will get no funding next year.

The second option is that they can follow normal legislative processes; pass the Second Stage and approve the general principles of the Bill; they can still have their negotiations with Lord Freud and the central Government; and they can work on the Committee where amendments may be made to make this Bill a better Bill for people in Northern Ireland. Members should choose the path that proves real leadership, which will be better for people in Northern Ireland and which will be welcomed by people in Northern Ireland on both sides of this argument.

I hope that the House will vote against Sinn Féin's tactics and ensure that the most vulnerable in our society will not be hit because of the tactics of the nationalist parties in the House.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: : Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This has been an interesting debate. It has in many ways exposed a fault line in the Assembly. Time and again, when it comes to key strategic moments or opportunities, we find arguments which are

perhaps more to do with whether there is some hidden threat to the constitutional position, as opposed to a debate or dialogue between parties of equals, as to what is in the best interests of the community that we all serve.

9.00 pm

The issues that are being discussed are at the heart of the debate. The entitlements that the Tories are determined to deny to the most vulnerable in our society are so vital that every party in the Assembly should be united in determined opposition. However, that option appeared to be ignored or rejected before it was even proposed. I believe that will continue to cost people, particularly the most vulnerable, in our society.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

I know very well that there is history and there is blame and responsibility on all sides of the House. There is a fixation among some to avoid accepting any responsibility for the travails and traumas that this society has been through but reality, nevertheless, speaks louder than those rejections. There is a responsibility on all sides of the House for the circumstances that arose. When we get the opportunity to come together, our first option should not be to reject it. We should explore to the nth degree whether there is something that we can do. On this issue, there was a very significant opportunity for not just the parties in the Assembly; there is very significant opposition in Scotland, Wales and England. There were opportunities for us to attempt to provide a platform or even leadership to those who are faced, on the basis of disunity, with the reality that the Westminster Government could end up imposing this, notwithstanding the quantum of that opposition. We should pause to reflect on that. Whether we do it in the course of this debate or after it, it remains an issue for the Assembly if we are ever to achieve the potential that, I think, all of us hope that we can reach.

This is a reasonable thing to say this evening: the parties on the opposite Benches quite clearly have in their ranks many people who are capable of developing rational arguments and examining the arguments of others. However, what we have is almost an ideological or knee-jerk response. Many examples have been given of the opposition that people have demonstrated in the course of the discussions at Westminster. The reality is that that opposition did not amount to a hill of beans. That is the fact. The reality is that we should not deny ourselves the power that we, as an Assembly, have to do something about that, in conjunction with and with the support of the Members who made that case. Our view is quite clear; I do not need to rehearse it. We did not expect you to be able to reverse the situation in Westminster. However, we expect us, in the Assembly, to maximise our strength and recognise the benefit of adopting all-party positions. It happens very rarely, and that is a matter of regret. We are hobbling ourselves.

I have listened to Members, and I have heard the bidding war on the DUP Benches. People have grasped figures out of thin air. They do not have the information. My party brought a motion on corporation tax a number of years ago, and it was rejected. What do we have now? We have an all-party position in agreement on the benefits of corporation tax powers. We have advanced negotiations. We also have increasingly more data about the revenue streams that are an essential part of the overall economy

here. It is not about only public expenditure and the private sector; it is about the revenues that flow from here to the Treasury. However, extracting that information, as our Finance Minister will tell you, has proved very difficult. Getting that information is like extracting teeth. Why is that? Information and knowledge is power. If we have the knowledge and information, we can make informed decisions. I say this with regret, but I have found that, even when we talk about air passenger duty as an option for the Assembly to deploy, people psyche themselves out and frighten themselves by saying that it would cost £60 million. If we were to advance on the basis of looking at those rates, we would see that it would be an integral part of developing the economy and of opening up export opportunities, perhaps one route at a time. That would mean that we would have to deal not with the quantum but with that one element and its benefits, which we would then test. However, we deny ourselves that time and time again. The first response is that we cannot depart from parity. If that argument does not prevail and is not sufficient, we frighten ourselves. That argument very often does not prevail, because if air passenger duty and devolving corporation tax powers are anything, they are departures from parity. We talk about £200 million or £400 million — it depends. We had a debate yesterday. One Member said that the deficit was £9 billion, and the Member who spoke immediately after him said that it was £15 billion. That is the kind of Mickey Mouse approach that we take to the cost of running our own affairs.

I am not saying that every decision can be afforded. I do not argue that. However, I do argue that we should not frighten or talk ourselves out of it on the basis that people are plucking figures out of thin air. It happens too often. If Members want to say that I am wrong about that, I am quite happy to take interventions. *[Interruption.]* Are you offering?

Mr Poots: Yes. In the first instance, the Member should realise that there are breaks with parity on a range of issues, whether they are the social care that we offer for free, free transportation for the over-60s or our attempts to seek to introduce our own air passenger duty rates. So, the Assembly can rise to the challenge.

When we are talking about welfare reform, we should remember that we have a figure of £220 million. If the Member wants to disparage the work that DFP and DSD have done to arrive at that figure, let him do that factually, as opposed to just making some general comment. That £220 million is the amount that we are, potentially, at risk of jeopardising from the Northern Ireland block Budget as a consequence of dropping the Bill. What are we prepared to accept when it comes to breaking parity on welfare? Are we prepared to accept £2 million, £20 million, £200 million or £2 billion? Once we break parity, we do not know where the figures will stop. There may be lots of just issues, but we do not know where it could end. That is the danger of going down the route of breaking parity on welfare.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Member, particularly for his other examples of breaking with parity. However, I do not think that he challenged effectively the point that I made about how parity is advanced as a defensive argument or the way in which the figures are plucked out. There is nobody in the House —

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes, OK.

Mr P Robinson: The Member cannot continue to make comments such as “plucked out”, as though somebody just thought of a figure and threw it out. The Department of Finance produced that figure. It was given at our Executive meeting, and it was not challenged by any Minister, including his own.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I was not at the Executive meeting, but I am challenging the figure. I have heard those figures, and I heard what people told us when we introduced the argument about corporation tax. They said that we could not afford it and that the claims on the block grant would be so significant that we could not deliver on our public service commitments. It turned out that that information was wrong. It turned out —

Mr P Robinson: Tell us what it is.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am demonstrating to you that, when this matter was introduced to the Assembly, we were told that we could not afford it. Now, all of a sudden, we find that it is worth negotiating. I do not know what the outcome of the negotiations will be, but I do know — I think that you will acknowledge this — that we now have much more information about the actual deficit than we did before that exercise started. For that alone, it has been worthwhile

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: As you know, I have already given way, and we cannot just go on debating this back and forward.

Mr P Robinson: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: If you are prepared to listen, I have demonstrated that, once we took our courage in our hands and started to examine the issues, we discovered that we could do more than we initially thought. We are very well advanced on that issue. On the example of air passenger duty, I also heard people in the House tell us that we could not do that. However, when we realised that our single route to North America was at risk, we, of course, discovered that we could. I am now arguing that we should go the next step, because I think that other routes would benefit from a similar application of that flexibility. I would then apply that in as many other circumstances as we, with our creativity and innovative approach, could imagine.

Mr P Robinson: Will you give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, sorry, I will not.

Mr P Robinson: You have all the time in the world.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Make all remarks through the Chair.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: As to the issue that we are discussing tonight, Sinn Féin's amendment was not to kill the Bill, because we could have killed the Bill this evening. We have explained over and over again that we believe that it can be improved. We believe that there are ideas that should be tested that have not been tested. We raised that as early as February or March this year, and we find that the Bill that has been brought forward has not changed one iota. On that basis, we are taking a stand. Our position is that —

Mr P Robinson: Do it at Committee Stage.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am not giving way.

On the basis of our proposition, we are saying that this Bill can be improved, and we are prepared to work with all parties in the Assembly to do that.

When it comes to the broader issues, let people be aware that if we do not attempt to establish the degree of support that there would be across all the regions that Westminster has a responsibility for and has to take account of, and if we do not make ourselves aware of that and become part of that, we quite clearly leave the matter at our cost, particularly for the most vulnerable in our community. They will pay the cost of the Tories' drive to hollow out the welfare benefits system. That is exactly the course that they are set on. While we are having this discussion, they are announcing another £10 billion in cuts.

Let us face it: this is a very significant challenge to the whole efficacy of regional Assemblies. I do not think that we would be the only Assembly, legislature or Parliament to respond to the opportunity to come together, act collectively and make representations on that basis. We have enough power in this place to be heard, and I think that we have enough skill and persuasive power to convince others to join us in addressing this issue with the people who can make the decision.

We can divide ourselves, weaken ourselves and paralyse ourselves. We can refuse to bring forward reasoned amendments to this Bill and present to this House, to parties that are not prepared to accept it, the Bill as it is. That is the choice we can make. People can play the numbers game if they think that that will help, but they know in their hearts that it will not. As we have argued for the transfer of fiscal powers, we do it on the basis that this Assembly will make informed decisions. It is not a matter of handing an open purse to anyone, nor is it a matter of writing blank cheques; it is a matter of us, as people who have experience and responsibility, working together to make informed decisions.

Mr P Robinson: Why can you not do it at Committee Stage?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I have given way enough times, and I want to bring this to a close.

My appeal to the Members opposite is to give us an explanation as to why they are not prepared to engage with the parties who are offering to engage to see how we can address this issue in a collective —

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, if you do not mind —

Mr Givan: You have asked a question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks through the Chair.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am putting the point; this is a question that we have avoided all afternoon, and it is getting late —

Mr Givan: Well, let us answer it.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No. We will answer it. You are going to get a vote: you can answer it. My view is that they are ducking around and questioning whether people have an ulterior agenda when, in fact, all we are trying to do is to make people aware that we can take more responsibility

than we have at present. We can take more creative options than those we are taking at present. We do not have to go for the balance of negativity; we can go for positive outcomes. We can develop local solutions to local problems. I do not think that the Assembly has reached that potential on very many occasions thus far.

This is a challenge, on this particular issue, to listen to and reflect on what has been said by those who have argued against welfare and benefits reform and have taken a stand against the Bill as it is presented. The question is whether you are going to attempt to push it through against that opposition or whether you recognise the opportunity to engage in meaningful, sensible discussion among ourselves. We will know the answer to that question when we get to the vote.

9.15 pm

Mr McDevitt: I want to focus on Part 4 of the Welfare Reform Bill, which deals with DLA reform and the proposed personal independence payments. Part 4 really illustrates the significant impact that the proposed legislation will have on our region from an equality point of view. It highlights the very significant new inequalities that this law, if passed, will create. It does so because, bluntly, it is not us but the fiscal institute in London and, I am led to believe Lord Freud, who accept that this region will be the worst affected in the context of welfare reform.

It is ironic that when you know, as a matter of uncontested fact, that you are in the Government of a region that is to be adversely impacted by something and that that region happens to have some of the best equality laws in the world — different from elsewhere in these islands — that you would not seek to use your statute book to defend the people whom you purport to represent. It is ironic, if not negligent, that this Executive and this Minister are refusing, point blank, to exercise the leverage of the differential in equality laws in this region versus the rest of the United Kingdom on this Bill. I can suspect only that the Minister does not want to test this theory because he is scared of the answer. He is scared that it might be found that the Bill does not meet a fundamental or proper detailed test against our equality legislation.

If he is not scared, let him invoke Standing Order 35. Let him put the interests of the most vulnerable in this region first. Let him test the boundaries of devolution. Let him assert the power of the Assembly. Or, let him be a little surrender monkey to those who really pull the DUP strings. It is a basic test. We know that the Minister supporting the Bill has a dodgy record on the ministerial code. We know that he does not really “get” some of the duties involved in holding office, but you would think that when he has a Standing Order smacking him in the face that states:

“For the purpose of obtaining advice as to whether a Bill, draft Bill or proposal for legislation is compatible with equality requirements (including rights under the European Convention on Human Rights) the Assembly may proceed on a motion made in pursuance of paragraph (2)”.

Paragraph 2 states:

“Notice may be given by ... any member of the Executive”.

We know, because the Speaker ruled on the matter yesterday, that that means the relevant member of the Executive or a Minister acting on behalf of the Executive:

“or the chairperson of the appropriate statutory committee”.

Why would we not want to give ourselves extra leverage with the British Government? Why would we want to deny the most vulnerable in this region, whom everyone, including the most right-wing Tory, believes will be the most disadvantaged and affected by welfare reform? Why not have another shout at a better argument that means that they get a better settlement? Why? The only conclusion is that you do not want to. That, I think, deals with the Minister's lack of proper duty towards his office today, which has been highly illustrated so far in this debate.

I place the same challenge at the door of the Chairman of the Committee. I hope that he has personal reasons for being absent for most of the day, because his absence for most of the debate has been noted. He stands for a party that claims to build an Ireland of equals — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McDevitt: He stands for a party that likes to own the issue of equality and purports to champion equality. Well, he has, at his disposal, a mechanism in the Assembly that gives him the means to test the Bill against nothing other than its compliance with our equality legislation and the European Convention. Let him step up to the mark and invoke Standing Order 35. Let him show that he is interested in moving beyond the rhetoric of opposition on the substantive, grievous, awful proposals in aspects of the Bill. Let him stand up to those who are being derelict in their duty. One of the things that I am struggling with today is the suggestion that we are going to be out 1,500 jobs if the Bill is delayed by so much as a day. We have heard it from the DUP, we heard it from Mr Dickson — who, I have to say, did the Alliance Party one of the greatest disservices that I have seen anyone do the Alliance Party in recent times — and I am sure that we even heard it from Members in the Ulster Unionist Party. Where is there one bit of proof that 1,500 jobs could go? Can you produce a letter or an e-mail? Do you even have a text? Did someone tweet it? No, no one did, and you have no proof. What you are doing is obvious to us all. You are scaremongering the people on your own Back Benches into believing that if they do not whip themselves into line, even though they disagree with the Bill and everything that it stands for, there is going to be significant fallout.

People need to reflect on whether it is really responsible to come to the House and scaremonger. You need to reflect on that on the day that you actually do come to the House and make specific policy announcements that will cost people jobs. That happened this afternoon. The Minister of Health came to the House and made specific policy announcements that will have a job impact. That is not speculation or scaremongering but fact, yet all that we have heard from the DUP today is that there may be, there could be, or — if we take Mr Ross's word for it — there will be 1,500 jobs going. Why? Because a Bill does not make it to Committee Stage next week. It is just pathetic. It is a disservice to the people who are making the suggestions, and, frankly, it is the sort of thing that gives politics a bad name.

One of the reasons why I find it difficult to believe a lot of what has been said is that, during his contribution, Mr Poots — speaking as Mr Poots, not as Minister Poots — said that we had 8% unemployed in this region and, therefore, we have 92% of people at work. That is just not true. We have the highest level of economic inactivity of any region in Europe. We do not have 92% of people at work. How can you have confidence in someone who cannot even grasp that basic concept?

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: No, I will not give way yet. I will be very happy to give way to you in a second, Mr Poots. The fact that you think that 92% of our people are at work proves that you do not get the real impact of the Welfare Reform Bill. It proves that you do not understand that there are a huge number of people who are economically inactive, many of them reliant — solely, obviously — on welfare of different forms. Many are on DLA and other types of payment. You have forgotten those people. You have written them out of history. You have erased them from the narrative. They are the people whom the Bill is going to hit the hardest. They also happen to be people who are living with the legacy of our conflict. I will give way to Mr Poots now.

Mr Poots: The fact of life, and Mr McDevitt may have difficulty accepting it, is that, of those who are available to work, 92% of them are in work. If Mr McDevitt does not understand that, that is a problem. If he wants to twist it, that is another matter altogether.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Poots's clarification. Fortunately, the Hansard report will prove which of the two of us is right. He took his 8%, he got his 92%, and that makes 100% in his ideal world. I wish it were so, but, tragically, it ain't.

One of the things that is worth seriously reflecting on at this stage is the impact that the Bill will have on those people who are permanently economically inactive. Not people who have the possibility of work or the option to work. Not people who, as some right-wing conservatives — as it turns out, in this House and across the water — like to suggest, just choose not to work, but people who cannot and will never be able to work. The Bill will hit them harder than it will hit anyone else. We have more of that type of person in this region than anywhere else in these islands.

I ask colleagues in Sinn Féin why they keep saying that we all share the blame for the Troubles. It is just not true. We are not all to blame for what happened, nor will we all accept responsibility for what was done. It was not done in our name, it was not done for our nation, and we do not perceive it to have been, in any way, a patriotic event.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: No. I am not going to give way to Mr Bell, and I will tell you why. When his own colleague gave way to him, it triggered a cacophony of hilarity from his own Back Benches, and I do not think that it is fair to subject him to a cacophony of hilarity from his own lot. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr McDevitt: I have too much of a working relationship with the junior Minister, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, to want to have him subjected to the hilarity of his own lot.

Mr P Robinson: Look behind you.

Mr McDevitt: The First Minister was not in the Chamber for that —

Mr P Robinson: I saw it.

Mr McDevitt: If he had been, he might be wanting to reflect on it the next time there is a reshuffle on the cards in the DUP. It was not what you would call a vote of confidence.

On the issue of confidence, there was a question about us proposing a special measures committee — a Standing Order 35 committee — and the impact that that might have on the standing of Mark H Durkan, our social development spokesperson. I assure colleagues who may be concerned for Mr Durkan's standing in the SDLP that it would have no impact. In fact, you will find that, when the Bill comes to Committee Stage, he may have a lot more to say about the really awful equality implications of this Bill.

That is the basic question tonight: what are Members scared of? Why will they not allow the Assembly to assert its authority, not just here in this jurisdiction but towards London? What is wrong with that?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member elaborate on what the SDLP said in response to the equality impact assessment on the Bill that was conducted between 5 September 2011 and 30 November 2011, and which is referred to in the explanatory and financial memorandum to the Bill? It would be useful to set out the precise points that were made by the SDLP at that stage on equality issues. Bearing in mind that equality is very much part of the memorandum to the Bill, which can be considered as part of the Social Development Committee's scrutiny, why can the equality issues not be considered in tandem with the rest of the Bill through the normal processes rather than having a separate stand-alone process, the effect of which will be to focus solely on equality issues and, at best, force a situation in which the rest of the Bill would have to be taken through by accelerated passage?

Mr McDevitt: That is a bit of homework there, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I will do my best to deal with it.

Dr Farry makes a couple of very interesting points. The first is a procedural point. As a man whom I have known for quite a number of years and who was given to reading Standing Orders at night when the rest of us would be heading off to the pub, he knows why we would want to invoke Standing Order 35. He would understand exactly the difference between a procedure under Standing Order 35 and the work of a regular Committee. He, more than anyone, having represented his party on the bill of rights forum, if memory serves me right, would understand that the test that we need to apply is a pre-legislative test.

It is a fact that we are choosing to invoke this procedure at this point, but it is not a fact that we ignored the equality issues in the Bill. You will find significant commentary throughout this process from the SDLP about the equality impact of this Bill. That is a matter of fact, and there is just no getting away from it.

Dr Farry: Did you respond to the consultation? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr McDevitt: It is also a matter of fact that Naomi Long, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks must be made through the Chair. You can respect the Chair or do otherwise, but the Member has the Floor, and I ask other Members to respect that. Everyone will have their chance. It is early in the day yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McDevitt: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is also a matter of fact that Ms Naomi Long took an entirely different position on the Bill to the one that the Alliance Party is taking in this Chamber. I have had a cursory look through the amendments that are relevant to Part 4 of the Bill — the part in which I am interested — and I see that she opposed every single bit of it. She backed the Labour Party on every single amendment. That said, there was at least one DUP MP present for all those votes in opposition to it as well. That is a situation that, I am sure, that party will be able to square at some point.

9.30 pm

I pay tribute to Lord Morrow. When the House discussed the House of Lords amendments to the Bill, which were very helpful to those of us who think that it is a bad thing, I could see that the good Lord Morrow felt somewhat satisfied with the work that he had done. It is true that, when Members, from all parties, have had the space to think about the Bill and its merits, they have done the honourable thing. What is absolutely unbelievable is that, when those same people — some of them actually are the same people, such as the Minister of Finance — find themselves in office, they seem to forget their principled stand. They seem to lose the integrity of the opposition position that they held when they were acting as parliamentarians. I am afraid that that is the only conclusion.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. If you look at the Member's remarks, you will see that he is suggesting that the Minister of Finance has no principles. That is not an acceptable remark for any Member to make, and he should withdraw it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I caution Members. In a debate across the Floor, it is sometimes easy to stray. However, I ask all Members to mind the language that they use in their descriptions.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate your guidance, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I made no such suggestion. If there was a suggestion that I made such a suggestion, I am happy, for the First Minister's benefit, if there was even a perception in his delicate mind that that may have been my suggestion, to correct it. However, I am questioning the integrity of the political position. I am questioning the justification. How can you stand in front of your electorate and justify having one position in London and another in Belfast that is basically diametrically opposed? How can you have one position when you are an MP and another when you are a double-jobbing MLA in an Executive Ministry? Those are statements of fact and legitimate questions to pose in the House. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no point in me continuing to repeat myself if no one is passing any remarks. I ask Members to respect the Chair and allow the Member to continue.

Mr McDevitt: I can only presume from the constant reaction to even a suggestion that there may be a contradiction in the DUP's position that I am onto something. Given the desperation — we may get a point of order or two yet to try to push the issue — I can only presume that there is some substance to what I am suggesting. That is for others to reflect on, I suppose.

The issue of the particular impact that the Bill will have on women has already been raised. It has been raised in the context of the proposed changes to the way payments will be made and the fact that, if the Bill passes, some payments that currently go to the woman in a household will no longer go to the woman and will go elsewhere. It has been raised in the context that the impact of Part 4 of the Bill will be particularly severe on women in this community. It has been raised in the context of our understanding the continuing role that women play in dealing with the legacy of our conflict.

I have heard some pretty awful remarks made from a sedentary position about legitimate remarks that were made, legitimate questions that were asked and legitimate issues that were raised. It raises this question: are we so determined to be gold star pupils with the Treasury or the Department for Work and Pensions that we are willing to sacrifice the most vulnerable in this region? Are we as an Assembly so determined to fall into line because a couple of Ministers have suggested that, if we do not, there will be some awful constitutional crisis, when, in fact, all we are doing is exercising the power that we have been devolved to exercised? It is the power that the very Parliament that these people purport to hold as sovereign has given to us to exercise. Are we really honestly suggesting that a failure to properly scrutinise the Bill for, specifically, the equality implications and the ECHR implications would not undermine and lessen the legislative process in this House and weaken the House's standing either in the eye of this region or in the eyes of Westminster? *[Interruption.]* I hear from the Benches opposite some suggestion that that may be how people feel. If that is the case, how do you square that with what Scotland has done? Scotland does not even have welfare reform devolved to it, and it has managed to have a considerably higher degree of influence over the Bill in its jurisdiction than has been managed here.

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will give way in a second. We have a power available to us, and, rather bizarrely, we refuse, point blank, to even consider using it. I give way to the First Minister.

Mr P Robinson: Of course, we have a power, and we have a normal procedure to scrutinise. You scrutinise it in Committee. That is exactly what this debate is about. It is about sending the Bill into Committee so that it can be scrutinised. Tell me what difference there is between negotiating with DWP outside when you have brought the whole thing to a standstill with all of the consequences that that will have and negotiating with DWP while the Bill is in Committee. What is the difference?

Mr McDevitt: The First Minister has nearly left me speechless. This is a man who is meant to be a master tactician. This is a man who is meant to have masterminded all the great negotiations on behalf of the DUP — everything. This is a man who is meant to be able to think like a champion chess player and anticipate the moves ahead. You would think that, if he was sitting on a

jewel piece and had a free move on that would never be threatened by making this move, he would use it. I suspect that at the heart of this issue is the fact that the DUP does not want to want to use equality legislation to strengthen the hand of this region because it does not like or believe in equality legislation and does not think that we should have human rights particularly enshrined in legislation. It wants us to be just the same as everywhere else. Well, we are not. We are manifestly different, and we have different powers and different duties. Most importantly, we have different opportunities.

What I hear from the First Minister is this desire to be just like Scotland, when, in fact, I would like to hear from him is "Do you know something? We are not like Scotland. We have more powers than Scotland, and we are going to exercise them in the interests of this region". That is what exercising a Standing Order 35 procedure would allow him and his colleagues around the Executive table to do. It is absolutely shameful that the House tonight is deliberately ignoring the opportunity to make a strategic move. It is a move that, if he were negotiating in his party's selfish interest, he would be the first to make but which, because he is looking over his shoulder to another big party that he may or may not be looking to do a deal with in the future — I do not know — he is unwilling to make.

That is just about as much as I would like to say about the Bill. The question is this: does this House have the courage to use its power to stand up to bad law from London, or does this House surrender to bad law and adopt bad process in doing so? That is the question for the DUP and Sinn Féin to answer.

Mr Douglas: I speak for the motion today or tonight, whatever it is. The Book of Proverbs says that there is nothing new under the sun. Unfortunately, I will probably regurgitate some of the stuff that has been said already. I suppose that there is nothing new under the moon at this time of night.

I want to make a number of important points as background to the debate. As has been highlighted a number of times today, many of us across all the parties have serious problems with aspects of the welfare reform before us. The current welfare system needs to be streamlined and simplified. However, during the process of reform, we must ensure that the caring principle enshrined in our welfare system is not lost. We must not leave a vulnerable person or family without help or assistance, and I am pleased that Minister McCausland highlighted that yesterday during the debate on food banks.

Universal credit attempts to address the two principal failings of the current benefits system, and I believe most of us agree on those. The first is the complexity of the system. Anyone who has claimed benefits will readily testify just how difficult it is to cut through the tangled web of bureaucracy. I know another big word: delicatessen. *[Laughter.]* Members in the House and their office staff will definitely know that you nearly need a master's degree to fill in the forms for constituents, and we have all experienced that at a local level. Secondly, the current system fails to make it worthwhile for people to take up paid work. As someone who has experienced the scourge of unemployment in the past, I know only too well the failings of the system and the feelings of hopelessness and despair of being on the dole.

I had a cup of coffee with my friend Blakely McNally from Ballybeen earlier. I think he is in the Public Gallery somewhere. He said to me that a journalist had approached him and asked him if he knew anybody who enjoyed being on benefits. That is a terrible slight on the many genuine people who, unfortunately, find themselves unemployed and on benefits. By the way, Blakely is looking a lift to Ballybeen tonight if anybody is going that way.

We in the Northern Ireland Assembly have a unique position among the UK's devolved Administrations in that we have the capacity to set aside some or, indeed, all of the welfare reform proposals. My colleagues and I are uncomfortable with certain aspects of the Bill — yes, we have had discussions in the Social Development Committee — but it is not principle we are talking about tonight but process. I firmly believe that any stalling will have serious repercussions for hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable in our society. The reality is that Northern Ireland has never broken parity with the rest of the United Kingdom on social security, and, hopefully, we will all agree that that should never happen lest we have a shortfall that the Assembly simply could not afford. As the First Minister said, we are talking about job losses to Northern Ireland if we mess up tonight.

Those who suggest that we should defer, ignore or hold out for changes to the welfare system in Westminster are not living in the real world. Tonight is "Make your mind up time" for the Assembly. While we will continue to scrutinise and press for changes and improvements to the Bill, we fully support the principle of parity because we recognise that Northern Ireland could not afford to meet the potential shortfall of hundreds of millions of pounds if the Bill is thrown out tonight. My colleague Simon Hamilton mentioned earlier that the cost could eventually reach £1 billion if we do not sort this out. Other Members have questioned that, but that is what Simon said: £1 billion.

Some people will know Bumper Graham from NIPSA. Speaking at the Social Development Committee on 2 February, he said:

"On a general point, the normal arrangement has been the application of parity for social security and, indeed, occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland. NIPSA believes that, by and large, parity, warts and all, is the lesser of the evils, so to speak. We are concerned about attempts to break parity ... We have had the nonsense from Tories, this week and previously, about looking at regional benefit rates in the UK."

That is the trade unions speaking. He finished by saying:

"While we are not absolutely wedded to parity, we believe that it is the baseline for going forward."

We are all aware of Northern Ireland's special social and economic needs. A study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, outside London, Northern Ireland will be the UK region worst affected by the coming changes to tax and benefits. However, the question that I ask Members is this: who are we to demand that vulnerable people in Ballybeen or Ballymacarrett in east Belfast should be treated more favourably than vulnerable people in Birmingham, Brechin in Scotland or Bangor in north Wales?

9.45 pm

As neighbours and citizens, we have a duty to care for those in need, whether as the result of sickness, bereavement or some other circumstance beyond their control. Although the government-sponsored welfare system is a recent development, the principle behind such a system dates back to biblical times. Welfare reform should not be about gaining the high moral ground; it should be about doing what is best for our communities and neighbours, in particular, the most needy. It is good for people to work. Therefore, we support the aim of reducing welfare dependency and encouraging progression into work. The welfare system should not discourage people from getting a job; rather, it should be structured to encourage advancement into the workplace.

Minister Nelson McCausland has pressed and will continue to press for changes and improvements to soften the blow so that we can make sensible modifications to the, frankly, horrifying situation faced by sick and disabled people. However, time is running out. Any delay to the introduction of the Bill will have potentially serious consequences for hundreds of thousands of our most vulnerable citizens.

Let us have a reality check about what we are really dealing with. The current Con-Dem coalition Government have the block grant in their sights and will continue to reduce our allocation. Every Department and every public service faces further dramatic cuts in years to come. Yesterday, the Chancellor, George Osborne, announced in Birmingham that benefits are to be slashed as the Government attempt to find another £10 billion in spending cuts. I read a report that said:

"The proposals place him on a collision course with Liberal Democrat coalition partners, after he bluntly rejected their calls to tax the rich".

That is the Government we are dealing with. It went on to say:

"the Chancellor set out an argument he clearly hoped would appeal to working people, as he insisted benefit claimants should be forced to make sacrifices to help the Government balance the books."

What a statement. Here is another millionaire member of the Cabinet, a Chancellor who has never known what it is like to stand alone in a dole queue, borrow from a moneylender to feed his children or struggle every August to buy school uniforms. This is the face of the Treasury that we are up against when Minister McCausland goes to London to press for changes. Can we really expect any empathy or understanding if, as a result of tonight's vote, we break ranks and, possibly, break parity?

The Bill is only at Second Stage, and we will continue to press for changes. I have just returned to the Social Development Committee and learned recently that it will increase the time spent in meetings from roughly three hours a week to around 20 hours a week right up to Christmas to scrutinise the reforms. If the Bill succeeds tonight, I will have a few nights off. Surely, that Committee, with the 20 hours a week to scrutinise the Bill, is the arena in which to come to agreement on the changes that are required by us all. There is precious little time to enable us to address concerns that I and many others in the Chamber have, but the answer is not to delay the Second

Reading. I support the motion and oppose the reasoned amendment.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an rúin. I did not think that I would have found myself agreeing with a quote from the Book of Proverbs, but there is nothing new under the sun. Hopefully, like the Member who has just spoken and brought newer material to the debate, I am not going to reiterate many of the points that have been made today.

I thank my party colleague Mickey Brady for tabling the reasoned amendment and Alec Maskey, who outlined the party position and, indeed, the position of the Committee. It was very noticeable, particularly with regard to the views of the Committee that he laid out, that all the Committee members who spoke subsequently did not disagree with anything he said.

The first of two of the striking things about the debate today is that I have not heard a single Member who has spoken say that this is a good Bill. Not one person in the Assembly who has spoken has said that this is a good Bill. Indeed, the person tasked with tabling and leading on the Bill — the Minister himself — said that it was not a Bill that he would have tabled if he had had the power to do something different. The question that raises is this: if this is a poor or bad Bill, what are we going to do to make it a better Bill?

Mickey Brady tabled the amendment on behalf of Sinn Féin. It provides an opportunity for the Bill to be made better. Again, I do not think that any Member whom I have heard speaking today has not said that they do not want to see a better Bill as the outcome of this process. So why would people not be for deferral to give us the time, space and opportunity to make this a better Bill?

One of the other aspects of this is that the Minister said that he was still in discussions or negotiations — whatever word you want to use — with his counterpart in the Tory Government. When he is having those negotiations, would it not be better if he was in a position to say that the Assembly is not satisfied with the Bill and will take time and space to make it a better Bill? Certainly, I believe and I think that our party and any person who thinks about it rationally would say that that would put the Minister in a better position. If it is passed, as it stands, I have absolutely no doubt that the person he goes to meet next week — we wish the Minister well — will say, "What is the point of me changing anything? You have already agreed the principles. Just proceed and take it as it is".

The Minister can address this when he is on his feet. The Bill has been in process for a long time. The Minister got sight of the Bill and will have seen its broad parameters. He tells us that he has been in discussion with his counterpart in the Westminster Government. Can he tell us what changes are in the Bill, as it is presented today, so that we can ascertain and analyse what changes have been made? When I asked that question earlier —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mr F McCann: Do you agree that two other Ministers have met Lord Freud on a number of occasions? They were the two SDLP Social Development Ministers, and they delivered nothing either.

Mr McCartney: I am certainly not going to disagree with that. I think that that is what we have to say.

In many ways, if we are going to strengthen the Bill, let us strengthen the hand of those who are tasked with making it a better Bill. In my opinion, deferral is the best way of doing it. If we vote this through to Committee Stage, why would the person on the other side of the negotiating table not say, "You have already revealed your bottom line. Why should I negotiate with you?"

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Bell: This is not a question of deferring it to allow the Minister to meet next week or the week after that. The Minister made it very clear at the start that, if we defer it tonight, it goes to 2013. That means that we have no social fund from 1 April. That is the reason why he cannot do it.

Mr McCartney: That leads on to the second very remarkable thing about today's debate. I have never heard so many assumptions in a debate. People got up and made assumptions. They think that, by making an assumption, all of a sudden it is fact. That is not the way that it works. This has never happened before. This is the first time that there has been a reasoned amendment. None of us knows how long the deferral will be. People are making assumptions because of what happens in Westminster or Leinster House. This is the Assembly. We are tasked with bringing this forward in the way that we wish. However, people are making the assumption that it will be six months and then the timeline will be broken.

When the Minister spoke today, I was struck by one phrase that he used. He said that we had run out of road, but he did not give us any timeline. That is another assumption. We have not run out of road. There is an opportunity, by deferral. The Assembly and the people who are tasked with making this a better Bill can, if they focus their attention, do it and do it within a timeline that would allow the Bill to proceed without all the assumptions that have been made here today. That is important. The assumption is made that the social fund will come to an end. Where are the facts? Assumptions were made today about the figures. I heard a number of figures mentioned, even in the debate. Some people talked about £220 million; some people talked about £200 million; and some people talked about £250 million. Those are all assumptions. When Alec Maskey spoke on behalf of the Committee, unchallenged by any Committee member, he said that officials could not tell the Committee the exact figure. I assume, which is perhaps a bad thing to do, that they could not tell the Minister either, because he did not give us a figure. It was very noticeable —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Allister: I inform the Member that I hold in my hand an answer that I received today from the Minister of Finance, which says that the direct costs amount to some £207 million during the spending review period and that, for the rest of the decade, they will accumulate to £1.2 billion. Someone seems to know, and that seems to be the Finance Minister, who might be thought a more credible source than the Member.

Mr McCartney: If the Member, with his training as a barrister, were given that answer in court, I am sure that he would certainly give it rigorous cross-examination. That is simply because the Finance Department tells us, at a particular —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: You challenge the House by saying that no one is able to provide facts. A Member presents you with facts, in writing, and you still will not accept them. Is it not the case —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Humphrey: Is it not the case, Mr Deputy Speaker, that this is not about parity or facts but simply about a party being led by the nose by those in Dublin who are trying to fight cuts in the Republic of Ireland and will not face reality here in Northern Ireland?

Mr McCartney: It is wonderful, when you make a point about assumptions, that the next Member to speak makes a number of assumptions.

That is a two-line answer. I do not know what the question was. Therefore, it would be very, very foolish, in an Assembly that prides itself on scrutiny —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Allister: The question was this:

"To ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel what would be the estimated impact on the block grant if the Welfare Reform Bill was not passed in sequence with similar changes in the rest of the United Kingdom."

It is not a two-line answer; it is a two-page answer. It says that there will be £207 million in this spending period, accumulating to £1.2 billion by 2018-19. If Sinn Féin thinks that the money for that grows on some mythical tree at Connolly House, the same tree from where money will come to fund a united Ireland —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions —

Mr Allister: — it really is completely deluded.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be short and to the point.

Mr McCartney: I would never assume that money grows on trees.

I am told that you were once an eminent barrister. I am sure that, when the word "estimate" is used, that is all that it is: an estimate. I am sure that if you —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr McCartney: If you were defending someone in court in the morning —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair. Everybody.

Mr McCartney: I am sure, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that, if the honourable barrister were defending someone in the morning, he would surely look for the grey area

around the word “estimate”. Assumptions are assumptions. We deal in facts.

I have not ruled out nor have I said —

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He has lectured us about making assumptions. Can he provide the House with evidence of Sinn Féin’s assumption that, in deferring this matter, the British Government are somehow going to roll over?

10.00 pm

Mr McCartney: Alex Maskey and Michael Brady did not make that assumption. However, we asked a simple question, which was why anyone would negotiate with you when you have already revealed your bottom line. It is like going to buy a car and telling the guy in the garage that you will buy it for £5,000 but you want it for £4,500. What is he going to say to you? He is not going to say, “Aye, right enough, let’s talk.” You have already revealed your bottom line. That is the point that we are making. The reasoned amendment does not stop the Bill from becoming better. That is our basic contention in seeking a deferral. It may not work out, but there is an opportunity that, in our opinion, we should not spurn.

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

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will, indeed.

Mr Maskey: Many people have referred to the social fund. Albeit it used to be governed under this wonderful beast in the room called parity, it is a devolved matter. It is entirely a matter for this Assembly how and when we disburse the social fund. It is not a question of parity. The social fund is not subject to legislation. It is already devolved to the Assembly, so let us dismiss the argument that if we do not pass this legislation, it will impact on the social fund. The Minister’s departmental officials advised the Committee no later than last week that this legislation will not impact on the social fund. They said to the Committee that there would be an issue around the money to be approved. That is a matter for this Assembly and the Finance Department. It is not subject to this particular legislation. It is already devolved.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much for that observation. It is very interesting. It has been said a number of times as a statement of fact that parity cannot be broken, but there is increasing evidence that there have been a number of instances in which parity has been broken. Therefore, the assumption that parity cannot be broken is just that — an assumption. Again, I congratulate the people who are involved in it.

I want to turn to the points that Edwin Poots made. He did a very good impression of the Minister of Health from the Back Benches. Conall McDevitt took up the same point. Perhaps it is something that you can reflect on. The idea is that 8% of people are unemployed, and the other 92% resent the fact that the 8% are claiming benefits. Even using your own statistics, many of the people who would be in your 92% bracket claim benefits. Therefore, the idea that it is the unemployed — in your definition, the 8% — who are the only people on benefits is totally and absolutely wrong. It is not only wrong; it is insulting to the people who find themselves in employment, and I have absolutely no doubt that there are people in this Assembly

who claim benefits, and quite rightly, because they may have invalidity issues or something else. Members have done it in the past, and I am sure that they will do it in the future. Therefore, I think that it is bad for you, either as a Back-Bencher or as a Minister, to make that type of assumption and generalisation. If you are looking for me to give way, I will give way.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. He has been very reasonable on that. On the 92%, is it not the case that elements of welfare reform are helpful to the working poor? Is it not the case that the working poor actually need the most help at the moment? Is it not the case that 10,000 children will be lifted out of poverty as a result of this?

Mr McCartney: I do not disagree with what you are saying. You are actually making my point for me. You had the 8% as the only people getting benefits. You have now accepted, even in your own percentages, that some of those 92%, quite rightly because they are working poor, are entitled to benefits and should be protected. I just want to make that point.

When we come to this type of debate, which is a very serious debate, we should not use a single incident about one person as a way of trying to convince the rest of us of what we should be doing. To say that someone out there has a drink-related problem and then for someone else to say that the reason that that person has a drink problem is because he or she is getting a couple of pounds on benefits is really crass. I can imagine you negotiating with a sector of the health service and saying that you are not going to give its staff a pay rise because it employs a couple of alcoholics, who might use it to get more drink. It is a bit silly to say that. We should not reduce this debate down to that type of argument, where we pick one anecdotal incident and give no evidence to back up a point that is spurious and that tries to create this sort of image that people on benefits are somehow malingerers. I think that that is wrong, particularly when it comes from a Back-Bencher or a Minister.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mrs Foster: Does the Member agree with me that it is also crass that a single mother who works 25 hours a week is not entitled to get free school meals for one of her three children, who is in secondary school this year, because of the policies of the Education Minister? Is it not the case that welfare reform is seeking to help the working poor to be able to work? That girl would be better off not working, and I think that that is wrong. She wants to work but is being penalised for doing so because she is not able to get free school meals for her child who has just gone to secondary school.

Mr McCartney: I do not doubt —

Mr O’Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will allow the Minister to answer that.

Mr O’Dowd: We have actually broadened the criteria for young people who are entitled to free school meals. One of our concerns, however, is that figures produced in England show that thousands and thousands of young people will lose out on free school meals because of welfare reform. I have made a commitment in this body that I will not allow a similar situation to arise here. I hope that the Member

opposite is as keen when it comes to backing that up at the Executive table, because it will require extra finances.

Mrs Foster: Well, that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr McCartney: I feel that I am taking on the role of the Deputy Speaker. I will certainly allow you to answer that.

Mrs Foster: The Education Minister did not answer the question about somebody who is in need now — now — and is working poor. He has not answered the question.

Mr O'Dowd: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to get back to discussing the scope of the Bill, please, rather than having this wider debate and this bit of tit for tat across the Chamber.

Mr McCartney: I am very mindful that I do not want to insult anybody in the House.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way on a related issue?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mr O'Dowd: One of the issues relating to the Welfare Reform Bill will be passported benefits such as free school meals. We will have to conduct a review of free school meals. I would like to expand, and will bring proposals forward to expand, the category of young people who qualify for free school meals. I am delighted to hear the Member opposite state that she will support those proposals.

Mrs Foster: I am saying —

Mr McCartney: I think that it is has got to the stage where I will be accused of double-jobbing, and I would not like to — *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: We can take it outside.

Mr McCartney: I know there are those —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Could all remarks come through the Chair, please?

Mr McCartney: Some people are very comfortable with double-jobbing, but I am not one of them.

On the Member's point, if someone finds themselves in that position, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that they can progress in the way that the Member outlined. As has been pointed out to me from a sedentary position, the Bill, as it is now constituted, will allow the Member in the future to stand up and talk about not just one person but perhaps countless others, and that is what we are trying to protect ourselves from.

A Member — I wrote this down but I am not sure who said it — said that we cannot break parity because we do not know where that will lead. Again, that is a massive assumption. I was only in the Assembly a short time when Mitchel McLaughlin tabled a motion on corporation tax. Members got up that day and made the exact same observation: if we break with parity and the tax regime, who knows where it will lead? Success has many fathers and mothers. Everybody now seems to say that the first person or first party to bring up the corporation tax issue was them. So you can break with parity if it is the right thing to do for the people whom we represent.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He seems to talk about corporation tax as if it is a done deal. I do not know whether he heard the Secretary of State at the Conservative Party conference yesterday. He seems to be saying that that was a breach of parity as if it had been accomplished when, three years after it was first raised, it still has not been done. So, how is it a break with parity?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that this is not a debate about corporation tax.

Mr Campbell: No, but it is about parity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we try to stick to the scope of the Bill, please?

Mr McCartney: The Member was not here when I said that one of the remarkable things about the debate was assumption. I never said it was achieved. What I said was that when it was said that it was good idea, people said that you cannot break with parity because you do not know where it is going to lead. I did not say that we have achieved corporation tax powers. Perhaps the way I talk translates as something different across the Chamber. Perhaps I will try it in Irish, and you may be able to understand it the next time.

Whatever we do and however we progress this, please do not base it on assumption. Base it on evidence and fact and then, perhaps, we will have a better debate.

I was struck by something that Sammy Douglas said in his last remark, that George Osborne wants to impose £10 billion of further cuts. If I was in George Osborne's shoes tonight, I would be looking across at this Assembly and saying, "Roll over." This is the rollover. They all said it.

I will finish off with a point I made at the start and I will give way to any person here who said it. Not one person here tonight or from the minute we started this debate this morning said that this was a good Bill. As a matter of fact, they all got up and said they would love to change it. So, if I was in George Osborne's shoes, do you know what I would be saying? "If you want a rollover, come over here." But there will be no rollover from this party. *[Interruption.]* That is why we will go for a deferral. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Givan: I support the motion brought forward by the Minister. I will recap on some of the key points on the broader principles of the Bill, which I support. The Members opposite challenged that they heard nobody say that they think this is a good Bill. This party has been clear that there are aspects of the Bill that need to be improved but the Minister indicated that this party supports the Bill's core principles and what it is about. Yes, there are elements that we want to change, and we will do that in the appropriate place, but the core principles of the Bill are something that this party can support.

Mr Ross: I appreciate the Member giving way so early. Is it not the case that virtually all Bills that come to the House at Second Stage will change through the normal legislative process? So, to claim at this point that the Bill is not fit for purpose before we have even got to Committee Stage to make amendments is a ludicrous position to hold.

Mr Givan: Yes, that is exactly right. This Place set up Committees to do that work, to scrutinise legislation then to come forward with proposals as to how it should be

changed. As Members indicated, whenever that process has been followed through, at times Bills are radically changed. At last, after months of delay, this Assembly now has the opportunity to do that work and make changes that could improve the Bill but the Members opposite and Sinn Féin delayed the Bill and denied the House that opportunity.

One of the Bill's core principles is about protecting the vulnerable. It is the mark of any society how it cares and shows compassion to those who are vulnerable and need help. That is something that we as a party are very clear on. I think it is something that everybody in the House shares, that those who are in need, need to get support. That is something that we all wish to do and provide for. We want to help those who are genuinely in need of that assistance. We never know when constituents of ours will need that help. Many who pay into the state, such as those who worked for FG Wilson, now need that support. They will find that support very helpful and it is quite right that that support will be there for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members, please.

10.15 pm

Mr Givan: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

What is important, which the Bill articulates clearly, is that people who can work should work. That is quite right and is a principle that I would have thought every Member would be able to sign up to. However, alarmingly, what I heard from the Members opposite relates more to keeping people stuck in the benefits trap as opposed to asking how we can help people get into employment. There has been a great degree of absence from the SDLP and Sinn Féin about getting people into work rather than keeping them stuck on benefits.

At the start of the debate, the Minister mentioned an interesting figure, which I have not heard Members refer to. I heard Members talking about the needs of children. The Minister said that 60,000 children have no working parents. We talk about a generational issue and how you break that cycle. Is it not alarming to everybody here that that is the environment and culture that 60,000 of our children are growing up in? There are very real reasons why some do not have a parent or parents who work. That is something that I thought every Member would want to address. There are 120,000 households in which no one works. I would have thought that that was something that every Member would want to address. There will be some who, for genuine and legitimate reasons, are unable to work, and they need support. That is why I am disappointed that the Members opposite have been greatly lacking in talking about how to get people into work and how people can be supported to get in to work, which is what the Bill talks about. Instead, the current welfare system has created benefit dependency. The current system denies people the opportunity to work, because, for some, it does not pay to work. That is what we need to change. We need to change the system to one that pays people to work instead of them being stuck in a benefits trap. What we need to do then is challenge —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McGlone: I think that, maybe, we have to inject a little bit of reality into tonight's proceedings. We are talking almost in isolation from the real world. In the past wee while, 38,500 more people are out of work not because they want to go on benefits but because there is no work. So, if we could just inject a little bit of reality into the debate, please.

Mr Givan: I am glad that the Member is now talking about the employment market. I say that because the parties opposite have not been talking about how to get people into work. Of course, there are people who have lost their jobs in what is a difficult economic climate, but jobs are available. Are Members really saying that there is not a single job vacancy in Northern Ireland that people could be applying for? I do not think so?

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I made the point earlier that all the parties were united weeks ago in complaining about and decrying the fact that a number of people lost their jobs in, for example, FG Wilson and have perhaps been thrown onto the dole queue. No Member would have had the audacity to say, "By the way, stop crying to us about losing your job in FG Wilson; there are plenty of other jobs out there. Go and get one of those." No Member said that.

Mr Givan: When Members talk about injecting a little bit of reality, let them not twist words and manufacture things that have not been said to try to detract from the flaws in the argument that they were making all day and up to 10.00 pm.

It is true that there are individuals who could work but, because of the current welfare system, it does not pay them to even go for those jobs. We should be supporting people to go for those jobs. As I indicated earlier, we should be supporting people who genuinely are not in a position to work, and people who are in genuine need and are vulnerable should be getting that support.

There are elements of the Bill that I welcome and that I think that all Members can support. For example, there is additional support for childcare. Mrs Foster mentioned the example earlier of a constituent of hers who it did not pay to work. The Bill will assist individuals, particularly women, who want to work and it will support them in meeting additional childcare costs.

I also welcome the fact the people who will be on the universal credit system will be able to remain registered on it for at least two years, so they will not have the fear of going for a job, getting that job, losing certain entitlements, and then having the concern that, if they lose their job, they may not get the benefits again. The universal credit system will help to facilitate those people to make that choice because they will have the security and knowledge that that support will be there for them again, if it becomes needed.

A core principle of the Bill is that the system should be fair to taxpayers. Taxpayers who pay into the state will want to ensure that the system is compassionate. That is the system that I and our Members want: one that will show compassion and support the vulnerable. Taxpayers also want, as the Minister indicated earlier, a system that is effective and affordable. We need to encourage taxpayers, particularly those who are on lower incomes, to stay in work. We should not allow those on low incomes to look at others and ask, "What is the point in working?" The working poor want to know what is the point in going out,

day after day, sacrificing home life, and all that, if they feel that the benefit system would reward them more. Therefore, they may not continue in their employment. We need to create a culture in which we want people to go to work, and we support them into work. That requires political leadership which, unfortunately, is absent in the SDLP and Sinn Féin on this issue.

The consequences of not taking the Bill forward have been made very clear, and Members have talked about assumptions. We made no assumptions in outlining the consequences for the social fund, the threat to jobs for those who administer the system on behalf of GB, and around the IT requirements to be met.

I did not quite pick it up earlier, but I see that Mr Brady is in the Chamber. He referred, I think this morning, to the NASA IT system as some kind of example. He referred to NASA in some respect.

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes.

Mr Brady: Let me clarify the point that you are trying to make. *[Laughter.]* What I said was that, in 1993, when the Social Security Agency went live, as the saying goes, it was the biggest computerisation outside the NASA space system. It went £55 million over budget, but it still did not work properly. That was the point that I made.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member saying that. I could not quite make it out when he spoke earlier.

The other assumption that was made was that, somehow, our position in going to the British Government will be strengthened by accepting the amendment to defer the Bill, which, ultimately, will kill it. Why do Members opposite not think that the British Government will turn around and say, "If you want to break parity and bring upon yourselves a bill of £200 million plus over the next decade, and £1 billion plus, which you will need to find within your own budget, go ahead; feel free. If that is the choice that you want to make, you will need to identify how you plan to pay for it, and where you will make cuts in health and education." I would say that it is a pretty safe assumption to make that that is exactly the position that the British Government will take when the Members opposite seem to feel that they hold some kind of extreme leverage to make the British Government pay for all that.

Members have talked around the principles of the Bill, but the crux of this, the reason that we are faced with the reasoned amendment to kill the Bill, is more to do with politics, the grandstanding that is taking place and the internal competition that is going on with the SDLP. That is really what determines the positions of the parties opposite.

The Bill was delayed for months by Sinn Féin and, as I said earlier, that denied the House the opportunity, until this point, to scrutinise the Bill, and come up with ways in which it could be improved. At no point in any of those discussions did Sinn Féin indicate that it would approve the Executive's paper, allow it to go to the Assembly and then, at the very first hurdle, table a reasoned amendment to defer it, which would, ultimately, kill the Bill. That was never raised in any of the discussions that took place. How has that come about? Why has it been the position of Sinn Féin, until now, to play this political game over the issue? I suspect, as Members indicated earlier, that it has

as much to do with the internal divisions within Sinn Féin on this issue. What you are really saying is that the long arm of Adams is reaching out from Dublin and controlling and interfering with Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. He is more concerned about the position that Sinn Féin is taking in the Dáil, where Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ridicule his party for implementing Tory cuts in Northern Ireland. That has more to do with Sinn Féin's position now. That concern has been coming from its Southern counterparts. Let us crystallise the position: it is a case of the Twenty-six Counties wagging the British Six-Counties tail of Sinn Féin, and it does not like it. The Members opposite need to try to take back some control. They are in a Northern Ireland Assembly. Stop being controlled by your Southern counterparts. Stand up and realise that you are the largest nationalist party in the Assembly.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for giving way. You talked about the reasoned amendment killing the Bill. I reiterate what I said this morning: tabling a reasoned amendment is not about defeating a Bill; it is about creating an opportunity for further consideration and adjustment. It is not about curtailing the legislative process; it is about using it to promote better outcomes. I just wanted to clarify that for you, because you seem to have difficulty grasping that concept.

Mr Givan: Thank you very much. I grasp the concept of the reasoned amendment. Members opposite have said that this has never happened before, and so the Assembly can decide how we would set a precedent. If the Assembly were to set a precedent of introducing a Bill, immediately tabling an amendment that, ultimately, would defer it and then saying that it would bring it back the next week, that would be treating the House with contempt. It would make a mockery of the process. If the House decided to kill a Bill, which is what reasoned amendments do, as they do at Westminster, it would make a nonsense of the House to want to bring it back a week later. Members need to catch a grip of exactly what they are suggesting and the way in which they think that they can use this place as some kind of toy. This is a serious Chamber, and the Members opposite should treat it as such.

Sinn Féin's failure of leadership, as the Members opposite indicated, is demonstrated by the fact that its MPs do not take their seats. The Members opposite will ask what difference it would make. I pose the question to the Members: why did it stand down its MLAs who were MPs and announce that they were going to spend more time at Westminster and make their presence felt? What is the point of the party taking that decision, recognising that it wants to spend more time at Westminster but not being able to walk through the door into where it could vote and make a difference?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to come back to the scope of the Bill, please.

Mr Givan: I am quite happy to do that, Mr Deputy Speaker. We, in this place, need to show leadership. Sinn Féin, as the largest party on the nationalist side of the Executive, has demonstrated cowardice as opposed to leadership. It has been shown lacking and needs to step up to the plate and show political leadership. Members of my party have made it clear that there are elements of the Bill that we do not like. There are elements of it, such as the core principles, that we agree with. We want to get it to Committee Stage so that we can work and engage seriously on it. Where we can make improvements, we will

do so. Ultimately, however, difficult decisions have to be made in politics. There will be those who are prepared to make those decisions and those who are prepared to duck them. What disappoints me is that Sinn Féin is ducking the political responsibility granted to it by the electorate. It is not showing leadership on this issue. My party, as the largest in the Executive, will show leadership not just for our community but for all the people of Northern Ireland, because they look to this place for serious consideration of and leadership on difficult issues and, ultimately, for the difficult decisions that need to be taken. That is what my party will do later tonight.

Mrs D Kelly: I remind Members that the economic meltdown was not caused by the poorest families and their children. The scandal today is that they are being asked to bear the brunt of austerity cuts in this recession.

I have listened carefully to what many Members have said this afternoon and this evening. I hope to refer to some of their contributions and to make some comments on how women will be adversely impacted by the cuts.

I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin Members have said that they are not going to roll over. There is still time for them to sign the petition of concern if they do not want to be roll-over Tory puppets. I invite them to reconsider their position on that basis.

10.30 pm

I listened carefully as many Members talked about the unemployed as if the unemployed have made a lifestyle choice. I welcome the contributions by other Members, who recognised that there are many people who are working poor. People ought to remember that.

I want to look at some of the statistics provided by Save the Children. In Northern Ireland, 21% of children live in persistent child poverty, which is more than double the GB rate. More than 12% of children or approximately 50,000 live in severe poverty. Approximately half of the children who live in relative poverty are in a family in which one parent works.

It is well known that Northern Ireland is a low-wage economy. According to the 2011 annual survey of hours and earnings, median earnings for all employees stand at £18,720, which is some 10.9% lower than the UK's £21,008. There has been an increase in part-time jobs at the expense of full-time work, and median gross weekly part-time earnings stand at £151.06. The unemployment rate for May to July 2012 was estimated at 8.2% or 71,000, which was up 10,000 over the quarter. Unadjusted figures show that 45.5% of the unemployed have been unemployed for one year or more. Those figures represent a rise of almost 20,000 since 2009, and the Northern Ireland jobless level has moved above the UK average. As Members all know, from that period until today, that brief has been held by a DUP Minister. It is unfortunate that the jobs Minister has left the Chamber, but, perhaps, that was to save her blushes. I know that she invited Mr O'Dowd to take it outside. I note that the boxing Minister is here, and perhaps she might referee if there any further interventions or invitations to take matters outside.

The cuts come not just against a background of rising unemployment. We all know about the rising cost of living. The cuts are happening at the same time as higher living costs, with utility bills in Northern Ireland up by £800

and the average cost of a shopping basket up by 18% since 2008. It is calculated that an average household in Northern Ireland will need to spend an extra £3,500 just to pay the bills compared with four years ago. That threatens to push more children into poverty. I am at a loss to understand how the Welfare Reform Bill will bring more children out of poverty.

In preparing my contribution, I looked at some of the research that the Committee for Social Development has rightly commissioned. One such paper is the Assembly Research and Information Service's 'Poverty and Social Deprivation: Mapping Executive and Departmental Strategies, Policies and Programmes in Northern Ireland'. I want to look at some of the measures that are supposed to assist people who live in poverty and to help take them out of poverty. The Minister for Social Development referred to some of those.

The SDLP did not support and still does not support the social investment fund. Nonetheless, it is a measure that is supposed to tackle poverty. It has not been delivered. We welcome the social protection fund, and it may well be a measure that can be enhanced to address poverty. In relation to that fund, the paper states:

"The Executive states that it remains committed to tackling the problem of disadvantage within Northern Ireland. This disadvantage is most acute in those interface communities where the problems are many and complex."

I know that many of the Members opposite represent such communities, and I believe that, tonight, they do them a real disservice by not recognising that their needs should come before we pander to the Tories and their imposition of cuts on the people in the North. Devolved government was supposed to be about making a difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

We should look at the childcare strategy, which others have referred to. We all know that affordable and accessible childcare is key in assisting people who are trying to get back to work. It is an enabler that will help many people to return to work, particularly those who have low pay. It has not been agreed. It says here:

"A new strategy is in preparation — to be launched summer 2012."

Sinn Féin and the DUP have questions to answer about some of the measures that they have put in the Programme for Government commitments to assist both the working poor and children in families that live in severe poverty.

I was somewhat alarmed at Mr Givan's contribution. I wonder just what his value system is and whether the DUP is wedded to the principles of a welfare system. Where would his theory end if we followed his argument? Would he propose that we had a US-type welfare system? I think not. That is not something that the SDLP would ever want to see in any other jurisdiction.

The Minister referred to mitigating circumstances, although we have not seen proof of those yet. The Children's Commissioner launched a report on 26 April 2012 that stated that the welfare reforms would put more children into poverty. Research at that time found that the families of 6,500 children would lose money. That is attributed to

the plan to cap benefits at £26,000 a year for working-age households. The Minister then said:

"I think the figure of £26,000 is a reasonable income on benefit and I think most people out there across Northern Ireland would take that view as well."

Perhaps that is a fair comment. He went on to say:

"I think that the impact on Northern Ireland will be very similar to what is it to many other parts of the UK."

Accepting that does not give us much confidence that he recognises Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. Many of my colleagues referred to those circumstances. The Minister went on to say in April:

"We are still waiting on information from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to enable us to get the precise figure."

I trust that he will be able to tell us the precise figure when he sums up this evening.

Turning to the ways in which the welfare reform will impact on women, I put on record our opposition to payment of the universal credit to one member of the household, which, in most cases, will be the main designated applicant. I welcome other Members' recognition of that. Ms Ruane pointed out that Sinn Féin opposed that measure. That is because we recognise that, in practice, it will often mean that the money will go to the man in the household. That provision could leave the vulnerable open to financial abuse, particularly in cases where domestic violence, abuse or addiction plague a household. It will not be as simple as a mutual agreement; instead, many claimants will have no access to their benefits and will thus be deprived of any state support. That will lead to serious domestic problems.

A recent report on economic resource transfers to women from men — from the purse to the wallet, as some call it — indicated that differences in preferences, incentives and bargaining power mattered to household outcomes. Even when women and men have the same capabilities, households do not act as unitary entities, and preferences over household production and consumption decisions are broadly gender-specific. A household is a collective entity where intra-household bargaining takes place, and decisions may or may not be fully co-operative. Bargaining power may be affected by individual household members' shares of resources or income.

A 10% cut to childcare tax credit should be reversed to provide financial support for low-income families and universal childcare. I hope that the Minister will take note of that.

My colleague Patsy McGlone referred to steps and actions that the Scottish Executive have taken and the types of Committee that they are establishing to look at how welfare reform will impact on their people and how they might mitigate that. I suggest that Minister McCausland look to the Scottish Government as an example of good practice in how to take seriously the adverse impact of the cuts on our people.

A great number of people have said tonight that money cannot be found. Only last night, all parties around here found an additional €15 million to be paid to the farming community. It has been widely acknowledged that money

has been lost through the failure of Sinn Féin and the DUP to agree on the Education and Skills Authority and to legislate on that. The most recent estimate was that around £12 million had been squandered on lost opportunities. I also ask Members to reflect on the all-party calls for air passenger duty to be different here in the North. Surely that could be classified as a breach of parity. Therefore, there are precedents for money being found, money being squandered and breaks in parity when there is the political will to do so.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr Allister: The Member talks about money being found and quotes agriculture. Is the truth of that situation not that the Minister announced that she would not take money from the farmers, which is modulation? That is not finding government money; that is allowing farmers to keep a little more money in their pockets. On corporation tax and all of that — I am no fan of that, as the Member might know — is the fundamental of that not that, if you are to devolve it, you must make up the shortfall out of the block grant? That is the parity point about that.

Mrs D Kelly: I will go back to the agriculture point, because, as the Member well knows, it is taken out of modulation, and the Member is correct, but there would still be a loss —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will Members make their comments through the Chair, please?

Mrs D Kelly: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the Member well knows, that is then a loss of €15 million to the rural development programme, which is designed to improve opportunities for economic growth, social capacity and cohesion in rural communities. So, there is a political will to move money around. I made the comment that money can be found where there is a political will to do so, and there can be arguments. That was my point over lost opportunities and the money that has been squandered over the failure to agree the ESA.

There has been a lot of talk this afternoon and this evening about political leadership and political skill and about time. The SDLP is prepared to commit to working day and night to get the Bill right, and I ask other Members to join us in that task. What confidence can we have as a devolved Administration when many of the amendments that the parties that attend Westminster supported were ignored by the Tories? Those amendments are not all particular to Northern Ireland. Many people living across GB will be adversely impacted on by the welfare reform cuts. So, let us get real here on what this actually means.

I used to work with a doctor — a psychiatrist, actually — *[Laughter.]* I worked with him; I have no difficulty with that. He used to say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I". Nobody knows when their family and their job will be at risk, and they may be in need of the very benefits that the Bill will diminish or do away with altogether. You should start telling that to the people in Larne and east Antrim in particular who will lose their job over the next few weeks with the closure of FG Wilson. Those people will say that they worked all their life and paid tax all their life but, when they went to look for benefit, there was nothing there because Members opposite did not have the courage to stand up and say that this is a devolved region that will

make welfare reforms that are fit for purpose for the people whom we represent.

10.45 pm

Mr Agnew: The Bill is about cuts: cuts to social security, cuts handed down by the Tory-led coalition, cuts that are an attack on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. In asking me to support the Bill, you ask me to support those cuts: I cannot do that.

From the outset, the UK Government have made it clear that they want to cut £18 billion from social security. It is worth pointing out that benefit fraud is estimated to cost us £1 billion, so that is £17 billion over and above trying to tackle welfare fraud. It is not just about going after the so-called undeserving; it is about making cuts across the board to social security payments. If this were proportionately applied to Northern Ireland, it would mean about £500 million worth of cuts to our social security payments, but we all know that, in Northern Ireland, we have a disproportionately high number on benefits, so that figure could be higher. Therefore, more than £500 million could be cut from the budgets of the poorest people in Northern Ireland should the Bill be agreed.

When you set a target of saving £18 billion, it is clear from the outset that your agenda is not improving the system to make it work better. It is clear that your agenda is to re-engineer the system to save money. I hear people talking about welfare reform as something that needs to happen and saying that we can all agree that the system is not perfect. We can agree that, but, ultimately, the changes that have come from Westminster and have been duplicated in this Bill are about saving money and taking money from the poorest households. Why do we need to make those savings? Not, as the Government would have us believe, because we spent too much on public services and therefore must cut back, but because of the billions that we spent on bailing out the banks.

During the Westminster election, my party and others called for a Robin Hood tax. The proposed reforms are the opposite of a Robin Hood tax. They propose to rob the poor to pay for the mistakes of the rich. Last year, average earnings shrank by 4.4%, while the incomes of directors of the FTSE 100 companies rose by 49%. We talk about making work pay, but, clearly, it pays some much more than others. In fact, the UK is one of the most unequal of the developed nations, with the poorest 10% of our society receiving only 1% of the total income, while the top 10% receive 30 times that. The proposed social security cuts will only increase inequality across the UK and in Northern Ireland. We are not all in it together. Clearly, those at the top have not felt their share of the pain. That is where the Government should focus their attention, not on an ideological attack on the poor.

We have been asked to accept the changes on the basis that they will get more people into work. Although that is a laudable aim, you cannot get more people into work when there are fewer jobs and continuing unemployment. Effectively, what is proposed is to punish people like the workers in FG Wilson who are set to lose their job. It is to indiscriminately punish people across the board who seek support from our social security system. It is to say that, even though you have lost your job through no fault of your own, we will change the system to make it harder for you to receive your entitlement and to ensure that, ultimately, we

pay out less. It is to punish our young people who cannot get a job because of an economic downturn that is no fault of theirs. Again, we are saying to them that we will make it harder for them to get support from the state.

The proposals in this Bill will disadvantage not only those who are solely reliant on the social security system to meet their basic needs but those in employment on a low income who rely on the social security system to supplement their income to support them and their family. In fact, the group on which the proposals will have the greatest impact, according to figures highlighted in the Children's Commissioner's report on the impacts of welfare reform, will be children, including those whose parents are in employment. I think that I am right in saying that that is based on IFS figures.

Across the range of groups of those on a low income, whether in employment or otherwise, everyone will be worse off as a result of the cuts, with the exception of single pensioners and pensioner couples. Single people who are not working will be worse off, as will single people who are working. Lone parents who are not working as well as those who are working will be worse off. Earner couples without children will be worse off, and earner couples, both of whom are in employment and who have children, will be worse off. It is clear across the board that we are seeing cuts that will have a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable in our society. Whether you are poor and in work or poor and out of work, you will be worse off as a result of the proposed changes. I say again that the Bill is an attack on the poor.

We have already seen that the changes to DLA that have come into effect have made it harder across the board for anyone to receive that benefit, regardless of their circumstances. The changes are making it harder not just for those who are perceived to be swinging the lead but for those who are genuinely disabled. We are saying that we are going after people who defraud the system, but the cuts go well beyond tackling benefit fraud and are applied without discrimination to all who seek the state's support. That is true across the proposed changes. Again, they are being applied *carte blanche*. They are not targeted; they are making it harder for people to receive support from the state, with the sole aim of saving £18 billion. As George Osborne has said, if he gets his way he will seek to save another £10 billion with further attacks on the poorest in our society. That is the real agenda. It is not about making the system better; it is about saving money. If that means that genuinely disabled people will lose their benefits, those who support the Bill seem to be prepared to accept that as a necessary consequence: I am not.

Mrs McKevitt: Does the Member share my concerns about how the standards and principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will be met in this welfare cuts Bill?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for her point, and I share those concerns. I have looked particularly at the impact on children. Whether you look at the Children's Commissioner's report or the Save the Children report, their conclusions are unanimous: this will have a detrimental impact on some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

I turn to the issue of housing benefits. Other Members have raised some of those points, so I will not dwell on them. There are a number of housing benefit issues that particularly concern me. I welcome the Minister's recognition that removing the choice for direct payments to a landlord could have a detrimental impact. As things stand in the Bill, however, the option for direct payments would be removed. We have not seen any amendment at the front end of the Bill.

Another particularly concerning aspect of the proposed changes to housing benefit is the increase to 35 of the age of those who receive the shared room rate, and I come back to the potential impact on children. The Conservative Party claims to be a party that represents the family, values the family and believes that the family is at the heart of our society. However, it is clear from the proposals that it has a very narrow view of which families in our society it wishes to support. Separated couples who have children and happen to be under 35 will not be supported by the current UK Government to allow both partners to have a stake in the child's life. If you are not the primary carer but still have access to your children, you will be required to live in shared housing. That leaves you with three choices. The first is that you do not have overnight access to your children. Surely that is not in the best interests of the child where it has been deemed, in some cases by a court, that such access is in the child's best interest. Alternatively, you can bring your child back to a house that you may share with strangers. However, there are serious child protection issues with that. Thirdly, you can seek to find an agreement with your former partner to return to the family home to have that time with your children. However, given that we are talking about couples who have broken up for various reasons, there is likely to be continuing stress. Therefore, that, too, might not be in the child's best interest.

The Minister outlined three areas in which he would like to see flexibility for Northern Ireland. I mentioned direct payments. He suggested that he would like to see flexibility in the payments of universal credit so that they are made monthly. The Minister also said that he would like to see flexibility in single payments to households. I urge him to add to that list and exempt single parents with access rights to their children from the shared room rate. When the courts are considering whether a parent's access to children is in the best interests of the child, they should not be deciding that it is not in the child's best interests to see the parent because that parent cannot get state support to have a bedroom for the child to stay in. The Bill as it stands is an attack on the poor and particularly on children in the poorest households.

As some other Members mentioned, studies have concluded that the cuts will have a particularly devastating impact on some women in our society. Save the Children, in its report on women in work, highlighted examples of working women who will be worse-off under the proposals. I will not highlight all of those, but it gives the example of a single parent with three children who works full-time for the minimum wage and has average housing costs. Under the current system, that single parent would be above the poverty line. However, under universal credit, her income will drop by £67 a week once cash protection runs out. That will push her and her children into poverty.

We have talked about making work pay, but it will not pay for everyone if these changes go through. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Agnew is speaking.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Paying universal credit to one member of the household has the potential to add to the disadvantage that women will face under these changes. There is the potential that the benefit will go to the main earner, who, in many but not all cases, is the male head of the household, instead of to the primary carer, who, in many but not all circumstances, is the mother.

That is where the focus should be: on the primary carers of our children, who are mostly, but not solely, the female head of the household.

11.00 pm

These cuts have been handed down by Westminster, and we can choose to accept them or to reject them. The amendment calls for a deferral, and I have heard concerns about that proposal. It is certainly not an ideal situation, but, equally, it is not an ideal situation that the first time that the Assembly has been able to have a debate on the Bill is at the stage where we are pushed right up to the limit of our time. Surely, that is a collective failure of the Executive as a whole.

Parity has been used as an excuse to hide behind to put through these changes without accepting responsibility for doing so. The Minister said that not voting through these changes would cost us £200 million and that it would result in the loss of teachers, nurses and money for school-building schemes. Indeed, his colleague the Health Minister said in the media earlier today that it would cost lives. If the loss of £200 million will cost lives, I have to ask how many lives will be lost if we are to follow the Minister's party's proposals to reduce corporation tax at a cost of £400 million. It seems that a breach of parity in those terms and a loss of £400 million to the block grant is acceptable when it comes to giving tax breaks to huge multinational companies, but a loss of £200 million to seek to protect the most vulnerable in our society is not something that we are willing to support. I fail to square those two positions.

Mr Bell: The reason is the thousands of jobs that could be created, but that £220 million is for this period. If you take it through to 2020, you are looking at a loss to the Northern Ireland economy of £1.5 billion. I actually agree with a lot of what you and Mrs Kelly said about protecting women and children in welfare reform. Where I disagree is on the view that the best way to do it is not to allow this Bill to go to Committee but to hold it up here. If we hold it up here, the legislative programme will take us up to 2013 and we will lose our social fund, £220 million and something like 1,500 jobs. The question is not whether we agree or disagree with the Bill tonight. The question is this: how do we protect the most vulnerable? Do we do it by means of a reasoned amendment and take that hit, which will be much harder on women and children, or do we do it in Committee, where the work should be done?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention, because it gives me an opportunity to answer some of the points that have been made in the debate. First, I have seen no compelling evidence that those 1,500 jobs will be lost. In fact, if the UK Government were to relocate those

jobs and change the administrative system, they would be cutting their nose off to spite their face. I have seen no evidence that they would do that, and I am not convinced by the Members opposite that that would happen.

[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Agnew: I am not convinced that those jobs are at risk, and I agree with others who have said that these figures are scaremongering.

No one in this House disagrees with the need for provisions for a social fund, so if it is absolutely essential that we get legislation for the social fund passed, why not decouple it from this Bill, which is controversial? I would certainly support accelerated passage for legislation that would seek solely to give us the power to implement a social fund. Why not decouple it and put it through the House with accelerated passage? I would support that, and I suspect that everyone in this House would support that. This is a controversial Bill, and the social fund is not. The two being tied together does not serve the social fund well.

On the issue of the £200 million, Mr Bell talked about the cumulative impact of that. Equally, there would be a cumulative impact on a cut to corporation tax. It has been suggested that the figure on corporation tax could rise to £700 million, leading, again, to a significant disadvantage. Indeed, even the best estimates on corporation tax are that we break even after 11 years, and that is the best bet. That is 11 years of pain and cuts to our block grant for something that may, some day, produce benefits. The other point is that the cut to the block grant that will come if we do not agree the Bill is the extra differential that will be paid to people through the social welfare system. So we will not lose that £200 million completely. That £200 million will come out of the block grant for the Executive to allocate, and it will go directly to the most vulnerable.

If you were to ask me whether I would rather the Executive spend £200 million or be guaranteed that the £200 million would go to the most vulnerable in my society, I would be honest and say that I do not have that much faith in the Executive's spending the money wisely. I have seen no evidence to date that the Executive would spend it on the most vulnerable. Indeed, many of the changes that the Executive sought to make were regressive and would cause the most detriment to the most vulnerable. So I would rather have a guarantee that the money would go to the most vulnerable. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There are many conversations going on. Only one Member should be speaking in the Chamber at a time.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

On one hand, Ministers are flying back and forth to London to fight the cause for a tax cut for big businesses; on the other hand, the same Ministers are refusing to fight to protect the most vulnerable and ensure that we have the power in Northern Ireland to make significant changes to welfare reform.

The Executive also have powers to raise revenue that could mitigate the worst impact of the changes. Indeed, the Social Development Minister said that he would welcome proposals on how we could mitigate the worst impacts, which he recognised, of the changes to housing benefit. Many of those changes could be detrimental. The cost

of not introducing water charges has been £200 million. Water charges could be introduced in a progressive manner to ensure that those who can afford to pay, do pay.

Mrs Cochrane: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Agnew: We had it as well. Do not worry, we did not steal it from the Alliance Party. To be fair, I should say that Paddy Hillyard, the chair of the Independent Water Review Panel, proposed it.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

If the current Executive were willing to use the Assembly's powers to ask those who can afford to pay more — the wealthy — to do so, we could mitigate the worst impact of the cuts. Rather than seeking tax cuts for big businesses or, as mentioned today, seeking cuts to air passenger duty, people should be prepared to stand up and fight for the most vulnerable. We should be prepared to raise revenue through a more progressive rates system. We currently have, essentially, tax relief for those living in million-pound mansions. In our own way, we refused the mansion tax and refused to charge full rates on mansions in Northern Ireland. If we were prepared to ask those who can afford to pay more to do so, we could mitigate the impact of some of the changes. Until proposals come from the Executive, asking those who can pay more to do so and ensuring that the Assembly does what it can to mitigate the worst impacts of the cuts from Westminster, I cannot support the Bill.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the amendment.

I realise that my colleague Mickey Brady has already laid out why we tabled it. I was reading some back issues of Hansard, as far back as 2007, and they show that Sinn Féin not only raised questions on the serious impact of welfare reform on those most in need in society but brought a number of motions on a number of aspects of welfare reform, including direct payments to landlords, work-related interviews and changes to housing benefit. We are debating some of those issues again in this version of the Welfare Reform Bill. We have also debated the issue of sanctions and, I believe, had a motion down opposing their introduction. More recently, there has been the question of shared room allowance. Our opposition is not new found.

We have serious problems with what is proposed in the Bill and the impact that it will have on many thousands of people across the North. That belief was strengthened after listening to George Osborne yesterday laying out his ideological vision on how an additional £10 billion could be cut from benefits. However, even more disgusting was his statement on what can only be described as social engineering, which points in the direction of having children only if you can afford them or are rich enough to pay for them.

Therefore, we do not make our decisions lightly. We make them in an attempt to protect those whom we represent. We would be poor representatives if we did not speak up for those who will lose out as a result of the Bill.

Underoccupancy proposals have the potential to make many thousands of people homeless. The proposal to fine people because they may have additional rooms in their home will result in their inability to pay the top-up in housing benefit to cover their rent. They are being penalised because they live in a two- or three-bedroom

house with empty rooms. We are not opposed to the reallocation of housing to better reflect housing need. We are against the imposition of financial penalties on people, especially when no suitable alternative accommodation is available that would enable families to be housed.

The Bill takes no account of the profile of housing stock in the North. It also fails to take into account the legacy of segregation. How would the Minister react if hundreds of people asked to be considered for the many empty houses in certain areas of north Belfast? He would be up in arms. However, that is the reality of housing in many parts of the North of Ireland. People will be penalised through no fault of their own.

It is widely accepted that there is a real possibility of a significant rise in homelessness due to underoccupancy rules, and no amount of dressing that up will get around that fact. The accommodation is not available to deal with this, and, given the financial constraints, it would take decades to build up the level of housing required. Having spoken to many housing providers, it is my understanding that they are ill-prepared to deal with this. Let us look at the size of some of the rooms that are prevalent in much of the older social housing. They are called box rooms, and, I believe, they measure 6 feet by 8 feet. People are lucky to fit a single bed into those rooms. The Minister should declare that those are not rooms but storage rooms for the purposes of determining underoccupancy.

We have also seen the implications of the shared room allowance, which is just starting to impact on many young people. We have been told by the Minister that discretionary housing payments will take care of that, and that it will be increased to meet the increased need. If he is being fed that information by his Department, I think that he should demand resignations. Discretionary payments are just that: a payment made over a short period. It will put back for months the inevitable, which is that people will not be able to afford to pay their rent. People will get a payment for 13 weeks at full rate. Then, if another application is made, there will be an additional 13 weeks paid at 80% of the rate. After that, people will be paid nothing.

In fact, when underoccupancy begins to bite, it has the potential of requiring tens of thousands of people to apply for discretionary payments. I understand that housing association tenants and Housing Executive tenants will be eligible to apply for those payments from next April. Those in the advice sector and the voluntary housing sector have said that, even with the increases proposed by the Minister, they will not meet the expected flood of applicants under the underoccupancy proposals. It was estimated that between 5,000 and 6,000 people would be affected by the shared room allowance, and that would see an increase every year. That is before underoccupancy kicks in.

The Minister has the chance to be the champion of those most in need. He has the opportunity to say to those who are being hit by shared room allowance and facing underoccupancy penalties that he hears their cries for help and will do something about it. The proposal will not be cost neutral. Likely, it will lead to increased rent arrears, which, in turn, will increase the risk of homelessness and the prospect of a significant number seeking rehousing. There is also a concern that it will impact on family life.

On the proposals for monthly benefit payments, our argument all along has been that there are major differences between here and what happens in Britain. We are a community still suffering from the effects of conflict, and we live in a society that has low pay. Monthly payments do not reflect the labour market in the North of Ireland. A monthly payment will hit a substantial number of families who are on lower incomes and paid weekly or fortnightly. Many will find their money running out one or two weeks into the proposed monthly cycle. They will be forced to go back to social security offices for crisis loans to see them through. Many will end up in the hands of moneylenders, because they need to feed or clothe their children or themselves.

11.15 pm

The work capability assessment is another of the issues that we raised back in 2007. We stated then, and we repeat now, that decision-makers need to be trained to a calibre that allows them to deal with the various types of illnesses that people on ESA have.

We also believe in the primacy of medical evidence. It is not good enough to say that assessors in Atos are healthcare professionals. That does not state the field of healthcare in which their expertise lies.

It is my understanding that, in Britain, the cost to the public purse of dealing with the increasing number of appeals has been about £150 million over the past two years. Many organisations and individuals have said that the system is flawed. In Britain, between 2009-10 and 2010-11, tens of thousands appealed the assessors' decision to refuse their claim for benefit. That number will continue to rise, and, unless we deal with that soon in the North, it will spiral out of control.

We are storing up serious problems for the future. Anyone who has followed some of the recent programmes about Atos, which is the company that runs the work capability assessments, will see that former workers have said that they were advised to rush through as many sick and disabled people as possible in the shortest time. It makes no difference to Atos if seriously ill people or those with disabilities are wrongly declared fit for work.

The British Medical Association's Scottish General Practitioners Committee said of the work capability assessments:

"These assessments can have a devastating effect on our patients' mental and physical health."

The BMA's local medical committee conference in May this year also voted unanimously for the end of the work capability assessment with immediate effect. It went on to say that:

"The inadequate computer based assessments that are used have little regard to the nature or complexity of the needs of long term sick and disabled persons".

Sanctions are wrong, and, under the present proposals, many will be punished by having their benefit removed for up to three years. Many of the higher sanctions are mandatory and often involve the total loss of benefit. They start at 91 days, progress to 182 days and then to three years for a third failure to abide by the rules. There is an inadequate recognition of people's requirements and a

failure to allow for the difficulties that some people face, especially those suffering from mental health illnesses, such as bipolar disorder or depression, or those with learning and functioning difficulties, such as autism and dyslexia. They will fall foul of these proposals, especially with attached compliance sanctions, which, it has been said, have resulted in a number of suicides and attempted suicides in Britain.

It is unclear how the imposition of loss of benefit sanctions, particularly over a protracted period, can be reconciled with the obligations to protect the most vulnerable and tackle child poverty. The reduced single household payment will have an impact on the whole household.

Benefit fraud is best dealt with by the criminal justice system. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr F McCann: The imposition of additional sanctions on those who are convicted undermines the tenet of everyone being equal before the law. I have heard it said that universal credit is bringing 30 benefits together, which must be a good thing. On the face of it, you would say yes, but when you consider the cuts that will be applied in the run-up to its introduction, you will see that most people will have already had their benefits cut to pieces. The social security advisory committee, which has a statutory duty to advise the British Government's Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Social Development, has advised that the different circumstances that exist here should be taken into account when considering the impact of welfare reform in the North.

When all is said and done, this is a Tory-driven agenda. It is nothing to do with reform. It has at its heart the belief that those who are on benefits are scroungers and cheats. They have set out to criminalise those who are on benefits, and, by and large, much of the media and many people have bought in to that message. We have an opportunity to send out a message that we do not buy in to that lie and that we are willing to show the leadership that is required to protect those who are most in need. The only way that that can be done is by supporting the motion.

Just before I finish, I want to say that there has been a wide and varied debate here tonight. A lot of opinions have been shared. I believe that everybody in the Chamber opposes most aspects of the Bill. People differ on the way that it should be brought forward. Over time, Sinn Féin has had quite a number of meetings with individuals and organisations with serious concerns about the passage of the Bill. With that in mind, and on behalf of my party, I intend to table a motion tomorrow invoking Standing Order 34, which allows for the obtaining of advice from the Human Rights Commission on whether the draft Welfare Reform Bill "is compatible with human rights", including those under the European Convention of Human Rights.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. He will recall that, earlier in the debate, I made it very clear that, as part of our party's considerations, we looked at a number of options, not least vetoing the Bill going to the Executive at all. We opted to take the Bill to the Assembly so that we could table a reasoned amendment and have further discussions with the British Government to resolve the outstanding matters. You referred to Standing Order 34. If the reasoned amendment is not passed tonight, or tomorrow morning, perhaps, I will certainly consider

invoking Standing Order 35, which provides for the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee, to ensure that the Bill is looked at from the perspective of whether it complies and conforms with the equality requirements that we addressed earlier.

Mr F McCann: Thank you. In conclusion, it is vital that any legislation passed in the Assembly that impacts on the most disadvantaged — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr F McCann: — should meet a standard that does not violate human rights, so Alex is right.

The tenor of the debate has been good, and our proposals have been fairly reasonable. We tabled a reasoned amendment out of grave concern for those whom we represent and how the Bill will impact on them. We ask Members to support our reasoned amendment.

Mr McCausland: Mr Speaker, quite often, the long series of speeches that we heard today covered the same ground. Therefore, rather than respond to each individually, I intend to deal with a number of issues in a generic form.

One issue is that of flexibilities, which has been at the core of the discussion today. It was raised at the start of the debate by the Chair of the Social Development Committee, Alex Maskey. Let me repeat that the discussions on flexibilities are ongoing. I have already put that on record and referred to it again this morning. I am already pursuing split payments, direct payments to landlords and more frequent payments. Lord Freud has already indicated that he is sympathetic to those concerns and is considering them. I cannot be any clearer than that, but I will be in a better position to comment after my meeting with him next week.

Another issue that Alex Maskey raised at the beginning of the debate was that of the social fund being devolved, and a number of Members referred to that later. There seems to be a great deal of confusion and misinformation doing the rounds. The discretionary elements of the social fund, which Members referred to repeatedly today, will be abolished at the end of March 2013. In Great Britain, those elements will move from the social security system to local authorities. It will be for the Executive to agree on any successor scheme here. The Welfare Reform Bill has provisions to facilitate such a scheme, and we need Government amendment at Consideration Stage. However, the detail of the new scheme will be spelled out in the regulations. My officials will shortly brief the Committee on the outcome of the consultation on the discretionary scheme. Again, the key point is that, without the legislation going forward, come the end of March 2013, there will be no scheme.

The next issue concerns split payments, frequency of payments and direct payments. The Bill, as it stands, already allows for each of the flexibilities requested in exceptional circumstances. As regards direct payments to a landlord, as the Bill stands, there are safeguards and triggers built into the system, whereby, if a claimant fails to pay their rent, there will be an automatic intervention and the rent will revert to direct payment to the landlord after six weeks' arrears. There is provision as regards household payments in that a couple can nominate who will receive the benefit. We want more than that, but those

are things that are already in there. What we are going for is the flexibility in the three areas that all the political parties have agreed are the key issues.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr F McCann: With regard to the payment of housing benefit to landlords, whether in the social sector or the private rented sector, we have been led to believe that you are paid in arrears. By the time you get to six weeks' arrears and they start to go into it, you could end up 12 to 14 weeks in arrears before anybody gets brought in, and the arrears could run to £1,500 to £2,000, which puts people in terrible debt.

Mr McCausland: That is why we are pressing David Freud. We will continue to do that, and we will see him again next week. We have been pressing him consistently, and the Member will be well aware of that, on the issue of direct payments to landlords. We believe that that is the option that is desired by, and required by, a substantial number of people in Northern Ireland and that the situation here is different from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Michael Copeland made comments about budgeting money monthly. We recognise that not all families will be able to budget and manage their money on a monthly basis. That is why my officials, together with colleagues in DWP, are looking to identify a range of products that will help people to budget. In fact, in recent weeks, DWP issued a prior information notice — an invitation to tender — inviting companies to come up with a range of helpful tools, such as jam jar accounts, which automatically put money for specifics, such as utility bills or rent, into a form of direct debit. That would ensure that all household overheads are paid without the client getting at the money. That is a good thing, but, in addition to that, we are asking that there should be the possibility of fortnightly payments and monthly payments.

Michael Copeland also raised the issue of the benefit cap. My officials are working to identify the number of claimants likely to be affected. The initial research that was done indicated that it was under 1,000. There were suggestions at an earlier stage that a huge number of households might be affected. However, when it was looked at more closely, it was clear that the vast majority of those that were originally talked about would not be affected. The work is now coming to a close regarding the precise number, but it is under 1,000. That was an upper limit, but it is substantially below that. We will work with the claimants who might be affected to help them to change and improve their circumstances so that they are not impacted adversely.

Comments were made by a number of Members about the current work capability assessment. We do not know yet who would be doing the assessment for the transfer from DLA to PIP. However, Professor Harrington said that it was a mistake to simply rubber-stamp medical reports. The assessment is about the ability to work, and that includes a medical assessment, but it also includes other factors. So, there is a constant refining of that system to get rid of any defects that are there, and that work will be ongoing. He has carried out three assessments, and the work will be ongoing.

As regards the question of people having access to the details of the regulations, they are almost saying that they are being given a pig in a poke: we do not know what is going to follow on from this, therefore we need to know the details of the regulations. The Department has already advised the Committee that it will provide copies of the DWP regulations that are in the public domain. Members should understand that we cannot share anything from DWP that is not in the public domain in case we compromise, undermine or damage in some way Westminster parliamentary scrutiny. However, my officials will, in so far as the detail is available, provide the Committee with whatever such detail they can, and that will be made available as soon as possible.

11.30 pm

Again, Members asked why they have not seen the detail of the regulations. The whole purpose of the primary legislation is to create an enabling framework that allows regulations containing matters of detail to be made later. My officials have already talked to the Committee Clerk about submitting draft regulations once the Final Stage is reached and in advance of Royal Assent. That is highly unusual, but I have authorised officials to do that because I want to give Committee members plenty of time to scrutinise all the regulations. Mark Durkan and Michael Copeland also spoke about the regulations. Clause 44 sets out the Assembly controls in place for scrutinising the regulations. That list includes regulations on housing costs, sanctions, hardship payments, etc. Those will all be subject to confirmatory procedure, which, as the Member knows, means a debate after six months. That will allow all of us time to get an idea of how the regulations are working on the ground. Furthermore, a number of regulations will also require Executive approval, and my officials will let the Committee have a list of those regulations.

Patsy McGlone took up the issue of Scotland and Wales. Although Scotland and Wales have devolved Administrations, they do not have devolved authority over social security matters in the way that we do in Northern Ireland. The changes, which the Member referred to, to ease the impact of the reforms in Scotland and Wales are precisely what I am urging Executive colleagues and the Assembly collectively to join me in implementing — changes to our discretionary support systems, to childcare and to programmes that support and help individuals back into work, to budget better and to take responsibility for their destiny. In other words and in simple terms, change the things we can to support reform and, like Scotland and Wales, accept that change is needed and that it is needed now.

The Member also mentioned the Consumer Council. I point out to him that the council is actively involved across Departments, in particular with DETI and DE, on budgeting initiatives such as Money Matters, which is gradually being rolled out, and on debt advice.

In the midst of all those speeches, there were some that really stood out. Michael Copeland's was obviously one such speech. It was — I wrote down these words — comprehensive and exhaustive. I also found Caitríona Ruane's speech interesting. She was obviously on a roll, as she was in full flow and full flight against all the evils of the Tories. I was just waiting for her to burst into a couple of choruses of 'The Red Flag'. It was quite clear that, in the

midst of all the rhetoric, she did not get the core point. She kept saying that we have time, but we do not have time. We have run out of time. We have used up all the time that we had. We have run of time and road. How many ways can I say that to make it absolutely clear? There is a timetable for getting legislation through the Assembly. We are now at the point today where we can just about get it through with all the extra work being undertaken by the Social Development Committee in extra meetings. Indeed, I think that it is sitting over the Halloween recess. Even then, it is very tight. This is as tight as it can get. There is no more time. There is also a tendency by some folk to ignore the consequences of delay, which I have spelt out already, in respect of the impact on the social fund and, therefore, the loss of support for the most vulnerable in our society, the fact that that endangers 1,500 jobs, and the long-term costs, which I will return to.

I was also interested by Conall McDevitt's contribution, although after his performance on the radio this morning, I thought that he might have gone into hiding for a day or two. He was asked a question about the issue of equality, which is near and dear to Conall McDevitt's heart. The question put to him by Stephen Farry was what contribution the Social Democratic and Labour Party made to the equality impact assessment that was published in April. What did the SDLP say because they are so passionate? Dolores Kelly and Conall McDevitt were passionate about equality. So, I looked on page 22 of the report, which gives a list of all the consultees who responded. I went down to the letter 's', for SDLP. We have Save the Children Fund and then it jumps to Simon Community. What do you find? The SDLP did not bother to comment.

Obviously, Conall had difficulty remembering that earlier on; did not want to remember the fact that his party said nothing about it; and did not want to acknowledge the point that Stephen Farry made. That is why I made sure that we got a copy.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No. After his performance on the radio this morning, there is nothing that Conall McDevitt could say that would bring any benefit to any discussion tonight, I can assure him of that. We have got enough humour out of Conall McDevitt today already. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister must be heard.

Mr McCausland: I thought some of the language he used was a little bit out of order, particularly his comments about his party leader.

A Member: Was that the surrender monkey?

Mr McCausland: It may have been that. It may also have been the double-jobbing issue. Certainly, I thought that that was most inappropriate. Maybe it was as part of his bid for the party leadership that he was going down that road.

He spoke about this committee that he wants to see set up. The reality is that we have a Committee — the Social Development Committee. It may not meet the standards of Conall McDevitt. He may not value the contribution that his party colleague makes to that Committee. He may feel that Mr Durkan is not up to scratch on the issue but surely that is a matter that should be sorted out and settled behind closed doors by the party rather than exposing poor Mr Durkan to that sort of ridicule and criticism.

He also spoke about those who want to sacrifice the most vulnerable. The point that I have made repeatedly is that those who want to delay, defer and prevaricate are the people doing the most damage to the most vulnerable in our society.

I am getting near the end because the hour is late. Dolores Kelly and Steven Agnew placed such emphasis on, and have such trust in, the Children's Commissioner's report. They will recall that, at the time, I said that it was fundamentally flawed. It was a report that they had commissioned from Goretti Horgan of the Socialist Workers' Party. It was a report that she produced and they published. However, it was fundamentally flawed because it was based on information that was already out of date. As a result, I asked my officials to meet the Children's Commissioner. I met her myself, in fact, in due course. The officials were able to go through with her the details of the report, explain the fundamental flaws in it, and set the record straight. So, the things that people are putting forward —

Mr D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just to have the record straight, the report was commissioned by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the University of Ulster. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Minister to continue, please.

Mr McCausland: What we need to do is avoid that sort of irrational suggestion. I remember some elements of that report that were quite alarming. That is the sort of scaremongering that we heard again today.

Steven Agnew did not understand why 1,500 jobs might go. The fact is that it is very simple — incredibly simple — for DWP to take a contract that provides 1,500 good jobs in Northern Ireland and move it across to some part of Great Britain. There is no difficulty, hindrance or obstacle to them doing that.

Mr Agnew: Why would they not do it now?

Mr McCausland: If Steven Agnew cannot understand why on earth they would do that at the slightest opportunity, I despair at his political insight.

Mr Humphrey: He is very green.

Mr McCausland: That is true.

If they are able to give jobs to people in their own constituencies, of course they are going to favour doing that. That is why the point has been made repeatedly that it is absolutely crucial that we safeguard the jobs of people in Northern Ireland, that we do not play fast and loose with people's livelihoods, that we do not play fast and loose with the social fund and that we do not play fast and loose with a cost of over £200 million.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Right, OK.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister clarify how many jobs will be lost through the imposition of universal credit.

Mr McCausland: The question is as incomprehensible as it could possibly be. It is almost as incomprehensible — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not debate across the Chamber. It has been a long debate, and all Members who

wanted to make a contribution have done so. *[Interruption.]* Order. The Minister is concluding the Second Stage, and he should be allowed to do so. *[Interruption.]* Order, Members.

Mr McCausland: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It seems pretty clear that some of the points that are being made are getting near the knuckle, which some Members find difficult.

We are talking about real jobs. We are talking about really vulnerable people. We are also talking about a real hit through money having to be taken away from the Health Department and other Departments. These are real issues.

In conclusion, I am on record as stating that I have held and will continue to hold discussions with Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smith and others concerning the operational easements that I consider necessary to effectively implement welfare reform in Northern Ireland.

I urge Members to reject the amendment, take account of the wider financial picture of our benefits system, and recognise that it is simply not an option for Northern Ireland to operate a benefits system independent of the rest of the UK. Apart from the logistical and IT difficulties that that would pose, we simply could not afford it.

Failure to implement the Welfare Reform Bill will cost Northern Ireland around £1.5 billion over the SR 2010 and SR 2014 periods. The rules that govern how Northern Ireland is funded by Her Majesty's Treasury allow reductions to the Northern Ireland block where local decisions made on social security spending do not maintain parity. Northern Ireland will see the removal of moneys allocated to Departments of £61 million in resource and £18 million in capital. Northern Ireland Executive-managed funds could be reduced by future controls on AME spending that are not delivered of around £1 billion, and Northern Ireland universal credit customers will not get the increases in benefit spending, which would amount to around £334 million, and which would ensure that they can keep more as they move into work. In other words, we would rob people of the benefits of universal credit. The core principles of universal credit are good principles, and that aspect of welfare reform is the good aspect. It would be wrong of us if we were to deprive people of those benefits.

The cost of administering different systems would be borne by Northern Ireland, including the higher costs of complex and expensive IT systems that the Department for Work and Pensions will be changing under welfare reform. Also, there will be more expensive delivery methods. In addition, £41 million of income a year for delivering services to Great Britain will be at risk. That is the 1,500 jobs and the income that we are getting from that for Northern Ireland. That £41 million out of the Northern Ireland economy would be a very significant hit, and one that people would be very foolish to ignore.

11.45 pm

So, we would simply lose that money because, as GB benefits change, Northern Ireland would no longer be placed to deliver them.

I think that I covered all of these things fairly thoroughly this morning and that I have touched on the main things tonight.

Mention was made of the social fund. I looked at some of the things for which people get payments from the social

fund: people who need bedding, clothing, or a cooker. Perhaps they need a washing machine because they have not one. Maybe they are moving into new accommodation and need help with a range of very basic things like that. Payments could also be made for food. We are talking about the basic things of life.

Do Members want to create a situation whereby, on 1 April next year, the vulnerable, who have access to the social fund for those particular things, will be denied them? I think that that would be totally and utterly wrong, but that is the direction in which deferral would take us.

I hope that I have addressed the main points that were raised. I commend the motion, that the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be agreed, to the Assembly.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Towards the end of the debate, Mr Maskey indicated that, if this Bill passed its Second Stage, he was minded to bring a motion under Standing Order 35(2) as Chairman of the Social Development Committee, to refer the Bill to an Ad Hoc Committee on equality issues. Could I ask you to rule that, under Standing Order 35(2), he can only do that with the authority and approval of his Committee?

Mr Maskey: You do not need to be a barrister to know that.

Mr Speaker: Order. There has been some discussion with parties who have come through my door over the last few days on that issue. I am absolutely clear that that can only be done with the approval of the Committee. It would be the same for an Executive Minister. A motion can only come to the House with the approval of the Executive, not by a Minister acting alone. That is absolutely clear. Over the last few days, we have been making that absolutely clear to whatever parties have come through the Speaker's door.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You also are aware, a Cheann Comhairle, that I am also aware of that — just for the record.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us move on.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 42; Noes 60.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy,

Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 60; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs McKevitt and Mr Rogers.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] be agreed.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine atá anseo anocht. Táimid ag plé anseo le hábhar an-tábhachtach: comhionannas agus oideachas ár bpáistí. I thank everyone for staying here tonight — or this morning. We are dealing with very important issues: equality and the education of our children.

This morning, we are dealing with post-primary education in Kilkeel. Over 1,500 young people are educated in three schools: Kilkeel High, St Columban's and the Louis Grammar. Kilkeel High has 696 young people. It is an all-ability co-ed school providing a high standard of education, and I welcome that. It does not carry out unnecessary private testing; it does not tell some children that they can come in and others that they are not good enough; and it does not operate social selection or academic selection. It has a very high percentage of young people who achieve 5 A* to C grades — some 76.6%. I commend it for the work that it does and the leadership that it shows in relation to education.

We have two schools providing education for the Catholic/nationalist community. St Columban's is an all-ability co-ed school suffering the impact of demographic decline. Throughout the North, we have 30,000 empty desks, and, despite the best efforts of many of our secondary schools, they are left dealing with the adverse impact of that. St Louis in Kilkeel is a Catholic grammar. The Louis order is a religious order. I went to look at the history of the Louis order. The Sisters of St Louis Ireland website states:

"The Sisters of St. Louis have been in Ireland since 1859, when the first three Sisters came to Monaghan from the French Motherhouse" ... "near Paris. Post-famine Ireland had great need of education, especially for poorer people, and the Sisters' influence was felt in local schools. As St. Louis Sisters increased in numbers, they met requests to staff several primary and secondary schools and new foundations were made. By the end of the nineteenth century St. Louis Convents and schools existed in: Monaghan Town; Bundoran, Co. Donegal; Ramsgrange, Co. Wexford; Middletown, Co. Armagh; Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan; Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo; Clones, Co. Monaghan".

In the 20th century, schools were added in Balla in Mayo, Rathmines in Dublin, Kilkeel in County Down, and Ballymena, County Antrim, among others.

I have a strong connection with the Louis order. It provided education in Kiltimagh, in Mayo. My mother and father were natives of Kiltimagh. My mother was president

of the past pupils, my auntie godmother taught in their school, and I attended one of their schools in Dublin as a child. I have enormous respect for their ethos in the South of Ireland for the services that they have provided to education. It gives me no pleasure to say that I am very disappointed by their failure of leadership in the North, in Kilkeel and Ballymena. I was saddened to see that they went against departmental advice.

12.15 am

Mr Storey: Will the Member explain what she means by their failure in Ballymena? If I am not mistaken, St Louis Grammar School in Ballymena has an arrangement with St Benedict's College in Randalstown and St Patrick's on the Broughshane Road. Where is the failure on the part of St Louis Grammar in Ballymena?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he would let me continue, I was saying that they went against departmental advice on Transfer 2010, and, despite knowing that academic selection is educationally unsound, morally wrong and socially divisive, two of their schools were still testing children. I hope that both those schools change and that they stop testing children and dividing them, which I find very socially divisive. *[Interruption.]* I hope that that is the case, and I hope that the Chairperson of the Education Committee will use his influence to ensure that that happens, not only in Ballymena but right across the North of Ireland. *[Interruption.]* He may laugh, but I respectfully say to the Chairperson that this is no laughing matter. Tonight, we had over 50 parents, teachers, support staff and students from Kilkeel. One parent told me that three of her children went to three different schools. What does that do for a cohesive community? What does that do for a family?

I attended a parents' meeting, and parents in the Kilkeel area are leading from the front. Parents, by and large, whether their children go to the Louis or St Columban's, want one co-ed all-ability school in the Kilkeel area. Many of the parents are bewildered and ask why one of their children is good enough to go to a certain school but their second or third child is told that they cannot go to the same school.

This is an issue of equality. There is no need for two Catholic schools in Kilkeel. There should be one school, and the two schools should amalgamate. There is a big banner outside St Columban's that says "Amalgamate, don't discriminate". To give the school its due, its representatives are not saying that it should be kept open at all costs. They were with me recently to meet Minister John O'Dowd, and I welcome the fact that the Minister met them. They were very clear that they were putting children first. I applaud that. They are putting the needs of children before their school. The Sisters of St Louis, who founded schools in very disadvantaged areas of post-famine Ireland, would want to see the same leadership from their schools. I hope that we see that.

Anyone who doubts the social selection argument should look at the statistics. We have heard loads of excuses from both parties on the opposite Benches, who are trying to say that this is not social selection. It is. You just need to look at the statistics. At St Columban's College in Kilkeel, 29.6% of the children are entitled to free school meals; at St Louis Grammar School, the figure is 12.1%. Statemented children account for 21.3% of the children

and young people at St Columban's, as opposed to 3.6% at St Louis. That speaks volumes. It shows the inequality. What makes this worse —

Mr B McCrea: There is always the question of the selective use of statistics. One of the arguments that comes across when you talk about social mobility is that all people who get free school meals get the opportunity to rise further up the social welfare scheme if they get an education that is appropriate to their needs. So, just because you bring statistics about what it means at the moment does not mean that is the way that it will turn out in the future.

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his intervention. Go raibh maith agat, Basil. I am not a statistician, but what I do know is that, when you have 3.6% special educational needs in a grammar school, 21.3% in a secondary school, 12.1% free school meal children in a grammar school and 29.6% in a secondary school, it shows where the mobility is. The social —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I have already given way to the Chairperson of the Committee. He will have his opportunity to speak.

Those statistics are stark, and you cannot argue against them. It is made even worse by the funding model that we have in our schools. Given that St Columban's is bearing the brunt of demographic decline, that schools get money per child and teachers per number of children and that that school has a higher percentage of free school meals and a much higher percentage of special needs children, who obviously need targeted intervention, the unfairness is even more stark.

There is also an equality argument in relation to staff and teachers. Because of the refusal to date of the Louis to amalgamate — I hope that that changes — the staff in St Columban's are not being treated fairly. There is something so wrong about that, and there is deepening anger in the Kilkeel area about it. People want to see equality for support staff and teachers in both schools.

Economically, it does not make sense. Children pass each other like ships in the night. They are going from Newry to Kilkeel, Warrenpoint to Kilkeel, Rostrevor to Kilkeel, Kilkeel to Newry, Kilkeel to Warrenpoint, Kilkeel to Loughinisland and Loughinisland to Kilkeel. *[Interruption.]* Sorry; I did not interrupt you.

Who pays for that? The public purse. The public purse is bussing children from all over, and they pass each other in the night. Instead, there should be one school catering for the Catholic community in Kilkeel. Kilkeel High should continue the good work that it does, and one Catholic all-ability, co-ed school should be working very closely with Kilkeel High to provide the entitlement framework. That is what should be happening. It does not take a rocket scientist to work it out; it just takes a little bit of common sense.

I will quote from a document headed "Catholic bishops call for an end to academic selection", a statement by the Catholic bishops on the future of academic selection signed by Bishop McAreevey and all the bishops in the North of Ireland, including the cardinal.

"Many share our conviction that transfer to post-primary education by academic selection, known

popularly as the '11-plus', is failing our young people and their parents. It can seriously distort the focus of learning and teaching for children in Primary Six and Seven. It artificially divides children into two distinct school groups, even though all schools must offer their pupils access to the same curriculum entitlement. It does not do justice to the way in which the skills and abilities of children develop at this critical stage of their lives. Further, it has a disproportionate and unacceptable impact on the educational opportunities of the most socially disadvantaged. As Catholic educators our outreach to these children and young people is particularly important."

I call on all parties in the House to support the amalgamation. I call on all parties to ask schools throughout the North that are still going against departmental guidance and testing children at 10 and 11 to stop doing that. The SDLP needs to talk stop talking out of both sides of its mouth. I hope that it will get off the fence on this one. I hope that it comes out publicly and states that it supports the amalgamation. I have yet to hear that from it.

I welcome the fact that Basil McCrea and John McCallister from the UUP are here tonight. I hope that they tell schools to stop testing. Indeed, they know the benefits of Rathfriland High School — past pupils and all that — and how well it is doing and how well Kilkeel is doing. It is unfortunate that Jim Wells could not stay, but I have no doubt that he will read the Hansard report of the debate. I welcome the fact that the Chairperson of the Education Committee is here. We need to stop high-stakes testing of children. In Kilkeel, we need one co-ed, all-ability school that serves the Catholic/nationalist community and works closely with Kilkeel High.

I thank the Deputy Speaker, Loretta and the other officials who are here for this morning's debate. It was also good to have the parents, teachers and support staff here tonight.

Mr Storey: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to this debate, but I think that it has more to do with the proposer, who is the failed Education Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, trying to hide her embarrassment at the fact that she has to stand up in the House and give us the same old failed rhetoric. Nothing changes. I will, at least, give the Member this: she is consistent. She is consistently wrong. We have heard all of this before when she was the Minister. What an admission of failure. She was the Education Minister who told the world that she had ended academic selection. She did not. She actually created a situation where it is now sectarianised, with a Catholic test and a Protestant test. Why did she not end it? It is because, legally, she did not have the power to bring it to an end. That is the reality, and that is the truth.

The former Minister talked about equality. It is very interesting that, in this debate, she talks about the amalgamation of two schools in one sector so that they can come together for the provision of Catholic education in Kilkeel. By the way, she says, let Kilkeel High School remain as it is. There is no mention of looking at a plan that might ask whether we need three schools in Kilkeel. The Minister knows that she has to pursue a policy that still pays lip service to the segregated education system in Northern Ireland, which is compounded by the fact that

there are schools that are based on religious divides more than educational divides.

I was interested to note that the former Education Minister did not quote the statistics for free school meals in Kilkeel High. We are always told that free school meals are only the domain of those who come from socially disadvantaged areas and that the numbers are always lower in grammar schools. It is funny that, in Kilkeel High School, the percentage of pupils who receive free school meals is 10.8%. That is lower than the figures she gave for the grammar school. I do not know how she would explain those figures. She will probably say that Protestants do not apply for free school meals, and that will be her way of getting out of the issue.

Rather than the party that secured the Adjournment debate coming up with something that is inventive and supportive of parental choice, that party is saying that you have to ignore parental choice. I find it sweet to hear the Member talking about children travelling to Newry or from Newry, given the record of the former Minister and the way in which members of her family travelled from another jurisdiction to Newry.

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate that a Member is speaking about children? First, that is incorrect, and, secondly, for the tone of the debate, our children should not be brought into it.

For the record, my daughter goes to a co-ed, all-ability school in north Louth.

12.30 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should not make personal remarks.

Mr Storey: History will prove that to be the case. What happens now and what happened in the past are two different things. We do not need to come to the House to be lectured about transport or about parents making choices. Parents are right to make choices and to do so on the basis of what is educationally right for their children. I am quite happy to talk about my children, who were able to avail themselves of different provision through choice. Why? It is because my three children are all different. Let us dispense with this absolute nonsense that you can somehow build one big school, put all the children into it and they will all turn out the same. That is an absolute educational fallacy, and it does not work. The reason why it does not work can be seen quite clearly when we look at Members on the opposite Benches, some of whom availed themselves of grammar school education while others did not. It is exactly the same on this side of the House. I do not believe that any parent should be denied that right or choice.

I commend Kilkeel High School. We must remember that it does not use academic selection. It is a successful school, and it proves the point that schools that do not make that choice can be successful. However, it has made that choice. Equally, the maintained sector has made the choice to ensure that it retains the right legally, as it can, to have a choice of provision that meets the children's needs. I get tired of the continual downing and reference to failure. The proposer of the topic and the party that she represents do nothing for the community, given that they continue to use those types of descriptors for young people who deserve the opportunity to have a good education. If her

colleague the Education Minister focused on the schools that need assistance and support, the numbers in the school in Kilkeel may not be falling. I have heard nobody — I do not think that I will hear it tonight — give reasons why there has been a decline in the numbers in the school that the Member refers to. However, I know from my own experience that numbers in a post-primary school in Ballymena declined because previous Education Ministers allowed other schools, such as those in the integrated sector, to be opened. That is never mentioned.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Storey: That is never given as a reason. Therefore, I trust that the Education Minister will listen to the issues on parental choice and will continue to allow that choice of education provision in Kilkeel.

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

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate, although it would have been preferable at a slightly earlier time. I begin by apologising for my DUP colleague Jim Wells. His absence will allow me to use one of his favourite lines. When speaking in a debate such as this, he usually says in his press release that he addressed a "hushed Assembly". At least I can maybe steal that line for my press release later on.

I want to pick up on several issues that have come up in the debate so far. I do not want to get completely bogged down in a debate about selection; the two Members who spoke previously did that. Ms Ruane said that I went to Rathfriland High School. I was proud to go there. However, I confess that I failed my 11-plus, which is the reason why I was at Rathfriland High School. Believe it or not, it is now over 30 years since I did it, and I was not that badly scarred by the whole experience. I got over it relatively quickly.

I would also point out in selection —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr B McCrea: Was the Member more scarred by that or by the events of the previous week?

Mr McCallister: I am rapidly getting over both of those major traumas, although, no doubt, my suffering continues as I head to the OFMDFM and Finance Committees.

I would add that, with regard to the points about selection — and as my colleague Mr McCrea has talked about before — selection very often reflects inequality: it does not create it. Inequalities can be created much earlier in life, and that is the point that many of us would like to see focused on. Indeed, I remember, in the year that I spent as a member of the Education Committee — I think that we had just been presented with the 0-6 strategy — being disappointed that it was not an all-embracing strategy and that a huge amount of work was needed on it.

The main substance of what we are debating tonight is, effectively, the future of St Columban's school. I had the privilege of visiting the school a few weeks ago and talking to the staff about the issues and difficulties that they need to address, and listening to their concerns. Certainly, some of the NICIE recommendations that have come to Kilkeel have not offered them partnership, co-operation or

any type of amalgamation. Also, in the details of whether there was to be some sort of amalgamation, was there likely to be a newbuild? The Minister will, perhaps, be able to answer whether that is likely to be on the agenda, and whether it is in his budget, or in his forward work programme. There would be time, over a set period, to work towards that.

There are the links that St Columban's could have with other schools. Mr Storey and Ms Ruane talked about the excellent work of Kilkeel High School. In the whole of the selection debate, Kilkeel has been one of the slightly quirkier places in Northern Ireland, in that it has a very successful nursery school, primary school and high school set, effectively, in one unit. It has produced some excellent educational results, with very few opting to leave the area. That model has worked well in that area. I do not think that any political party has ever proposed changing something that is working in an area. That should, possibly, be looked at and replicated in the maintained sector. If it is to work, that is something that I would like to see working there as well. Of course, we, as a party, support parental choice.

Therefore, perhaps the Minister can look at the role of reports and deal with getting any amalgamations or collaboration between St Columban's and St Louis. Is that work ongoing? Is there likely to be an outcome quickly? Is there likely to be any prospect of a newbuild? Of course, there is a huge worry among the staff and the pupils who attend St Columban's. What is going to happen to the staff? Sometimes, in any situation, if a school starts to get a reputation that things are not going well and that there is no long-term future, it starts to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is a danger that we ignore the excellent work that is going on. I accept that — Ms Ruane quoted some of the statistics — there are issues, and that they are dealing with twenty-something per cent of special needs. Therefore, there is a need for that school in the area, and there is a need for the work and the education that it provides. We, and the House, cannot ignore the fact that that need has to be met. We cannot move this out of Kilkeel and send kids all over the place. That need has to be met, and I am sure that, in the Minister's response to the debate, he will be keen to answer those questions and lay out for the Assembly what he sees as the way forward, and the reassurance that he can give to pupils, to staff and to prospective pupils as to how you best manage post-primary education in the maintained sector in the Kilkeel area to have the best outcomes for our children in that part of our constituency.

Mr Rogers: Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this tonight. The Member who has just spoken did not use the word "sleepwalking" once. I would have excused it tonight.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: Yes.

Mr McCallister: I learned my lesson.

Mr Rogers: Before I begin, I would like us to remember two members of staff of St Columban's who died in recent weeks, Marian Hughes and Ray Carville.

I suppose I should declare an interest as a past pupil of St Columban's, past principal of St Louis and the only Mourne man in the House tonight. I welcome those in the Public Gallery and those, perhaps, who are suffering from

insomnia and watching proceedings on TV. I also thank the students who have e-mailed me over the past week or two.

The title of the debate is "Post-primary Education: Kilkeel". It could quite easily read "Education in Mourne", because the longer that this matter remains unsolved, the greater effect it will have on all our schools.

Only tonight, at a meeting in Longstone, were fears expressed about our primary schools and the effect that it will have on our society in general. When a young couple decides to settle down and have a family, education is a very important issue. We all want the best for our children. This will not affect schooling alone, but every aspect of what happens in the Mourne area.

Yes, I failed the 11-plus and went to St Columban's. Did I feel socially excluded as a consequence of that? No, it probably increased my resolve to achieve my potential. What do I attribute my success to? To a supportive home, good teachers and, most of all, hard work. I took one path, and others went a different way. I think specifically of a gifted tradesman who spent his latter years passing on his skills to his students. At that stage, it was probably the minority who followed the academic route.

Many years later, St Columban's pupils follow similar paths. At 16, many go to the Southern Regional College and enter the trades; others transfer to St Louis and other schools to follow the A-level route, and then to university. Over the years, it caused me great anguish when St Louis could not take some of the local children at 11, because of the admissions number, but that was replaced with genuine delight when they came back after their GCSEs. They brought that work ethic, contributed to the extra-curricular life, be that on the stage or on the field, and got good A-level results. They are today's nurses, social workers, vets and engineers.

As previous contributors mentioned, parental choice is extremely important and must be respected.

What of the future of post-primary education in south Down? I have consulted widely over the past six months. I have met trustees, governors and the principals, and listened to parents and pupils from both schools. What has happened since the post-primary review in February 2012? Basically nothing, much to the frustration of both schools. A vacuum has been created, which is not good for the community of either school.

When I listen to parents, I hear that they want to see the high academic standards of St Louis maintained. They want to see it continue to attract children from a wide south Down area to one of the best schools in the North. Parents of St Columban's pupils want to see good education, and they are happy with the education that their children are getting at St Columban's. I think that that happiness is very important. Creating that happy atmosphere is so important for our children, because if we do not get that right, education does not happen.

Parents want to see opportunities for all our young people who desire to follow a vocational route. We have a strong trades culture in Mourne. Those paths are equally important today. Our students must have the right skills when the opportunities arise, be that in the traditional trades or in developing opportunities in offshore energy, tourism or agrifoods, but, most importantly, parents need a guarantee that there will be places for all children from the

feeder primary schools in the parishes of upper and lower Mourne.

When times were tougher than they are today, our parents and grandparents contributed in their weekly church collections to the building of Catholic schools. It is imperative that future generations are guaranteed high-quality Catholic education, whether academic or vocational, in the Mourne area. I would like to see the voluntary principle maintained. I want to see the ongoing development of cross-community work and our schools working together. At this stage, I commend the work of Mr Cunningham and the staff at Kilkeel High School.

12.45 am

Can all the things that I want done be done in one school? Yes, they can; in one all-abilities school, to meet the needs of all our children. I have every confidence that it can happen, but it will take time. It will take time to plan; this cannot be thrust upon us, it must be agreed. I welcome the statement from the St Louis trustees and board of governors, as it acknowledges that pupils may enter the school via a route that is not necessarily academic. That is only the start. I look forward to the conversations between the representatives of both schools about the best way forward. It will take time to develop a strategic development plan; a plan that will satisfy all stakeholders.

I do not think that we should narrow this to Mourne or Kilkeel. I believe that the learning experience of our local children is enriched by mixing with those from Warrenpoint, Rostrevor, Newcastle, etc.

We need time to build a new school. Look at St Columban's and St Louis. There has been an absence of investment. St Columban's is basically the same school that I attended in my new green uniform, nearly 50 years ago. I have had first-hand experience of St Louis. As principal, I expected to cut the first sod of the new school six years ago. So did my predecessor. But children are being educated in rooms of a convent that is 90 years old. Did that affect the quality of teaching? No, it did not. It was always easier to fix the leaking roof.

Why, Minister, has the newbuild proposal been allowed to gather dust, or should I direct that question to the previous Education Minister? Minister, it is an essential building block to the realisation of our dreams. I extend an invitation to Minister O'Dowd to visit both schools and experience for himself the strong support therein.

I come now to the words of some of the pupils who have e-mailed me over the past few weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Rogers: Look at the schools in Newry. Millions of pounds have been spent on them. Why should Kilkeel not have a brand new school of its own, rather than two old buildings?

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

Mr Rogers: In the meantime, St Columban's should be kept open —

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

Mr Rogers: — until the new building is ready, and all pupils can go to the new school together. I urge the

Minister to take that on board, not just my views, but those of the children who have e-mailed me.

Finally —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Mr Chris Hazzard.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my party colleague Caitríona Ruane for tabling the debate tonight. Far from being a failed Education Minister, as portrayed by the Member opposite, my party colleague was indeed the Education Minister who resigned the 11-plus to the history books, and I am very proud of that fact. I put that on record before I start.

Moving forward with effective and inclusive education provision is a vital task facing the Assembly. Therefore, it is an appropriate and pertinent subject to raise. I hope that it illustrates the urgent need for a collaborative area-based approach to the provision of education in the Kilkeel area.

I pay tribute to the staff, parents and, indeed, pupils who travelled to Stormont, late tonight, to engage in the debate. Their commitment and passion for inclusive and innovative education in the Mourne area is testament to their status as community leaders. I have no doubt that their tireless efforts and ongoing campaign for education equality are appreciated by hundreds, if not thousands, of families across the constituency.

In recent weeks, we have spoken at length in the Chamber of the need to drive forward change in our education system. Tonight's debate is no different. As we continue to build education provision fit for the challenges of the 21st century, we must empower our young people with education policies designed to raise standards and eradicate inequality in the system.

I stood in the Great Hall this evening, and listened to young people from the Mourne area speak passionately about the barriers that have been placed in front of them. I listened as they pleaded with me to help them in their ongoing campaign to challenge such inequality and eradicate such blatant elitism. Not everybody gets over those hurdles in the way that was portrayed in the Chamber tonight.

Despite my obvious respect for these young women marching into Stormont tonight and demanding change, I was genuinely saddened by what they had to say. They spoke of the negative effect that such elitism has on their mental health, the daily effects of academic exclusion and the long-term disadvantages facing them in the job market as a result of perceived educational inequalities. This is sheer and unadulterated academic apartheid, and it must not be tolerated. Given the right environment and support, every single young person across this island can and should be a success. Every one of our children is an individual with unique talents and abilities. It is the task of the education system to identify and encourage every child, not just some of the children, not merely a minority who are considered easier to teach.

Just this week, the eminent British scientist Professor John Gurdon was awarded the Nobel prize for his groundbreaking work in the field of bioscience. There can be no doubt that this man is one of the finest scientific minds in the world. However, above Gurdon's desk in his Cambridge office is a framed school report from his days at the elitist Eton College. It reads as follows:

"His prepared stuff has been badly learnt... He will not listen, but will insist on doing his work in his own way. I believe he has ideas about becoming a scientist... This is quite ridiculous. If he can't learn simple biological facts he would have no chance... It would be a sheer waste of time, both on his part, and of those who have to teach him."

That succinct snapshot demonstrates exactly why we need to build a fit-for-purpose education system. The old rigid traditionalism of the elite sector was not flexible enough to identify the dynamic scientific ability of that young pupil. He apparently could not learn facts and was wasting his teacher's time. I repeat: he is one of the foremost scientific minds in the world today.

At such an early stage, Gurdon was deemed a failure. There can be little doubt that Gurdon was no failure. Indeed, there is even less doubt that he was the one who was failed by a system of division and exclusion. Thankfully, that young pupil was able to find a suitable environment in later years and went on to have a fantastic career. Unfortunately, however, not all children get that second chance. Shamefully, the barriers and hurdles placed in front of our young people remain insurmountable throughout much of their lives. We are not only failing these young people, we are failing their families, their communities and our society.

Just yesterday, we stood in this Chamber and welcomed the Executive's investment strategy, a strategy that acknowledges the huge importance of education in building our society in the years ahead. As it outlines, a peaceful, fair and prosperous society has at its heart a well-educated population with the skills to engage fully and positively in society and in the economy. The skills base of countries and regions is increasingly the key determinant of relative economic growth, competitiveness and productivity, which are factors that are vital to support higher living standards in an increasingly globalised economy.

Children are central to those considerations. A modern educational environment that cherishes and nurtures all our young people should be at the very core of our vision for restoring economic prosperity in our local communities. That is a vision shared by educationalists and stakeholders throughout Ireland and further afield.

A recent OECD report into student performance across the world heaped praise on students in Shanghai and Hong Kong when it said that their educational performance seems to be as spectacular as the country's breakneck economic expansion. Although that achievement cannot be attributed to any particular reform, the OECD was unequivocal in stressing that Shanghai got rid of the key school system that had previously concentrated resources only on supposed top students and elite schools. They initiated educational reforms, which resulted in a system that focuses on the majority and not the elite minority. Such educational changes have been instrumental in economic growth.

The overwhelming evidence quantified in those international reports illustrate beyond all doubt that the best schools throughout the world are those schools that provide high-quality education to all abilities. We cannot extol the virtues of expanding economies throughout the world, yet stay blind to the educational measures that

propel such excellence. Without a determination to deliver real and substantive change, we set our young people an impossible task in the face of such challenges in the 21st century.

I would like to relay the challenge that was put to me tonight by the girls out on the steps of the Great Hall. They wanted me to put this on the record tonight and say the following to those who advocate discrimination in our education system, "The higher you build your barriers, the taller I become. The more you refuse to hear my voice, the louder I will sing."

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

Mr Hazzard: Those words, of course, are inspired by the elitist apartheid that built barriers and divided communities in South Africa for generations. The elitist division and exclusion of young people in Kilkeel and throughout the North is academic apartheid. It always has been and will be wrong. The provision of education must empower and unify our communities, not degrade and divide them.

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

Mr Hazzard: It is time that we put our children before our buildings. To those involved in the debate in Kilkeel, I say this: amalgamate, do not discriminate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mrs McKevitt: I, too, would like to thank the officials and the Minister for staying here into the early hours of this morning to hear this very important discussion. I welcome the opportunity to discuss post-primary education provision in the Kilkeel area.

It should be noted that the three Kilkeel post-primary schools of Kilkeel High School, St Columban's College and St Louis Grammar School cater for over 1,500 pupils. St Louis is fully subscribed, but there is capacity in the other two schools for a further 440 pupils. So there is an opportunity for continued collaboration between all the schools. I believe that a number of initiatives already exist between the schools, and the local community has been the lead driver in all of those.

Amalgamations and forced mergers do not work. That was not part of any proposal. The important thing to point out at this stage is that all the schools that are oversubscribed use a form of selection. Not all pupils can get into their school of first choice, irrespective of whether they use academic selection or selection by other means.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mrs McKevitt: No.

That leads me on to the elephant in the room, or should I say the elephant in the Chamber? If the political parties around the Chamber cannot resolve the long outstanding issues around selection and testing, any proposals around integration, amalgamation, consultation or restoration are premature. The position of the horse and the cart would need to be re-evaluated. The lead will come from the education providers themselves. They consult on and share ideas and are meeting the needs of pupils in the greater Kilkeel area by offering joint courses through their area learning communities and other initiatives. We, the politicians, must not be an obstacle to their progress.

The misinformation surrounding the proposals for Kilkeel has been most unhelpful. St Louis, which is a regional school and is the only co-educational grammar school in the area, draws pupils from Kilkeel and the wider South Down area. I was very encouraged by the recent press statement issued by the board of governors of St Louis Grammar School in which it reaffirmed its support for the recommendations of the post-primary review and the SELB area plan and, more importantly, outlined its desire to move towards a situation where some will gain entry to the school by means other than academic selection.

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mrs McKevitt: I am not going to give way. It is very late, and I have five young children at home.

However, it cannot expand and increase its enrolment in the present building. Unfortunately, a newbuild approved by the Department of Education in 2006 has not materialised, and almost £300,000 has been spent on its development to date. It is perfectly justifiably that the school wishes to remain a voluntary grammar school, with a focus on academic excellence as set out in its entrance criteria until such times as there is political agreement on transfer. We and in particular the Minister of Education must listen to the schools. They need our help and support with their development plans, consultation and financial planning, and I, for one, will pledge that support.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Chomhalta Caitríona Ruane as an ábhar seo a ardú inniu. Nochttann sé tábhachtacht na ceiste dá cheantar. Creidim go bhfuil géar-ghá le fócas na gComhaltaí tofa a bheith á dhíriú ar réiteach na faidhbe sa cheantar.

I thank my colleague Caitríona Ruane for securing the debate tonight — or the early hours of this morning. The importance that Members place on the matter is reflected in the fact that they are prepared to stay until the early hours to debate education provision in the Kilkeel area.

1.00 am

Let us study the debate and the concerns raised by Members across the Chamber. It was mentioned that the Catholic sector had already provided its post-primary review. I have put in place an area planning process, which is ongoing and is to be concluded by 26 October. I am content for Members and communities to respond to that process. This evening, I received a petition from St Columban's College on its concerns about future education provision in the area. I will work towards a resolution of all outstanding area planning issues. However, the important thing is that we plan on an area basis and not on an individual basis.

The debate took a number of directions. Understandably, it raised the issue of academic selection and the differing views on that. My view on that subject is clear: there is absolutely no requirement for it in terms of area planning or educational outcomes. The Member opposite, the Chair of the Committee, has shared his views on academic selection. He pointed out that all children are not the same, and he is absolutely right: individualism and uniqueness are great things about children. He did not answer the question of why we needed to divide children to educate them. That is the core issue. No one is suggesting that we

put all children into one school and just meet the needs of that group. Education is about meeting the needs of individual children through the curriculum, through the provision of good teachers, as was pointed out, and by giving them ambition and a hope of moving forward. Through area planning, I need and want to provide that.

Concerns were raised that perhaps the Kilkeel issue was not debated among the partners in that area as robustly as it should have been. I have no difficulty with the Member opposite putting forward a proposal for Kilkeel High. If Members or the community in Kilkeel wish to bring forward proposals on issues concerning the three schools in that area, I will study them closely. At the moment, the only proposal that I am aware of is one to amalgamate St Louis' and St Columban's on one site.

Sometimes, I am concerned when I hear people saying, "We need time to resolve the selection issue", "Someone else has to resolve the selection issue" or "We need political agreement to resolve the selection issue". That is a cop-out. The debate did not start in 2002 with my colleague Martin McGuinness or when my colleague Cairtíona Ruane was Education Minister. It started five decades ago. Five decades ago, those who supported academic selection were saying that they needed time, and they have not shifted an inch since. In fact, Mr Storey may say that they have strengthened their position through the actions of the DUP at St Andrews. I do not buy into the notion of "We need time". We need decisions, leadership and people who are prepared to step forward and make crucial decisions on education that will improve educational outcomes for all our young people.

I think that it was Mr Hazzard who said that the OECD had pointed out that children of all abilities who are educated in the one setting do better. The academically gifted perform better, and those with fewer academic skills perform well in the academic world. International evidence points us towards all-ability schools providing excellent education to all our young people.

I also become concerned when I hear it said in defence of academic selection that grammar schools will provide academic excellence to their pupils. Under the Every School a Good School policy, all schools have a responsibility to provide academic excellence to their pupils. That is not the preserve of any one sector or group of schools. All schools have a duty to provide academic excellence to the young people they serve. All schools teach the same curriculum, and all teach to the one exam system. Therefore, I do not buy into the notion that academic excellence requires separation at the age of 11.

In the months ahead, as the consultation closes, we will allow the boards to assemble the consultation responses, go through them and prepare a report for me as Minister. I will then make a decision early in the new year about area planning. I will make it on the basis of the terms of reference for area planning, my departmental policies and what is good for the young people in an area.

I urge Members to assist communities in debates around the future direction of travel for education. There is no easy road for a leader in a community, and all elected representatives are leaders in a community. At times, it takes that extra bit of courage to step forward and say exactly what you believe, to stand by your party policies in some instances and say that there is another way to do

this and that we can provide academic and educational excellence to our communities in a different way.

I can understand the connection to and relationship with a school or a school identity. That emotion is built up over generations, with parents and grandparents going through a particular school. However, we have to look to the future. We have to create a sustainable schools estate that serves the needs of future generations.

It is nice to reflect on our own educational journey. It is well known that I did not sit the 11-plus. My educational journey, which was 30 years ago, took place in different circumstances, in a different era and with different outcomes from those of the young people who are going through the system today. We have to learn from the past five decades of debate and the international evidence that is before us. We have to give our young people every opportunity to succeed not as clones or robots but as individuals, and we have to prepare them for the challenges and opportunities in life. I will be making the defining decisions in the months ahead, whether around Kilkeel or elsewhere.

The debate in Kilkeel may not be at as advanced a stage as I am being told. I acknowledge the recent statement from St Louis', and I understand that there has been communication with parents etc. If that is fed in to me directly, I will also take that on board when I make my decisions around area planning. However, it is vital that elected representatives are involved in the education debate in local communities and provide leadership on the way forward. As someone who is opposed to academic selection, I acknowledge that we have to convince parents who have concerns about their young people's education suffering as a result of all-ability schools. We have to convince them, and convince them we can, because all the evidence is there. All the evidence is there to convince those parents that we are interested in their children's education, in excellence in education and in academic excellence. All those things are provided throughout western Europe without academic selection. That is a job for us all, and we have to bring those parents along with us. Do not buy into the notion "We need time". They have had five decades to make up their mind, and they are digging in. I am not referring to the Kilkeel circumstances in this case, but in other areas they are digging in to protect what they have instead of looking around their area to see what they need to provide in education.

I am sure that, like me, all Members want to go home. That goes for staff and everyone else, so I will conclude. I welcome this opportunity to debate area planning. I welcome the opportunity Members have had to project their views about Kilkeel. I will take them on board as part of my decision-making process about future outcomes for Kilkeel. I encourage Members to get involved and to take leadership positions when moving forward with area planning, whether in Kilkeel or elsewhere.

Adjourned at 1.09 am.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 October 2012

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Roy Beggs replace Mr John McCallister as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Mr John McCallister replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; and that Mr John McCallister replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. — [Mr Swann.]

Ministerial Statement

Housing Strategy

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on my new housing strategy for Northern Ireland, entitled Facing the Future, which I am launching for public consultation today. The strategy is intended to cover a five-year period, from 2012 to 2017. It links closely to the key priorities in the Programme for Government of supporting economic recovery and tackling disadvantage.

This is the first housing strategy ever produced for Northern Ireland. In it, I have taken a tenure-neutral approach, recognising that we need a broad mix of good quality housing at a reasonable cost in the owner-occupied, private rented and social rented sectors. I have also outlined the significant role that housing could play in helping to support and sustain economic recovery, creating employment and helping to regenerate some of our most deprived and neglected communities.

The strategy articulates for the first time what we see as government's three main roles in relation to housing. These are, first, to help create the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market that supports economic growth and prosperity; secondly, to provide support for individuals and families to access housing, particularly the most vulnerable in society; and, thirdly, to set minimum standards for the quality of new and existing homes and for how rented housing is managed. I also envisage housing playing a key role in supporting my Department's regeneration responsibilities. In the strategy, I have outlined my broad intentions for significant structural change within the housing system in Northern Ireland.

The strategy sets out how I plan to fulfil those roles under five key themes. Those are, first, ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures; secondly, meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable; thirdly, housing and welfare reform; fourthly, driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing; and, fifthly, getting the structures right.

The economic context in which I am launching the strategy is clearly challenging. The Northern Ireland housing market is slowly emerging from a turbulent period. There are hopeful signs that the market is beginning to stabilise, with prices now at more sustainable levels. I am keen to do more to help create the right conditions for longer-term market stability. Such stability is an important component of future prosperity.

For those reasons, my strategy rightly places a clear focus on the role housing can play in supporting sustainable economic recovery. In that regard, the strategy focuses, in particular, on four areas. Those are, first, working in partnership with others to increase the supply of new housing; secondly, providing support for prospective first-time buyers to access the housing market; thirdly, funding the provision of advice to those experiencing difficulties in sustaining home ownership; and, finally, using public spending on housing to create jobs and training places that will help address long-term skills gaps and provide opportunities for our young people.

The figures on new housing supply present a stark message. Whereas social house building has continued at significant levels throughout the recession, there has been a large drop-off in building in the private sector. The 'Regional Development Strategy 2035' indicates a need for around 11,000 new homes every year. In recent years, the supply of new homes has been closer to 7,000. Simple economics mean that, if that situation continues in the longer term, house prices may rise again unsustainably and many households will be unable to find a home to call their own. Increasing housing supply also presents a huge opportunity to create a substantial number of jobs and support economic recovery.

Addressing the supply issue will not be easy, but I am keen to work with the private sector and others to identify and develop viable solutions, and, today, I announce my intention to establish a housing supply forum for that purpose. I am also keen to maximise the number of new social homes we can bring forward within the budgets that are available. Building new social homes will help us meet housing need and have a significant positive impact on the construction industry, as well as a multiplier effect on the economy in general.

The current climate also challenges us to use our other budgets and assets to greater effect to ensure that we meet the housing needs of the most vulnerable. My strategy contains proposals to make more effective use of existing social housing stock, undertake a fundamental review of how we allocate social housing, improve the way we support people to live independently and do more to prevent homelessness.

Much has been said in recent days about how welfare reform will affect the lives of many people here. Dealing with the impacts of housing benefit reform requires proper consideration of the types of actions that will make a difference to people's lives. I am already taking forward a number of actions to ensure that appropriate housing services and support are in place to assist those impacted upon by welfare reform changes. Some of these are outlined in the strategy. I will also be listening carefully to what people are saying and seeking to put in place other practical measures to support those impacted upon by the changes.

Many communities in Northern Ireland are stigmatised by blight, deprivation and a dwindling population. Housing can and should play a greater role in helping to regenerate those communities. We will develop new ways of helping communities to reshape such areas and make them places where people want to live again. This will include bringing more empty homes back into use. I am also challenging social housing landlords to play a greater role in supporting

their tenants of working age who are unemployed or economically inactive to take up work or training.

The standard of housing in Northern Ireland has improved dramatically over the past 30 years. This has made a major contribution to improving health and well-being and reducing carbon emissions. The strategy aims to build on this by ensuring that standards are maintained, energy efficiency is further improved and remaining poor housing is tackled. In the social housing sector, this will mean improving further the regulation of social housing landlords to ensure that tenants continue to receive good service and finding new ways of financing essential maintenance of Housing Executive stock on a sustainable basis. In the private rented sector, this will mean focusing on making the sector a more attractive housing option for a broader range of households by improving standards and regulation.

When developing the strategy being published today, my officials met a number of key stakeholders, including representatives from the construction sector, housing professionals and organisations representing the interests of tenants and the homeless. Their views have played an important role in shaping the strategy, and my officials will continue to engage with these stakeholders and others during the eight weeks of public consultation. During that period, my Department will be organising events in Belfast and Londonderry, and we will be casting the net wide to hear a broad range of views. Following the consultation period, I will carefully assess all the ideas expressed in order to finalise the strategy and develop an action plan to deliver on its intentions and commitments.

The strategy is an important document and contains a number of proposals and themes that I have outlined to the House and on which I am seeking comments. However, at its heart is a very simple vision that I know will have support across this House; that is to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has the opportunity to access good quality housing at a reasonable cost.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. I welcome the fact that, perhaps incredibly, we are now beginning to look at an overarching housing strategy here for the first time. It is remarkable that we have not had that to date. Clearly, the Social Development Committee has spent a lot of time, as have most Members, dealing with housing matters; those are very important.

The Committee looks forward to giving its full consideration to the Minister's proposals in the time ahead. I spoke with the Minister earlier this morning, and he clearly acknowledged that, in developing this strategy, there will be further opportunities for people to have discussions around this matter about primary legislation that may be required, which will of course go through the usual full scrutiny process, and the other elements of this strategy that will require further public consultation. We all look forward to that process.

Mr McCausland: The Member is right in recognising the importance of housing in providing a good future for people in Northern Ireland. It is true that this is the first time we have had a housing strategy for the Province. It is a commitment that we made and have delivered on, and there is a great opportunity to build on this. It is only

the start of the process. There is other work to be done because other things will flow from this in due course.

12.15 pm

Mr Campbell: In the early part of his statement, the Minister talked about the establishment of a housing supply forum. Will he indicate what he realistically expects that to achieve?

Mr McCausland: The level of new house building in the private sector has fallen dramatically over the past few years, yet the long-term need for additional housing is still there. The regional development strategy for 2035 indicates the need for around 11,000 new housing units per year; currently, only about 7,000 are being built. That problem clearly needs to be addressed, and there is no one organisation or sector that has all the answers. We need financial institutions to find creative ways to make appropriate mortgage finance available. We need the construction industry to have the confidence to start building again. We need to have the right policies in place, right across government, to support an increase in private sector activity.

The housing supply forum is intended to bring together key stakeholders from the private and public sectors to identify the barriers to increasing housing supply and to find practical solutions that can work and make a real difference. I recognise that it will not be easy, but the effort will be well worth it if we can unlock new opportunities, build more housing to meet projected needs and, at the same time, create lasting and sustainable jobs in the construction industry and beyond. That will help to get our economy moving again.

Mr Copeland: On this occasion, I, too, thank the Minister for his statement and for giving us in the Social Development Committee, at some stage in the future, a chance to give our input into the strategy. The truth is that housing affects every single facet of all of the people that we represent. The secret to a stable society is the citizen in his or her home —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to the question.

Mr Copeland: The biggest thing, Minister, is: do you agree with me that the provision of a house is merely the beginning of the story and we must work towards the situation where those who get houses are equipped to turn them into homes?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his welcome for the strategy. I also thank him for his brevity, on this occasion.

Mr Humphrey: Enforced.

Mr McCausland: Enforced or otherwise, it is, nevertheless, welcome. Yes; the broader issue here is that it is not simply a matter of providing a home. Other issues arise because there are vulnerable people in our society who do not have certain life skills that they need to acquire, not only to benefit from having a home but also to avail themselves of all the other opportunities that flow from those life skills. So, a valid point was certainly made there.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the publication of this long-awaited strategy. Housing, or lack of it, is a major issue in my constituency, as it is, I am sure, in many others. Does the Minister

have any intention of seeking additional funding from the Executive in the future to enable the construction of more much-needed social homes than are currently planned and budgeted for?

Mr McCausland: My priority at the moment is to make sure that the money that has already been allocated to the Housing Executive is used and that we do not end up in the situation where there is an underspend. We are putting that responsibility very clearly to the Housing Executive and housing associations. There is money in the budget. I want to be sure that all of it is spent.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, thank the Minister for bringing this strategy forward, and I look forward to the outcome of the consultation greatly emphasising sharing. I am interested in what he said about:

“challenging social housing landlords to play a greater role in supporting their tenants ... who are unemployed”.

What specific actions does the Minister think a social housing landlord could take to encourage a tenant to take up work or training?

Mr McCausland: First, I will pick up on the Member's reference to shared housing. Certainly, over the past number of years, my Department has worked to meet the aspirations of many communities to make the transition to a more shared ethos, including more shared housing. We will continue to work with communities, social housing landlords and public agencies to remove further barriers to developing more shared communities.

The other issue was about the role of housing associations. The role and the work of housing associations in Great Britain are, in some ways, much more imaginative and innovative than what we often see with housing associations in Northern Ireland. The area that the Member has identified is simply one of a number of areas where we need to work with the housing associations to help them to develop the scale of the work, the scope of the work and the vision and aspiration that we see with some of the GB housing associations. That is one area that is mentioned in the strategy, but it is only one.

Housing associations in Northern Ireland need to become much more visionary about what they do. There has perhaps been a lack of ambition in the past, and more work needs to be done. We are regulating them much more than was the case in the past, but there is another side to it, and that is helping them to step up to the mark and do more. Even with welfare reform, there is work ongoing between the Government at Westminster and housing associations. There is a need for a sea change in terms of housing associations in Northern Ireland. We are keen to work with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations and the individual associations in trying to do that.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, in the event of an increase in the supply of housing, what economic benefits would be expected to flow from that?

Mr McCausland: One of the main benefits is the building work that is done. There is a tremendous benefit spin-off from house building, in that, of all the forms of construction work, you get the biggest return from construction of

houses. It is a labour-intensive activity. Increasing the number of homes that we build will certainly create jobs for people. A 2009 study by Mike Smith and Dr Mark Bailey from the University of Ulster showed a housing multiplier effect in Northern Ireland of 1.7. That means that, for every 10 jobs created in the construction industry, a further seven jobs will be created.

I remember speaking to some folk in the construction industry some time ago, and they pointed out that you create more additional jobs through house building because there is more need for architects and so on, which you would not get if the money was just put into road construction or whatever. Last year I funded the delivery of over 2,000 social and affordable homes, but that helped us to sustain close to 3,000 jobs in Northern Ireland. I believe that unlocking the potential of the private sector to build the almost 9,000 new homes we need each year would certainly be an even greater benefit to our economy and job creation, as well as helping to create long-term stability in the housing market.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. As the Minister is aware, the private rented sector provides a lot of social housing at the moment. If more use is to be made of the private rented sector, can the Minister ensure that the properties provided are fit for purpose and will meet decent homes standards?

Mr McCausland: I have said on a number of occasions that, if we are to meet the housing need in Northern Ireland, it needs to be across all three sectors — private ownership, private rental and social rental. We have now started down the road of registration of landlords. We have started down the road of dealing with a number of other issues, such as tenancy deposits, and that type of issue that comes up. There are issues that have been raised with me directly by some Members about problems regarding antisocial behaviour. In some ways it is easier to deal with in the social rented sector than in the private rented sector. There is also a danger of shifting it from the social rented sector into the private rented sector — simply displacing it.

I am keen to ensure that, in all of this, we get to the point at which the private rented sector is seen as every bit as attractive an option as any other and is not seen as second rate or as a last resort. People in that sector should get the same standards, protections and benefits as people in other sectors. We have to have equality right across the private and social rented sectors.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the note of some of the themes developed by the Minister in the strategy, including ensuring access to decent affordable housing, meeting housing need and supporting the most vulnerable. However, then I look at welfare reform. Will the Minister elaborate on what his Department has done to look at key issues, especially those affecting the most isolated and most vulnerable, such as under-35s, who may find themselves penalised, and particularly people with mental health problems, who will find themselves increasingly isolated and vulnerable as a consequence of the changes to housing benefit?

Mr McCausland: We had a fairly extensive debate on welfare reform last week. I am committed to continuing the work that we are doing of engaging with the Government

at Westminster, including the Department for Work and Pensions, to secure whatever flexibilities we can for Northern Ireland and to try to tailor the welfare reform package to the particular needs of the Province. That work continues. We are due to meet David Freud. I am going over this afternoon ahead of meeting him tomorrow morning.

As regards the pressing situation with housing benefit, we have increased the amount of money for discretionary housing payments. There are arguments regarding the amount of money that is needed for discretionary housing payments. We have doubled the support available from £1.713 million in 2011-12 to £3.426 million in 2012-13. It will be £6.944 million in 2013-14 and £5.939 million in 2014-15 before falling back to £4.431 million for 2015-16 and 2016-17.

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

The funding is not allocated to specific areas of change, such as the increase in the age threshold for the shared accommodation rate, but it is intended to provide the Housing Executive with enough flexibility to sustain tenancies where additional support is needed in vulnerable cases. I have asked for a change to be made to the legislation that will give Housing Executive tenants access to discretionary housing payments. That is just an example of what we are doing.

I am sure that the Member will agree that, in dealing with all this, the important thing is not to alarm people unnecessarily but to focus on practical measures such as this, which will make a difference and help us to go through this process in a way that minimises difficulty for anyone in the Province.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement, the aims of which I fully support. What plans does he have to proactively target tenants who, through antisocial behaviour, make once very attractive social housing areas much less so?

Mr McCausland: The Member identifies what is a very real problem in many parts of the Province, and that is antisocial behaviour. The strategy focuses on two areas as regards antisocial behaviour. The first is working with social housing landlords to build their capacity to deal with antisocial behaviour more effectively using the statutory powers that are available to them. There is work to be done on that with the Housing Executive and particularly with the housing associations.

The second area is to introduce a form of short, secure tenancy along the lines of the approach used successfully in Scotland. It is important that we learn from good practice elsewhere. If things are working elsewhere in the United Kingdom, or indeed anywhere else, let us learn from them. The idea of the short, secure tenancy is one that has been used successfully in Scotland. It is tested and proven.

The yellow card system, as it is called, will provide a strong message to tenants who act in an antisocial way that their tenancy is at risk unless their behaviour improves, while offering them support to make the improvements required. We intend to move forward on that.

12.30 pm

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for making his statement to the House; its outworkings will set in place structures to

deal with housing over the next 40 years. We need to get it right. Will the Minister assure us that dealing with objective need will be at the heart of any new housing strategy?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member that that will be the case. Meeting objective need will be right at the heart of the strategy. There is no question about that.

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 October 2012.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 October 2012.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. Today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm.

Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The aforementioned statutory rule will, subject to the Assembly's approval, set out the procedure to be followed for the breeder of a future working dog to apply for an exemption from the tail docking ban. Before I go into the detail, I will explain briefly to Members the background to the regulations.

The new Welfare of Animals Act 2011, which the Assembly passed last year, contains powers in section 6 making it an offence to dock a dog's tail unless it is removed by a veterinary surgeon for the purpose of medical treatment or to save the dog's life. The Act makes it an offence to take a dog outside the North of Ireland to have its tail docked, unless it is for medical treatment by a veterinary surgeon. The Act also provides the power to exempt certified working dogs that are not more than five days old from the tail docking ban.

The Act specifies that a dog is a certified working dog if a veterinary surgeon has certified it in accordance with the regulations made by the Department. The veterinary surgeon must also have seen evidence that the dog is likely to be used, as specified in the Act, for work in connection with law enforcement, lawful pest control or the lawful shooting of animals and is of one of the following breeds: a spaniel of any breed or combination of breeds; a terrier of any breed or combination of breeds; any breed commonly used for hunting or any combination of such breed; any breed commonly used for pointing or any combination of such breeds; and any breed commonly used for retrieving or any combination of such breeds. The Act also makes it an offence to fail to identify the dog in line with the regulations before it is eight weeks old.

Tail docking was one of the most contentious issues when the Assembly debated the Welfare of Animals Bill, as it went through the legislative process. However, it is important to remember that we are not here today to reopen the debate on the pros and cons of tail docking. That was decided by the Assembly last year. Today's debate is purely about the procedure to be followed and the evidence that must be produced to a veterinary surgeon to allow a pup of a breed specified in the Act to be certified as a working dog and thus exempted from the tail docking ban. The draft regulations specify the evidence that must be produced by the breeder to a veterinary surgeon and set out the certification and identification process that the veterinary surgeon must follow to certify the pup as a future working dog.

A 12-week public consultation was undertaken with stakeholders last year. Over 690 stakeholders and interested parties were consulted, and the Department received 30 responses. The consultation sought feedback on specific questions on the certification and identification process to determine whether any amendments should be

made to the draft regulations. Overall, the draft regulations were welcomed by stakeholders, and there was significant support for the majority of the proposals in them. In the consultation responses, a number of stakeholders, including the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, expressed their disappointment that an exemption for working dogs had been included in the Act. One stakeholder proposed that a non-veterinarian should be able to dock a pup's tail and questioned the need for the certification process for working dogs. These issues were outside the remit of the consultation, as they were already specified in the parent Act that had been approved by the Assembly. Hence, these views and suggestions have not been reflected in the draft regulations before the House.

A small number of stakeholders, in response to the consultation, questioned the need to present the dam of the pups to the veterinary surgeon at the time of docking the pup's tail. However, the veterinary profession sees this requirement as crucial to allow it to comply with the Act when deciding whether the pup is of a breed specified in the Act. In addition, a small number of stakeholders questioned the need for the pup to be microchipped by the veterinary surgeon and asked why it had to be microchipped at the same veterinary practice at which its tail had been docked. In including these requirements in the regulations, I have tried to close loopholes identified in similar exemption schemes already in place for working dogs in England and Wales. The RSPCA, which has enforced the legislation in England and Wales since 2007, has advised that, in its experience, the pup presented for microchipping is not always the pup that has had its tail docked. It is critical that, in putting in place an exemption for genuine working dogs, we do not open the door to unscrupulous breeders who want to continue the cosmetic docking of their pups. I believe that the certification scheme for working dogs detailed in the regulations will allow the breeders of working dogs of the breeds specified in the Act to continue to have their pups' tails docked while ensuring that cosmetic docking is not legitimised by the back door.

I am pleased to say that the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, as part of its scrutiny role, thoroughly examined the certification process in May and June of this year. Initially, the Committee was concerned not about the certification process but that there might not be a sufficient number of veterinary surgeons in the North of Ireland prepared to dock pups under the exemption for working dogs, given that there is no legal obligation on any veterinary surgeon to dock a pup's tail under the exemption. However, that was not the understanding that my officials had obtained from working with the veterinary profession here to put this robust scheme in place. My officials and the Committee liaised with the veterinary associations in the North of Ireland to clarify the issue. On the basis of information from the two veterinary associations, I am happy to say that the Committee and I are assured that an adequate number of vets will be prepared to dock future working dogs' tails under this exemption. At the Committee meeting on 26 June this year, the Committee indicated that it was content for the regulations to be brought before the Assembly.

My officials have also assured the Committee that there will be a campaign to educate dog breeders and the public on the change in the law on tail docking. I fully support this, and I think that educating the public is critical so that

cosmetic docking becomes socially unacceptable and people will not want to buy docked pups. To allow time for this campaign, I intend to delay the commencement of the new regulations until 1 January 2013. In addition, my officials will work with the veterinary profession to help it to understand the certification process and both its and breeders' responsibilities under the exemption for working dogs.

Investigations of any breaches of the new regulations will be undertaken by councils' animal welfare officers as part of their enforcement responsibilities for non-farmed animals under the Welfare of Animals Act. My officials have been in regular contact with the five lead councils for animal welfare and will continue to work with them in the run-up to the commencement of the regulations so that they will be ready to enforce any breaches of the ban on tail docking. I am grateful to the Chair and members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for their support for the regulations, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The motion seeks to affirm the Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. The statutory rule will commence the final provision of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. When the Act was commenced on 11 July 2011, the majority of its provisions were also commenced, and further parts were brought into law on 2 April 2012. That left one important provision from section 6 on the docking of working dogs' tails. When commenced, it will ban the tail docking of dogs unless the whole or part of a dog's tail is removed by a veterinary surgeon for the purpose of medical treatment or to save the dog's life when it is not practical to have the whole or part of the tail removed by a vet. The rule, however, provides for an exemption for certified working dogs that permits tail docking for working dogs such as spaniel, terrier or hunt, point and retrieve breeds involved in law enforcement, lawful pest control or the lawful shooting of animals.

As part of the Committee's scrutiny process of the legislation, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development first presented the pre-consultation to the Committee at its meeting on 28 June 2011. The regulation returned to Committee at SL1 stage on 8 May 2012, at which stage the Committee had no issues with the merits of the policy. It was considered again on three further occasions at SR stage, when issues with the certification of a working dog by a vet caused some concern and prompted the Committee to seek clarification from the Department.

Several vets contacted Committee members advising that they had concerns with the docking of tails for certified working dogs. The parent Act sets out specific elements that a vet must certify a dog as a working dog before it is five days old. The responsibility to provide evidence that the dog meets the requirements of the regulations is on the owner. However, vets raised concerns about the next step in the process, which involves microchipping. The pup must be presented to the same vet before it is eight weeks old to confirm that it is the same pup that had its tail docked seven weeks earlier. Once this is confirmed, the pup will be microchipped. The role of the vet at that stage is to certify that they are microchipping a dog that the

owner claims is the same dog that was docked previously. The owner, not the vet, does the certification.

The exemption was subject to a 12-week consultation period. The Department advised that, whilst the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is opposed to the docking of dogs' tails, it acknowledges that some of its members may choose to dock tails within the proposed legal framework. Under both the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 and the proposed regulations, there will be no legal obligation on any vet to dock a dog's tail. Therefore, it will be an ethical decision for the individual vet to make.

Departmental officials met representatives of VetNI and the Committee in an attempt to resolve the issues with the regulations. The Department advised that it has been working closely with councils and enforcement officers to educate them about the forthcoming regulations. That has given some assurance to vets that there will be enough education for dog owners about the requirements of the new legislation. Committee members were content with the explanation provided by departmental officials and commend them for their active intervention with the vets to resolve the issue.

The final issue of concern to the Committee was about some form of public information. The Committee felt that it was vital that the general public were made aware of the new law. We are glad to note that the Department agreed with this position and initially agreed to delay commencement to allow it to inform the public and veterinary professionals. The Minister confirmed that today. For the record, the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee agreed at its meeting on 26 June 2012 that the statutory rule should be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: As Ulster Unionist Party agriculture spokesperson, I welcome the fact that the regulations have reached the Floor of the House. The issue has been the subject of lively debate since 2009, and concerted pressure from Committee members in the previous and current mandate, alongside consultation responses, has resulted in the exemption in the Bill for working dogs. Some in the agriculture community may well ask why so much time has been devoted to one issue. However, I acknowledge the excellent debate in the House last week on the farming crisis and that we are focusing on matters of greater importance to farmers, the wider agriculture industry and rural communities.

The exemption for working dogs will avoid unnecessary suffering and improve their welfare throughout their working life. If an adult working dog sustains an injury to its tail, amputation is a major act of veterinary surgery. It requires anaesthetic and an extended period of recovery, all of which could simply be prevented shortly after birth by a small procedure. However, it was no small procedure to bring the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to the position that it is in today. It has been forced into an about-turn on its initial position of a complete ban on tail docking.

12.45 pm

During the previous mandate, in February 2011, Members debated the Consideration Stage of the Bill. The Minister's predecessor spoke of the unnecessary suffering and acute pain that is caused by tail docking and said that

she wanted to impose a complete ban. In response, the Committee highlighted the total reluctance of the Department to listen to alternative views, its dismissal of the evidence and its refusal to listen to the voice of the rural community. The result is evident in the final regulations that are before us, proposals in which the voice of the rural community of Northern Ireland is acknowledged.

Committee members have been told that, following five years of a similar tail docking exemption in England and Wales, the legislation there is operating relatively well. Perhaps in her response, the Minister will tell the House whether the number of illegal tail docking incidents has reduced in those jurisdictions as a result. We would all welcome that occurring in Northern Ireland.

Now that the proposals have reached their final form, the Department, from today, has a duty to educate the public. It is vital that everyone knows their roles and responsibilities. Dog owners and breeders will need to know exactly how the new regulations will affect them. It is therefore vital that the Department increases awareness of the documentation required to avoid confusion or delays when people arrive at the vet.

I welcome the agreement between DARD officials and the Dogs Trust to work together to start the process of informing vets and the public of the changes to the legislation. The Dogs Trust does fantastic work increasing public awareness of changes in regulations, and I commend it for its involvement in helping people to understand the changes that were brought in last year on the microchipping of dogs.

I also welcome the assurances that have been given by the Department to the Committee that it will work directly with vets. It must give vets the right level of advice and guidance to make sure that they are fully aware of their role under the new legislation. It is critical that vets do not find the new regulations overly complicated or bureaucratic. We certainly do not want to make a decision that could, in any way, lead to an increase in illegal tail docking. The legislation leaves it as an ethical decision for a vet whether or not to dock a working dog's tail. I hope the Department recognises that, if a significant number of vets decide not to make such decisions, it could trigger an increase in illegal tail docking, which presents a greater risk to the welfare of pups. The Department must work alongside vets to ensure that that does not happen.

I also urge the Department not to instigate a witch-hunt against the owners of dogs that have had their tail docked. We must recognise that, for the next 10 to 15 years, there will be owners of dogs whose tails have been docked, quite legitimately and legally, under the present provisions. I would welcome the Minister's assurances that the Department will not stigmatise those owners.

We welcome the proposals before the House, and I would further welcome the Minister's assurances on the points that I have raised.

Mr Byrne: As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and spokesperson for my party, I support and welcome the motion on the docking of working dogs' tails. The consultation between the Committee and stakeholders has meant that we have better legislation before us, and that will be more beneficial in the long term.

I ask the Minister to make sure that the Department issues clear guidelines to dog owners, the dog wardens of district councils and animal welfare officers to make sure that there is no ambiguity. Vets were very concerned that they were almost being expected to dock tails at the request of owners. However, the onus is on the owner to ensure, certify and guarantee that the animal will be used as a working dog if the exemption is to be obtained. I support the motion, and I hope that the Minister can give those guidelines to the necessary stakeholders.

Mr McCarthy: I agree with the Chairman and other members of the Committee on this very important issue. I express my appreciation to the officers and staff who serviced the Committee and continue to work with us. I also thank the people and organisations and the staff from the Department who came to the Committee to make representation and give us advice.

The issue has provoked many worries and concerns, and, as a Committee, we were sympathetic. However, decisions have to be made, and I hope that the compromise that is arrived at will serve the community as we move forward. Let us remind ourselves that a dog is supposed to be and always has been a man's and a woman's best friend. The least that we, as humans, can do is ensure that those animals are well treated at all times.

I welcome the Minister's statement and our intention to do what is necessary to inform and educate everyone involved in this important topic. I recall representations from the dog-showing fraternity. Its concerns were genuine, and it suggested to the Committee that revenue could be lost to our economy if restrictions were imposed. Only time will tell whether that has been the case.

The exemption for working dogs is welcome. I sincerely hope that no attempt will be made by anyone to undermine the regulations. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who spoke, particularly the Committee Chair, for their comments. I will pick up briefly on a few of the points that were raised. I think that everybody recognises that we need a campaign of information and education for everybody, and that is why we have delayed the implementation until January so that we can have the time that we need to do that.

Jo-Anne Dobson talked about figures in other areas, particularly Britain, where legislation has been in place before now. No figures are available, so I cannot give her any details from Britain. She talked about a witch-hunt of people who had their pup's tail docked previously. Obviously, that will not be the case. Any dog that was docked before 1 January 2013 will have been done by a vet under the current situation. So, I hope that that assures Members.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Education Bill: Second Stage

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Education Bill [NIA 14/11-15] be agreed.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus go raibh maith agaibh, a Chomhairle. Ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh.

I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on the Education Bill. It is surely one of the most important Bills to come before the Assembly, not just in this session but in this mandate. This day has been a long time coming. The need for reform was recognised as far back as 2002. In my view, education is too important to wait any longer, and the Bill sets out the overall aim of education, which is:

“to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual and physical development of children and young persons ... and ... of the community at large”.

To put it more simply, education determines the future for individuals and society. It can shape and guide our young people's development and life chances, build strong, cohesive communities and drive and fuel the economy. That means having a clear vision of a modern, fit-for-purpose education system that delivers educational attainment and the fulfilment of potential. Good schools are the key to delivering that vision, and we already know what good schools look like. They have strong, effective leadership from their board of governors and senior management team; they have a strong sense of belonging to the communities that they serve; they each have an ethos that pupils, parents, staff and governors support; and they have the autonomy and the support that they need to manage their day-to-day affairs. I wish every school to be like that. To achieve that, we need better planning of the education estate and delivery of the curriculum, better support services for schools and freedom for school leaders to manage and innovate, with clear accountability for outcomes.

If we are serious about reform, we need to compare our system against the best and constantly challenge it to do better. That means taking as broad a view as possible beyond these islands. For example, we know that good teaching is the key to raising standards. We also know that the success of STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and maths — is the key to rebuilding the economy. If we want to benchmark against the best, we must look at China, which leads the world in the teaching of science. That is the scale of our challenge.

A 40-year-old model of education simply cannot deliver a new vision, but let me make it clear that it is the system that is wrong, not the people within it. I pay tribute to the thousands of people who have served with dedication and distinction as officers and employees of the various organisations, often in very difficult circumstances. They deserve our recognition and thanks for all that they have striven to achieve over the past 40 years. Now, however, we are asking them to do the job with the wrong tools, and they deserve better than that.

The board system is ageing. The direct rule model is no longer fit for purpose. We, as elected representatives in the House, have an opportunity to replace it with our own model — a model to meet the needs of our communities,

our children and young people and our economy. We must seize that opportunity.

The Bill reflects the heads of agreement published by the First Minister and deputy First Minister last November. At the centre of the Bill is the creation of ESA, a new and different type of organisation with a new and different role. Its purpose will be to improve education outcomes, not to run schools. ESA will have four main functions. First, it will plan the education estate. It will consult and involve stakeholders, but it will be the only body with a statutory education planning function. Secondly, ESA will be the employing authority. Its role will focus on system-wide workforce planning and development. Boards of governors will take all employment decisions in their school. Thirdly, ESA will promote the raising of standards as a supporting and critical friend. Fourthly, ESA will support professional development. It will provide or procure support and development services for schools and support schools to provide services themselves. ESA will take on the functions of the bodies it will replace, such as school maintenance, school library and meal services, transport and youth services.

The Bill draws heavily on the two Bills brought before and during the previous Assembly mandate. However, importantly, it also sets out fresh thinking, particularly in the matters that were of greatest concern to stakeholders. Those include the membership of ESA and the autonomy of schools. Members will be glad to know that ESA will not be run by bureaucrats. The membership provisions are based on local democratic accountability. They also preserve the established rights of the churches to take part in the governance of education. That will ensure that we have responsible and accountable service delivery.

In relation to employment provisions, my aim is to deliver two key benefits: a single employing authority to provide better workforce and planning; and guaranteed autonomy for all boards to take employment decisions in their school. The Bill delivers that. Members will know that many of the concerns of stakeholders related to employment. I have taken those concerns on board, and the provisions before you are very different to those in the previous Bill. In particular, there is a range of safeguards in the Bill, including an independent tribunal to rule on disputes between schools and ESA. That will provide the necessary confidence for schools that ESA will concentrate on its proper role and leave schools to get on with their role.

The Bill also seeks to strengthen and underpin child protection arrangements in education and will ensure consistency and clarity of roles and responsibilities across the entire education sector. It will also provide for strong powers to intervene, where necessary, to protect children.

Further provisions will place the funding of early years services on a formal statutory footing for the first time.

Before concluding, let me acknowledge that some stakeholders remain wary of or opposed to the Bill. No doubt, we will hear some of their concerns voiced by Members today, rightly so. Let me say this to those stakeholders and Members: the Bill threatens no one. It offers accountable autonomy to all schools, not just a few. It does not change or detract from the ethos, identity or values of any school. It does, however, challenge schools to improve, to put the needs of learners before the needs

of the institution and to share and work in partnership for the greater good of all our young people.

Our education system needs this Bill. It needs clear leadership and direction from the Assembly. It needs modern, fit-for-purpose arrangements that aim to make every school a good school and support every learner to achieve his or her full potential. It needs arrangements where schools have autonomy and responsibility, where success is celebrated and underperformance is challenged, where the leadership of governors and principals is supported and where high quality teaching is promoted. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

1.00 pm

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): At the outset, I declare an interest, as a member of the boards of governors of Ballymoney High School and the integrated Ballymoney Model Primary School. I will contribute to the Second Stage debate first as Committee Chair, then as the DUP's spokesperson on education.

There is a sense almost of *déjà vu* for some of us in the House. That feeling comes as a result of having had an Education Bill in the previous mandate, as you will recall. In fact, we need to be reminded that we almost had two Education Bills. In the previous arrangements, there would have been two Bills. The first Bill had a Second Stage and even a Committee Stage. Although the final outcome was not in any way satisfactory for anyone, I think it is important to remember that a great deal of very good scrutiny work was done by the previous Education Committee. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee staff, the departmental officials and the members of that previous Committee for their work, which is still available for us today.

The legislation before us today is a different Bill. The question is: how different is it? The Committee, in its initial consideration of the relevant clauses and schedules, has considered a number of key differences. At this stage, I again thank the Department for making available to us, on Wednesday past, one of its officials, Mr Chris Stewart. He came with the Committee on its visit to Omagh to spend some time with us on the introduction of the Bill as it progresses through its Second Stage. As part of the exploration of the principles underpinning the Education Bill, I want to take a few minutes to explore those differences. I am sure Members will be glad to know that it will be a few minutes, as opposed to the long time we spent in this House last week. However, one should not rule out being here for a considerable length of time this evening.

Let us begin with the heads of agreement, which are referred to in a number of places in the Bill. The heads of agreement document promises the setting up of the Education and Skills Authority. It needs to be remembered that it took some considerable time to get to the point where there was an agreement that, in this mandate, there would be movement on the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority.

The document spells out the appointment arrangements for the ESA board, ensuring political and community representation. It sets out the sectoral support bodies that will be established. It indicates that there will be no change in school ownership that negatively affects the role of the

boards of governors of schools. The heads of agreement document indicates that there will be no change to the way in which boards of governors are appointed. Furthermore, the current arrangements under which boards of governors hire and fire their staff will be unchanged. Additionally, there is to be no transfer, secondment or redeployment of teachers without the consent of schools and boards of governors. It should be remembered that, in the previous Bill, there was a proposal for what were to be called community governors. Everybody had all sorts of ideas, and there were different opinions as to what was going to define "community". Was it going to be the geographical community? Was it going to be the educational community? Was it to be some other definition of community? However, the term "community governor" is no longer there.

The Committee understands that the current drafting of the Bill includes a rather inelegant linkage to the heads of agreement document. The Committee expects, following the passage of Second Stage, that those drafting issues will be addressed by the Department, probably through amendments. I welcome the fact that it was very clear from the presentation that was made to the Committee on Wednesday that that is the case. So, we in the Education Committee will take a very close look and have a very close scrutiny role in regard to how that particular element proceeds. Following the Second Stage, further thought will be given to whether the Bill properly reflects the promises in the heads of agreement and, indeed, to whether further checks and balances are required by ESA. That will also be an integral part of the work that we will carry out.

I also want to draw attention to the issue of the independent tribunal. It is an important additional feature of this legislation. Let me pause there for one moment and pose the following question: why do we feel that it is necessary? The sad reality is that it is felt to be necessary because of the absence of one thing. It reflects its way through legislation in this House in many shapes and forms, and it is particularly relevant in education. It is the word "trust". I have no doubt that the Tories do not trust the Lib Dems, and nobody trusts Labour. You can go through all the political connotations of any Parliament, and you will probably find that the word "trust" and the exercise of trust are in low demand. However, when it comes to education, particularly in a Northern Ireland context, it is bad enough having to trust your political opponents, but it is equally as challenging, if not more challenging — I mean no disrespect to civil servants working in education — to trust the system. The system sometimes does not endear itself to being trusted. That goes right across educational provision and the sectors that are provided for. So, unfortunately, the tribunal is necessary to ensure that the trust can be built upon and that there is some mechanism to ensure that there is neither political interference nor interference from the Department, for whatever reason or for whatever purpose it is intended.

The tribunal will be appointed by the Department of Education, but the relevant regulations will be made by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The tribunal will rule on disputes relating to employment schemes and schemes of management. That is intended as a check on the authority of ESA in respect of its dealings with boards of governors and other submitting authorities. The Committee has noted the inclusion of the relevant clauses and, I think, will spend quite some

time reviewing those provisions and those relating to employment schemes in general.

As I said, the heads of agreement and the independent tribunal are intended to provide reassurance and, in the case of the latter, make up part of an amended regulatory framework that will support what is described as a more delegated model for schools in Northern Ireland. Assuming the successful passage of the Bill at Second Stage, the Committee will explore and seek to verify, and, indeed, challenge the assumptions that underpin those checks and balances and the revised regulatory framework.

Let me deal now with some key parts of the Bill. The Education Bill will see ESA replacing a number of organisations, including the five education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). It is hoped that that will deliver a significant financial saving and reduce greatly the bureaucracy and inconsistency of approach evident across those organisations.

I will pause at this point and say that it is only right and proper that we place on record our appreciation and thanks to those who, through many difficult and challenging years in our education and library boards, have provided a service to our educational family. It has not been easy. They have gone through a multiplicity of changes. They have had various direct rule Ministers and initiatives. It is fair to say that we need to remember where ESA came from. I am glad that ESA did not have its genesis in Connolly House. I am glad that ESA was not created in the normal political structures but had its genesis in the Department of Education.

We all can recall the damning report from the House of Commons Select Committee on the way in which the Department had squandered or had not spent appropriately £40 million in regard to numeracy and literacy. At that stage, back in the early 1990s, there was a desire to have a more streamlined approach to the delivery of education. So the education and library boards are not averse to change and to doing something differently. It is only right, therefore, that we place on record our appreciation for what they have done. However, it is also right to say that we have not always agreed with the decisions of the education and library boards. I am sure that many Members across the Chamber have, in their constituency role, challenged their relevant education and library board and had exchanges with them about issues on which they clearly disagreed.

I note in clause 2 that ESA has a duty to encourage and facilitate:

“the development of education provided in an Irish speaking school.”

The Department appeared to advise the Committee that that provision would bring the Irish-medium sector more into line with the legal status of the integrated sector. I expect that the Committee will wish to explore that matter further, and you will not be surprised to hear that I, as a DUP MLA, want to return to it in a few moments.

I turn now to another key feature of the Bill: the employment schemes. As the House is aware, the Bill will make ESA the employing authority for all teachers in all grant-aided schools in all sectors. As I indicated, we are given to understand that boards of governors will continue to

employ and dismiss teachers as they have previously done. It is also understood that ESA as the employing authority will simply look after workforce planning.

The Department advised that it expected there to be a saving for voluntary and grant-maintained integrated schools under the new employment arrangements. Those schools will, with ESA as their employing authority, no longer have to meet premises insurance costs from their delegated budget. The Committee will explore the extent and importance of those savings during the anticipated Committee Stage. That issue was raised recently, even before the introduction of ESA, around some of the practical problems that some of our voluntary grammars are having as regards workplace issues, especially if they have students in a health setting. I am well aware that my colleague, the Health Minister, has been doing some work in the past number of days to help address that. That is another element of the Bill for which detailed scrutiny will be key over the next number of weeks and months.

I think that we all remember being told that there would be savings in the region of £20 million over the period. However, when we look at the savings delivery plans and at the schemes in place for the education and library boards, we can conclude that in the region of £15 million has already been taken out of the budget. In one way, I am glad, but in another way, I am confused, because last Wednesday, the Committee was told that the estimated savings are now in the region of £40 million. If that is the case, we want to find out where that additional saving will come from and how it will be broken down. So clearly there are challenges when it comes to budgets.

Let me say something about budgets, and I would appreciate it if the Minister would make an intervention on this point. In Northern Ireland, there has always been a debate about what is known as the delegated budget — the amount of money that goes to front line services. I appreciate that we are not comparing like with like in our educational structures as opposed to those of our counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom, particularly in England, where the local authorities have power and resources. However, depending on whose sets of figures you listen to, the delegated budget — the amount of money that goes directly to front line services in education — is somewhere in excess of 65% to 75%.

1.15 pm

I can assure you that the issue is extremely difficult. We have Mr McCrea, a member of the previous Committee, here. He will recall that we had long discussions around the previous Bill of trying to determine the delegated budget for education. Is it 50%? Is it 55%? Again, depending on what figures you look at, it ranges anywhere between 45% and 55%. The question is this: will we be able to guarantee that, as a result of the establishment of ESA, schools will have more financial resource to be able to deliver education in their area?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member answered his own question in many senses: it depends on whose figures you wish to listen to. This somewhat reminds me of a debate in the last mandate when the Libraries Bill was being debated and my colleague Barry McElduff stood up and made available figures from England. The responsibility lay with Mr Poots at the time, as Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) who refuted those figures, and Mr

McElduff said he was aware of that but those statistics did not suit his argument.

That is the territory we are in at this time. The budgetary process is currently open and transparent. ESA will not change anything with regard to the budgetary process. The debate about how much money should be delegated to schools will, I fear, continue.

Mr Storey: I am not sure whether I am any the wiser after that response. It reminds me of Groucho Marx:

"Those are my principles, and if you don't like them ... well, I have others."

We do need to have —

Mr McNarry: I thank the Chairman very much for giving way. We all share his confusion. In the area of budgets, will he tell the House, as Chairman of the Committee, what he sees is deliverable to protect the future of grammar schools as he and I know them today?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his question. This has been a difficult issue for the Committee, for previous Committees and, certainly, for me personally. We need to ensure that, whatever sector comes to make its point to you, you do it in a way that tries to reflect the overall provision that we have in our educational system.

The Member will be well aware that this party — my party — has done what we did at St Andrews, specifically around the issue of grammar schools. We have listened to the argument around the voluntary principle. I have no doubt that we will revisit that issue. A legal document, in the region of 10 or 11 pages, that was made available to us was as conclusive as the answer from the Education Minister a few moments ago about how to break down the definition between the employing authority and the employer. Not having any legal background, I do not want to tread too far into that territory other than to say that their heads of agreement was an attempt to ensure that the concerns, particularly among voluntary grammars, about the voluntary principle were enshrined in legislation in such a way that it did not take away from them the autonomy, responsibility or place they have had but recognised that we were still moving to a place where there would be the establishment of a single employing authority.

In direct answer to the Member, I believe that there will be no change to that current arrangement and system other than that the employer will be ESA. The Committee needs to take time to be clear in members' minds that that is the case and to have every possible assurance that we are not moving to a situation in which this Bill will be used for some other purpose, reason or means.

I place on record our appreciation to the Member for the contribution that he made while a member of the Education Committee. I have no doubt that his presence here today is an indication that this is an issue that he has a concern about and an interest in. I look forward to working with him in his new role, with his new political hat on, and I assure him that we will endeavour to be of whatever help we can in trying to answer his queries and questions about the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the —

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Chairman for giving way. He talked very eloquently about the underlying principle of the voluntary grammar school and about the fact that

there are worries in that sector that the Bill may be used for other, nefarious purposes. I wonder whether he thinks that it would be helpful if, in some form in the legislation, we had an explicit recognition of the voluntary grammar principle extended to all schools. The trouble with the Bill, I suspect, is that you have to read it very closely and you are not absolutely certain what everything means. It would go a long way to reassuring people if we could find some way for the Bill to be absolutely clear and explicit in order to protect those schools, which are the foundation of our society.

Mr Storey: I thank Mr McCrea for that. That is where we want to get to, and that is why I believe that the issue that I raised at the start about schedule 2 and the linkage between the Bill and the heads of agreement needs to be clear. It should have been clearer before we got to this stage. However, having got to this stage, the work that we have ahead of us with your party colleagues on the Education Committee is to ensure that recognition is reflected in a way in which we understand.

That will not be an easy task, because it seems that there will always be a fundamental difference between what people believe they have had and what they believe will be the new structures in place. That is why this Bill is different from the previous Bill. Remember that regulations to deal with the employment structures will now be brought to the House, which was not going to be the case previously. That should give us the assurance that the Bill will not be used for any other purpose. Unfortunately, however, when you are dealing with the party that is responsible for bringing the Bill to the House or with the Department of Education, one can never be sure that that is exactly how it is, but the duty and role that has been vested in the Committees is to ensure that, when it comes to the minutiae and the detail, we are as clear as we possibly can be and that we have as many checks and balances as possible in place to ensure that those who have concerns have them mitigated.

Mr Allister: Has the Member any concern that the Trojan Horse for moving matters towards the destruction of the voluntary grammar schools might well be the area-planning powers now in the Bill? The assessment of the need for the number of schools in any area could well be the vehicle used to do that, as could ESA seeking to interfere with the grades at which grammar schools can accept pupils. Therefore, should the Member not be particularly concerned that one of the greatest threats to grammar schools in the Bill is the introduction of area-planning powers?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is the chair of the board of governors in a school in our constituency, so I am aware of the contribution that he makes to the education debate. I share his concern, and not only on area planning. We need to look at every element of the Bill, and I will come to the inspectorate later on. It will raise more concerns for me, although I share concerns about the area planning process.

I will try to answer this in another way, through why the Bill was brought into existence. The fundamental issue for some people is that the Department of Education set the policy and paid the money but never had any control. In some regards, that has been a good thing. Some schools, because of the power that they have had, have been able to set out their stall, employ their staff and do things in the

way in which they have done without it being detrimental to education. In fact, it clearly indicates that, as a result of that formula, they have benefited and have delivered a very good education. I want to see —

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Chairman of the Education Committee recognised that Mr Allister was the chair of a board of governors in a particular constituency. In this debate, is it not essential that Members who contribute declare their interests in respect of being a chair or otherwise of a board of governors in a particular sector?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is for Members to judge whether they should declare.

Mr Storey: If the Member had been here at the start, he would have known that I declared an interest; but obviously he had more important business and was somewhere else. I take his point, but it was yet another attempt to try to cause a diversion.

Let us get back to the point that I was going to make, which is about trying to ensure that the position that some schools have regarding autonomy is greater exercised by those that wish to have that autonomy. For example, in the controlled sector, we have controlled grammars. I have spent a considerable length of time having discussions with the controlled sector, the voluntary sector and the controlled grammars. I have met the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector. I doubt that there is any element of the education system that I have not met over the past three years. Some schools think that this will be good for them, but others believe that it would be better to retain the right to exercise that power rather than have some other organisation use it on their behalf.

The Department advised that the new approach to the employment relationship would bring — and I hope that this confirms the point that I was trying to make — other benefits to controlled schools. I will talk about controlled schools in a moment or two. It is understood that the Bill will provide those schools with greater autonomy; it will allow them to appoint their own principals, which they can do currently only with the agreement of the education and library board.

A school in my constituency has tried on three occasions in the past few months to appoint a principal and has not been able to do so. I asked the North Eastern Education and Library Board serious questions about why that is the case. I have a serious issue. I think that other Members will concur that, although there has been merit in the teacher appointments committee and the way in which it has delivered over the years, there are other elements in the process that we need to question seriously. I trust that the way outlined in the Bill will be beneficial to controlled schools. However, we have a challenge to test and scrutinise to ensure that this will be the case. That is why I am looking forward to hearing from the public.

To date, this debate has been carried out virtually — not exclusively — behind closed doors, with one or two salvos being fired occasionally by different interest groups on a number of issues, depending on the latest rumour or issue that they think that may or may not have been raised.

We now have a Bill in front of us on which there will be public scrutiny over the next number of weeks. All those organisations will have the right and opportunity to raise

with the Committee issues that are of concern to them. I know that the Deputy Chair and other Committee members share the view that that is necessary.

1.30 pm

The Committee noted with great interest the prospect of greater delegation and responsibility for schools. I expect that, in determining their final views, Committee members will spend a long time considering the merits of employment schemes and the sometimes vexed issue of who exactly is the employer or, indeed, the employing authority — a very important issue.

The Bill indicates that ESA will consult, as appropriate, with sectoral bodies that appear to the Department or ESA to represent the schools of that educational sector. The Committee understands that the sectoral bodies will not be established by statute but there will be a statutory requirement for ESA to consult them. It also understands that the sectoral bodies will be funded by the Department and that all sectors will be represented. I will come back to that issue in a moment or two, particularly with regard to the controlled sector. The Committee welcomes fair and equitable representation by sectoral bodies, and it notes with interest the working group that is to be established with regard to the controlled sector. While generally welcoming the relevant clauses, I think Members will want to be assured that representation is not in any way distorted and that the sectoral bodies are free to express the views of the schools they represent.

As mentioned by Mr Allister, the Bill will make ESA the area planning authority for schools in Northern Ireland. The Committee recently spent some time considering the operation of the area planning process. I do not intend to discuss that at length at this time. It is sufficient to say that the majority of Committee members are most unimpressed by the area planning and viability audit process that has been exercised to date. Look at the way in which the viability audits and the area planning were constructed and delivered. I know that this refers to my Deputy Chair's constituency, but I still have not received a satisfactory answer from the Department or the North Eastern Education and Library Board about why, during a consultation process, the status of a particular school — I refer to Parkhall — was changed from a school that caters for 11- to 19-year-olds to one that caters for 11- to 16-year-olds. So the area plans and the consultation process were not set in stone to the degree that some would try to tell us they were. We have issues with the current process, and, if we have issues now, I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we will have issues with the area planning that is outlined in the Bill. Clause 27 requires an adequate opportunity for persons to make representations to ESA on revisions to area plans. Given its recent experience, I expect that the Committee will wish to deliberate on exactly what will constitute an adequate opportunity.

The Bill includes what appears to be a much revised inspection regime for schools, including new powers for the Education and Training Inspectorate to remove documents and materials. The Department has advised that that is in line with powers currently available to Ofsted. I expect that I will have a bit more to say about that when I speak as a private Member. I assure the House that the Committee will scrutinise that section of the Bill thoroughly to ensure that it is satisfied that the issues of

appropriateness and proportionality are at the centre of the proposals.

The Department characterises the Bill as giving an enhanced level of delegation to schools, while balancing that with a stronger regulatory regime.

I also expect that, in addition to the clause-by-clause analysis, the Committee will wish to give some thought to the Bill's overall balance. Members will come to this welcoming the fact that more delegation will be given to schools, and they will see that as a reward for our hard-working school principals and staff. It is only right that, as a matter of courtesy and fact, we put on record our appreciation to the many people who work in our education system. Despite all that is thrown at them and despite all the issues that they have to deal with, including more legislation coming down the track, their fortitude and resilience mean that they continue to deliver education to our children and young people on a daily basis in a way that, in many respects, is exemplary. They need to be commended for that.

The Committee will want to be sure that the Education and Skills Authority will live up to its billing as an efficient and effective replacement for existing organisations. That is a huge challenge, and all eyes will clearly be on those who will have responsibilities as and when the organisation comes into existence. To make that happen, those people will need to be very focused to ensure that they work in a way that reflects fairness and equity in educational administration and in how resources are allocated.

I also note that the Bill amends the quite large body of existing education orders. The Committee will want to explore exactly what differences the Bill will make to that substantial body of legislation. I understand that there are around 11 subordinate pieces of legislation. At some stage, as was indicated to the Committee on Wednesday, I think, the Department may want to consider a programme or process that brings all that legislation together. I assure Members that that is a piece of work that none of us looks forward to seeing. However, at some stage, it may be necessary to undertake it.

The Education Bill is yet another cause for concern for many in the education sector, including, as I said, our principals, teachers, boards of governors and others. Assuming the Bill's successful passage today, the Committee will gladly take evidence from those groups. Committee members have agreed to clear our forward work programme and to set aside as much time as we need for sober reflection and detailed scrutiny of this important legislation. However, that does not mean that we will take our eyes off the ball on any of the other ongoing issues. There are so many things going on with education that you would need eyes in the back of your head as well as in the front to ensure that you did not miss anything.

The majority of Committee members are just about content to allow the Bill to go to Committee Stage, albeit with some reservations and issues that they believe will have to be further explained and ironed out and amendments that will have to be agreed. I believe that the Committee feels that the Bill includes new checks and balances that are sufficiently different from the previous legislation to warrant further scrutiny and possible amendment at Committee Stage.

I hope that, in responding today, the Minister will provide what reassurances he can to Members on the issues that will be raised in the Second Stage debate. I hope that he can dispel any misunderstandings and reduce any unnecessary concerns about the Bill. I am sure that he will also take the opportunity to undertake to be very flexible in any future discussions with the Committee, as he has done to date. I place on record our appreciation of his help in that regard.

I will now comment as a Member of the House, as the DUP spokesperson on education and as an MLA for North Antrim. I want to address certain aspects of the Bill that continue to give concern not just to my party but to those who want to ensure that the issues will be properly dealt with during Committee Stage. The Committee Stage is not just a process. It will not just be looked upon as something that we have to do. As I have said repeatedly, if the House is to continue to ensure that it has the confidence of the community that we seek to serve, one of the places in which that is best demonstrated is in the huge amount of work that is done in our Committees and in the huge amount of effort that is put in by our Committee staff and by all associated with the Committee process to ensure that there is proper, due regard and scrutiny of whatever legislation or policy comes before them.

As a party, we strenuously opposed the previous incarnations of the ESA Bill, in that it was a direct attack, we said at that stage, on the controlled sector. This sector was already under pressure in that, unlike other sectors, it had no representative body to speak on its behalf. Its teachers were at a disadvantage in seeking employment across all schools, an issue accepted by the Equality Commission as being in need of redress. It appeared to this party that the sector was often at a disadvantage in the sharing of resources, whether capital or recurrent. That was particularly true in the most disadvantaged unionist wards and in the problems around Protestant working-class boys' educational underachievement, which is not unrelated to the situation.

As someone who was educated in the controlled sector, I stand here and say that, since becoming my party's spokesperson, I have endeavoured to ensure that we did not just continue giving the controlled sector platitudes and acknowledgement that it was there but understood the real needs that existed in some of its schools. I remember coming to the House when there was a discussion about trying to take the TRC members off boards of governors, in response to which Members in the previous mandate jumped up and said, rightly, that it was awful, terrible. Some of those Members seemed to disappear when it came to rolling up their sleeves, getting involved and having discussions with the TRC. Indeed, I recall one Member saying that the way in which the controlled sector was being denigrated and was not being represented fairly was awful. I then made some enquiries and discovered that the same Member had not even had any discussion with the TRC, the organisation that represents the Protestant churches' interest in education.

Let me say that the controlled sector and the legislative rights that the controlled sector received in 1940, under Lord Londonderry, are rights that we were very clear would not be given up. They were rights that were not going to be negotiated away. Remember that the efforts of the previous Minister and mandate were to have an

ESA board made up, in the majority, of councillors that would have taken away the legislative right and legal place of the transferors. I am glad that we have secured their position. I understand that the TRC will issue a statement later today on the Bill's Second Stage. However, it does us well to remind ourselves what it said — indeed, what other sectors said — on the establishment of the heads of agreement. In November of last year, the TRC said:

"In particular the Transferors welcome the fact that their existing legal rights have been both acknowledged and protected. This, alongside the establishment for the first time of a sectoral support body for controlled schools, to mirror a similar body for maintained schools, will provide a firm and equitable basis to move forward in dealing with so many of the educational challenges that lie ahead."

So, that is an issue that we need to be very clear and focused on in the Bill. We welcome the establishment of the controlled sector body, and I pay tribute to the work that has been done to date.

I know that there are those who will say, "Forty years later, here you come. It is only tokenism; it is limited; it is not statutory", and there will all the negatives around it. I say to those Members: go and talk to the TRC. Go and talk to the bodies that have a legal responsibility on the boards of governors of controlled schools and schools that transferred and ask them what they think of it. Ask them whether they believe that they have been given something of merit and worth. I welcome the fact that the first meeting of that body has taken place.

1.45 pm

It is regrettable that a direct rule Administration established CCMS back in the late '80s and gave it the position that it had. It is not that I have any issue with giving sectors sectoral support or a body that represents their cause, but I do have an issue when I look at the history of CCMS, particularly the issue that was raised about area planning. The maintained sector is at an advantage today in area planning over the controlled sector and some others, because, for the last number of years, it has been able to use money that was given to it to have staff employed in area planning to look at their schools, amalgamate, rationalise and do all that they have done. It is for those reasons that the establishment of a body for the controlled sector is to be welcomed. It is an important beginning, and we should not underestimate it. However, we will be vigilant in ensuring that the body is truly reflective of the sector it serves and has an important role in developing a sector that, for too long, has been neglected by the Department. Successful passage of the Bill and successful establishment of the body are — to use that well-worn phrase — inextricably linked.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's comments about the protections that are in place for the Protestant churches. Does he agree with me that, for decades — indeed, centuries — the Protestant churches have shown a commitment to the education of children, which this place is right to continue to recognise and enshrine in law? Indeed, the many Protestant churches that put transferors onto the boards of governors bring a particular expertise around the pastoral care of our children. Schools are not just about educational attainment but about the all-round

pastoral well-being of children, which is something that our Protestant churches have brought to our school systems and which, quite rightly, we will continue to protect.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I concur with his comments. At this point we should again give our appreciation to all in that sector who have worked down through the years to ensure that their voice is heard and the sector is reflected and represented fairly. I am sure that some found it a strange situation for me to be in, but, just last year or the year before, I was probably the first Free Presbyterian who was ever welcomed inside the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church, as opposed to being a Free Presbyterian outside the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church. I was there as the party spokesperson for the debate on ESA and education reform. It was clear in the discussions that we had that day that there are many who have given unstinting service but have genuine concern about elements of decline that have taken place in our controlled sector. We have seen that in reports by the inspector and in our constituencies, where there are particular challenges in the controlled sector. We need the sectoral support body to be in place so as to be of help. I trust that it will not be too late for some schools but will be in place to be of benefit to them.

That leads me on to the second major issue: equality of treatment for all in education. When you use the term "equality of treatment for everyone in education", it can unfortunately mean different things to different people, at different times and in different places. The Bill seeks to confer certain responsibilities on ESA and the board of governors with regard to the Irish language sector. We, as a party, are extremely concerned about those clauses. In dealing with these issues, we will challenge them, if the Bill moves to Committee Stage. I find it interesting that, when this was introduced in the Bill, something seemed to happen in the interpretation of the 1989 order. Unfortunately, under the Belfast Agreement, which, I am glad to say, my party was not a co-signatory to, provision was given that elevated to a place of importance two sectors of our education system, namely the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector. There was a duty on the Department to facilitate and promote those two sectors. All of a sudden, when the Bill appears, only one is mentioned. I do not know whether the Department has decided that it is now time to forget about the integrated sector. I hope not, because invaluable work has been done on the challenges faced in bringing that sector to where it is today. I may have particular issues with the make-up of some integrated schools and all of that. However, when the Irish-medium sector came into our education debate, it was clear that there was a duty to facilitate it. The previous Minister, who I see has joined us, reminded me on I do not know how many occasions of her statutory duty to promote and facilitate the Irish-medium and integrated sectors. However, when we come to the Bill, lo and behold, the integrated sector has disappeared. It is not in the Bill, but the Irish-medium sector is.

The Irish-medium sector is in the Bill in two ways. One is a reference to the fact that it will be consulted. However, more worryingly, it states that, when it comes to placing governors on the board of an Irish-medium school, ESA will have to pay regard to ensuring that the person who is being appointed is in keeping with the ethos and identity of the school to ensure the continuation of that school. Was that the same thought as was in the Department's mind

when it appointed two members of that party to Lumen Christi in the city of Londonderry? Were the two members who were appointed to that board of governors in keeping with the ethos and identity of the school? Were they put there to ensure the continued viability of the school? My party will ensure that we deal with those issues in Committee as we take the Bill forward, I hope, after Second Stage.

Furthermore, there are differences in the approach to the role given to boards of governors in the controlled sector with regard to being the submitting authority for schemes of management and the approach to the role in the Catholic maintained sector. That is another area that has given rise to concerns. We, as a party, need to be satisfied that no deals will be done by the Minister or his officials outside the Bill. In Committee, we will assure ourselves that all sectors are treated as equitably as possible in proportion to the delivery of education in each sector. In the Bill, the board of governors is the responsible body, and there should be no diminution of that.

Similarly, we will seek to ensure that ESA is the single employing authority for all staff and that the current discriminatory approach to teachers in the controlled sector is resolved as the Bill continues its legislative passage. Members will know that this has been a problem for a long time. Although it falls within the remit of OFMDFM, particularly as regards exemptions from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, we await the Minister's review of that issue in respect of the Catholic certificate. That is important because, if there are going to be employment issues that are challenged and changes to employment arrangements, you cannot look at one and not look at the other. You cannot leave one sector with concerns about employment issues and leave another sector untouched. That is an issue that we will have to give some consideration to.

The protection afforded to the voluntary grammars, as we referred to earlier, in section 10 of the heads of agreement must be reflected in the legislation. We welcome the establishment through the legislation of the tribunal and the fact that OFMDFM has a key role in the process. I look to the Minister and the party opposite to honour the document published jointly by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. The DUP has championed the right of schools and parents to avail themselves of academic assessment, and we are determined that the ESA arrangements, if passed, will not damage those rights and will not be used as a means of subverting the rights that we have secured.

That brings me to the clauses that deal with the inspectorate. I know that it was unfair to ask the officials, on their first outing to the Committee on Wednesday past, about that issue, but we took the opportunity to say to them that we had great concern about the inspectorate seemingly being used in the pursuit of political or departmental objectives. I trust that we can come back to that at some stage. The inspectorate should be separate from the Department. I went as far as saying on Wednesday at the Education Committee that the inspectorate could inspect the Department, which caused some eyebrows to rise.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that that is why we have an Education Committee.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for that. However, it might be useful for us to have some other body, similar to ESA, which he will have, to look at those issues.

I get concerned when I see the powers that the Bill seeks to confer. Although it has been said that the powers will try to bring the inspectorate into line with other arrangements in the United Kingdom, I am concerned that we will have a situation where we have an inspectorate that is very strong in its powers. The provisions, we are told, are similar to those previously drafted, with the exception of the removal of the inspection powers for library premises, as requested by DCAL. I have to ask why the Department feels it necessary to have an inspectorate that can lift papers and lift computers. I place it on record that I trust that it is not being used by the Department as another method of spooking or spying on primary schools that are being put in a very difficult position around transfer. We have seen —

Mr O'Dowd: I am happy to clarify that point for the Member. As with any legislation that goes through the Assembly, Members will look to see whether there is an interwoven agenda. I assure the Member that there is no agenda at play in this, other than improving the inspection powers of the inspectorate to ensure that all young children receive a high-quality education. There is no other agenda at play, and I am sure that my officials will be happy to discuss that with him further as the Bill goes through Committee Stage.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for that. It is something that we will come back to and look at.

CCEA is no longer part of ESA, which has to be welcomed. I welcome the commitment to come back to the issue. As a party, we were concerned about the scope of ESA and its responsibilities in the last Bill.

However, we believe that there needs to be a major overhaul of CCEA, and we will be looking to continue discussions with the Minister to assure us that the clauses in the Bill are not just another one of the Department's famous sticking plasters that we have seen in the past and that we will have education reform that lets us progress in a way that is to the benefit of our educational sector. There is so much going on regarding the issue around CCEA qualifications. There are issues around where CCEA will be placed in the light of the discussions and decisions made by the Secretary of State for Education in England, Michael Gove. We need to have a debate, and I welcome the fact that some discussions are already under way, outside this House, about that matter on the best way to provide for CCEA, a regulatory body and a body that sets examinations being in the one building.

2.00 pm

The issue of area planning has already been raised. The current attempts by the Department to control the area-planning process by proxy have been nothing short of disastrous. The effect of the process has been to cause confusion and concern in many schools where that does not need to be the case. If you look at the viability audits, you see clearly how that has happened. A concern has been raised in places where there need not be a concern

about the future of a particular school. If we are to give ESA a role in area planning, it needs to take account of the key role, especially in the controlled sector, that is played by the new sectoral body and to understand the importance of the needs and wishes of the local community.

Public services and the public are very clear that they want to have a vibrant and strong school that is at the heart of their community. As a party, we will scrutinise the clauses of the Bill to ensure that we have a school estate that the community wants and needs and not what the Department of Education thinks it should have. That is a major problem and a major concern. To that end, we will seek, in advance of the Bill passing, clear, local structures from ESA that will deliver regional policy in a manner that is sensitive to local needs.

That brings us to the question of where services will be based and delivered. Members are accustomed to going to Omagh, Dundonald or County Hall in respect of the service delivery that the boards have given to our respective schools. I welcome the fact that the Department, I understand, is revisiting the work that was done by the ESA team to look at what type of model we would have for service delivery. Although we will have this debate and all have our views and opinions, the reality is to consider how this will affect teachers in a particular school.

The boards have been run down since the introduction of vacancy control — I remind Members that vacancy control has been in place since 2006 — and CASS is, in many respects, decimated. People, who had previously been there, are not in place or in position to give advice to schools. Principals and governors want to know whether these arrangements will be unwound, delivered or explained to us over the process of time to ensure that they know what the service delivery model will be. If the Minister could later give some indication of how that issue will be addressed, it would be appreciated. Furthermore, there are differences in approach to the role given to the board of governors in controlled schools. We have already said something about that.

In conclusion, a huge amount of work remains to be done. The Bill, with its 57 clauses, I think, and seven schedules, will require considerable scrutiny. As we have been able to bring it to this place — I know better than most how difficult that has been — I trust that, with hard work and determination, we can put in place something that will be of benefit to our education system and to the advantage of education rather than to the advantage of either the Department or any political agenda. Therefore, I support its passing Second Stage.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak to the Education Bill before us today.

Over the preceding four decades, those working for the education and library boards, CCMS, the Youth Council and the Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards, whether staff or board members, played a central role in the development of our education system. It is only fit and proper that, during today's discourse on the need to build a modern, fit-for-purpose education system, we recognise and acknowledge the dedication of those who have shown great commitment to improving the educational experience of learners for the best part of the previous half century. Their dedication not only delivered

many key services but developed many new approaches and facilitated much improvement during a long and often arduous journey for our education system.

The Education Bill is, undoubtedly, a milestone in that unbroken journey. The educational case for change is obvious. Despite various excellent schools, the recent viability audit highlighted the large numbers that are educationally, financially or physically unsustainable. Our education system is characterised by an uneven performance of outstanding academic excellence coupled with some 40% of children leaving school without five good GCSEs. Furthermore, the overall performance of our local education system is falling behind that of our economic competitors, and there is little doubt that our present arrangements are not capable of redressing the situation. Indeed, having separate arrangements for the various sectors has restricted the development of agreed good practice and placed obstacles in the path of joined-up planning.

Tasked with modernising the administration of education here in the North, the Bill will replace the outdated administration with one that better meets the needs of the 21st century. At the core of the reform and, indeed, the Bill is the foundation of the Education and Skills Authority. Overseeing the establishment of a modern, fit-for-purpose administration, ESA will focus on assisting the raising of standards, providing support to schools and educational establishments and ensuring the effective planning and delivery of the educational estate. ESA will replace the eight administrative bodies next year and ensure that our education system continues to transform to meet the needs of our young people and our economy. However, that transformation does not represent a wild stab in the dark for our system. ESA will build on the vast work and experience of the various boards and education bodies as —

Mr Storey: The Member raises a point about meeting the needs of the economy. Has he had any discussions with, for example, Queen's University or other universities that have raised issues about the capabilities of our current cohort of students? Some of those issues will not be addressed by ESA; they will have to be addressed by a revised curriculum, and there are issues with how that will be delivered in our schools.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his intervention. I hope to cover that point later.

Embedded firmly in the context of the two previous Bills, the 2012 Education Bill reveals a few areas of fresh thinking, demonstrates a mature flexibility and encompasses solutions to issues that were previously of concern to stakeholders. That has clearly been important in reaching agreement on issues such as the membership of ESA and clarification on the autonomy of schools. As the Minister outlined, the membership of ESA, as set out in the heads of agreement, is to consist of a chairperson, eight political representatives, four transferor members, four trustee members and four other members. This will not only ensure local democratic accountability but preserve the participation of Churches in the governance of education.

I welcome the fact that the Bill will not only deliver a single employing authority but enshrine the guaranteed autonomy for all boards of governors to make decisions in the best interests of schools. It will also provide a

framework whereby the ethos of schools can be reflected in employment arrangements. In short, the core principle at the centre of those arrangements is that there will be a single employing authority with schools exercising devolved autonomy.

In addition to ESA improving employment and management schemes put forward by the devolved submitting authority, appropriate checks and balances have been enshrined in the Bill to prevent ESA from acting unfairly in its approval role. This is vitally important for stakeholder confidence, and I have little doubt that the presence of an independent tribunal will help to encourage confidence in schools that ESA will concentrate on its role and leave schools to get on with improving education outcomes.

As Minister O'Dowd outlined, the Bill poses no threat to any sector, nor does it look to alter or detract from the ethos or identity of any school. However, a Cheann Comhairle, and this is to be welcomed, the Bill will challenge each and every school to raise the bar in education standards and put the needs of young people at the heart of the learning process. Central to this is a world-class education system for all our young people.

Education must be first and foremost about individuals and equipping those individuals with the tools to value themselves and their society. It has been said:

"Citizens empowered through the gift of education will repay that gift time and time again to their families to their community and the economy."

We must continue to push forward with determination and commitment to educational excellence. Vested interests and reactionary objection must not hide the real and present need for reform. Dogmatic gesticulation should not stand in the way of change; for, in driving forward with the desire for educational excellence, standing still is simply not an option. We need to recognise the fact that, in global terms, unless we bring about change, education outcomes for all concerned will regress.

The delivery of education in the North has developed over the decades into a system designed around the needs of schools and institutions, often at the expense of the education needs of our young people. Certainly, we deliver education through schools and the needs of those schools are important, but we cannot continue to shape our education service around the needs of buildings.

In his statement to the Assembly last September, the Minister's policy, Putting Pupils First, was launched in an effort to build on Every School a Good School as a signpost for the journey ahead. Referring to the 2006 Bain report, which explicitly spelt out the dangers of continuing along the road of unsustainable educational provision, Putting Pupils First acknowledged that without a determination to deliver change, we set schools and children on an impossible task to reach their education potential. It is with this in mind that we must forge ahead with determination to ensure that we will have a system of education provision in place that delivers optimal education standards for all our young people.

As we move forward, it is vital that the pattern of provision and investment in our schools is dictated by the needs of education excellence in the modern era. We must constantly strive to improve, to go that bit further, to be the best that we can be. At a time when economies around the

world are on their knees, our education system needs to drive our local economic recovery, for we will undoubtedly need a vibrant workforce, educated and trained in a variety of skills, which can not only adapt to emerging economic conditions, but can be bold and inspiring as it spearheads our local recovery.

On this day last week, we welcomed the Executive's investment strategy, which acknowledges the huge importance of education in building our society in the years ahead. It outlines:

"A peaceful, fair and prosperous society has at its heart a well educated population, with the skills to engage fully and positively in society and in the economy. The skill-base of countries and regions is increasingly the key determinant of relative economic growth, competitiveness and productivity – factors vital to support higher living standards in an increasingly globalised economy."

The outworking of the Education Bill is central to those considerations. A modern education environment that cherishes and nurtures all our young people should be at the very core of our vision for restoring economic prosperity in our local communities. That is a vision shared by educationalists and stakeholders throughout Ireland and further afield.

A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report into global student performance heaped praise on the education system in Shanghai. It is a system which recently initiated far-reaching reforms in the delivery of both investment and educational provision. Shanghai is perhaps particularly salient as it abandoned the outdated practice of concentrated resources at the request of elite schools in favour of building educational success and economic expansion through education reforms designed to empower the individual student.

We cannot extol the virtues of expanding economies throughout the world, yet stay blind to the educational forms that propel such excellence. Without a determination to deliver real and substantive change, we set our young people an impossible task in the face of such challenges. The establishment of ESA is by no means an end in itself but, undoubtedly, it equips our educational leaders with the tools required to build an education system that our young people deserve. This may not be the final stage on the educational journey, but it is, no doubt, a great opportunity for a new beginning.

2.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I call Danny Kinahan. I may need to interrupt the Member as we move to Question Time at 2.30 pm.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I fear that, given the length of my speech, you probably will. I am very pleased to speak on such an important matter as the Education Bill. I join others in thanking all those who worked on it. I particularly thank all those who work in our education system and give their time, life, heart and skills to educating our children.

However, I am extremely saddened that we have a Bill that, the more I look at it, seems to be filled to the brim with hidden intentions. Given Sinn Féin's record, we must treat the Bill with healthy mistrust. Given that the previous

Education Minister seemed to listen to no one, and that the Department often seems to be of that mind too, the Ulster Unionist Party is opposing the legislation. We know that Sinn Féin would really like to dismantle everything and anything that smacks of Britain, and that it will pursue tirelessly its endless push for a united Ireland at the cost of everything in its path. We must treat this legislation with total awareness and search out all that is hidden within.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. This is not the first time that the Ulster Unionists have taken a different policy position. They had three last week. Can he explain why his colleague, who is sitting beside him, criticised OFMDFM on 23 July for not being quick enough in bringing forward the legislation? All of a sudden, today, we are being told that they have now a principled position on ESA: the first time that the Ulster Unionists have taken a principled position on anything. Hopefully, his colleague has given him the answer as to why, on 23 July, the Member said that there should be more progress on delivering ESA. Can they tell us what exactly they are up to?

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. It looks like we are not allowed to think, read or take on new positions as we learn more. The more we dig into the Bill, the more we find that we have something that gives us great reason for concern.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I am going to get very sore knees at this rate. Yes.

Mr Allister: Reflecting on the last point made to the Member, would he care to reflect that the Member who intervened, Mr Storey, said on 18 May 2010 that ESA was dead, was not coming back and that it was:

"bureaucratic legislation that satisfies the control freakery of the Department." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 51, p339, col 1.]

Perhaps the Member might reflect on who is doing somersaults today.

Mr Kinahan: My knees are not good enough for somersaults. However, I enjoyed that point. Thank you very much.

The Bill is the 'Where's Wally?' for every politician. We have to search through it from top to bottom and from word to word to try to understand what it means and why it has been written in such a way. Hidden in every clause, sentence and schedule could be a "Wally" of hidden Sinn Féin chicanery. Anyway, enough about wallies; let us move to better things.

We would normally welcome a Bill that purports to streamline our education management so that we can put in place high standards of educational achievement in all our schools. We would normally welcome, as should everyone, such intentions. Children, and their education, must be given the very highest priority. However, we cannot support this legislation because we do not fully understand all that is in it. We find ourselves in a similar position to last week when the Welfare Bill came before us. Do we oppose it outright at Second Stage, or do we let it move forward? In this case, we have decided to oppose it outright. It is sad that we find ourselves pressurised by the need to pass the Bill quickly to stop our education system collapsing into further decline at a time when we really need to take our time to make sure the legislation is right. It

is very sad that our education system has been allowed to fall into such a mess.

It is 10 years since our deputy First Minister banished the 11-plus from our education system in such an ill thought-out manner, without even the slightest thought of how it was going to be replaced. We have had 10 years of no long-term strategy, 10 years of trying to impose one side's view of education on everyone else and 10 years of, we assume, attempts at dealmaking, such as the previous ESA Bills. It is sad how much time has been wasted. If the original manner of government envisaged in the Belfast Agreement had been used, we might have an agreed long-term strategy instead of the carve-up deals and counterdeals.

The Programme for Government had planned for this Bill to be passed last summer and for the body to be in place by April 2013. The pressure is on, but let us not hurry it and get it wrong. The UUP will oppose the Bill all the way, as it is a flawed piece of legislation. If it moves forward, it will not be our doing.

We want to see an education system that really works for everybody and that puts children and their education first. Why on earth can we not sit down like grown-ups, produce an agreed long-term strategy and design a system that works for everybody? At present, England and Wales have learned their lessons and are moving towards academies and streaming, but we seem to be determined to move totally in the other direction.

What has happened between the end of the summer and now? It was announced that ESA would come forward as soon as the autumn Assembly session began. What went awry? Was it to do with legal matters? Or was it that the First Minister realised that he could not sell to his own party what he had agreed? After all, it is his MLAs, as well as many Sinn Féin MLAs, who will have to explain the Bill and the area planning to their electorates. I wonder whether I am right. Are cracks appearing between DUP members?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I am very happy to give way. I hope that you will clarify that for me.

Mr Storey: The Member has come to the House today and has given us a lecture on fractured relationships in parties. He is probably speaking from experience, given the number of differences that there are in that corner between the Members who even wish to appear here. Let me make it very clear: there are no differences between Peter Robinson and myself; and there are no differences between Peter Robinson and the members of this party. The Ulster Unionist Party might be in disarray, but this party is still united and going forward.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have interventions that are clearly linked to the Bill, especially as this is its Second Stage, which is when we talk about its principles.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. It is nice to find that I have obviously hit a sore point. If I am right, we may be close to a betrayal of all that is great in our education system. We may be close to a betrayal by our First Minister as grammar schools, voluntary grammars and even the maintained system are thrown to the lions. I want to ensure that I leave with you the thought, which I have articulated previously, that we are on course towards achieving the

lowest common standards of education, rather than the highest. We should be raising our standards, not dragging them down.

Today, we have a Bill that is so complex and yet so vacant of detail that no one in the Chamber really knows what they are letting themselves in for. We have a heads of agreement, which were agreed in November 2011, as the basis of the Bill. Indeed, any decision that is agreed in that office would immediately make me suspicious about its intentions and all the political bargaining that must have inevitably occurred in the run-up to such an agreement.

Following last week's Education Committee meeting, we know that it is the heads of agreement that have yet to be finalised. Let me read you part of it. It states:

"10. Notwithstanding the foregoing, nothing in the new arrangements will undermine the following principles;

a) There will be no change to the ownership arrangements which negatively affects the respective role of the Boards of Governors of a school."

I will read that again.

"There will be no change to the ownership arrangements which negatively affects the respective role of the Boards of Governors of a school."

Who wrote that? What on earth does it mean? It is appalling jargon. I raised that, as well as the lack of intelligibility of the heads of agreement, at last week's Education Committee meeting, only to be told that that section of the heads of agreement has yet to be finalised.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. If the Member was as forensic in his detailed analysis of the Bill, he might go and ask someone from the community that he claims is being fed to the lions where some of that language came from. He might then discover that maybe it is not as badly written as he is claiming. Maybe some investigation by the Member might be useful.

Mr Kinahan: I am rather enjoying this. I do feel that there is a mass in there that we all need to read. Yet the more I listened to the Chairman of the Committee, the more I felt that, all through his speech, there was a lot of uncertainty and certainly a lack of surety as to whether he really supports the Bill.

I go back to the heads of agreement. At times, it does seem to have been done on the back of a fag packet, put together at the last minute. We are about to start legislation based on a set of agreed principles that have yet to be finalised. Were there no wordsmiths available that day? Two weeks ago, teachers in post-primary schools were pulling their hair out as they battled for three days with the Northern Ireland Literacy Assessment (NILA) and the Northern Ireland Numeracy Assessment (NINA). They were on their computers trying to carry out assessments using a system that had been hurriedly piloted so that it could be rushed in this October. Are we about to see the same again? Here we have a core piece of legislation being pushed through before the heads of agreement have even been finished.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I will take an intervention.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not know whether the First Minister or deputy First Minister were before the Education Committee last week. I was not there, but I suspect they were not. The heads of agreement, as presented to me as Education Minister to bring forward as a policy memorandum, are complete. The work of the First and deputy First Ministers is complete on that section. The legislation then proceeds by a policy memorandum, which was brought before the Executive and received approval. The policy memorandum sets out the broad aspects of the Bill and was approved by the Executive. I then brought the legislation to the Executive, and it has been approved in the sense that it has been forwarded to the Assembly for the Assembly to pursue. Is the Member going to take on his role as an Assembly Member? Are his fellow colleagues going to take on their role as Assembly Members? I do not care personally whether they trust me or not. The question they have to ask is this: do they trust themselves? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kinahan: Mr Speaker, I have to answer that. Of course we trust ourselves.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will have an opportunity after Question Time to answer the Minister. As we move quickly towards Question Time, I ask the House to take its ease until that time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Childcare Strategy

1. **Mr Gardiner** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the gaps in the childcare provision are being met whilst a childcare strategy is being finalised. (AQO 2642/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask my colleague Assembly Member and junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Programme for Government 2011-15 commits the Executive to publish and implement a childcare strategy that will provide integrated and affordable childcare. Our Department is leading the development of that strategy. Any new childcare strategy needs to be evidence-based. We have, therefore, commissioned research that will quantify, among other things, the current demand for childcare places, the current provision, the uptake data and the barriers to uptake. We believe that the research will deliver its final report early next year, will inform the development of the childcare strategy and will allow for more effective childcare provision.

Further evidence will come from public consultation. We are currently preparing a document that will inform the consultation on the childcare strategy. In developing the consultation document, we have engaged fully with other Departments and with the main childcare stakeholders. We have allocated some £700,000 to PlayBoard's school age childcare programme up to 31 March 2013. The funding is intended to maintain the after-school childcare capacity pending the development of the childcare strategy.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the junior Minister for his response. Can the junior Minister assure the House that the £12 million allocated to childcare remains ring-fenced for its intended purpose and will be spent over the next four Budget years?

Mr Bell: I am confident that the full £12 million will be spent over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period up to 31 March 2015. It is important that the funding is spent on high-quality projects that will make a real difference. Departments need to ensure that any bids to the fund will be completely additional to their own spend, and a significant range of further bids are currently under consideration in the Department. That is in addition to the hundreds of thousands of pounds that we have already spent on this matter.

Mrs Hale: Can the Minister give an outline of the number of registered childcare facilities available? In his view, is there sufficient childcare out there?

Mr Bell: I will take those questions in the order that they have been asked. The information that I will give you is from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety up to 31 March 2011. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will publish its new children's social care statistics bulletin on 26 October. That will include statistics on registered childcare facilities as of 31 March 2012. As of 31 March 2011, there were 5,058 registered childcare providers, and they offer a total of 53,223 registered places. The Department is very concerned that we get proper and robust data, and I know from listening to my constituents in Newtownards through to Ballynahinch through to Portavogie that there are major concerns about the availability and cost of childcare.

The vast majority of childcare providers are childminders — some 75%. They offer 36% of all registered places, day nurseries offer 25%, and playgroups offer 22%. Out-of-school clubs are sitting at 11%, and crèches and summer schemes are at 6%. We have commissioned the data to see where there are gaps, whether they are geographical or in respect of types of childcare provided. Most Members are aware that there is concern about the availability and cost, and, as I said to Mr Gardiner, we intend to spend the £12 million by the period recommended.

Mr McMullan: Can the Minister give me some assurance that any potential impact of welfare reform cuts on childcare provision and the affordability of childcare is being considered in the development of any childcare strategy?

Mr Bell: We are very much aware of what is going on in respect of welfare reform and the proposals that have come through. With the childcare strategy, we are looking at ensuring that there is proper parental choice. It is not just about the number of places but about the quality, so we have been in discussions with many of the early years organisations about the quality and standard of childcare that we expect our young people to have access to. We will also look at how accessible it is; how affordable it is, which I think your question directly related to; how sustainable it is; and whether it forms part of an integrated approach. Those are the six policy principles that we will look at in our childcare strategy.

Mr Rogers: Will the Minister outline the measures being considered to ensure that our rural communities are provided with affordable childcare options?

Mr Bell: There is already significant funding for rural areas, particularly in the Armagh region. As I say, in developing our childcare strategy, accessibility is critical, as I outlined to Mr McMullan. It has to be affordable, available and integrated into an overall approach. The issue of rural accessibility, of course, has to be factored in. You can see already that rural issues have been considered in the initial tranche of funding from the Department and that we have already delivered in respect of rural childcare. We envision making childcare in rural areas sustainable, affordable and integrated.

Social Investment Fund

2. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. (AQO 2643/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Following Executive agreement on the final operation of the social investment fund (SIF), I can

confirm that membership of the community and political steering groups has been finalised, and members have been officially appointed and notified. They will participate in a workshop scheduled for 17 October and 18 October. A council officer from each zone will also take part in the workshop. The names of the council officers who have been nominated are outlined in the published list. However, the formal appointment of the four statutory and two business representatives will be made after the workshop.

The workshop provides an opportunity for the steering groups to familiarise themselves with each other and formally meet officials. Very usefully, the groups will also have the chance to work with the technical assistance provider allocated to their zone. We have set aside a four-month period for the area planning process, and we expect to have completed plans for the proposed projects, supported by economic appraisals, with the Department by February 2013.

Considerable work has already been done to ensure that appropriate and robust structures are in place for the effective delivery of the area-based plans. We are confident that that is the case and that we are now in a position to achieve maximum impact from the fund. The focus going forward will be on assisting communities to identify and evidence objective need and to develop robust area plans that will improve the lives of the people living in the prioritised areas.

We are determined to make a real and lasting difference to the most vulnerable in our society. The social investment fund, together with our announcement last week of six Delivering Social Change signature projects, demonstrates our commitment to address some of our most intractable social and economic issues.

Mr Easton: I thank the First Minister for his answer. What is the relationship between the announcement you made last week on Delivering Social Change and the social investment fund?

Mr P Robinson: This gives me an opportunity to indicate that the SIF zones, in the work that they will do, will not act on their own, outside of everything else that is going on in government. They will be part of the integration of all the services that we provide. DSD and other Departments will provide other projects in the same kinds of areas. It is important to recognise that the social investment fund will enjoy the benefits announced by the deputy First Minister and me. Indeed, we have structured at least one of those in the social investment zones. It is important to recognise that we are looking not simply at the themes outlined in the social investment fund document but at how they play into everything else that government is doing to ensure that what we are asking for from SIF is real added value and is additional to what Departments and other agencies are doing.

Mr Eastwood: Given the delays so far, what guarantees do we have that the £80 million set aside for the social investment fund will be spent within the four-year timetable that was set out at the launch?

Mr P Robinson: We will listen to what the steering groups have to say. If they are looking for more time, we will seriously consider that. There is a difficulty, particularly if people are looking at capital schemes, about whether that can be realised within the time left in the CSR period. So, we will look at that. The £80 million is ring-fenced, but, if

it appears that the groups require more time, we would be sympathetic to that.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for his responses so far and, despite my different political views, extend my genuine congratulations on the new addition to the Robinson family.

It has taken about 20 months to get to the point of appointing the steering groups. I declare an interest as a member of the east Belfast steering group. Is the three-and-a-half to four months now available to the groups to develop those area plans a reasonable amount of time?

Mr P Robinson: If it is not, we will, of course, listen to them. The people whom we have appointed will know their area well, know the needs in their area and will, no doubt, be able to put proposals together. If they require more time, again, we will look at that. I do not like the suggestion of delay; we have in fact grown an organisation from the grass roots. This is something completely new and different and something that people will probably want to replicate for other areas of government work. It was more important for us to be sure that we got it right rather than getting it quickly. That is why we ring-fenced the money — to ensure that there would be no funding loss to local communities because they moved from one Budget year to another.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Given the slower than expected spend, have the First Minister and deputy First Minister considered rolling the social investment fund programme into the next CSR period rather than rushing to spend the £80 million in the final two years of this one, given the obvious pressure that that would put on the zones?

Mr P Robinson: I have no doubt that groups will be able to come forward with a series of proposals about how the money should be spent. I am pretty confident, having spoken to a number of them, that they know what their areas need and will come forward with proposals. When it comes to issues such as current expenditure, very clearly you can spend it on an annual basis as you move towards the end of the initial fund period. However, if you are talking about the construction of buildings or infrastructure in some form, I can say that there is a long lead-in to the planning process, the drawing up of plans for whatever the building may be and the construction. It might be optimistic to imagine that that could all be done within the initial period. Therefore, we may well have to look at putting it into the first year, at least, of the next CSR period.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Minority Ethnic Development Fund

4. **Ms Lo** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the minority ethnic development fund. (AQO 2645/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask my colleague, junior Minister Jonathan Bell, to answer this question.

Mr Bell: I am pleased to be able to advise the Member that an extension to the current minority ethnic fund will commence with immediate effect and will run until 31 March 2013. The information was conveyed to the minority ethnic sector last week. The extension to the fund will allow

for engagement and consultation around the development of a racial equality strategy and how that relates to a longer-term fund. Officials will meet sector representatives in the very near future to discuss the fund and the strategy.

2.45 pm

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for conveying this very good news. Unfortunately, funding has been granted on a six-monthly basis in the past year and a half. I would like to hear an assurance from him that, from next April, the fund will continue and continue on a much longer basis, in order to provide continuity and certainty for the sector.

Mr Bell: I appreciate the concerns that have been raised. We are still working with the sector on the racial equality strategy and on what it specifically wants out of the fund. We want the strategy and the funding to be interconnected so that they can deliver both what ethnic minorities are reflecting that they need and the support requirements that they have. We will look at how the fund can continue to deliver the key service that the sector provides on the ground. The strategy should reflect what the sector says as a whole. Therefore, we need to look towards the strategy and see how we can connect it with the fund. I have spoken to many of the groups, and they are happy that, with this extension, they will be able to continue the level of service that they have been providing. We will look at it in connection with the strategy.

One thing that I will make clear — we have raised this at the all-party group meetings, and I appreciate the work that Ms Lo and my colleague David McIlveen have done in this respect — is that the principles of the shared aims of eliminating racial inequality, of equal protection, of equality of service provision and of participation, dialogue and capacity building will be at the heart of the new strategy, which I hope will connect fully with the new fund. We will reveal details of both when we can.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the announcement of the six-month funding extension, which will provide much-needed services. However, given that the extension is to pre-existing funding, is there opportunity or scope for groups not currently being funded to secure funding during these six months?

Mr Bell: I appreciate the work that the Member does in south Belfast with the minority ethnic community and the meetings that he has had with me in recent times in connection with that work.

Last week's announcement that the funding will be extended was made to allow the groups that are currently being funded to continue to receive funding, and I think that that has been welcomed right across the minority ethnic sector. Development or core funding was awarded to 24 organisations for 2011-12. Twenty-two of those groups continue to be funded.

A deficit over the next six months clearly exists for groups that were not previously funded, as the Member points out. Our officials will work with those groups, and they are currently looking at what options may be available to include in the new funding period those not currently being funded.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the racial equality strategy. The junior Minister knows my concerns about strategies that do not turn into actions. Will we be guaranteed no more

brinkmanship over payment so that groups will not have to wait until 31 March and beyond to get their next bit of funding and will instead have a little bit of comfort?

Mr Bell: I announced at the very start not a strategy but that the funding is immediately in place, is available now and will run until 31 March 2013. We will certainly work with all the groups, not only on the strategy but with our racial equality panel. We will continue to look at times when there is a need for crisis funding, and we will work right across the sector to try to ensure that service provision is as good as it can be. The funding is there with immediate effect until 31 March 2013. That is the action.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the junior Minister's news. Does he agree that minority ethnic communities unfortunately remain the target of vile racism from certain sections? Will he join me in condemning the distribution of a racist leaflet in south Belfast over the weekend by the National Front and add his voice to the voices of all the other people in the community who are asking for any information out there to be passed on to the police?

Mr Bell: I condemn fully any form of criminal behaviour that involves racism, homophobia or attacks on people's homes, property or ethnic heritage and life. That goes without saying. There is no truck with that at any level. In my role in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I took part in the NIACRO seminar on hate crime. Hate crime takes many forms. I will not single out any particular one. Last weekend, in my constituency, there was a horrific attack on a woman who has three children. Last Thursday night or Friday morning, children could have burned to death in my constituency, as we have just seen happen in Essex. Wherever there is hatred, we will seek to do all in our power to oppose it and to inform and educate people. We know that people from ethnic minorities make significant contribution to our educational life. My wife is a nurse, so I know of the contribution that they make to nursing. We know of the contribution that they make to business and the hospitality sector. Overall, it is a positive contribution. Northern Ireland should be and will be a welcoming place for all of its people. We will do all in our power to ensure that that happens. Where it does not happen, we will seek, through the Department of Justice, to ensure that those responsible are brought before the courts and made amenable for their actions.

Mr Speaker: Mr Lunn is not in his place to ask question 5.

Social Investment Fund

6. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they are taking to ensure that the problems with administering the social investment fund are not replicated in other programmes. (AQO 2647/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: As it is an Executive fund, moneys allocated to the social investment fund do not sit in the OFMDFM budget line but are held centrally by the Department of Finance and Personnel. In addition, the central fund of £80 million is ring-fenced. Over the next few years, we will consult steering groups on both the reprofiling of spend and the length of the first implementation period for area-based plans.

I am not clear what problems Mr Cree refers to in his question, as we have not yet administered the social investment fund. If he refers to the time that we spent

ensuring that the right structures and processes were in place, I can assure him that that was time well spent. Given the fund's scale and nature, we have expended significant effort and resources on researching best practice and learning from other initiatives. We are determined that the administration of the social investment fund will prove innovative and workable.

Part of the process was a very useful and informative public consultation. Having listened to the views expressed by organisations and individuals, we significantly changed the operation of the fund so that it reflected that useful feedback. It is worth recording that the feedback on the concept of the fund and its four key strategic aims and objectives was almost universally positive.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. He indicated that the time frame may be a little bit longer depending on what transpires. Will he assure me that the fund will be delivered in line with its original objectives and meet the Programme for Government commitments? Does he have any views on the likely duplication of European funds post 2013?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, I assure the Member that, in line with what was the intention, the themes will remain the same. We are now setting up the steering groups. Their kernel, the community and political representatives, is in place, and representatives from the statutory and business sectors will follow shortly. All of that remains as originally intended.

Obviously, the timetable is tight for some of the spend to take place. We will look at that carefully. We will not, however, reduce the spend available to groups. It may be available on a slightly longer timetable. The deputy First Minister and I are still considering schemes, and we will monitor and assess them as they are processed. We will look at an extension of the process or even at a long-term future for the scheme beyond the initial period that we outlined.

We are confident that it was essential that the groundwork was done, and I believe that it will prove beneficial as we move into the area planning stage. I hope that the political representatives who will be present will, alongside and in tandem with the community sector and other representatives, bring forward some innovative schemes. The kind of seminar that we hold helps to look at how good ideas in one area might also work in another area.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his answers to date. Could the social investment fund fund additional literacy and numeracy support, if communities want that in their area, to support the project that he and the deputy First Minister announced last week?

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I announced a scheme that has been widely welcomed by parents, the general community, teachers and even the press. It will bring real benefit. It will take time for the Department of Education to be able to roll it out. It is spread across the whole of Northern Ireland. It could well be that some of the social investment areas will determine that they need something by way of a top-up in their area because of a particular need. It is one of the themes in the SIF document, so it is allowable if it is something that they want to do. The whole idea of the fund is to allow areas to determine for themselves the way in which their area is at present deficient and how it could be helped by some

additional funding. If it comes from the grass roots, it by all means lies in the processes of the fund.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. How does the social investment fund sit in the overall Delivering Social Change framework?

Mr P Robinson: They are complementary. Indeed, one could look even at neighbourhood renewal and other projects that are under way. All of them can work together. That is the importance of having the local input: they will know what is happening in their area from other Departments and schemes, they can see where the deficit is, and they can seek to meet it through the fund. By all means, we are happy to continue the work that we did earlier this week on the general issues involved. The Department will have a role in that regard. As I indicated, what happens under the SIF should be additional to what we do in other areas.

Parades

7. **Mr Swann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to address the parades issue in advance of next year. (AQO 2648/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: There has been a discussion at Executive level on parades and associated protests. At the last meeting of party leaders, we discussed the best approach to establishing the views of all stakeholders. It was agreed that suggestions would be brought to a further meeting on the best process to advance the issue. The right to assembly, the right to express cultural identity, the right to protest and the rights of those in and living in proximity to parades are at the heart of the proposals agreed at Hillsborough on parades and protests. The principles of mutual respect and tolerance are key to resolving the issue of disputed parades and counterparades. The deputy First Minister and I have met various participants on both sides of the argument. We remain committed to facilitating discussions in any way that is helpful. We have indicated to Executive colleagues our determination to agree a process on taking this complex issue forward before the year ends.

Mr Swann: I thank the First Minister for his statement. Will he give a commitment that OFMDFM will consult all parties as well as the party leaders' group and that any alternative to the Parades Commission is simply not that that came from the Hillsborough agreement?

Mr P Robinson: I would have thought that we were consulting all parties when we talked to party leaders, unless the Member is saying that party leaders are not representative of the party that they lead. I hope that we have met that. Of course, the parties are all represented on the Executive as well. There is no intention on the part of the Executive or party leaders to stifle discussion and debate on these issues; we want it to be as wide as possible. We want to encourage people to take part. That is why we are looking at what the processes will be so that people can feed into them.

This is a very serious issue. We all become very aware of it when we get round to June and July, but it is now that we need to deal with the issue. We are determined to try to get the process under way before the end of the year. I hope that everybody will come forward in a constructive manner to attempt to resolve these issues, which are toxic in our society.

3.00 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Flood Alleviation: Sullatober Water, Carrickfergus

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the alleviation works on the Sullatober Water in Carrickfergus. (AQO 2657/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am pleased to inform my colleague that the Sullatober flood alleviation scheme, which provides protection to 28 properties, was completed in September. The area of park occupied during the construction of the scheme has also been fully reinstated and is open to the public.

Mr Hilditch: That was a necessary and welcome project. However, a four-month project took 13 months to be delivered on the ground. What were the financial implications of that nine-month delay?

Mrs O'Neill: The scheme involved a considerable amount of earthworks, and the prolonged wet weather we experienced meant that the works took longer than originally anticipated. Additional works were also required to reinforce the banks of the pond, and staff were diverted from the project to deal with the impacts of flooding elsewhere.

I am pleased to say that the original estimated cost at the project's feasibility stage was £350,000 and we were able to deliver the project for £250,000. That is, obviously, a good news story.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Will the Minister outline what major flood alleviation infrastructure schemes are planned for 2012-13?

Mrs O'Neill: As well as undertaking a number of minor schemes, the Rivers Agency has also completed construction of the Lodge Burn drainage infrastructure scheme at Coleraine, will complete the refurbishment of the Portna sluice gates, will commence construction of the Ballygawley flood alleviation scheme and will complete the construction of interim flood alleviation works in east Belfast. So there is quite a big programme of work for the Rivers Agency in the time ahead.

Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the implementation of the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010. (AQO 2658/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The commencement order of September 2010 brought into force most of the provisions of the Forestry Act 2010. Since then, under section 1 of the Act, we have continued to develop forestry land to deliver a wide variety of ecosystem services, including providing 400,000 cubic metres of timber to underpin a wood-using industry that provides 1,000 jobs a year, facilitating millions of visits to forests for recreation and tourism, and providing secure habitats for many birds and animals, some of which

are rare in Ireland and are also important for achieving conservation objectives in a European context.

Under section 4, which provides for other use of forestry land, we have developed a business case for the commercial development of forestry land for wind farms and tourism. Under section 7, we have entered into formal arrangements with district councils to improve the recreational infrastructure of forests, and construction is under way to build footpaths in Fermanagh and cycle trails in the Newry and Armagh and Down districts. Under section 6(3), work is ongoing to develop a register of the location and size of woodlands and their types of trees. Preliminary results were published on our website in March, which showed a welcome increase in the area of woodland to about 8% of land area.

We still have to implement the provisions that create a public right of pedestrian access to forestry land, that restrict the felling of trees in woodlands and, if the need is established by affirmative resolution of the Assembly, that regulate the control of animals in land adjacent to forests. The provisions for public right of access and the restriction of felling depend on making subordinate legislation, and we are working on that. Following major consultation last year on the by-laws and the draft felling regulations, those have been substantially revised, and I expect to introduce the regulations before the end of this Assembly session. In my view, there is no pressing need to regulate the control of animals in land adjacent to forests at this stage.

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Minister for her detailed response. Are there any other aspects of the Act that the Minister considers might need to be improved at a later date through secondary legislation?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my original answer, much of the legislation has gone through and the regulations have come forward. We had to do some work on the by-laws. There was obviously a considerable amount of interest in that area, and I thank everybody for raising all the issues — lots of views were expressed. We were able to take on board some of the suggested changes, and I hope to bring regulations to the Assembly before the end of this session.

I do not think that there is anything outstanding that is of worry. There is lots of potential in our forests, particularly in social and recreational use, and the potential use of Forest Service land for wind turbines. There is lots of potential, and, as I said, there is nothing of concern at the minute that has not come forward under the Act.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister give any indication what plans she or the Department has to develop the potential of forestry and the timber industry over the next 25 years?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very much committed to ensuring that we increase our planting, as we are aware that it is not at the level that we envisaged. We want to expand tree planting from 8% up to 12% cover, and we can do that through the woodland grant scheme and the other agrienvironment schemes. I think that there is lots more potential in that, and we have set out the way forward. The strategy has been set out, and I am happy to provide the Member with that if he wishes to look at it. If we continue to work in partnership with people such as the National Trust and the Woodland Trust, there is a lot of potential for us to ensure that we increase our planting. As I said in my original answer, over 1,000 people are employed in this

industry, so it is key that we support it and take all actions to do so.

Mr Campbell: Does the Act provide for recreation and leisure facilities that are compatible with forests so that the Forest Service can actively promote them?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. The policy document, 'A Strategy to Develop the Recreational and Social Use of Our Forests' has been brought forward, and that works with, for example, local councils in promoting tourism potential. We have a brilliant natural resource that we need to use. Councils have tremendous ideas about things that have tourism potential, such as cycle paths, and, through the policy, Forest Service clearly has the remit to promote such things.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Given the great potential that we have in our forests for participation in local interests and tourism, what is the Department doing about the lack of mountain biking facilities?

Mrs O'Neill: The Forest Service's recreational and social use strategy that I referred to recognises that benefits can be achieved from working with our partners to ensure that mountain biking and all other recreational opportunities are fully developed.

For example, I was at the launch of a 34-kilometre multipurpose trail network at Castleward forest that was developed through close partnership between Forest Service and the National Trust. Forest Service is working with Down District Council, Newry and Mourne District Council and other partners, including the Tourist Board, to develop a 40-kilometre mountain bike trail network at Castlewellan Forest Park and Rostrevor forest. Forest Service is also working in partnership with Cookstown District Council on the development of a trails project at Davagh forest, which includes mountain bike provision.

Construction of trails in those three forests has commenced, and that will represent a significant new mountain biking resource in the North. I think that there is so much more potential for us in continuing to develop those trails. I have met many of the mountain biking organisations, and they are very keen for us to get involved with them and to promote this area. I think that there is a lot of potential there.

Sudden Oak Death

3. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the damage that sudden oak disease (*P ramorum*) causes to forests, particularly in south Down. (AQO 2659/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. *P ramorum* has the potential to attack a wide range of woody plants and could cause significant damage to woodland and other habitat if it were to become established. Symptoms include bleeding cankers on the tree trunk and dieback of foliage, which, in many cases, eventually lead to the death of the tree. It poses a threat to certain tree species and other ecologically important plants.

During a visit in July to Moneyscalp wood at Tollymore forest in south Down, where my Department has committed significant resources to control the *P ramorum* disease, I was able to see for myself the damage that that

pathogen can cause. Felling of over 30 hectares of larch trees at two public forests and two private sites has been undertaken to contain the spread of the disease in the area, along with an ongoing programme to monitor and control the disease in rhododendron at private sites. My Department remains committed to managing *P ramorum* disease in trees, woodland and on other plants and is funding research, carried out by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, that is looking further into host/pathogen interactions.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. Will the Minister be making a statement about the tree disease ash dieback?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for raising that issue, as that is a relatively new disease. Although it is important to recognise that the *P ramorum* and *P lateralis* diseases in forests are causing extensive damage, press and science reports suggest that the disease that is causing the ash dieback — *Chalara fraxinea* — is even more damaging. Regrettably, that disease has now been found in County Leitrim, as the Department there announced on Friday.

I hope that there is still time for us, both North and South, to work together to find and eradicate the disease wherever it occurs. To give ourselves the best chance of that, I have decided to move to bring in emergency legislation to ban the importation or movement of ash trees for planting unless they are known to come from a disease-free area.

I am also concerned that untreated ash wood may be a possible pathway for disease to enter Ireland, and I am minded to extend the ban to cover that also, although I acknowledge that the movement in plants presents the greatest risk. I will work closely with Minister Simon Coveney, as we need to make sure that we have a consistent fortress-Ireland approach. I will also keep the authorities in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) informed, as this is, ultimately, a matter for EU legislation. In due course, I will announce the details of the legislation, the results of surveys and any other practical measures that need to be taken.

Agricultural Wages Board

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the rationale for the retention of the Agricultural Wages Board. (AQO 2660/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Agricultural Wages Board sets minimum rates of pay and conditions for workers in the agriculture and horticulture sectors, including the large proportion of migrant workers, here. In addition, as I have previously said, I firmly believe that the Agricultural Wages Board's structure is a valuable forum for wage negotiations and, importantly, is used as a benchmark for the wider agri-food industry. In November last year, I launched a public consultation on a review of the board's structure, and, following its conclusion, I gave careful consideration to the responses that were received. I believe that the decision I have now reached is in the best interests of agricultural workers here.

The Agricultural Wages Board provides higher rates of pay, more generous sick pay and greater holiday entitlement than the basic existing employment legislation. It will now continue to protect the rights of low-paid

agricultural workers here, including migrant workers, by ensuring that they have enforceable employment conditions, which I believe can have only a positive impact on the sustainability of the rural economy. As we try to grow the economic potential of the agrifood sector in these difficult times, it is essential that workers in the industry are protected and have the skills not only to help the sector flourish but to encourage others to consider a career in it.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her response thus far. Members will be aware from last week's debate on the farming crisis that the Agricultural Wages Board is powerless to do anything to ensure that farmers receive a fair wage. Has the news not yet reached Dundonald House that we have a national minimum wage that was, after all, introduced 13 years ago? Will the Minister tell the House how much the Agricultural Wages Board has cost taxpayers in that 13 years?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The cost of maintaining the Agricultural Wages Board for the past five years, about which I can speak, has been between £20,500 and £26,500. That is not an extortionate amount to run a board that is protecting the rights of agricultural workers. It is helping us to retain suitably skilled individuals who want to work in the industry. It is also helping us to attract people into the industry. The reality is that the agrifood sector is continuing to do well throughout the recession, and we have to continue to make sure that we have people who are available to work in that industry. In my view, the board is a way to protect such workers.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister mentioned migrant workers in particular, which suggests that a number of people from here cannot be recruited. Will the Minister indicate the number of people, particularly from the migrant workforce, who are employed directly on farms and who the board seeks to protect?

Mrs O'Neill: I can write to the Member with a specific breakdown of figures, which I do not have with me. The key element to this is that there was a balanced approach to the consultation that we carried out; some were in favour and some against. The reality is that this board will protect those working in this industry, and we need people to stay in this industry if we are to continue to grow it. If it is to continue to be the leading light that it is throughout the recession, we need to support those workers. I am happy to provide the Member with a proper breakdown of the number of people that it employs.

Wildlife Intervention Programme

5. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the wildlife intervention programme. (AQO 2661/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: On 3 July 2012, I announced to the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee that I had asked my officials to design specific wildlife intervention research. This approach would involve testing live badgers; vaccinating and releasing the test-negative badgers; and removing the test-positive ones. The purpose of this intervention research is to assess the impact of this approach on the level of TB in badgers and cattle in the field study area. This balanced approach would provide a focus on removing diseased badgers and protecting uninfected ones. It would avoid removal of

uninfected badgers and could lead, in time, to a reduction of TB in badgers and a reduced transmission of TB from this source to cattle.

The first step is to commission initial modelling work using local information. This modelling is necessary to help inform the cost and subsequent design of the study and to ensure that the design is scientifically robust. Preparatory work to gather the relevant information from our databases has been completed, and we expect results to become available from the modelling over the coming weeks and to be completed by the end of December 2012.

3.15 pm

The outputs from that modelling will then help inform the design and costs relating to the specific test and vaccinate or remove study proposal. The design for the study will be complex, and we want to make sure we get it right. I recognise that there are many practical design, costing and approval processes to consider the progress. We will also need to conduct badger sett surveys in the study areas early next year. Subject to the completion of the necessary preparatory work, I wish the study to proceed as soon as possible next year.

Finally, I have been very encouraged by the wide spectrum of stakeholder support and engagement for the test and vaccinate or remove intervention research. Farmer, environmental and private veterinary representative organisations are participating fully through the newly constituted TB stakeholder working group on the development of this wildlife intervention research.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her answer. The wildlife intervention programme is based solely on the Brock Stat-Pak, which has 49.3% accuracy and is only used on badgers. Is that an admission that the Department is not using the wildlife intervention programme to look at any other sources of TB in any other species of Northern Ireland wildlife?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As I said, it is proposed that badgers will be captured and blood samples will be taken to test for the presence of TB. It is likely that the Brock Stat-Pak blood test will be used, because it is the only available test that is a set-aside test and can be completed quickly in the field, so there is less distress for the badger. Other tests require the recapture of the badger or prolonged confinement, but that is not a good approach.

I do not think it is correct to say — as I have heard you comment before — that that test is no better than tossing a coin. I do not think that is a fair way to look at it, because the specificity of the test is almost 50%. It is a very sensitive test, which means that it is highly likely to detect the most highly infected and potentially infectious badgers so that we can remove that source of infection. The test is also highly unlikely to give any false positive results, which is key, because I have no desire for any unaffected badgers to be harmed. It should be remembered that all badgers that give a negative result to the blood test will be vaccinated. If any test negative badgers are in the early stages of infection, they will be detected by subsequent blood tests, as the Stat-Pak test is able to differentiate between animals that are vaccinated and animals that are infected.

We have to look at the whole gamut of infection. People have different ideas. As you know, this is not a simple solution or a quick fix for that disease. It is a very complicated disease, which is why different approaches are being taken in England, Scotland, Wales and here. All of the research that is going on will inevitably lead to an improved situation so that in future we can hopefully get to the stage where we are free.

Mr Frew: Has the Minister considered any geographical areas or spread with regard to the wildlife intervention programme? Has she even done any work on the amount of land that will be needed to cover the study effectively?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The test and vaccinate or remove wildlife intervention research is a completely new approach. The design for such a study is going to be very complex, and it is important that we get it right from the outset, otherwise we will be going down the wrong path.

As I said, the first step in developing the research approach is to undertake the modelling of the approach using the local information. That modelling work is necessary if we are going to be able to identify the appropriate study area, the sufficient size that we need to work on and the appropriate duration of the study to ensure that the design is scientifically robust. That modelling work is going to help inform the study design and costings. When that has been completed, which will be over the next number of months, we will know more about the scale and area of the study and be in a better position to select the most appropriate area to start off with.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Will she indicate what the budgeted cost was for delivering the programme?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware — I have told the House before — that we set aside £4 million for the TB prevalence studies, so we still have those funds. The costings that we will reach towards the end will be informed by the prevalence studies that we are involved in now. When we gather all of the information, do the local modelling and identify the area, the size of the area and how long we will need to be in the area, we will be in a better position to give final costings for the project.

Agri-Food Strategy Board

6. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board. (AQO 2662/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Agri-Food Strategy Board was appointed to agree a strategic plan to develop the agrifood sector to 2020 and beyond. It has met on a number of occasions since it was established earlier this year, with recent activity concentrating on the gathering of evidence with which to develop a strategic plan for the agrifood sector. The board recently completed a call for evidence where key stakeholders were invited to feed their views on the industry to the board. The responses are currently being considered by its members.

In addition, subgroups have been established covering the main subsectors in the agrifood industry. Those are chaired by Agri-Food Strategy Board members with membership from the wider industry and will provide the board with specific input relative to each sector. That

will ensure that the strategic plan, when completed, will recognise the requirements of the individual subsectors and target specific recommendations for each of them.

The chair of the board, Tony O'Neill, has briefed the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the work of the board to date. I understand that both presentations were well received, and Tony agreed to keep members informed of progress. I understand that the board is still on track to deliver a comprehensive strategic plan for the sector by the end of the financial year.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that very detailed reply. In an earlier answer, you indicated the significance of the agrifood sector to the economy. Can you give us any indication of when you think the strategy will be available? You mentioned that it might be towards the end of the year.

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that we always mention the fact that the agrifood sector continues to do well. Through the recession, with all the negative stories, agrifood continues to do well. We need to support that industry to be able to continue to do well. These are obviously particularly challenging times for the industry because of the weather and rising costs and falling prices.

We have to continue to work with the industry. That is why the work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board is so key. The strategy and associated targets will be developed in conjunction with the wider industry through not only industry representation on the board itself but wider consultation. It will be up to the new board to determine the methodology and timing of the strategy. However, I envisage that the work will be well advanced by the end of this year. I expect to take receipt of the final report by the end of this financial year.

Mrs Dobson: Given the increasing international competitiveness for contracts in this industry and the growing need for our producers to tap into markets such as China and the Far East, can the Minister detail what resources she and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) have allocated to the strategy board for that purpose?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. It is absolutely an export market that we are targeting. We are targeting export-led growth, which is why the work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board is so important. DETI and I established that board earlier in the year because it is so important that we work collectively. Industry and government very much need to work together.

As regards moving forward, when we receive the final report, there will be a number of recommendations and targets. We will then decide how we work together to deliver on those. That is when we can look at the new rural development programme and how we can shape it to suit the needs of industry. We are doing this work at an ideal time. It will lead very nicely into the new rural development programme and ensure that it is shaped to meet the needs of industry from now until 2020.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I attended the meeting of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment at which Mr O'Neill presented on behalf of the Agri-Food Strategy Board. One of the key issues in respect

of efficient delivery of the strategy and projects on the ground is realisation of funding from the banks. He drew a very strong contrast between here and parts of England.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr McGlone: Has there been any direct dialogue between the Minister's Department and the local banks to ensure that we have efficiency of finance so that the projects are delivered on the ground?

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm to the Member that I have met all the major banks to raise the issues that he spoke of. Earlier in the year, I met the banks to discuss single farm payments and explain the process so that they could better understand the needs of the farming industry. That work is ongoing.

Slurry Spreading

7. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following her statement on 2 October 2012, whether her Department has any contingency plans in the event of the ground conditions being considered unsuitable for slurry spreading on or after 1 February 2013. (AQO 2663/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The contingency, in the event of ground conditions being unsuitable for slurry spreading after 1 February, is adequate slurry storage capacity. The closed spreading period for slurry is from 15 October to 31 January, which is 16 weeks. Livestock farms are required to have slurry storage with a minimum of 22 weeks' capacity. The minimum slurry storage capacity exceeds the length of the closed spreading period by six weeks. That is to ensure that farms have sufficient slurry storage in the event of weather and ground conditions being unsuitable for slurry spreading outside the closed period.

I appreciate that managing slurry can be challenging, and wet weather and ground conditions can create practical difficulties. However, since the closed period was introduced, farmers have worked hard to manage slurry and protect water quality. There has been significant investment in new slurry storage tanks, and slurry is now being used more efficiently.

Farmers have also been investing in advanced slurry spreading machines with support from my Department's manure efficiency technology scheme (METS). Those machines provide more flexibility in the slurry spreading process and deliver a range of productive and environmental benefits. METS has provided some £2 million of grant support, and over 200 advanced spreading machines have been funded to date.

I am pleased to say that water quality in our rivers is improving, and it is important that farmers keep up the good work.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Minister. What ongoing communication exists between your Department and the Department of the Environment on farming-related environmental issues?

Mrs O'Neill: I confirm that I regularly meet the Environment Minister on all of such issues, because quite often with a lot of the directives that we work under, particularly in this instance with the nitrates directive, NIEA is involved in the enforcement. So, we have to work very

closely. That communication is ongoing at an official level and happens when needed at ministerial level.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister outline whether there are any plans to deal with obnoxious problems associated with the spreading of treated human waste on agricultural land?

Mrs O'Neill: That is not really relevant to the substantive question, but I am happy to write to the Member.

Mr Copeland: Has the Minister had any discussions with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) about the dangers associated with farmers not being able to spread slurry on fields, which results in a backlog and an accumulation of slurry in tanks?

Mrs O'Neill: Work is ongoing with the farming community to prepare for the closed period and for the difficulties that farmers might find themselves in. As I said, that is a joint piece of work — the Department of the Environment is the enforcer through NIEA, so we have to continue to work with it. I have not met the HSE on the issue, but everyone involved in that area of work regularly engages with one another, and that engagement has to happen.

Broadband: Rural Areas

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress that has been made in tackling the lack of broadband in rural areas. (AQO 2664/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As you know, last year, I announced my Department's intention to invest a further £5 million in broadband, having previously invested £2.5 million. My officials are carrying out some analysis to produce a prioritised list of rural areas that can be fed into the DETI broadband delivery UK (BDUK) project as the list of areas to be targeted by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) funds. The analysis will consider such criteria as deprivation, access to services, concentration of rural population and the number of farmers, to name but a few. It is vital that we address broadband isolation for rural dwellers, and I will ensure that those funds are specifically targeted at rural areas to eliminate "not spots" and improve line speeds.

The BDUK project is citizen-centric, and it is clear that the vast majority of postcodes on the list published by DETI are in rural areas. That reinforces my commitment to address the issue, and I am sure that the rural Members will agree that we have to do everything we can to ensure that people living, working or conducting business in rural areas have access to services that can offer download speeds of at least two megabytes per second.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. The Minister responded comprehensively. I was going to ask whether she will ensure that the funding that she has available will be delivered to those areas in greatest need of the facility.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his comments. The issue is a key one; there is no point in just saying that we want to target rural areas and not following through on that. It is very clear to me that we have to target those areas that have no speed or very slow speeds.

Mr Speaker: That concludes Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease before we move to the next piece of business.

3.30 pm

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the proposed Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast will be monitored to ensure strict compliance with the law on abortion.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): First and foremost, all health and social care organisations must comply with the law in Northern Ireland. The current regulatory framework, the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, is an additional safeguard that is applicable to a wide range of establishments and health and social care services. I have asked my officials to consider whether the current regulations apply to this establishment and, if not, whether they require amendment to ensure that they provide the appropriate safeguards as intended by the legislation.

Mr Allister: Is it not the case that the current Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) monitoring arrangements, by virtue of the manner in which they are constituted and the powers given, would ensure only that the unborn are killed in hygienic conditions and would not address the wider concerns of how many abortions will be conducted in this clinic, on what basis they will be conducted, whether the basis will be verified and transparent and how it will be seen that all those matters are entirely within the law in Northern Ireland on abortion? Will the Minister give an assurance that, as he looks at this issue, those are the matters that, at the end of the exercise, will be addressed?

Mr Poots: The Member will recall that, in August, I confirmed that officials were developing a data collection system to collect robust statistics on terminations taking place in Northern Ireland. It is my intention that all terminations that take place will be recorded by this system. So, work is still ongoing on this matter.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is well aware that a number of concerns have been expressed about the lack of guidance, including, this morning, from the Royal College of Midwives. Can the Minister outline a definitive time frame for the introduction and publication of guidance on the issue? Can he detail the rationale for the delay in reissuing the guidelines?

Mr Poots: Unfortunately, I cannot. The truth is that guidelines have been produced twice, and they have been taken to court twice, where judicial reviews were twice upheld, once by those who supported abortion and once by those who were opposed to abortion. So, it is a huge legal minefield to produce guidelines that will not be judicially reviewable, and therein lies the problem. I have so much different advice on how we should move this forward, and it is very challenging to identify a way forward that will be judicial review-proof. Therefore, I am not in a position to indicate when we can introduce guidelines, and, to this extent, I am sympathetic with doctors and those who work in this field.

I make it very clear that we have the law that was passed and two sets of legislation on the matter, the most recent being in 1945. In 1939, a hearing that took place under Lord Chief Justice Bourne gave considerable guidance. I know that that took place in England, but, because it was on the same law as currently applies in Northern Ireland, it is still used by our courts. So, there is very strong and clear advice, which is that, if individuals carry out abortions — terminations of pregnancy — that are outside of the legislation, they are breaking the criminal law. In breaking the criminal law, they are subject to a sentence of up to life imprisonment. To that extent, those who are engaging in the Marie Stopes clinic would be well advised to observe the law. Some journalists might think that the law is a paper tiger, but that is because it has been largely observed. If some people think that they can get away with not observing the law, they may find that it is not a paper tiger but one with a lot of teeth. I caution any physician who would seek to challenge it.

Mr Wells: I understand that the courts have instructed the Minister to provide guidance on abortion, but does he accept that the issue is more for the Department of Justice than the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

Mr Poots: In so far as it is criminal law, it is very much a matter covered by criminal justice. As the Abortion Act 1967 does not apply in Northern Ireland, abortion here is regulated by criminal law and clarified by case law, as I identified. I have the responsibility for ensuring the health and social care of the population, and Minister Ford has the responsibility for the criminal law in Northern Ireland. We will provide the aftercare for women who have had an abortion, whether in Northern Ireland or elsewhere, but a lot of these matters are for criminal justice. I have instructed my Chief Medical Officer to contact the Chief Constable and the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice to indicate to them where we believe the law lies and to discover what action they intend to take.

Mr Beggs: It is evident that the Marie Stopes website promotes abortion. Will you confirm that, in the absence of guidance, there is no requirement for all other options to be presented by someone working in this field before abortion is presented as an option?

Mr Poots: We are back to the criminal law. If Marie Stopes is advising people that they can have an abortion before the period of nine weeks, as they indicate, and that it wishes to carry out abortions in instances where the life of the mother is not under threat and the permanent or long-term mental health of the woman involved is not impacted on, it would clearly be breaking the criminal law. I suggest that doing the latter in terms of mental health could not be

managed in a short period. I think that it will have to be done to royal college standards. Marie Stopes should be very cautious about what it does here, and we will ensure that the law is fulfilled.

Mr McDevitt: Given that the position of the SDLP and all major parties in the House is that we do not support the extension of the 1967 Act to this jurisdiction and that the context for termination within the current legal framework is very clear — a healthcare context — will the Minister please confirm to me that he considers it his duty to bring forward guidance? I appeal to him, in the interests of society and health, to do so at the earliest possible date.

Mr Poots: Yes, I do. It is my strong desire to bring forward very clear and adequate regulations. On a personal level, I want to do that, and I also want to do it because it is an instruction from the court, and I want to show due respect to the court. I have outlined previously the difficulties that we have, and my suspicion is that whatever guidelines we bring forward will be challenged by someone. It is very difficult, therefore, to ensure that they are bomb-proof when it comes to judicial reviews, because both previous sets of guidelines were overturned in court.

Mr McCarthy: Given that the organisation has come to Northern Ireland quite quietly and quickly, will the Minister explain why, if his Department knew about it, guidance and clarification was not issued as soon as he and the Department were aware that it was coming?

Mr Poots: I am not sure what the Member means by “guidance and clarification”; I do not know whether he is asking about the Marie Stopes clinic or about the two previous answers that I gave to other Members.

I am not exactly sure of the Alliance Party's position when it comes to Marie Stopes. Some members may welcome it; others may not be so welcoming of abortion coming to Northern Ireland. We will see who wins the day in the Alliance Party. We saw who won the day recently on other issues.

The Marie Stopes clinic may have been capable of being regulated. It depends on the nature of the work and those carrying it out. It can only be properly assessed when we get to this point, which is somewhat unfortunate. Nonetheless, we will make every effort to ensure that full and adequate regulation is applied to that organisation, and we will work very closely with all other organisations to ensure that that is the case.

We will seek to ensure that, in Northern Ireland, the law is not broken. We have made it very clear how the law stands in Northern Ireland on abortion. I am totally and wholly opposed to the application of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. Were the time reduced to 12 weeks, I would still be opposed to its application to Northern Ireland. That is the nature of it. I do not think that there is any appetite for abortion on demand in Northern Ireland. I trust that that will be the case in the future and that the Assembly will show due respect for the public.

Mr Agnew: Does the Minister agree with the law as it exists in Northern Ireland? If so, given that there are documented cases of women being unable to access services on the NHS due to the lack of guidelines for doctors, does he not agree that there is nothing to fear from the Marie Stopes clinic? Indeed, does he not welcome it, in that it will ensure that women are able to

access the health services that they are entitled to under the existing law?

Mr Poots: Over the last 45 years, since the 1967 Abortion Act was passed, in England, Scotland and Wales there have been 6.4 million abortions. That is more than 10% of the existing population of GB. In Northern Ireland, where the population is 1.8 million, that would equate to around 200,000 abortions. Regrettably, I understand, up to 50,000 women have travelled to England for an abortion, but the figure that is left is 150,000 people who are alive in Northern Ireland who might not otherwise have been alive. I expect that around half of them are women. You talk about choice: they are living a life in which they have the choice to marry or to have children and the choice of what work they do or what education they take up. Had they been aborted, they would not have any choice in life. So the term “pro choice” is really one that means “no choice” for thousands of children here and millions of children in GB. I will always resist the 1967 Abortion Act coming to Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Education Bill [NIA 14/11-15] be agreed. — [Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education).]

Mr Kinahan: I remind those who were not here beforehand that the Ulster Unionist Party opposes the Bill. We are concerned about what it hides. I described it as “Where’s Wally?” for politicians, with too much hidden from view. I am concerned that we have been betrayed by one side and possibly tricked by the other. We cannot risk getting this wrong.

Also, I finished the earlier part of the debate with a query about the heads of agreement. I just want it to be clear that last week in Committee, when I was asking what was meant by some of the words in that agreement, it was the Department that said that the heads of agreement were not finalised.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Can I just clarify something? I think, in fairness to my officials who were at the Committee meeting last week, any reference to the heads of agreements by them — I was not there so I do not know what was said verbatim — will refer to the clause that was referred to by the Chair of the Education Committee, which refers specifically to the heads of agreement. There is a view that that clause requires tidying up. My officials have not been instructed to suggest and, I believe, would not have suggested that the heads of agreement document itself was not complete. The legislation referring to the heads of agreement is not complete.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. Last week, I was grateful that departmental officials were there to give clarification on many matters, and it is good to hear that some things will be tidied up. I want to keep to my argument, so I will not take any more interruptions.

As we work through the Bill, which abolishes our education and library boards and three other bodies and sets out the roles for the new Education and Skills Authority, it seems to tick many boxes. It purports to give power to the boards of governors and trustees to allow their schools to maintain their ethos and manage their own schools. That all seems very good, but I can see no fewer than eight occasions — I am sure that there are many more — on which the Department seems to be able to overrule, override or force through change if it really wants to. That is why we oppose the Bill today.

I would like everyone to consider for a minute that, if we put all this legislation in place, with all the extra regulations and guidance — we were told earlier that there were 11 pieces to come through — in a few years we could have a complete change in politics here, and education could fall into the hands of a manic, driven, crazy fanatic. He or she could set about destroying all the schools to her or his agenda. That is not a pretty thought, but I want to make that point. Our job in the Assembly is to get things right

and to get the legislation right. That is why we oppose the Bill.

In the meeting with the Minister that the Committee Chair and I attended two weeks ago, when I raised my concerns that we seemed to be giving too much power to the Department — I was grateful for the meeting, but I might not be asked back after this — the Minister indicated that he envisaged the tribunals being very busy in the early stages of implementing the legislation. The more I thought about that, the more it began to horrify me. The Minister is envisaging many battles. Why? Does that mean that there is a lot that we have to be careful about in the Bill? That reinforced my concerns.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No. I said that I would not. That was a test.

I have indicated that I feel that the Department is too powerful, and yet this is the hardest matter to illustrate in such a speech as this when a Bill is so complex. If we consider the employment schemes, namely those laying out who is to be employed by the school, which the board of governors and/or the trustees must submit to ESA, it is not just ESA that will be checking that. On deciding whom to employ, there are four different clauses: one stating that the Department may issue guidance; another stating that statutory requirements must be complied with; another stating that revised schemes may be produced by the Department if required by it; and yet another — clause 9 — stating that the Department may require ESA to reconsider. Those are just four examples of a Department maybe having too much power, four different ways in which Sinn Féin can follow its own rules.

Let us go further and think about the appointment of ESA. The chair will be appointed by the Department, and it is very possible that at least nine of the other 20 members may all be on one side, should we, sadly, end up taking sides on this, which, of course, we are at the minute. On top of all of that, the Department needs approval from OFMDFM if it wishes to issue guidance on provisions on the schemes. So, if it is not agreed there, it can go to a tribunal appointed by OFMDFM. Think about it. Not even the First Minister really agrees with the powers we are putting through, as it was he, I assume, who insisted that the checks come back to his office. So we are back to a carve-up and share-out that is typical of OFMDFM, where, I remind everyone, Sinn Féin has equal power. It has equal power to set the rules, set the procedures and, in this case, appoint the judges and the jurors. I hope the House sees now why I am so sceptical. And that was only on employment schemes; we have not covered schemes of management and many other areas laid out in the Bill.

I will look now at the tribunals. Who appoints those? Again, they are appointed by OFMDFM. We have already seen how appointments may follow down one side of who supports whom. I would like to raise a question: who will pay for those tribunals? The schools will not have the funding to do so.

I move now to other matters and to area planning. This legislation provides for ESA to prepare or revise area plans, which, as we all know, are an essential part of the organisation of schooling. Yet we are in the middle of a tortuous area planning process for post-primary schools and will soon be in the middle of one for primary schools, where no meaningful consultation has happened, where

no overall plan seems to exist and where rumour and fear rule the roost. The Bill indicates that ESA will deliver such a bread-and-butter process as area planning, but I reinforce the point: there is no overall plan that we can see. It should be concentrating on what is in the Bill — achieving the best education for our children. I ask the Minister not only for a long-term strategy but for an overall plan in area planning. I wonder whether one exists.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I will carry on. Could we have consultation with teachers, staff, boards of governors, parents and maybe even the pupils themselves? At the stakeholder meeting held two weeks ago, the message was clear: the education bodies really do not know what is going on. No communication plan exists, and no one knows of the overall plan. We are meant to be in the middle of a consultation. I fear that it seems to be a bit of a farce.

ESA was consulted on in its previous form six years ago. Much has happened since then. Nearly half the children will be new to it, and a similar group will have left. Many in education will have changed or moved on, and many of the facets of our education system — we know that schools have been inundated with this — will also have changed. Will the Minister carry out a proper new consultation? In fact, will he lead the way and create a new method of consultation that reaches everyone, one that is not conducted only by e-mail, not aimed only at school principals and not laced with jargon? We want one that informs, explains and listens before it decides.

Our area planning seems determined to entrench our divided education sectors, as maintained schools join with maintained, controlled with controlled and so on. Is that the shared education our Programme for Government envisaged?

While I am on the subject of sectoral bodies, I will say that it is excellent to see that we have a sectoral body for the controlled sector. It is good to know that we have one for the maintained sector, although it is not in the Bill, and that we have one for the integrated sector, although it is not in the Bill. However, we have no sectoral body for the voluntary grammar sector, unless GBA becomes it, in which case it needs to be funded. We cannot have good legislation with so many inconsistencies. Will all sectoral bodies be put into the Bill, and will all of them be funded?

I move on to the transferring of employees. The Bill allows for all employees of the eight bodies to be combined under ESA. A great idea, but has anyone costed it? It looks like the gold-plating of the teaching unions. Think of all the different rules and pay levels in every organisation and the endless capacity that will exist to compare, raise and equalise pay. I must say that the unions are very important and are part of the system, but we are opening ourselves up to excessive cost. Has anyone actually looked at that cost? It also seems that the maintained system may still be able to avoid the fair employment legislation, yet the rest of us must follow it. Is it true that maintained system employees are not to be transferred? We need consistency in all sectors and the same rules for all.

When it comes to local management, we all appreciate the benefits of having one body, such as ESA, and welcome the slimming down and the economies of scale. However, we also know the differing needs of parts of Northern Ireland. Fermanagh has different needs from Antrim, and

both of them differ from Belfast, although neither comes near Antrim as being a great place to live.

We are all aware of the need to preserve our communities and, to an extent, rural proof any changes in education. The Department has indicated that it will have local offices. What will the cost of those be? Where will they be? While we are on that, Massereene in Antrim is available. We were told that the ESA would save £40 million. Will it? When I look at the costs coming through in pay and offices, I wonder. Anyway, food for thought.

The Bill allows inspections on any matter felt necessary at any time and reports in any manner that the Department feels suitable. To me, that is quite terrifying. School principals are already under appalling pressure with the present system. Now, we are trying to pile more pressure onto an already overloaded system. The chief inspector assured me that the inspectorate was independent, and yet its employees are appointed by the Department, the standards are set by the Department, and all the reports go to the Department. Now, we have in the Bill a panel of laypeople to be appointed by the Department, all to be part of the inspection system. Again, it smacks of too much power in Sinn Féin's hands in the Department. We all must recognise that we have the highest standards of education and professional practice, and we need inspection to put that in place. However, the inspectorate must get its own organisation and get its act together. It must create a more comfortable assessment system for teachers. It must not destroy its evidence. It must have no preconceived ideas of the school or of the actions it will take when it gets there. It must be transparent at all times. I go back to the beginning of what I said on inspection: it must be totally independent.

If we look at the assets in schools, we see that CCMS is to hand all its assets to ESA. Yet I cannot quite get my head around exactly what is going on here. We have helped finance the whole of the maintained system so that it is in good order and are now handing it over to ESA. Are we compensating the Church or Churches? Indeed, are we going to spend the same amount of money on the controlled or integrated sectors? We certainly seem to spend a great deal on the Irish language sector. As in area planning, that seems to be a sectarian carve-up. Here we see that being hinted at all over again, with the controlled sector as the poor cousins. Clause 2(5) could be read in such a way that all grant-aided schools should encourage and facilitate the development of Irish speaking. It depends how you read it, but that is the sort of point that is wrong in the Bill, and we need to get clarity.

4.00 pm

The Bill also gives ESA a commercial role. I would like the Minister to tell us more about what he means by that. Is that just a nice bit of branding and advertising around our sports pitches, or is it something that will allow it to raise more funds through advertising and other commercial ventures? We need to know more about exactly what it is opening us all up to.

You will probably all agree that I have gone on for long enough, but I have only one more page left. If the boot were on the other foot, would you want this legislation in place in the form that it is coming forward today? We know that Sinn Féin does not like grammar schools. We know that it does not like the power of the church and, to some

extent it seems, the maintained sector. We know that it does not like the voluntary grammar sector, and it does not like the Dickson plan. In fact, if anything is good and is successful, somehow Sinn Féin does not seem to like it.

We need this Bill, but there is much more that we need, and we have to get it right. We need a proper, agreed, long-term strategy and policies and plans that all fit together, especially as we have, ongoing at the moment, the entitlement framework coming in, the common funding formula being reviewed, special educational needs legislation, the new assessment system coming on board, area planning, as I have mentioned, GCSEs and changes to that being reviewed, and, looming behind it all, the spectre of a cross-border dimension. I put it to all of you here that this Bill is a licence for Sinn Féin to destroy our education system. Is that what you want? It is not what the Ulster Unionist Party wants. We oppose the Bill.

Mr Rogers: I declare an interest as chair of the board of governors of Grange Primary School. Before I start, I wish to acknowledge the good work done by the boards, CCMS and the other bodies in helping to administer our education system over the years. However, there is a case for change.

The ESA journey has been a long one. No one will argue with the review of public administration, which the Executive launched in 2002 with the aim to deliver modernisation and reform across the public sector. RPA suggested the need for a new single education and skills authority. It seems to make sense when you compare Northern Ireland with authorities such as Birmingham. Why do we need so many bodies frequently overlapping to provide our education services? We have five education and library boards, staff commissions, CCMS, the Youth Service and the voluntary sector, which deal directly with the Department. I have just one cautionary note: Northern Ireland is not Birmingham.

It took years to get it to the Executive, and, in sharp contrast, it flew through the Executive, which would lead one to speculate that some sort of deal was done. We hear the Member who spoke previously, and we listen to political commentators say that Sinn Féin now owns the ball on the pitch and the fixture list. It has been said that, in the party's strive for education, it has left little to chance. ESA will implement education policy made by John O'Dowd.

It is somewhat strange that the biggest issue on our education system — selection — has not been addressed in the Bill. Whatever about selection, ESA acknowledges the need for education and financial change. I was in a different place in the education debate at that stage, encouraged that, possibly, I would have just one circular to read instead of three and heartened by the chief executive designate's statement that it would deliver more resources to the classroom. However, the reality is that schools now get three circulars where one would do. Less money is getting to the classroom. There is a half-baked area plan and a culture of constant change — InCAS out, new assessment methods in, GCSEs possibly out, EBacc possibly in. Our school estate is crumbling. Millions have been spent on ESA with nothing to show for it.

Before I address the main points of the Bill, I want to refer to the three most important groups in this whole education debate — the pupils, parents and teachers. It is important

to recognise that what this Bill is about is enshrined in clause 2. It is about giving our children the best start in life. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child places a responsibility on the Executive to consider the rights of the child. That emphasis requires the system, structure and content of education to adapt. It provides a framework within which ESA can contribute to the all-round development of our children and young people.

I appreciate the constraints under which the Minister is working. It is a case of doing more with less money. Our spending profile on children and young people is imbalanced, with little spending on the early years at primary level and more spending at post-primary level. In the past, early education was provided in the home. Children went to primary school age five, and the majority of them then left school age 16 and went to work. Today, we live in a different society. Many parents need the help of organisations such as Sure Start to help them develop parenting skills. Children attend nursery or play groups and begin primary school age four, and the majority of them stay in full-time education until age 18 and beyond. Suspensions and expulsions were unheard of in the past, but today they are a common occurrence. It was unheard of for children to be out of control at seven years of age. However, many of our young people now enter the criminal justice system early in their teenage years.

We cannot underestimate the effect of the Troubles on our education system. Fathers, mothers and children were killed or maimed unnecessarily over the past 50 years. During that period, the only bit of normality that existed was the school day. As the Bill moves forward, we must keep our children at the core of it. We need to get this right early on. Parents who need parenting support must get those skills. Locally accessible preschool provision, where children are taught how to play and learn the basics of literacy and numeracy, should be there for everyone.

We now come to what, in my mind, is the most important stage in any child's education: Key Stage 1, where good or bad habits are established. Many children and parents need extra help, and that is where we need to get numeracy and literacy right. I welcome the recent announcement of extra teachers, but nurture programmes need to be more widespread. Educationalists will tell you that if the right attitudes are not developed by the end of Key Stage 1, it becomes a difficult struggle. Early intervention is the key. Our system has ground to a halt because of bureaucracy. It takes up to four months to get a child statemented and an education recovery plan in place.

To all our students who work hard at school, year by year, and achieve their potential, be it in the exam hall, on the stage or on the sports field, well done. To their parents, the greater the parental involvement, the better the outcomes for all our children. Many parents need some encouragement and help in getting involved in their child's education. Education is not just the schools' prerogative. All parts of the Executive have their part to play in ensuring that parents play a supportive role in their child's education. I must pay tribute to all the hard-working teachers who work under extreme pressure and who give their all day after day, many in difficult circumstances.

Minister, when you visit schools, you do not see the stressed-out teacher who is teaching a composite class of 20 P3 and P4 children with a range of special needs and who has to deal with the added stress of a new computer-

based assessment system that does not work. You do not see the teacher who has to go to her classroom early in the morning to empty the basins that catch the drips from another night's rain. Many of our schools at the minute are preparing for Halloween shows, and many children were in schools over the weekend preparing for that. Sometimes, we only see the results. We do not think of the teacher who eats his sandwich while giving children a bit of extra help at lunchtime.

Parental choice is very important and must be protected. Parents may choose to send their children to a Protestant school or a Catholic school, to an all-ability school or a grammar school, or to an integrated school, an Irish-medium school, a special school or whatever. Last week, we had a debate on education in the south Down area. Parents there want one all-ability school in the area for their children. I attended a meeting in St Aidan's in Derrylin last Thursday night, where the people in the packed hall gave their unqualified support for a cross-sectoral multi-campus approach to post-primary education in south-east Fermanagh. Those parents must be listened to. Just because it is rural and far away from this House does not mean the request is any less valid. Many children in my constituency travel to Coláiste Feirste for Irish-medium education. Many travel 20 or 30 miles to go to integrated schools because that is what they want.

In terms of roles and responsibilities, I welcome the commitment in the Bill to the development of all children. The term educational services covers preschool education right through to further education. It is good to see the promotion of high standards of achievement spelled out. I welcome the duty to promote Irish-medium education while it is not necessarily spelled out for other sectors. For example, the Department of Education's responsibility under the Education Reform Act and the Belfast Agreement to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education seems to be omitted.

ESA will be the employer of all staff. We talked about the employing authority and whatever and there is quite a bit of confusion around that. There seems to be a significant departure from the present situation where we have a mixture of employing authorities: the education and library boards, CCMS and the voluntary schools and the grant-maintained. The critical departure for the voluntary grammars is the ability to employ all their staff. They have argued that the failure to contemplate an opt-out clause for those schools that have always employed their own staff changes the essential purpose of their schools, although that is being addressed to some extent in section 3 and by heads of agreement.

There appears to be an additional duty to be placed on the trustees of voluntary schools, who will have due regard to the views of boards of governors when drawing up schemes of management. What weighting will be given to the board of governors' views by the trustees or vice versa?

The Irish-medium sector should also have a recognised submitting authority. Although there have been some briefings to trustees of various sectors, the Irish-medium sector has not had that choice.

Employment schemes —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Rogers: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: I met all sectors over the past 10 days and briefed them all about the ESA Bill. I informed them that my officials will be available to them to discuss all aspects of the Bill, including the Irish-medium sector.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Minister. The preparation of employment schemes will affect the workload of governors. Will governors receive the training? Will anyone want to become a governor? What are the implications for the board of governors if an Irish-medium school becomes unsustainable?

The implication is there that the Department of Education can modify employment law without Assembly approval. The Education Committee recommended that no modification could be made without a draft of the order being approved by the Assembly. I hope that will be the case.

Area planning is an important statutory function of the Bill. The current area planning work that has been contemplated by the boards, although important in itself, is only the starting point. It highlights the danger of adopting a secular approach to planning and the education estate. It has essentially been reduced, like quite a few things in Northern Ireland, to a sectarian headcount: a maintained area plan; a controlled area plan. Concerns expressed to me include how will areas be decided and will they be based on the new council areas. Unlike the current area plans, will they take account of neighbouring areas or cross-border provision?

What we have are sectoral area plans with little mention of, never mind an aspiration for, shared education. Will they use the same criteria to determine the adequacy of current provision? It seems very strange that a criterion such as effective leadership has been omitted from the present area planning process. Education should always be about promoting effective leadership. What data and indicators will be used to predict future trends? Is this reactive planning to accommodate today's empty desks or is it being proactive, meeting the needs of five or 10 years hence?

The area plan must detail all education provision in the area, preschool, primary, post-primary, special and further education. Our current plans bear no mention of further education, although many young people attend further education as part of the entitlement framework or on a day release programme. It is not good enough to say that a different Department — the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) — will deal with things. Why should statemented children not receive the same level of support when they continue their education at a further education college? It is not the college's fault but the system's.

4.15 pm

To what extent is community-based planning part of the process? Schools depend on community and a community depends on schools. To what extent will the plans be rural-proofed? That is why I said earlier that Birmingham is not Northern Ireland. To what extent have the recommendations of the rural White Paper been taken on board? There is a rightful emphasis on social disadvantage, but what about rural disadvantage? To have access to services, a car is a necessity. That will set you back £5,000 to £8,000 a year. There needs to be a similar emphasis on rurality, whether we speak of education or health provision.

If you follow the Department's line on viability, what does it mean for schools such as St Aidan's High School in Derrylin? What does it mean for Fermanagh, where very few of the post-primary schools, half of the controlled primary schools and over half of the maintained primary schools would satisfy the enrolment criteria? Indeed, what does it mean for rural Northern Ireland? It would be devastating for our rural schools — the heart and soul of our rural communities — and would have a major economic impact, never mind a social one, with additional travel time for our students, the risk of family flight, an ageing population remaining, lower-income families left behind in increased welfare dependency, less access to public services and continuing polarisation of our communities. Therefore, I repeat that plans like that for St Aidan's for a cross-sectoral multi-campus proposal for post-primary education in south-east Fermanagh need to be explored fully and given the support that they deserve.

One of the underlying principles of the Bill is equality: equality of access to education, irrespective of whether you live in BT9 or BT90. I just wonder what the ESA Bill means about consultation. Is it the real and meaningful consultation that we had with the Minister on the special educational needs reforms or is it the consultation that we had on area planning? I, and the Education Committee, asked for an extension to allow wider opportunities for consultation on area planning, but that did not happen. A Member who spoke previously mentioned the very worthwhile stakeholder event that we held here, at which we saw the passion of people right across the North when discussing area-based planning.

I welcome the fact that the ESA will have a wider Northern Ireland perspective, but stakeholders must be listened to. Time will tell whether "ESA" does not really stand for the "Economics and Statistics Association". Although I acknowledge that we are living in very difficult times and that the Minister's budget is severely curtailed, educational viability does not equate to the Department's definition of a "viable school". Area planning cannot simply become a number-crunching exercise. We must take on board the view of all sectors out there, whether they be Irish medium, integrated or whatever.

It is essential that the ESA Bill be clear and unambiguous on the management of grant-aided schools. In the case of the Catholic bishops, the Bill should enable the Catholic sector to function with some degree of cohesion. Without it, small rural schools will become even more isolated. The preparation of a scheme of management will be a new role for most boards of governors or trustees to perform, and consideration needs to be given to simplifications for boards of governors and trustees. The relationship between the trustees and boards of governors is important in drawing up the schemes. Is there not a duty on boards of governors of Irish-medium schools to secure viability? What implications will there be for the board of governors if the school is unsustainable?

I welcome the reference to "ethos" in the Irish-medium sector, but that needs to be spelt out for all school types. Ethos is very distinctive, whatever the school type, be it Catholic, Protestant, integrated or whatever. The Catholic bishops highlight the fact that nowhere in the Bill is there a reference to or description of what a Catholic school may be. There needs to be such a statement — a definition —

of who decides what a Catholic school is. In fact, there is no reference to faith schools in the Bill.

In the heads of agreement, there seems to be a contradiction between the ESA being the single employing authority and stating that nothing in the new arrangements will undermine the principle that, where it is already the case, boards of governors will continue to employ and dismiss members of staff.

As regards the promotion of high standards, the ESA Bill is really putting the current guidance for boards of governors into statute. The key question is how that will be assessed. Will end-of-Key-Stage assessments or value-added or benchmarking data be used? There is certainly a duty on boards of governors to be committed to the ethos of Irish-medium education. The same must apply to all other schools.

With regard to inspections, the new legislation widens the remit of the inspectorate. The focus is certainly on inspection, rather than on advising schools and youth services. It moves from a curriculum inspection to an establishment inspection. Teachers have already expressed many concerns about the inspection process. It really looks as though the inspection process is becoming an MI5 operation. A previous Member talked about concern in schools when there is an inspection. I want to reiterate that: teachers are very stressed when inspections are on. With an even bigger role for the inspectorate, stress will increase.

There are extra duties on governors. I would have thought that schools updated their school development plans automatically on receiving their inspection reports. It is difficult to see where the inspectorate fits in. Will it be part of the Department of Education or the ESA? Is it the beginning of a new independent service? I would welcome that. The inspectorate needs to be seen as an aid to raising standards because, in general terms, inspections are necessary. However, they must not be carried out in a manner that causes added stress.

The tribunal is an acknowledgement that, due to the complexity of the Bill, it is unlikely that full clarity will be achieved before the Bill passes into law. Difficulties would become that body's responsibility.

As regards the sectoral bodies, again, the language is purposefully vague. What is meant by:

"to represent the interests of schools of that description"?

There appears to be sectoral bodies for Catholic trustees and transferors, the integrated sector and Irish-medium education. However, the voluntary sector, which represents 33% of schoolchildren, has no sectoral body. Perhaps, Patrick Murphy's comments in the 'Irish News' on 6 October 2012 are credible. The biggest losers are the grammar schools, which now enter the mainstream administration. Will the Catholic/Protestant sectoral body be similar to CCMS? Will it have offices in each county or dioceses? Will there be funding? What is the point of having such a body if it has not got the wherewithal to ensure that it is effective?

As it is presently constituted, the ESA board does not reflect a commitment to equality of representation. The absence of representation from the integrated

movement suggests that consideration has not been given to obligations under the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Belfast Agreement to promote integrated education. Similarly, there is a complete absence of any representation from the voluntary sector. Although Irish-medium education is promoted in the Bill, it is, again, not represented on the board.

In conclusion, if the purpose of legislation is to ensure higher standards and administrative efficiencies and to release a greater share of the education budget directly to schools, why is there such emphasis throughout the legislation on the increased role of the ESA compared with that of the educational and library boards? A greater role will need greater resources. The amalgamation of the boards to increase administrative effectiveness is welcome. Why does the Bill go beyond that and introduce a command structure when the direction of travel in England is the opposite? Why is there so much control? If we write the ethos of one sector into the Bill, the unique ethos of other sectors should be protected. Finally, what savings have been achieved through the introduction of the legislation? The SDLP will support the Bill. However, we will interrogate it at every Stage and in the Committee.

Ms Lo: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the passage of the Bill at this Stage. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Cranmore Integrated Primary School.

My party is glad to see the Education Bill finally come before the Assembly for debate and discussion. It has been a long time since the 2005 proposals and the first draft in 2008-9. It has been seven years from when this was first suggested to eventually making some progress on the issue. The delay in the Bill has been one of the worst examples of the DUP and Sinn Féin's political posturing over major issues. Those who work in the education sector, particularly in the education boards, will welcome an element of clarity over what might happen to their jobs. They do not care about political wrangling, but the uncertainty over ESA and the inability to plan long term has really hampered the ability of the education boards to function to their full potential. Hopefully, we never again see this type of situation, in which vital legislation is held up for years by politicking.

The people of Northern Ireland expect us to tackle important and difficult issues head on and with maturity, so it is most welcome that we are at last getting the opportunity to do that with the Education Bill. The Alliance Party welcomes the opportunities that the Bill and the formation of the Education and Skills Authority bring, such as streamlining education provision, realising economies of scale, the standardisation of school support across Northern Ireland and the delivery of services in a more efficient manner. We also welcome the moving of appointments to boards of governors from the Minister to ESA. However, we greet that with a note of caution: we will be interested to see how the consultation with the relevant sectoral body will work and what exactly that means for the selection process.

Clause 54 refers to the duty of CCEA to pay regard to the needs of industry while discharging its functions. That is welcome. However, we look forward to seeing how that will work in practice. For example, who determines the needs of industry? Perhaps formal structures should be created to formalise the link between CCEA and industry

on a sector-wide basis. It is important that the school curriculum meets the skill needs of those in the business community. Achieving that will have a massive impact on the employability skills of our young people and will pave the way for long-term economic growth.

All that being said, we have a number of reservations about the Bill, which I will lay out. My party will take the opportunity to further scrutinise and consider them during the Committee Stage of the Bill and as it progresses through the various legislative stages in the Chamber.

We have some reservations about the make-up of the ESA board. From its inception, it will be divided along political and sectoral lines. Segregation is a major issue in our education system as it currently stands. To see that disjointedness being institutionalised in the board of ESA is disappointing. We see no need to have as many as eight political representatives on the board other than political expediency. Added to the four transferors and four trustees, we have a situation in which over half of the board will represent the interests of their perceived sectors. We will rely on the four other representatives and the chairman for total objectivity. The board will also, thanks to its make-up and representation, have massive emphasis and focus on the controlled and maintained sectors.

Why were just those sectors chosen for representation? If any sector is to be represented on the board, should all sectors not be included? From that, we fear that the board has been planned from a political perspective, rather than being designed as an effective education and skills management body. On balance, we believe that the majority of those on the board of ESA should be there as of merit and on the basis of an open public recruitment procedure, rather than representing particular sectoral interests. The creation of ESA represents a chance for Northern Ireland to shape its education system for the needs of the 21st century. Therefore, its board should model the future shape of our education system and not reflect its currently divided nature. My party looks forward to scrutinising that part of the Bill to ensure that the board is selected on merit and made up in the best interests of education in Northern Ireland and not just in the specific interests of particular sectors or political interests.

4.30 pm

It will come as no surprise to the Minister or anyone else in the Chamber that the Alliance Party is disappointed that the Bill places no duty on ESA to encourage greater sharing and integration in our education system. That is despite the fact that all major polls show that the public has a preference and a desire to see more opportunities for shared education. The 2010 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey showed that 74% of parents would prefer their children to be educated in a mixed school, and one of the single biggest things we could do to tackle the segregation and sectarianism that pervade our society would be to educate our children and young people together. Through the Bill, the House could make a massive statement to the people of Northern Ireland that we fundamentally believe that our education system must move in the direction of one that has sharing and integration at its core. We have an opportunity to do that through the Bill. We do not want to look back at missed

opportunities, nor simply continue to, on the whole, educate our children along segregated lines.

The Bill singles out boards of governors of Irish-medium schools as having a duty to ensure that their schools are viable. Why is that just levelled at the Irish-medium sector? It is unclear why that sector has been singled out on that issue. The Minister appears to be making a clear point that he would rather see Irish-medium schools survive than those from any other sector, particularly integrated and shared schools, which, as I outlined, would make the biggest and most positive impact on our society. Similarly, we note in the Bill that:

"ESA shall ensure that its functions relating to grant-aided schools are...exercised with a view to encouraging and facilitating the development of education provided in an Irish speaking school."

We would like to understand why Irish language schools have been singled out in that manner. If one sector is being singled out above others, the reason for that needs to be spelled out. On the other hand, the Bill provides the Department and ESA with the opportunity to put to the fore and reinstate the commitment to shared and integrated education, as stated in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and the Good Friday Agreement.

As the Youth Council for Northern Ireland will be absorbed into ESA, the lack of reference to youth services in the Bill is worrying to the Alliance Party. The Youth Council does excellent and important work in supporting our children and young people.

The characteristics of the Youth Council are distinct and unique in many ways: the majority of the workforce are volunteers and participation in youth-work provision is voluntary. There is also a number of vital youth services that go beyond formal education. It is therefore essential that it is not swallowed up within ESA, forgotten about and passed over.

Several clauses in the Bill could require ESA to take action at the Department's determination. Some people may wonder what the point of ESA is if the Department can direct it to do its bidding. Although it is not unusual for a sponsoring Department to require a sponsor body to do certain things, there is a case for including a definition in the legislation of when this may be the case; for example, the conditions for when an area plan may be revoked could be laid out clearly.

Despite raising these concerns, my party will support the Bill as I have said, and we look forward to scrutinising it carefully in the Education Committee.

Miss M McIlveen: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Castle Gardens Primary School in Newtownards and Killinchy Primary School.

I speak in broad support of the principles of the Bill. It is by no means a perfect Bill, and I believe that there will be a lot of hard work for the Education Committee in the coming weeks and months. Those who were Members of the Assembly in its previous mandate, particularly those who served on the Education Committee, will have been acquainted with this Bill's wayward cousin. I said at the Second Stage debate on that Bill that it could have marked the most important and fundamental rationalisation that we had seen in education in Northern Ireland, but that, if

it were to have been handled incorrectly, we could have seen one of the biggest tragedies in education, which could have ruined a generation of pupils. This legislation is an opportunity for this Assembly and this Minister to demonstrate a capability to put aside party politics and sectarian policies, and take a step towards creating the framework for an education system that is fit for purpose, cost-efficient and non-discriminatory.

There is no doubt that, from the point of view of Members on this side of the Chamber, the earlier Bill was handled incorrectly by the Department and the previous Minister. So much was wrong with that Bill that, prior to it being withdrawn by the previous Minister, a total of 104 amendments were tabled: 44 of those amendments came from the Department of Education; 15 from the Education Committee; 16 from the DUP; 13 from the UUP; 14 from the SDLP; and two from the Alliance Party. This party had a further 28 amendments to be tabled when the news came through that the Bill, if not dead, was on life-support with a "do not resuscitate" sign hanging from it.

The 44 amendments coming from the Department at that time were an acknowledgement that the Bill simply was not right. Going back to that debate on the previous Bill, I warned, as did others, that the Minister should not adopt an approach of digging in her heels, but take time to listen, digest, rationally consider and hopefully adopt any reasonable suggestions that the Education Committee and other Members may have had in relation to the legislation. She was warned about being aggressive and dogmatic, and told how that achieves nothing but an aggressive and dogmatic response. Unfortunately, those warnings were not heeded, and it has taken us almost four years to come to this point once more.

Once again, we have an Education Bill before us. The first question that comes to mind is what is in this Bill that makes us support it where we could not support it previously. This is a very different Education Bill, and I would like to highlight a few of those differences as well as outlining a few areas in the Bill where clarity needs to be provided and changes perhaps made, which can hopefully be done through its Committee Stage. From my work on the previous Bill, I can appreciate the complexity of the issues involved in this legislation. It is by no means an easy and straightforward task, and while those of us who served on the Committee previously can bring a certain amount of experience and knowledge with us, this is, as I said, a very different Bill. It is essential that the Education Committee has all the time that it needs to scrutinise it properly.

As a general point, I welcome the fact that we are considering a single, consolidated Bill. The previous proposed legislation was to have been split in two. That, of itself, would not have been too great a problem, but we were not to be shown the second Bill until we had cleared the first. Nothing engenders suspicion more than being instructed to lay the foundations for something and not be shown what is to be built on them. It would have been exceptionally poor corporate governance for the Assembly to have allowed that to happen. However, that is what the previous Education Minister expected. Nevertheless, I am pleased that we are able to have a consolidated Bill that allows us to concentrate on what is in front of us, and not try to second-guess what may lie ahead.

As the Chairman indicated, one of the primary concerns that we had, as a party, was that the controlled sector was to have been put at a clear disadvantage compared to other sectors in education in Northern Ireland. That was an incredible proposition, given that the controlled sector is the largest sector in Northern Ireland, so while the ethos of other schools was to have been protected, the ethos of controlled schools was to fall by the wayside. Although other sectors already had sectoral bodies that ESA could consult, the controlled sector had none and there was significant feet dragging in ensuring that one would be established. I am pleased to note that this Bill recognises that sectoral bodies are to be consulted for all grant-aided schools with regard to a number of ESA activities contained in the Bill.

Clause 63 of the Bill also refers to what a "sectoral body" is. Although this is, in principle, a welcome difference, I look forward to the Committee scrutinising the detail of how this works in practice. A number of questions need to be asked. What is envisaged as the list of sectoral bodies referred to in the Bill? Essentially, what sectors will they represent? Clause 63 talks about a sectoral body as being "recognised", but what are the criteria for that happening? What does the phrase grant-aided schools "of a particular description" mean in layman's terms? What will funding be for these sectoral bodies? How will funding be managed? Will the sectoral bodies be given any guidance as to their functions and how such functions will be exercised? What is the timescale for the establishment of a sectoral body to represent the controlled sector and which sectoral body will represent the voluntary sector?

As I understand it, the controlled sector will have a sectoral body that is established under article 115 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, while the Catholic sector will have a trustee support body (TSB) to represent its interests. The TSB will be consulted on matters affecting the Catholic voluntary grammars and maintained schools. NICIE and CnaG will become sectoral bodies for the integrated and Irish-medium sectors respectively. However, what sectoral body will there be to represent the interests of non-Catholic voluntary grammars? Given that the Bill refers to consulting with the relevant sectoral interests in decisions related to voluntary grammars, I would expect a body representing non-Catholic grammars to be recognised by the Department. I am also interested in clarification about what happens if a school or group of schools believe that the sectoral body is not representing their interests accurately.

The board was a further issue of concern under the old Bill. ESA was potentially an uncontrolled body, with a potentially unrepresentative board. Given that ESA's board was the check on its activities, it would have been vital to get that board right. Under the old Bill, the board was made up of a chair and between seven and 11 other members. The majority of those members — between four and six — were to have been councillors, all of whom were to have been appointed by the Department. It is difficult to be representative with such a small board, and, given the track record of board appointees by those on the Benches opposite, I am glad to say that the Department does not have carte blanche on appointments under the current Bill. Furthermore, I am pleased to note that the board that is envisaged under this Bill will be much wider and much more representative.

The board that is proposed under this Bill will be a chair, to be appointed by the Department; eight persons to be nominated by the parties; and 12 other appointees, including four representing the transferors, four representing the trustees of maintained schools and four being representative of the community.

I am particularly pleased to note that the transferors have a place on the board as of right. That is a key issue that was fought for and secured by this party. While the current sectoral divisions exist in education in Northern Ireland, how unfair and inequitable would it be to have the ethos of every other sector protected and represented and the transferors excluded?

4.45 pm

We previously secured a concession under the old Bill that the transferors would be able to retain their places on boards of governors. Now we have managed to secure their right to have a say about the plans for the school estate. When the transferors passed the school estate on to the state, they did so on the understanding that they would have a place on the various education boards as of right, yet, under the previous Bill, that right was to be extinguished. I am particularly pleased to see that it is now to be maintained.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Does the Member also agree that, in the previous Bill, it was proposed that a holding body would be established, which would become the organisation responsible for owning the controlled estate? That would have added another layer of bureaucracy. However, under this Bill, ESA will have responsibility for the controlled estate.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for that point. To go back to the point about the board, the issue of the number of voluntary grammar schools still has to be raised. It would be welcome if representatives of that sector were included on the board, and perhaps that is something that could be looked at during Committee Stage. It is important that the board reflects the balance of society and the balance of sectors.

Obvious concerns have arisen as a result of the Lennon case, and regarding other appointments made by Sinn Féin-held ministries. The Northern Ireland public and I will have to be convinced that there will be a robust and fair system of appointment for the four members who will represent the community of Northern Ireland. As we all know in the House, the Northern Ireland community is a varied and multi-faceted thing. What process will the Department use to appoint those members? What criteria will be used to assess how those appointed are representative of the community in Northern Ireland? How can we be assured that it will not simply be a mechanism for the Education Minister to seek to influence the decision-making and strategic direction of the board?

It is interesting to note that officials advised the Education Committee on Wednesday that they were to begin the appointment process as soon as the Bill passes Second Stage, which is perhaps somewhat presumptuous. I would like the Minister to consider that point.

A significant change in the Bill, which, again, is to be welcomed, is the removal of the power of ESA to impose modified schemes on schools without redress. We

recall that, under the previous Bill, ESA would approve a scheme of management or employment with or without modifications, and it only had a duty to consult with the Catholic trustees or, in other cases, the board of governors of the school. Now ESA can approve a scheme without modification, but where modifications cannot be agreed with the submitting authority, it must be referred to a tribunal.

In addition to this, the boards of governors of all relevant schools now have the right to refer the scheme to a tribunal to test for compatibility with the heads of agreement. That welcome and important check has been put in place for the benefit of boards of governors that are not the submitting authorities for their school. It seeks to ensure fairness for schools of whatever type.

Another important change is the removal of the unfettered power of ESA to prepare guidance and model schemes. Under the new Bill, it is now the Department, under the approval of OFMDFM, that has that power. Under the previous Bill, ESA was an unwieldy beast that simply had too much power.

It is a welcome change that CCEA will not be abolished and subsumed into ESA. I previously felt that, as one of ESA's roles was to ensure that efficient and effective primary and secondary education and that educational services are available to meet the needs of such children and young persons, it should not, therefore, be the body that sets exams and assesses achievement as well. It really is quite a clear conflict of interest. That said, I am concerned with the caveat in the papers we received from the Department stating that that is the case for the time being.

My colleague Mervyn Storey covered well his and our party's continued concern about the role and position of the inspectorate. I am confident that we will return to that at Committee Stage.

I notice that the Department has opted to retain the provision in schedule 7 whereby the word "educational" is to be removed from article 17A(2)(g) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. What that does, in effect, is grant the Department power to make regulations about how schools keep, disclose and transfer all records about pupils and not merely educational ones, as is currently the case. The fear that has been expressed from some quarters is that that will give the Department huge scope for gathering information on pupils. That has already been highlighted to the Department, but we are yet to receive a satisfactory response as to why that amendment is being made. I ask the Minister to provide some clarity on that issue. It will certainly be a matter that will concern the Committee in due course.

One of the main issues that remains outstanding and is pertinent to the provisions of the Bill is the continued teachers' exception from the provisions of fair employment legislation. Since 1976, fair employment legislation has not applied to the employment of teachers in schools. That allows schools to lawfully discriminate on the grounds of religious belief in the appointment of teachers in schools. That exception applies only to the recruitment of teachers following the implementation of the European framework directive. It was affirmed in the 2007 Court of Appeal case of Beatrice Debast and Caroline Flynn v Dr Malcolmson, Laurelhill Community College and the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB).

The exception also extends to excluding schools from monitoring the community background of their teaching staff. Schools are also not required to review their teaching workforces or employment policies and practices that affect teaching staff. That means that they do not have to take into consideration whether they are providing fair participation to Protestant and Roman Catholic teachers.

It is worth noting the concerns that existed at the time that the exception first came into being under the 1976 Order. A report by Seamus Dunne and Tony Gallagher, who is known to us all, commissioned by the Equality Commission in 2004 stated:

"Roman Catholic educational interests were concerned that, without an exception for teachers, the 1976 Act could eventually lead to a system of non-denominational education, with a resulting loss of Catholic ethos. On the other hand, Protestant educational interests had a very different concern. They were concerned that, without an exception, Protestant teachers would be placed in an unduly unfavourable position. They believed that the state education system would come within the scope of the legislation, while the maintained schools, which are in the main Catholic, would not ... as they could conceivably claim that religion was a bona fide occupational qualification. In other words, Roman Catholics would have a right to equality of opportunity in state schools but Protestants would not have the right to equality of opportunity in Catholic schools."

Following an investigation, the Equality Commission recommended that the exception be narrowed to restrict it to teachers in mainstream primary schools. The commission's opinion remains the same to this day. However, from a personal perspective, I would prefer the exception to be removed altogether.

The basis for the commission's opinion was its consideration that the genuine occupational exception permitted under veto in 1998 would exempt many other posts in the maintained sector than the controlled sector, and accordingly reduce the relative opportunity for Protestant teachers. The commission further recommended that teachers be included in monitoring and review requirements, as are all other occupations, as it would ensure that the benefits of annual data collection and rigour of regular review are brought to the teaching workforce as well as all other employment groups.

This issue is relevant to the Bill on two grounds. First, the single employing authority is a centrepiece provision of the Bill. As I stated, the apparent intention of ESA to be the single employing authority is to not only ensure that common employment policies are applicable throughout the grant-aided teaching profession but to facilitate easier sideways movement between the sectors for staff. Yet, without an amendment to the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order (FETO), there remains a stumbling block to that sideways movement, particularly for Protestant teachers. Officials have acknowledged that clause 3, under which the single employing authority is established, requires modification. However, the Department's timescale for bringing forward those proposals remains unclear. Obviously, the Committee would like to see those at the earliest possible opportunity, particularly in light of the concerns that exist in various sectors.

Secondly, clauses 24 to 27 refer to area planning. Essentially, that is code for ESA's plans for the rationalisation of the school estate. Concerns have already been raised around the Chamber in this debate about the status of voluntary grammar schools in that process. Indeed, there are issues around that whole process. That said, the Minister has already conducted an audit of schools, which he said was a precursor to area planning. While he tells us that it is not the case that a school that is demonstrating stress will close, it is surely inevitable that, under area planning, there will be closures.

Mr O'Dowd: Is the Member seriously suggesting that our current school estate is fit for purpose and that schools should stay open because they are currently open? Members will have to accept that our school estate needs to be rationalised. Unfortunately, that will mean school closures, but if it is the right thing to do, it has to be done.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for that intervention. We are all very well aware of the issues around the school estate and the need for rationalisation. However, the point that needs to be made is about the movement of teachers across the sectors. I am going to focus on the issues around FETO. FETO needs to be addressed to allow the movement of teachers across the sectors.

Several years ago, the deputy First Minister told us during Question Time to wait for the outcome of the former Education Minister's review into teaching opportunities before taking any decisions about the teachers' exception. We were told that in October 2009. A joint Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning consultation ran between June and November 2010, entitled 'Teacher Education in a Climate of Change: The Way Forward'. That did not, however, contain anything about the removal of the teacher exception. We are still waiting for a draft strategy and implementation plan for the future direction of teacher professional development that was to be prepared following that consultation. That issue really needs to be resolved, given the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

It is a welcome development that the education advisory forum is no longer part of the proposals. Certainly, that was a particular bugbear of the Committee Chairman, who is delighted by its removal. He already referred to this in his contribution, but, given the protections afforded to the Irish-medium sector under article 89 of the 1998 Order, it seems totally unnecessary to have clause 2(5). That seems to be a clumsy attempt to tie the hands of ESA to promote one sector over the others. The Minister will no doubt say that it does not change what is already the case under article 89 of the 1998 Order, but if that is true, why is it there at all? In that clause, there is no mention of the controlled, maintained, integrated or voluntary sectors, so why specifically mention Irish-speaking schools? Clauses 33(5), 33(6) and 39(7)(b) raise similar concerns, which will need to be addressed.

On a more general point, when considering the previous Bill, the Education Committee was briefed on how ESA would be a single, regional organisation but with a very strong local presence. At the time, the Committee was presented with the structure of how those local services would be delivered. That briefing paper from January 2009 stated that those services must be locally based and accessible and outlined seven functional areas headed by

a director. Whether such an organisation is envisaged for this incarnation of ESA needs to be clarified.

The organisation of ESA itself still has to be fine-tuned, particularly around how it delivers locally. What the local footprint will look like remains to be fleshed out, and I hope that that will become clear as the Bill passes through its Committee Stage.

The issue of governors will no doubt be a thorny one in the Committee, and I am pleased to see that the concept of community governors has been consigned to the dustbin and that potential governors must be committed to the ethos of the school.

How that is defined must also be clarified, but it is a step in the right direction. One thing is clear: the role of the board of governors is expanding, and much greater consideration must be given to the mentoring of governors and to building up their capacity to discharge properly the responsibility that they are taking on. It should also be borne in mind that those who take on the role are volunteers, and I sense a great deal of apprehension, even among people who have been governors for many years, about what may be coming down the line as a result of this legislation.

5.00 pm

I will make a final but important point. Although it has been stated that staff who transfer from the various boards and the Department will be covered by the Transfer of Undertakings (Employment Protection) Regulations (TUPE), I reiterate my hope that that will also be the case for the staff who are employed across the sectors as teaching and support staff. This is an opportune moment to pay tribute to those staff, who have worked under extremely difficult circumstances over the past number of years, particularly during this period of uncertainty. I also pay tribute to the teaching staff, who work tirelessly on a day-to-day basis.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I could talk about a number of other issues arising from the Bill, but I have given a flavour of the work that lies ahead for the Committee in scrutinising this legislation. These matters are by no means straightforward, and I am pleased that there have been many positive changes in the proposals surrounding ESA and that many key demands have been met in the redrafting of the proposals. I hope that further changes will take place to further improve this important legislation. I support the general principles of the Bill, but I recognise that it is not the finished article.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I do not think that anyone can disagree on the need to reform the education system; that is a given. The current system is well past its sell-by date. The education of our young people and the administration arrangements for our education system are too important to be left to chance or, more accurately, to the vagaries of an outdated, 40-year-old model. We need to fast-forward the education system into the 21st century. I do not think that anyone can argue with that.

Perhaps we need to reflect on why education is so important. It improves the life chances of our children. It assists the intellectual, personal and social development of those children. It can be an escape route from poverty, and

it provides a platform on which the economy can prosper and thrive. To deliver all of that, we need good schools. Every one of us here knows a good school when we see one. Therefore, although we might all support the policy of Every School a Good School, unfortunately, not every school is a good school. That is why it is important that the Education Bill includes provision for raising standards in the education system.

The fact is that, irrespective of what we think here, the evidence from international studies shows that we are falling behind our competitors in educational outcomes. To improve those outcomes, we need less bureaucracy and more streamlining of delivery. We also need cost-effectiveness for our education system. In the current economic climate, with extensive cuts to the education budget, it is prudent to look to savings in administration costs. That is why the time has arrived for the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority. That will provide for the rationalisation of the education and library boards, CCMS and the other bodies. ESA will not be a further layer of bureaucracy. It will have democratic accountability, with input from the Churches, and rightly so. A single education authority will also bring a consistency of approach on issues of disability and standards in numeracy and literacy. The new arrangements will also make it easier to share good practice.

It is also important to ensure that the rights and needs of the Irish-medium sector are recognised and protected by ESA. Perhaps the Minister could explain what measures are in place to ensure that that happens.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: In a wee second; there is another question. The Minister could also clarify whether the creation of ESA will impact on the legal responsibility under the Good Friday Agreement to encourage, facilitate and promote Irish-medium education. I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: The simple answer to that question is no. That responsibility remains in the 1998 order, and the ESA legislation in no way negates or diminishes those obligations.

It may be useful at this opportunity to answer a number of questions that have been raised about boards of governors in Irish-medium education and about why we have not mentioned integrated education. Several Members have mentioned that. The Bill brings us into line with the 1989 order. We are not proffering more powers to the Irish-medium sector but bringing it into line with the 1989 order, which proffers powers to the integrated sector. It is not about us giving more powers or rights to the Irish-medium sector; we are tidying up the legislation to ensure that that sector is on an equal basis with the integrated sector and all other sectors.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for that.

A single education authority will result in up to £40 million of savings, and it will help to reduce levels of bureaucracy, provide more strategic direction and streamline delivery of more effective planning as well as delivery of infrastructure for all sectors. Moreover, by tackling inequalities in educational attainment, a single education authority should assist in raising standards among all our young people.

Mr Craig: I start by declaring an interest as chair of the board of governors at Laurelhill Community College and a member of the boards at Harmony Hill and Killowen primary schools.

The Bill presents many changes that will influence the education of our children and young people. The introduction of an Education and Skills Authority has been on the agenda for several mandates. In fact, it goes back a long number of years, but its inclusion in the Programme for Government demonstrates a commitment to create a more efficient management system for education in Northern Ireland. ESA, with its membership, will provide representation consisting of the controlled, maintained and community sectors. Its replacement of the current board system with a single employing authority is a positive step in ensuring fair competition for roles in all sectors of our educational system.

The legal requirement under clause 34(1)(b) for a submitting authority to draft schemes of management and employment presents boards of governors in controlled or integrated schools with the opportunity to maintain their role in setting admissions criteria, and that process can be amended with the agreement of the authority and ESA. While trustees in the voluntary sector may act as the submitting authority, there will be a relationship between them and the board of governors in setting the relevant schemes for the school, as they must consult and have due regard to the governors' views. In any event, admissions criteria remain within the competence of the board of governors alone. That is a big statement and a big change from our previous Bill.

While much is to be welcomed for controlled schools, the establishment of ESA as a single employing authority represents a significant change in the voluntary principle. However, that provision needs to be read in conjunction with schedule 2 to the Bill, which allows boards of governors to take back all the employing power from ESA. In Committee Stage, we will need to carefully examine schedule 2 and ensure that voluntary grammar schools retain the powers that they need to continue to provide the excellence in education for which they are known. It is interesting to note that the provisions in the Bill that delegate responsibility to boards of governors of post-primary schools may, therefore, create a system whereby schools or the submitting authority can, in effect, almost lay down management schemes that could enhance a secondary school and almost change it into a grammar school. So there is a much more level playing field.

The Department may issue model schemes for employment and management, but how specific those may be will be of interest to boards of governors and trustees. Whether the Department takes a "strict constructionist" or a "loose constructionist" approach will greatly influence on how the submitting authorities can draft their schemes. However, it has to be noted that any school is free to submit any scheme of management and employment, provided the scheme complies with the Bill.

It is welcome that the school's position in doing this is protected by the tribunal established under clause 62. That represents a huge step forward in the Bill. Schools will be protected from the overbearing, all-powerful arm of ESA, as envisaged in the last Education Bills. It is also welcome that the heads of agreement, drafted last autumn, will be

available to the tribunal in making its deliberations. That provision is important in protecting schools

The contents of the Bill provide the Department with a support mechanism for non-statutory sectoral bodies in the establishment of modern fit-for-purpose administration arrangements for education. The grant-aid support provides for representative bodies, with the method of presenting the interests of different sectors to ESA, in a non-statutory manner. The involvement of each sector is imperative to ensure that no imbalance is present in the representation of each individual sector within ESA.

Contrary to the previous Bill, there will be no holding body for controlled schools, as was pointed out by the Chair. Controlled schools will be owned by ESA and managed by their own boards of governors. That gives ESA similar responsibilities for both the controlled and maintained sectors. Thus, a more indifferent form of governance between those two sectors will exist.

Sectoral bodies will be consulted with in regard to the area-planning element of the Bill. Their involvement in the education estate will contribute positively to the overall viability of many locations. In addition, they will form part of a consultative measure taken by ESA in relation to the raising of standards within schools. Their involvement in holding schools to account is not a statutory role, but it is hoped that it will promote an improvement in standards within primary and post-primary education. The introduction of two new sectoral bodies — one for the controlled sector and one for the Catholic voluntary grammar and maintained sector — are a welcome move away from the situation where by there is CCMS but no representative for the controlled sector.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Craig: I certainly will.

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that there is an issue that we will need to build on with regard to the controlled sector? That is clause 18, which confers power on ESA particularly for the duties of establishing a controlled school. The Committee needs to do a piece of work to ensure that that is not restricted solely to views of ESA but also — as is not currently provided for — provision for ESA to consult with the sectoral body which will be established by this piece of legislation.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for that intervention and he just got to it before I was about to deal with that.

Mr Storey: I am sorry; I will read your notes —

Mr Craig: No. You are absolutely right in what you said about that issue. There was a degree of confusion on that which, no doubt, we will take a lot of time and deliberation over at the Committee Stage.

As we potentially move forward with this Bill, it will also be important that the voice of the voluntary sector is not lost. The Department needs to bring forward proposals for a sectoral support body for that sector as well. I have absolutely no doubt that that issue will take up part of the time at Committee Stage, if we get there.

5.15 pm

The role of ESA in the appointment of governors who are committed to the ethos of the school is a welcome

development. However, I seek clarification on how that commitment will be measured with each board member that will be appointed. The thinking around this provides a more logical and forward-thinking approach to the future ethos of schools.

A more concerning aspect of all this is clause 2(5). I have listened with interest to what the Minister said about the Irish-speaking sector. We come back to the basics. Legislation protects that sector already, so why is so much emphasis given to that sector well above any other sector in the ESA Bill? We, as a party, will have to scrutinise that very closely. When I read clause 2(5) and clause 33, language is used that, I believe, overemphasises or gives too much emphasis to that sector above other sectors. Although the Minister might think that the Irish-speaking sector is the most important thing in the world, I could quite easily argue that any of the other sectors are probably more important to me or others. We need to get away from that attitude. All the sectors are important in their own right.

I was brought up in the controlled sector, which seems to have been the Cinderella group among all of the sectors for the past 20 years. They had no one standing up for them to use the influence that they should have had, while other sectors had a lot of different groups standing up and protecting them. That is one thing that we ensured was changed in the present ESA Bill, and we make no apology for that. We look forward to some of those changes taking place. A representative body for the controlled sector is long overdue.

I find the empowerment for the board of governors and its scheme of management in all sectors absolutely fascinating — not just the voluntary grammar, but the controlled and maintained sector — and how it can take much more responsibility for how its school is run. That is a huge opportunity for those schools to move things forward. I clearly recognise that, as I am the chair of a board of governors. However, how much responsibility any governor in any school takes on it is a massive challenge. An interesting aspect of the Bill will be seeing how that is worked out in reality on the ground.

There has been talk that all this administrative change will save £40 million. I look forward to that. Will that actually be achieved? If it is achieved, will it be put into the front line of teaching in our schools? As the Minister well knows, there are massive resource needs out there.

In conclusion, although I do not agree with every clause, I broadly welcome its general principles and look forward to amending the Bill at the next stage of the legislative process.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to speak during the Second Stage of the Education Bill.

Today's debate represents progress in that, finally, we have the Department's latest proposals for ESA before us, albeit political and not educational proposals. This allows us to debate it in an open and transparent forum. This is indeed quite different from the situation of having the Bill, which has far-reaching consequences for education in Northern Ireland, discussed in the locked rooms of Stormont Castle with each of the present two largest parties protecting only what they judge to be in their own self interest. Nevertheless, when we look at all that has happened over the past decade with regard to the political

wrangling over the Education and Skills Authority, it is not at all surprising that it was the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that felt it necessary to issue its heads of agreement document last November.

It is that document, with the relatively short statement that accompanies it, that today's Bill is so heavily based on, and that will give cause for concern to many. It concerns me because I wonder what has been added to the Bill and what bits have been taken out merely to sustain the present mutual carve-up. That detail will remain firmly behind the closed doors of Stormont Castle. Nevertheless, the fact that we have a Bill, singular, before us today must be acknowledged.

I will make a number of remarks on the Bill's content. All in all, my party and I support the broad objectives of a single ESA. A single authority makes much more sense administratively and financially. It makes more sense to have that than to carry on with the often criticised bureaucratic status quo. If I may misquote Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings', one ESA to rule them all.

It has long been said that if we were to start again with a blank sheet of paper, our education system, crafted as it has been by our history, would never look as it does today.

My party's position is clear on this, and it has already been said that we support a single education system where children from all backgrounds are taught together. We also recognise that such a transformation in our education system will not happen overnight.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I would rather make my point. We support an ESA that is crafted in an open and transparent way, not one that is cooked up behind closed doors and free from any form of outside or public scrutiny.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mrs Dobson: No, I want to make my points. ESA will only come about after many years of hard work by the Executive and responsible Minister. That is something that should involve all political parties and viewpoints, not least the existing school sectors.

I believe that the goal of a single administrative system is the first of many required steps to improving and normalising our education system. However, as with any form of streamlining and reform, there will, inevitably, be a human impact, and it is to that impact on staff and personnel that I ask the Minister to pay a particular regard. I urge him to ensure that the appropriate safeguards are put in place to assist and inform the staff who, if the Bill is passed, will be asked to make the transition from the current eight individual organisations into an ESA. For those staff, many of whom have long records of dedicated service to our education service, the prospect of change has been on the cards for a number of years, but it must be change that they can trust and be fully involved in.

The ongoing delays in implementing ESA, delays which have cost the taxpayer millions of pounds and, indeed, reduced the short-term impact of savings, will have weighed heavily on the minds of many involved in the education of young people in Northern Ireland. Indeed, their service to education must be recognised and upheld. They must not be ignored; they should be fully involved.

However, the human impact of the Bill stretches beyond the staff affected.

The Minister and his Department must keep parents and teachers in all of the schools across Northern Ireland fully informed of his proposals for change. The Department must be prepared to listen to and act upon their views, which will be in the best interests of the pupils. Those are views that the Minister and his Department have not at any stage asked for. Not to do so would be to ignore the human impact of the Bill on every single pupil attending school in Northern Ireland. While the Minister may think that the sectoral bodies will be able to perform that role adequately, he must acknowledge the fact that schools, boards of governors and parents are already suspicious of his motives.

Today's Bill makes reference to area planning, but it does so in a way that is so void of detail that, again, schools will be rightly concerned as to the Department's motives and intentions. Indeed, schools have been left feeling badly let down by the shambles of the consultation on area planning. Before that, many were instructed to go through the worrying process of a viability audit, again with little consultation from the Department either before or after. For many schools and communities, that worry grows with every day that passes. Rural communities are left wondering whether their schools will remain open, with, all the time, the spectre of the self-fulfilling prophecy of a drip-feed effect making closure an inevitability for many.

Another crisis of concern for many schools is how their current ethos will be taken into account by ESA. Again, the sectoral bodies will have an important role to play in that. However, schools will inevitably be concerned, not least after the ideologically driven tirade Sinn Féin has launched against schools that, for whatever reason, believe academic selection best meets their needs.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I want to make my points.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Having four representatives from the trustees and transferors' representatives on the ESA board is progress. However, I ask the Minister, when responding, to tell us how he will determine the four other, so-called community board members, he must appoint. Will they include a representative from the integrated sector or the Irish-medium sector, both of which have yet to have their future representation in ESA explained?

From my perspective as an MLA for Upper Bann, I ask the Minister for a guarantee that the Dickson plan will not be affected adversely by any of his proposals as we work towards an ESA, and that it will not, in any way, be left at a disadvantage in its treatment by a future ESA. The Minister will be fully aware that local people are inevitably and justifiably concerned about his intentions for the plan. Given remarks he made in the local media, their concerns are not at all surprising. I wish to put on record my firm belief that the Dickson plan has served the people of Craigavon exceptionally well by balancing academic and technical ability. I fear that, were the Bill to pass, a system that consistently delivers academic success would be left at a disadvantage. Any moves against that system from any quarter would lead directly to a deterioration in the

education of young people in Craigavon. I eagerly await the Minister's response to these points.

As I draw my remarks to a conclusion, I reiterate my point about the urgent need for consultation: not just consultation for consultation's sake, but effective and accountable consultation that actively seeks the views of staff, parents and pupils, not just because a consultation needs to be held but because the Department actively wants to listen to the views of the people who it is employed to serve, the people of Northern Ireland. The Department and the Minister have a duty to ensure that the voice of those people is heard and that their views are taken into consideration. It already appears that the Department is failing in that regard. Neither the substantive points in the Bill nor its earlier incarnation a few years ago were put to the public to seek their thoughts. Surely the biggest shake-up of the organisation of education here entitles members of the public to have their views heard. At present, the Bill is completely devoid of detail.

As Danny Kinahan indicated, my party will not be supporting the Bill's passage. We believe that it does not adequately represent the views of anyone other than the two main political parties. It is a political solution devoid of any educational input. After all, ESA will impact on the education of our young people for decades to come. We owe it, not just to present generations of children and young people but to the future children of Northern Ireland, to get this right.

5.30 pm

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the Bill and welcome the reform of our education system, as its current administration process of 40 years is outdated. It is essential that we have a system that is fit for purpose and serves the needs and rights of all our children. We have to build on what we already have so that, for generations to come, we can look back and say that we got this reform right and made the right decision for the future planning of our education system, with a single skills authority delivering a model that is inclusive of all our children and communities and delivers on the diverse needs and best interests of the child and school.

For effective change, ESA needs to look at other models and best practices. My colleague Chris Hazzard made remarks earlier to that effect. That is key to delivering practical guidance that aims to assist staff and address outcomes that are properly identified and managed appropriately, so that initiatives can be applied for the future of education. ESA can deliver on that.

We are a significant step closer to the planning and delivery of education for our young people. ESA needs to be reflective of what is needed on the ground, and schools need accessibility to ESA. That is vital. The Bill will meet the needs and benefits of all sectors of education. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on the rights and needs of the Irish-medium sector and the sector that provides for children with special needs and how they will be protected.

I acknowledge that the transition from board to ESA has had to be carefully planned in going forward. Now is the right time to bring the Bill forward. We need to pay tribute to all those involved in the commitment to ESA and delivering a good service throughout the whole process.

There have been many concerns about the Bill from education practitioners. I am confident that, in the Bill, the Minister has moved to allay those fears and concerns. Schools can rest assured that the main objective of the Bill is to ensure the establishment of modern, fit-for-purpose administration arrangements for education. That will effectively allow schools and staff to get on with their job of teaching.

Clause 38 places a duty on boards of governors to promote high standards of educational attainment and to co-operate with ESA to promote the achievement of high standards in their schools. We have to acknowledge the good work of the boards of governors, but I believe that, in some schools, they need to be reminded of the key role that they have to play in ensuring that the main aim of the Bill is implemented.

Clause 14 goes some way towards addressing the needs of providing training and advisory support services for the boards of governors, if ESA considers that necessary. I would very much welcome further clarification from the Minister on that clause.

In conclusion, I feel that the Bill threatens no one. How can a Bill that has the best interests of our children at its heart for their future education be a threat? I see nothing in the Bill that changes or detracts from the ethos, identity or values of any school. No doubt, in the weeks ahead, I will have further opportunity to debate and scrutinise this legislation in the Education Committee. I support the Bill.

Mr McDevitt: I was tempted to continue on Mrs Dobson's theme about Middle Earth. She quoted the author of that fine piece of work. The claim that we have a system that consistently delivers academic success strikes me as a statement that you could only frankly, honestly and with any degree of sincerity make from Middle Earth. That is not a statement that you can make about where we are today in this jurisdiction: it just is not true. We have a system that delivers academic success for the top cohort. That is brilliant and fantastic, and those of us who have the great opportunity to have our kids educated among that cohort are very proud of it. But what about the rest? What about the thousands of young people whose GCSE results should scream at us because they are failing to meet basic standards in literacy and numeracy?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Although it is clear that we need to do more for young people who leave school without the defined five GCSEs in grades A* to C, is that the appropriate benchmark? I think that part of the difficulty and one of the challenges for ESA and for all of us is accepting that that is not the case. I speak more as a parent than as a Member of the Assembly, knowing my children and their educational experience in trying to raise their standards. Have we got to a place yet where we have a proper benchmark that reflects accurately the needs, aptitudes and abilities of our young people?

Mr McDevitt: That is a very fair comment, but it is the benchmark that we have today. What it clearly tells us is that there are two speeds in our system and there are, quite literally, two classes of education, to put it bluntly, in this part of Ireland. Depending by and large on a parent's ability to earn, a kid will nearly always end up in one class or the other. So, it is — I continue the analogy — "Middle Earthian" to think of the system as one that is built on academic excellence. That is one of the things that will

either be a great opportunity or a huge missed possibility for ESA.

We talk about changing the architecture — there is much in the architecture that undoubtedly needs to be reformed — about building on best practice and about taking steps to reduce inequalities, but nowhere in the Bill do we really get into the meat of how we might achieve that. I am sure that the Minister will say that that is a Bill for another day. However, it is undoubtedly the case that the vast majority of people who are looking in at the House and at the legislation, when it eventually gets onto the statute books, as, I suspect, it will, will be thinking not about the efficiency in back-office systems but about the quality of education.

I fear that the Bill allows the myth to live on that, as I think Mrs Dobson accidentally ended up suggesting, this is about academic excellence and not so much about educational excellence. There is a big difference between academic excellence and educational excellence. Not everyone or every school can legitimately strive for academic excellence; that is just not the way of world. However, every school could and should strive to be a place where there is educational excellence and where the education of young people is treasured as just that — an education — rather than just a passport to a particular social standing, a route to a particular degree course or a reinforcement of some sense of personal status. We need to have a system that is built on the basis that, no matter who you are, you can access excellent education, and no matter what type of school you are in, that school's basic mission is to be excellent at education rather than academically excellent. That is the elephant in the room in this debate. We still struggle to come to terms with that, and I hope that the House will have the courage to face up to it in the years ahead.

It has to be said that one clause is pretty unique. It is clause 34, which deals with the preparation and approval of schemes of management. The clause tells us what a scheme of management should do in a school, and it is all pretty sensible stuff. A scheme of management should decide how a school is managed. Of course, in there, as I understand it, will be the admissions policy for the school. Does the Minister want to intervene?

Mr O'Dowd: No element of the Bill will deal with the admissions policy for any school.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate the Minister's clarification. I will happily give way to the Minister because we can maybe clarify this matter now. Clause 34(2) states:

"The Department may, with the approval of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, issue such guidance as the Department thinks fit as to the provisions it regards as suitable for inclusion in schemes of management; and such guidance—

(a) shall include model schemes regarded by the Department as suitable for particular descriptions of schools;

(b) shall be kept under review and revised by the Department from time to time; and

(c) shall be published in such manner as the Department thinks fit."

It all sounds terribly sensible, but I have a simple question: why do the First Minister and deputy First Minister need to approve something as routine as that?

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Storey talked about trust in his opening remarks. The reality is that, throughout our system and society, at times there is a lack of trust and understanding. There was a view among some, I believe, that the schemes of management and employment schemes — perhaps more the schemes of management — would be used as an underhand way of dealing with admissions criteria. Despite repeated reassurances that that was not the case, that was not taken on board. There was also a view that, through guidance, we could try to do something in regard to those matters. Despite repeated reassurance, that was not taken on board. It was felt that, if we were to offer reassurances to the whole sector, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was a way of doing that.

Mr McDevitt: That is welcome clarification indeed, but, frankly, it makes me even more curious about why that is the case. If the Minister tells us that admission criteria cannot be part of a scheme of management and, therefore, would never be part of a scheme of management, what else is there that causes mistrust around here? What other aspects of school schemes of management would be so politically divisive and explosive that you would require the First Minister and deputy First Minister — I shall use an insurance term, as Mr Lunn is in the House — to underwrite the Department of Education's authority and competence on the issue? It seems very strange to me. For example, if you were developing a model scheme of management for an academy-type school based on a centre of excellence in, say, the performing arts and you were getting pretty creative about the sort of individuals you might want on the board of governors and they were being pretty imaginative about the use of classroom space, the allocation of resources or even how you might timetable such a school, how could that possibly create a crisis of political confidence? For that matter, if it was something around shared education and the possibility of setting up a federated school — I understand that that is not provided for in the Bill, although I suppose that is a debate for a future date — and you had several boards of governors coming together to think about how they could better co-operate, how could that create such a crisis of confidence that it would need to be underwritten by the First Minister and deputy First Minister? I accept the Minister's answer — of course I do — and I accept it at face value. However, I return to the basic question: if it is not possible to deal with admission under the scheme of management, why do we have legislation that requires the First Minister and deputy First Minister to approve guidance on the very question of schemes of management? If there is no need for it, why can we not just propose an amendment — maybe we will propose an amendment; I will speak to Mr Rogers about that — and just delete the reference to Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

5.45 pm

I am willing to stand corrected, but I am not aware of any other legislation that has emerged from the House since this particular Assembly was established that has required a Department to seek approval to do something from another Department that has no material interest in its work. It is a strange precedent. Does it mean that every time in future that we reach a junction in the road — on justice policy, say — approval will need to be sought from the First and deputy First Ministers? I think of the economy,

DETI and other such aspects. Will we need to invoke them there, when the House is coming down with double locks, triple locks, vetoes, petitions of concern and section 75(1) and (2)? We have all the protection built into our legislation that means that you cannot behave in a discriminatory way, even if you are a Minister and have the great privilege and honour of having and holding Executive office. Yet we have put it into a clause that the First and deputy First Ministers have to approve guidance.

I accept the Minister's assurance that this is not about selection, but it is difficult to see what other issue could have required the DUP to seek the approval of the First and deputy First Ministers. Perhaps colleagues in the DUP can tell me what other issues they are so concerned about that are not selection policy and would require them to seek the approval of the First and deputy First Ministers for guidance on schemes of management. Mr Storey is reluctant to intervene publicly in the debate.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. When it comes to him looking across the Chamber to me to defend all elements of the Bill, the Member needs to remember that, yes, this was in the Programme for Government but the person who holds the education portfolio happens to be the Minister opposite, not the Chair of the Education Committee.

If the Member had a close working relationship with members of his own community, perhaps he would understand, like other Members who have made statements about certain sectors when they had never met those sectors until the Friday of last week and have given them a different signal to the one that they had already intimated to the public. It would be a better situation if Members were better informed when they come to the House. Then they might have the answer to their question.

Mr McDavitt: That is a most cryptic reply from Mr Storey. I resent the suggestion that he made about the community and my relationship or otherwise with it. However, I have not sensed anything other than confusion from all parts about why you would want to put that into legislation.

I have to be honest with you, Mr Speaker: the only reason that I even suggested that Mr Storey might want to remark on this is that, unless I misheard him, the Minister suggested that it was the DUP that thought that this would be a particularly good thing to have in the Bill. Mr Storey is now leaving the Chamber.

I say this seriously: if we are to establish an Education and Skills Authority, it is important that we do not establish it on the basis of some dodgy deal. It is important that it not be undermined five or 10 years or five or 10 months down the road by some understanding that then becomes apparent to us all. It is either going to be that the House resolves that we establish an ESA and give it the powers that we democratically vote to give it or we do not. What we cannot have is a legislative process in which we all accept the outcome even if we do not agree 100%. Mr Rogers has put well on the record our many concerns about the Bill. However, either we accept the outcome of the legislation and the organisation gets on with doing its job, or we have a situation in which we are only giving rise to a whole new set of arguments, a whole new set of problems and a whole new set of complications and undermining the very thing that, you would think, this legislation is trying to create, which is a better infrastructure for education,

greater clarity around policy and an attempt to tackle honestly some of the long-held ideological divisions and different outlooks on the education system.

I want this to succeed, but for it to do so it must be crystal clear. We know that where there is uncertainty in education, there is a lack of confidence. Where there is doubt, there is inevitably someone somewhere who will seek to exploit that doubt for a vested or selfish interest. Therefore, I appeal to the Minister to spend some time in his summation justifying that part of that clause and explaining why we would not have a better Bill without it.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Second Reading of the Bill. I am pleased to be able, along with my party colleagues, to broadly welcome it.

As we are all aware, in 2008, the first Bill on ESA was introduced under the previous Minister of Education. The Bill before us today is a much-improved piece of legislation. Many provisions in the previous Bill were unacceptable to schools, staff, parents, political representatives and sectoral bodies. I am pleased that those provisions are not in this Bill. The idea of community governors is gone. The power of ESA is reduced. CCEA is retained. Schools will have much more control over how they run themselves. Members of the ESA board will be appointed in a way that is much more acceptable than would have been the case. It is particularly welcome that there will be political representation on the board. That will be decided according to party political strength. Thankfully, this Bill is very different to the one that the previous Minister introduced.

In fact, there is much for us to support in this Bill. Clearly, one of the most welcome aspects is, as other Members have mentioned, the significant savings that can be made from dissolving the five education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Staff Commission and the Youth Council. That is a welcome reduction in bureaucracy. Dissolving those bodies and creating a single administrative structure is something that we should all welcome. A good balance has also been struck in the Bill in that there will be central organisation, which will save money and prevent duplication, while ensuring protections and safeguards for schools so that they can retain control. Schools will prepare and submit their own schemes of management and schemes of employment. They will still employ and dismiss staff. It is important that they have the right and ability to run their school depending on their own needs. That independence is vital.

I also welcome the tribunal that will be established. Instead of giving power to ESA when there is disagreement over schemes of management and employment, the tribunal will settle disputes. That will be an additional safeguard for schools. In addition to this, boards of governors, not ESA, will continue to set admissions criteria. It is extremely important that that is not changed. Again, it gives boards of governors the protection that they need to run their school as they decide. That will be welcomed by people across Northern Ireland. That important clarification will be enshrined in the legislation.

Particularly welcome in the Bill is the requirement for ESA to appoint governors who are committed to the ethos of the school. That will do away with the obscene situation that took place over the summer, when the Department

appointed governors to schools against the wishes of those schools. The views of those governors were clearly at odds with the ethos of the schools, and that caused considerable anger at that time. I am pleased that that clause of the Bill will mean that such appointments will not be possible in future. The ethos of a school is best left to the school to decide and is not to be dictated by the Department or ESA. It is right that people can be appointed to a board of governors only if they support the ethos of the school. Boards of governors, parents and staff will welcome that.

I also take the opportunity to welcome the establishment of the controlled sectoral support body. The additional powers and rights that it will have will put it on an equal footing with other sectors and is a huge leap forward towards equality between the sectors. It is also the first step towards raising achievement in that sector. I look forward to getting more information from the Department on the details of how and when it will be set up.

Of course, no Bill is perfect. As a party, we will seek to make changes during Committee Stage that my colleagues have already outlined. Obviously, work still needs to be done on clauses 3(4) and 34(9). Those provisions are very important because they give the tribunal power to use the heads of agreement drawn up last autumn when adjudicating the competence of schemes of management and employment. Those provisions require more work. However, what is eventually legislated must reflect accurately what is currently in the Bill. Although we welcome the sectoral support body for the controlled sector, a gap clearly exists for the voluntary grammar sector. It has no sectoral support and does not have a voice on the ESA board. That must be remedied. We also have concerns about the preferential treatment of the Irish-medium sector. That needs to be clarified and amended at Committee Stage.

Although we will seek changes, I am pleased to see the Bill progress to this stage. The establishment of the Education and Skills Authority was a key commitment in my party's manifesto and the Programme for Government. The passage of the Bill through its Second Stage today is an important step towards fulfilling another Executive commitment. I am pleased to lend it my support.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht. Ceapaim gur díospóireacht an-tábhachtach í, agus gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine a rinne a lán oibre ar son an Bhille: an tAire agus a chuid oifigeach. I welcome the debate. It is very important. I thank the Minister and the officials who did a significant amount of work over the years on the Bill. A lot of work has been done, but there is obviously a lot of work to do in education. My colleague John O'Dowd is up for that, as is our team here, to ensure that we have academic excellence for all — not just some, as Conall McDevitt suggested — and the highest standards for all. I do not take a narrow view of academic excellence, and I hope that the House does not either.

ESA will mean that we do not squander the amounts of money on administration that were wasted in the past. We will be able to ensure that more money gets to the front line and the classroom. Instead of having eight or nine HR and finance managers, we will have a much more cohesive and consistent approach. That is one of the areas that I welcome. I welcome the fact that we will have a more

cohesive approach to special educational needs, so that a child in Derry, Newry, Downpatrick or Antrim will get similar access to special educational needs provision, rather than some areas having a greater degree of access, as it was in the past. I welcome the fact that there will be much higher standards in public procurement and greater equality right across the North of Ireland. I welcome the fact that there will be better child protection arrangements. Those of us who were at the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association on Friday will know that every party there — every political party in Ireland — spoke about the need to strengthen child protection in every area, be it health, education, cross-border areas, policing or justice. Today is another step in educational provision and child protection. Given the amount of time that children spend in school, the importance of children being safe cannot be overstated.

I think that all Members who spoke talked about equality, although some always qualify it, particularly when it comes to the Irish-medium sector. Ceapaim go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach go bhfuil go mbeidh comhionannas ann do gach páiste inár scoileanna agus do gach earnáil. There should be equality for all children, regardless of whether they learn through the medium of English or Irish. Tá a lán daoine ag freastal ar scoileanna lánGhaeilge. A lot of children attend Irish-medium schools. I suggest to the Members who put the "but" after equality — I notice that one of them is yawning as I speak about equality — that they read the Council of Europe's guidance on regional or minority languages. Part of that is that exceptional measures have to be taken to protect languages that, in the past, have been excluded or discriminated against.

I welcome the fact that ESA will look at the planning of school estates. We all know what happened in the past: schools were built close to one another where they should not have been. We are all dealing with the legacy of that now. We are crying out for planning. I welcome the work that the Minister has done. I welcome the formalisation of early years and the work that has been done in that regard.

I also welcome the focus on building leadership for boards of governors, which have a hugely important role to play. They know that it is not about cheerleading for principals but about ensuring that departmental policies around standards for every child are at the centre of their policymaking. I argue that one of the most important jobs in the coming years will be membership of boards of governors.

6.00 pm

I will say a few words on standards, because I believe that ESA will make a significant difference to tackling underachievement and standards. I have to say that I was saddened to hear members of the UUP trying to pretend that we have a world-class education system and hankering back to the good old days of this amazing system that gave academic excellence to all children. I do not know what world they are living in. Thankfully, we are increasing the number of children and young people who are getting five GCSEs, but we have a long way to go. I believe that ESA will deal significantly with raising standards for each and every child and will put the child at the centre of the education system.

I do not believe in comparing with mediocrity. I believe that we should be comparing with the best. So, yes, we can start looking at comparing with England; that is grand, but

I would much prefer to compare with the countries that are doing very well for all children. So, let us look at Finland, Poland, New Zealand and South Africa, which are some of the countries that are genuinely moving towards a much more equal and world-class education system.

In a previous life, I chaired the chairpersons' group on RPA. I want to put on record my thanks to every member of that group. When I heard Danny Kinahan speaking, I thought of one of those chairpersons, Roy Beggs Snr, who worked very closely with us and was very supportive of ESA, along with all the other chairpersons. They understood that, although the boards may have done good work in the past, they were an outdated model for a previous century. They understood the importance of new models and of ESA. Each of them attended nearly every single meeting, and I really appreciated the time that they gave.

I was disappointed with the UUP contribution. I think there is a little bit of myopic thinking there and too much of a defence of an outdated system. I think there is a defence of unacceptable levels of achievement. I think there is a fear of democracy. Thankfully, instead of unelected quangos running education, health or whatever, we now have elected Ministers, and I, for one, welcome that. Who fears democracy? Danny obviously does; I do not. I wonder whether it was really Danny's speech or whether somebody else wrote it for him. In any discussions that I had with Danny Kinahan, I believed that he was very supportive of bringing about changes in the education system. I will give the Floor to him, if he would like to take on any of my points.

This is a good day for education. This is a good day for our children. For me, that is what is important for this generation of children and the next. I believe that the work that will be done following Second Stage, which I hope and expect will be passed today, will be some of the most important work that the Assembly does.

I pay a final tribute to the Minister and his officials. I know for a fact how much time they put into this.

I welcome the debate. I understand the important role that the — *[Interruption.]* Mr Spratt would like me to thank the Chair of the Education Committee. Gabhaim buíochas le Cathaoirleach an Choiste Oideachais. I would also like to thank the Chair of the Education Committee, and I hope that he moves forward in a democratic way as the entire Committee scrutinises the Bill. Tugaim tacaíocht don Bhille, nó ceapaim gur Bille an-tábhachtach é. Go raibh míle maith agaibh an an díospóireacht seo. I support the Bill, and I ask every Member, even those in the UUP, to join the rest of us in supporting it.

Mrs D Kelly: I too think it is a good day for education. It was a very good day for education when Sinn Féin stood down Caitríona Ruane as the Education Minister, in particular, but it is also a good day to be talking about education, given that today is the first international day of the girl child. Members might be interested to learn that 75 million girls throughout the world are denied access to education. To mark this particular day, 150 girls in the square in Roscommon put their hands up for education and wore a pink wristband. I think all of us wish Malala well in her recovery; she was shot by terrorists in the Taliban for daring to exercise her right to education.

There are a number of points that I want to put on record. I have to respond to Ms Ruane's deliberate attempt to

paraphrase and misinterpret what my colleague Conall McDevitt said earlier. The SDLP is committed to academic excellence for all, and that has been the party's standpoint. It was our party, I think, that first talked about and put forward proposals that academic selection should be ended. While we will be very much putting our hands up for the Education Bill today, we note the failure of the previous Minister of Education, who presided over a number of failures, not least in getting the Bill to the Floor of this House, but also —

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: No, I think I have heard enough today and for some time from Ms Ruane, and I do not think she has anything useful to contribute further to the debate this afternoon. Certainly the fact that over 40% of our young people are leaving school without five GCSEs is a testimony to the failure of Sinn Féin's stewardship of education. The fact that over £26 million has to be pumped into literacy and numeracy because of a failure of our young people to leave school with the basics in literacy and numeracy is also a testimony to the failures of Sinn Féin's stewardship of education.

In relation to the inter-parliamentary association that met in Dublin on Friday past, I congratulate my party colleague Pat Ramsey, who ensured that safeguarding children on the island of Ireland would be the first subject of debate at the association's meeting. I certainly wish that association well in its work over the coming months and years.

We very much welcome the opportunities for equality protections in the Bill to ensure that people's voices will be heard, but I do not think we will take lessons from Sinn Féin; we note that the current Minister stands accused by the ombudsman of breaches of his ministerial code of conduct in his appointments to the General Teaching Council, and also for other measures —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, I will of course give way to my colleague from Upper Bann.

Mr O'Dowd: I hope I cheer you up somewhat; you seem to be in bad form. The Member is quite right; the Commissioner for Public Appointments has challenged me and my Department over appointments to the General Teaching Council. However, in no way were any of those appointments challenged on the basis of equality. They were procedural. There is no suggestion whatsoever that any of the appointments were not made on merit. It was the procedure that was called into question, not the equality or the nature of the background of the appointees.

Mrs D Kelly: Unlike, I believe, the challenges that have been made in relation to your appointment of two members to the board of governors of Lumen Christi school, but that is a debate for another day.

Perhaps, Mr Speaker, I might go back to the Bill and ask if the Minister might respond to some concerns that I have about the Youth Council and the provision of youth services, and how he feels that the Youth Council, which always suggests that it is the poor relation in terms of the provision of education and under the education boards, will have its role and funding enhanced? Also, can the Minister give us some reassurance that the anticipated savings of £20 million in year three of the establishment of ESA will be on track, bearing in mind the experience

that we have had within the Health Service, where savings were not realised or pumped back into front line services? Perhaps the Minister might also give us more information on how area education plans will work in the absence of agreement or decisions on the viability audits that have already been published. I would be grateful if the Minister responded to those concerns.

Mr Allister: Today, some Members have been anxious to go out of their way to suggest that this is a very different Bill from the previous one. Most notably, Members from the DUP Benches have been striving to make that point. If that is right, the first issue that arises is this: why has there not been a regular, proper and complete consultation?

When we go to the explanatory document, we find that recourse is had to the fact that there was consultation way back in RPA times and before the previous Bill. Singularly missing, however, is any consultation on this Bill. It is my understanding that the Department's guidelines suggested a consultation period of up to 12 weeks. Even a few weeks ago, I was taken to task in the House by some Sinn Féin Members for not having had a long enough consultation on my private Member's Bill. My consultation lasted for seven weeks, and the guidance for a private Member's Bill is six to eight weeks. Yet those same Members come from a party whose Minister heads the Department that had no consultation on this Bill. Why is that? Why have we not been done that due courtesy? More particularly, why have the stakeholders — the parents across the country — not been done the courtesy of consultation. It seems rather strange, unless, of course, it would be a waste of time because this is a done deal between the DUP and Sinn Féin, and the Bill is guaranteed to be pushed and rammed through the House whatever anyone thinks. Maybe that is more the truth of it.

I am not persuaded, as some would have us persuaded, that this is such a radically different Bill. The main thrust, trajectory and purpose of this Bill remain the same: it is still a charter for totalitarian control of the education sector by the Sinn Féin Minister. Perhaps I will elaborate on that in a moment.

Right at the heart of the Bill is ESA itself. How ESA is to be composed is, of course, most enlightening, because it gives a little indicator of how it is likely to operate. It will have 20 members plus a chairman appointed by the Sinn Féin Minister. Of the 20 members, four will be transferors and four will be trustees. A further eight people will be appointed by the political parties and will, under d'Hondt, if I am not incorrect, break down as four unionists and four nationalists — you can see where this is going — and four people will be appointed to reflect the balance of the community.

Earlier, a Member for South Down complained that there was no express representation on ESA for the Irish-medium sector. I suggest that he watch that space for the appointment of one of those final four. If I know anything about the Sinn Féin agenda, I know that it is likely to manifest itself in that regard. You can expect that the four community background people will be made up of two representatives of each of the two main communities. So what do you have? You have an ESA board likely to be composed of 10 members from a unionist background and 10 members from a nationalist background, with the all-important post of chair appointed by none other than the Sinn Féin Minister of Education. If that is not good enough,

he gets to appoint the first chief executive of the board and is required to ratify the appointment of every subsequent chief executive.

The history of appointments of individuals to boards by Sinn Féin Ministers since the Assembly was re-elected, and the irrefutable statistics for those appointments by, for example, the present Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the previous Minister for Regional Development, show that, whatever about the safeguards that are supposed to exist on public appointments, if you are a Catholic applicant for a public appointment under those Sinn Féin Ministers, you are twice as likely to be successful as a Protestant applicant is. I must say that that gives me no confidence when it comes to how the ESA board will be appointed, particularly for the all-important post of chair of the board.

6.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. You said that you are twice as likely to be appointed if you are from the Catholic community. Does the Member acknowledge that, if you are a certain type of Catholic from the Catholic community, you are more likely to be appointed?

Mr Allister: The Member would know a lot more about that than I would. I take it that she makes that point with compelling validity, and, therefore, I am sure that it is right. That perhaps underscores an even greater concern. She could also take it back from me that, if you are a certain type of person from the Protestant community, you are maybe more likely than others to be appointed by some. However, that may be another story altogether.

The core body that lies at the heart of the proposals, ESA, is imbued with all the things that should cause alarm. Before we even come to analyse the extent of the powers that it has, just looking at the hands into which we are putting those powers is enough at this point. Those who have done the deal to establish ESA need to, even yet, think carefully about what they are committing the future of education in Northern Ireland to and to whose hands they are committing it. It may not be a happy outcome. I suspect that they know that, but political expediency and the requirement of the moment are greater compulsions and have driven them to that position.

There have been some interesting articles, and a most interesting one was published in the 'Irish News' Saturday week ago. I think that it has been referred to in the debate. It was by Patrick Murphy and, in it, he gave an interesting analysis of the proposals. In that article, with a lot of rational argument, Mr Murphy stated, quite clearly:

"Educationally, the big losers are the grammar schools which now enter the system's mainstream administration for the first time. While other state-funded schools are financed through education and library boards, grammar schools receive their funding directly from the Department of Education."

He went on to make the point — it was a point I exchanged with Mr Storey when he spoke — that:

"However, area planning for groups of schools will be much easier now, because ESA will be the sole employing authority for all teachers, including those in grammar schools."

But will ESA allow grammar schools to recruit children with low grades in academic selection to keep their numbers up at the expense of neighbouring secondary schools?"

The suggestion there is that, in area planning, the device will be used to squeeze, ostracise and eventually destroy grammar schools. That, undoubtedly, is part of the *raison d'être* for these proposals.

The same article in 'The Irish News' went on to make some other interesting points. It said that, politically:

"the winner in all this is Sinn Féin."

It went on:

"The draft bill differs little from what Caitríona Ruane advocated during the years of stand-off and stalemate. Politically, her adversary, Mervyn Storey now looks a little bit silly. (Well, very silly actually.) Presumably Peter Robinson backed down on ESA in return for DUP advances elsewhere — maybe over the chair of the Maze development"

The chronology is interesting. I will pause there to reflect that, sadly, there is probably a lot of truth in that: the so-called heads of agreement, who took this decision way above Mr Storey's pay grade to the Office of the First Minister, decided that, after all the sham fights, shadow boxing and loud protestations, ESA was the right way to go.

That is a bit embarrassing for Mr Storey, of course, because he is on record as having said many interesting things. In fact, he told the House that the ESA Bill was dead, although some Members have not realised that it has had a funeral and seem to think that there will somehow be a resurrection if we lay hands on it. We need to put that idea to bed once again. Poor Mr Storey did not realise that, just a short ride down the road, in Stormont Castle, it would indeed be resurrected and that he would be the one sent in to sell it, to eat his words and to pretend that that which hitherto was hideous and unacceptable was now wholesome and wonderful. That is the uncomfortable position that the Member for North Antrim occupies tonight. He told the 'Belfast Telegraph' that, as far as the DUP was concerned, ESA "is in the bin". Well, through resurrection, retrieval from the bin, or however you describe it, it has had a remarkable comeback.

The other point that I wanted to draw attention to in Mr Murphy's article was this:

"ESA's significance is that if the argument over academic selection is a political football match, Sinn Féin now clearly owns the ball. And the pitch. And the fixture list. In the party's drive for influence over education, it has left little to chance. ESA will implement educational policy made by John O'Dowd. Its 20-strong board will oversee that implementation."

No wonder Sinn Féin Members are so happy today. After such a long time struggling and fighting to get ESA back on stream, here it is, large as life before us again.

I said that my primary problem with ESA was the totalitarian control that it gives to the Department. That is rampant throughout the Bill. ESA employs all the staff, approves all the employment schemes and, under clause 4(3)(a), can bring forward schemes to include the "general management of the staff". That is, I think, an interesting clause. There is lots of scope there for control freakery. It

can secure rolling control by reason of the Department's power in clause 4(6) to amend schedule 2, which governs the employment schemes. It has the power, in clause 6, to make an employment scheme for a school. Under clause 9(3), it can force a board of governors to reconsider decisions taken under an employment scheme. It has the power, in clause 18, to establish controlled schools. In fact, it can do anything, because, if you look at clause 22 of the Bill, it has the most sweeping powers imaginable. Clause 22(1) provides that:

"Except as otherwise provided by any statutory provision, ESA may do anything that appears to it to be conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions."

It is veritably all-powerful.

We then have the clause 24 powers over area planning. There, we have the same controlling power in respect of the schemes of management that we have in respect of the employment schemes. They are duplicated virtually word for word. The effect is to give totalitarian control to the Department, because it appoints ESA; it appoints the controlling chairman and the CEO. The nub is that the Sinn Féin Minister emerges with far more power through this Bill.

If that was not bad enough, I draw attention to a couple of clauses that have not had a lot of attention in the debate, but which are of seminal importance. I refer to clauses 64 and 65. Clause 64 states:

"The Department may by order make ... such supplementary, incidental or consequential provision ... such transitory, transitional or saving provision ... as it considers appropriate for the general purposes, or any particular purpose, of this Act, or in consequence of, or for giving full effect to, any provision made by this Act."

It goes on:

"An order under subsection (1) may amend, repeal, revoke or otherwise modify any statutory provision (including this Act)."

Then, when you read clause 65, you discover that all of that, which can involve a total rewrite of the Bill, can be done merely on negative resolution. At least the old Bill had clause 51(3), which provided that no such order could be made:

"unless a draft of the order has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly."

Clause 51(3) of the old Bill has been exterminated and removed, and what you have in its place is all-pervading powers in the Department to rewrite the legislation, to do whatever it likes, and all that it has to do is submit itself to the negative resolution procedure. Why — maybe the Minister can tell us — was the old protection of what was old clause 51(3) removed? If the Minister decides to amend, repeal, revoke or otherwise modify any statutory provision, including the Act, why is it no longer necessary to lay that before, and have it approved by a resolution of, the Assembly?

I think the answer is the worry that it is quite clear that the Bill is about building, substantiating and intensifying the powers of the Department and, in that regard, undermining

the powers of the House, which now does not even have to be consulted.

6.30 pm

Then, some come to the House today and tell us that this is a better Bill. It is certainly a better Bill if you are a scheming Sinn Féin Minister who wants to control education, but it is very far from a better Bill if you are someone who has some concern about where education might be taken. I say to those who are falling over themselves to try to make this a better Bill and to say that it is a better Bill that they need to read some of the small print. They will see that, far from being a better Bill, it is a very dangerous Bill.

Of course, we then have the issue of who all the power is going to go to. Well, it will go to ESA and to a chief executive in ESA, Mr Gavin Boyd, a man who has had a most charmed existence in education. He has had the most bountiful of positions. Although there has been no ESA, he has been its chief executive. He has been its chief executive, at times, on a salary, we are told, of about £145,000. If that was not good enough, he has been chief executive of certain other organisations as well. He has been running CCEA and some education board that he took over. What a charmed existence. What a favoured son is Mr Gavin Boyd. Why could that be? Could it be because his anti-selection credentials are impeccable? Could that be why he is the favoured son of successive Sinn Féin Ministers? Methinks it is.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, I do not think that it is appropriate for officials to be named in the House. Secondly, I do not think that it is appropriate for the appointment of a named individual to be called into question in the House.

Mr Speaker: I certainly take the Minister's point of order very seriously. The Member is straying into dangerous territory, and I ask him to, as far as possible, get back to the Bill, especially the Second Stage, which is really all about the principle of the Bill.

Mr Allister: Indeed, Mr Speaker, and a principle that concerns me greatly is into whose hands we are handing education.

Let us look at CCEA. Let us see whether it has been a fantastic success. Has it been a body that has steered clear of the pitfalls and difficulties of administration and has emerged from all of that with distinction? Well, think of InCAS. Think of the scheme it introduced and the shambles it was, only now to be outdone by the shambles of NINA and NILA, the numeracy and literacy assessment instruments.

I forgot at the beginning, but, out of deference to Mr McElduff, I ought to have repeated in the House my declaration of interest, in that I am the chairman of the board of governors of Moorfields Primary School. I hasten to add that it is not a proscribed organisation, nor has it ever been, but I declare that interest nonetheless. Last week, I spent part of a morning being shown, by the utterly frustrated staff, the shambolic operation of the literacy and numeracy assessment instruments. I could not believe the inefficiency and downright unreliability of the system. Whose brainchild was that? Who decided that we would pay some colossal sum of money for these mismatched, inoperative, faulty schemes? Someone who heads up CCEA. It does not exactly fill you with confidence when such a person has control of ESA —

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. I intervene to humbly present some information that may reassure him in relation to a topic that he discussed earlier. He pointed Members to clause 64 and suggested that the Department and ESA had the overriding power to rewrite the Bill without any reference to the Assembly. I respectfully point the Member to clause 65(4), which reads:

"No order shall be made under section 4(6) or 64(1) unless a draft of the order has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly."

It was clause 64(1) that the Member referred to. The power does not rest with ESA. The power does not rest with the Minister. The power rests with the Assembly. I hope that that reassures the Member on his concerns.

Mr Allister: It would reassure me more if the express power that was in clause 51(3) of the previous Bill had not been removed.

Mr O'Dowd: It is there.

Mr Allister: It is not there. Clause 51(3), in very express terms, required it to be laid before the Assembly and approved by resolution of the Assembly. I can understand the Minister's anxiety to distance himself publicly from any gathering unto himself of all-powerful functions. However, the Bill has been changed in that regard and changed for a purpose.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way again?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: I appreciate that the Member may not have the clause in front of him, but what part of this empowers the Minister and ESA over the Assembly? Clause 65(4) states:

"No order shall be made under section 4(6) or 64(1) unless a draft of the order has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly."

It was clause 64(1) that the Member expressed concern about. I am reliably told by my officials that clause 65(4) is the same as the old clause 51(3) that he referred to. I am not sure why he is getting himself into a twist over this. The Bill states clearly where the powers will rest.

Mr Allister: The Minister's problem might be the fact that there is a parallel clause to the old clause 51(3), but it is clause 65(2). However, it restricts itself to only the powers that are in clause 62, which is about the regulations by OFMDFM in relation to the establishment of a tribunal. In the words of the Bill, those cannot be changed:

"unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly."

I am glad to get it on the record if the Minister is committing to the fact that there is no way that his Department can exercise any of the functions under clause 64(1) — that effectively includes clause 64(2) — without seeking the express resolution and approval of the House. If that is so, it should say it in the Bill.

My reference to OFMDFM takes me to something in the Bill that concerns me: the empowerment of OFMDFM. This is a new clause in the Bill and a new dimension to the Bill. Clause 5(2) introduces, for the first time, reference to OFMDFM. It states that OFMDFM has to approve the

guidance that is thought fit with regard to employment schemes. As a Member asked earlier, why are we now engaging OFMDM? Of course, OFMDM also has the power to make the regulations about the tribunal. The tribunal is actually appointed by the Department, but OFMDM makes the regulations. Why are we now involving the most dysfunctional, slow-moving Department in all of government in something as pertinent to education as the making of regulations and the establishment and approval of the draft schemes on management and employment? Of course, the answer is — the Minister hinted at this earlier — that it has been done at the behest of the DUP. The DUP thinks that it is some sort of protection. Of course, if the DUP thinks that it needs such protection, it should look at why it is going to give such powers in the first place.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Has it dawned on the Member and, indeed, others that there is a growing power base in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that will impinge on other Departments as we move forward?

Mr Allister: Yes, one can see that OFMDM likes to have a finger in every pie. That might not be so bad if it was capable of the productivity that you might expect to go with that, but, as I said, it has to be the most dysfunctional of all the Departments that report to the House.

The truth is that this change is being made so that the DUP can say, “We have a veto” or Sinn Féin can say, “We have a veto”. We all know about the historical great success of mutual vetoes in the House. The problem with that is that issues are then decided not on their merits but as part of a trade-off. You could have logjam and standstill on a multiplicity of issues, such as the need to approve regulations for the tribunal or the need to improve the guidelines for a management scheme for schools. However, the decision in OFMDM will not be made on the merits of a scheme and whether it is a good one or a bad one; it will be made on the basis that one side plays it off against the other to get something else. And so, we will end up with education being mired in that scenario. The losers in that are the schools, the boards of governors, the parents and the children. That is the folly of engaging, in the House and in this Bill, in any enhancement of the powers of OFMDM. Far from that being a comfort to me, it is an unnecessary development that is totally negative and will not produce the good governance and good arrangements that we all hope to see in education.

If this is a new Bill, there certainly is one very important new dimension, and that is the special status for Irish-medium education. The Minister comes from a party that has a history of liking special status, and in the Bill there is deliberate special status for the Irish-medium sector. I refer to clause 2(5), which states:

“ESA shall ensure that its functions relating to grant-aided schools are (so far as they are capable of being so exercised) exercised with a view to encouraging and facilitating the development of education provided in an Irish speaking school.”

That is not just some throwaway line or feel-good collection of words. That creates a statutory duty. It is couched in mandatory terms. The words “ESA shall ensure” put a statutory duty on ESA to ensure that

“its functions relating to grant-aided schools”

— not selected functions, but all its functions —

“are exercised with a view to encouraging and facilitating the development of”

Irish-medium education. Why is that? If this is about equality, why is it thought necessary to pick out a particular sector of education — the Irish-medium sector — and bestow on it the special status of a statutory duty of the Department in all that it does in relation to grant-aided schools to do what it does with a view to encouraging and facilitating the development of that sector? That is an outrage to other sectors. It is politically gratuitous and put in there by the Department to deliberately and consciously advance a particular sector.

6.45 pm

It gets worse. In clause 33(5), we discover:

“The scheme of management for an Irish speaking school shall require the Board of Governors to use its best endeavours to ensure that the management, control and ethos of the school are such as are likely to ensure the continuing viability of the school as an Irish speaking school.”

The clause also says that the scheme of management of a part-Irish-speaking school is required to do the same. In this situation, in a scheme of management for the board of governors of Moorfields Primary School or any other primary school that is not in the Irish-medium sector there is no compulsion on those who serve as governors to use their best endeavours to ensure that the management, control and ethos of the school are such that it is likely to ensure its continuing viability, yet that special status, that special imposition and that special hedge exists in the Irish-medium sector. That is what it is; it is building a hedge around the Irish-medium sector and saying that, when it comes to the management of those schools, amalgamation or moving into the integrated sector cannot be considered. We might say to a controlled school that it must close or go integrated, and we might say to some other school that it needs to make arrangements to amalgamate. We do not say that the board of governors must use its best endeavours to maintain the viability of the school. We say, in fact, to those schools that they might be compelled and required to consider other options. However, when it comes to the Irish-medium sector, the Bill builds in that special hedge of protection. Why is that if the agenda is not to give preference and advancement to that very sector?

Then Ms Ruane tells us that it is all about equality. All of us who have an interest in controlled schools would gladly take a bit of that equality, but it is not available to us in this Bill. How anyone who is interested in fairness and protecting our education could vote for this Bill with that in it is way beyond my comprehension. That, in itself, along with the bureaucratic, totalitarian control of ESA, is more than enough to damn this Bill and not make it worthy of a Second Stage.

That is even without considering the dangers that, I fear, may lie in the area planning powers. We can all see and suspect that they will be used at the behest of the Department to guide and control the fusion of schools.

That fusion of schools will cause the closure of controlled schools, but not Irish-medium schools, because they will have special protection. That fusion of schools will undermine the voluntary grammar sector particularly, and area planning will become an instrument in the hand of those who are malevolent towards grammar schools and will mark the death knell of those schools. The Bill is utterly devoid of very much that warrants agreement.

Even in the way it is drafted on some matters, it is a surprising Bill. In clause 3(4), I read about a test of compatibility with the heads of agreement. Reading the Bill, you would not know if that is the heads of agreement between tribal leaders in west Sahara or Afghanistan, because nowhere is it defined. Multiple pages of the Bill reference the fact that something has to be done in compatibility with the heads of agreement, and no one reading it would know what on earth it is talking about. Even in drafting, it is so deficient.

I can find very little in the Bill to recommend it to me, and I will certainly take the opportunity that is afforded tonight to vote against the Second Stage, and so should anyone who cares about the future of education and does not want it to be handed over to those who have already demonstrated malevolent intent towards key sectors and a vested interest in protecting, promoting and ring-fencing one sector above all others.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Education Bill, which is clearly one of the most strategic Bills to come before the Assembly. It has been an interesting and, to say the least, wide-ranging debate, if we reflect on the extravagant speculation and paranoia from some Members. I look forward to the Minister's response on the details and specifics of the Bill.

The Bill is about our young school-going children and our future workforce, and it is crucial for our economic well-being and recovery. This afternoon, the Minister properly characterised ESA as the foundation on which to achieve key milestones, to shape and guide the development and life chances of young people, to help build strong and cohesive communities and to help drive and fuel the economy. All that demands that we have a clear vision of a modern, fit-for-purpose education system. It means that schools will have strong and effective leadership from their board of governors and senior management team and that those teams have a strong identification with the communities that they serve and reflect an ethos that pupils, parents, staff and governors will support. The schools management will have the autonomy, remit and skill sets that they need to manage their day-to-day affairs.

Progress has been painfully slow in the Assembly, but, nevertheless, agreement and consensus on important elements of our education process has been established. For example, we have existing cross-party consensus that success in the STEM subjects — science, technology engineering and maths — is a key element in rebuilding our economy. We have already developed agreed positions on better management and planning of the education estate and delivery of the curriculum, improved and thoroughly modernised support services for schools and competent local school managements that will lead and, indeed, innovate with clear and rigorous accountability for outcomes.

We accept that good teaching is the key to raising standards, and we know that we are blessed with good and, indeed, some great teachers. It is time, is it not, to let our teachers realise their potential. Until now, we have expected them to do the job within a structure that is four decades old and is tangibly and visibly failing our teachers and students. They require and, indeed, we all deserve better than that. Yet again, as ever, as this debate has demonstrated, the naysayers are spouting paranoid and speculative assumptions to argue against change when, manifestly, change is an imperative requirement. It has to be said that to argue thus is to defend the status quo; it is to defend the indefensible. Those arguments — not exclusively, of course, but mainly — have come from parties that have ditched leaders and indeed deputy leaders, more often than other parties in the Assembly have changed spokespersons or Ministers. More often than not, the parties in such circumstances are those that argue that they have an agenda for change. I wonder whether that agenda for change applies to their leadership rather than to the policies of the Assembly.

The Minister forthrightly set out his perspective, which includes taking the broader view by being prepared to accept that our education system is consistently outperformed by other education systems and that it is time to change the current arrangements. The Minister has made it clear that he is prepared to take what is best in other education systems, including international best practice, and that the Assembly, for the sake of all our children and for the advantage of our future economic potential, must encourage that outward-looking analysis.

The Minister has stated the blindingly obvious: that a 40-year-old model of education structures simply cannot deliver that vision. Even the sceptics cannot deny that the board system is an ageing direct rule model that is no longer fit for purpose. As elected representatives in this Assembly, we have the opportunity and, perhaps more importantly, the political mandate and the power to replace it with our own mode that will meet the needs of our communities, children and young people. We must not fail to grasp the opportunity with both hands, and we must not be afraid to use the devolved power that makes it our responsibility to improve a system that fails too many of our young people.

Mr B McCrea: I rise to speak at a late hour, hoping that I can add something to the debate. I have listened intently throughout the day. I have not always been able to be in the Chamber, but I have done my level best to listen to the arguments as presented. Given that we are at the Second Stage, the key issue is that we ought to deal with first principles. What are the principles of the Bill? Do we support them, or do we not? The very first questions we might ask are these: why do we need this Bill; what is the Bill being introduced for; and what is going so wrong that this Bill is going to fix?

When the Bill was originally talked about and when ESA was originally discussed, it was on the basis that we could get administrative efficiencies and did not need to have all the education and library boards doing administration for any particular issue. Surely, one of them could take the lead and the others could buy in services. When the Bill was in that format and that was the discussion, my party was happy to support it, but, somewhere along the line, it changed from being an administrative exercise into

something that says we want to raise standards and take control of the schools.

That is where I start to get extremely worried about the fundamental motives of this legislation. I share that feeling with others. It was outlined not only by Mr Allister but by the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Storey, that there is a profound lack of trust in the system. Whether it is the people who administer the system or the system itself I know not. However, I can tell you that there is a complete and utter absence of trust. When you get that, you get a Bill that is presented in language that is barely readable. I listened to the interplay between Members here present about how this clause means that and that clause means the other. Properly, of course, that work will take place in Committee. However, the fundamental issue here is that people suspect that there is a hidden agenda; that this is not really about raising standards but is a political stance by politicians who are trying to advance an argument that does not command the support not only of the House but of the people at large. Until you deal with that issue, it is extremely unlikely that the Bill will go through.

7.00 pm

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

When I look back to the first principles of the Bill and to the choice of a centralised, monolithic, single entity controlled by a single person reporting directly to the Minister, I ask myself whether that centralised Marxist-type of ideology is something that I want to see.

Mr McCartney: It is not true.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I hear the words “not true”. If it is not true, put it in the legislation.

Mr O’Dowd: It is in the legislation, if you would only read it.

Mr McCartney: Is the Member actually saying that ESA will be made up of one single person?

Mr B McCrea: The Member is actually saying that this is a Trojan Horse, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr McCartney: That is not what you said. You can read what you said in Hansard.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am trying to address the House, and I am getting —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr B McCrea: — intemperate comments from stage right. If the Member wishes to make an intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take an intervention, and I will take more interventions. Let me say quite clearly now: we do not believe that the intentions behind the Bill are as they were put out. That is why we reject it, and that is why we say that this is not good enough. It is for the Members and others here present who say that it is wrong in that —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No, I will not give way. I will give way in a minute when I have finished my point, which is that it is for others here to convince us of their bona fides. It is they who have to convince us that the Bill has merit and should go forward. When I look at this Bill, although I have not got the complete detail, which may come out at some other time, I am at a loss to understand the nuances and subtleties of any changes made since the first Bill that

was brought here. I rejected that at the time, and I reject this now. When you start to look at the Bill, you see that it is dancing on the head of a pin. It does not deal with the real issues or with the perception that the Bill is an attack aimed not at trying to resolve certain issues but at our very finest schools in all sections of the community — these are schools that are not disastrous.

I listened to Mr McLaughlin who, sadly, is not in his place. If he was, I would take him on. People keep going on about our education system being in tatters. It is not; it produces some of the best results in the world. Our schools are great, our teachers are great, our head teachers are great. Why are people trying always to put our system down? Let us not talk just about schools in my constituency, where we could talk about Wallace, Friends’ or Rathmore. Let us also talk about St Mary’s in Magherafelt or Lumen Christi up in Londonderry. Those are really great schools doing really good work, as are other schools in other sectors. How dare you say that our education system is failing? I have just come from talking to a load of people from the universities, and our education system provides some of the very best A levels and GCSEs that you can get. There is real merit in our system, and we should not be attacking it.

So when you come to the bit —

Mr O’Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened to three of your party’s spokespersons in here today. One after another, they said that Sinn Féin has made a mess of the education system, that confusion reigns and that it is a disaster. In fact, when some other Members whom I referred to were speaking, I did not even recognise the education system that they described. Now you come in and tell us that the system is brilliant. Which is it? Has Sinn Féin made a mess of it, or is it brilliant?

Mr B McCrea: If you are asking whether Sinn Féin has made a mess of the education brief, the answer is a resounding yes. I have seen nothing but complete and utter disaster, not only from this Minister but from previous Ministers over a period of years. When we look round the Chamber and ask what is the greatest crowning success of the Assembly, do we all cry out with one voice, “Oh, it is the education policy. Thank goodness for the Minister.” No, you are an absolute disaster when it comes to trying to get some sort of resolution to this. This is not working. You are carrying the ball. Your party is carrying the ball. You have been doing it for years. The education system is suffering in your hands. The only thing saving it, which is why I am so keen to keep a devolved system, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that you do not have your levers on all the controls.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could all remarks be made through the Chair, please?

Mr B McCrea: Heaven help us, Mr Deputy Speaker, if we ever got to a situation in which every single school, every single head, every single teacher and every single board of governors was under the control and at the behest of the Minister of Education, because that is what is happening.

Mr O’Dowd: Will you take a point of information? I hate to break the news to the Member, but they are. You are talking about democratic accountability. We are talking about £1.8 billion of public funds. Every school out there is ultimately accountable to the Department of Education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could all remarks be made through the Chair, please.

Mr B McCrea: People talk about their mandate and about democratic accountability. Let me tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, they do not have a mandate to push this through. They may have a mandate in general, but this is a matter of policy, and we, on our mandate, are going to stand and oppose it, because we do not trust the way they are going on this issue.

If people had argued a different sense, tried to take something a little bit more sensible and tried to suggest looking at administrative savings, they would have seen that all of us are prepared to find ways of making savings on those issues. However, as Mr Storey, the Chair of the Committee for Education outlined, most of the savings in cash terms that were originally projected have already been taken. I look forward to finding an answer to that. We were promised £20 million — I think it was £20 million — and £15 million has already been realised through vacancy control and other measures. Suddenly, we are now to find another £20 million. That is £40 million. Where are those savings coming from? Those are questions that have not been answered, and I think they are spurious, because I do not think that the Bill is about a more efficient and effective way of running a system. The Bill is about exercising political control from one side of the House on people who do not want to see it exercised. That is my point of view, and that is why I join my colleagues who argued forcefully that we are opposed to this. The Members opposite may disagree with that. That is fair enough. Engage in debate with us. Tell us we are wrong, explain how we should go back in.

I read the Bill, and I hope there is not an A level in it, because it is pretty hard to read, is it not? Where is the cast-iron agreement? I raised the matter with the Chairman of the Committee who very graciously took the intervention. I said that I want to see some cast-iron guarantees in legislation that protect the voluntary nature of our schools, build on success and which tell us that what makes a good school is a good head. That is what it is. Real leadership comes out, and that is what comes back. A good head, supported by good teachers, good governors and, above all, an ethos in which people say that they will go to school to learn and do things is what makes a good school.

I look round our schools, and I think some of them are spectacularly good. Why would you take away something that is spectacularly good? There are some other issues and some other places where people are struggling — fine. Our aim is to try to find ways of dealing with those issues, but, in many situations, they are to do with environmental matters and the environment in which people teach.

Do you know what I found when I was on the Education Committee? The Chair was particularly good enough to take those two areas at that time. I found that what brings it together and what lifts standards is schools engaging with the community, and schools saying that they were all in this together and deciding to try to have nurture clubs or after-school clubs and all those things. It is parents, it is the community, it is the school that raise standards. All sorts of diktats that come from the centre do nothing but add to the burden of our teachers and prevent them doing what they are supposed to do, which is teach. If you talk to any teachers, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will hear that they get initiative after initiative and have form-filling after

form-filling. It prevents them doing what is right; it prevents them doing what is good for our children. If we go down this route, it will lead to more of that.

An issue was raised about the inspectorate. Many fine people come along, and they have a look at issues and give advice. That is fair enough. However, will it not provide us with problems if you get to a stage where somebody is going to try to tell schools how they are going to do something?

Some of you will know that I have a masters in informatics, which is sort of ICT. I looked at CCEA's GCSE in applied ICT. The specification states that the qualification gives students hands-on experience of ICT and first-hand experience of how it is used in a real-life context. If you read through all of this, you will see that it basically amounts to the student being taught how to use Word. That is not what we need. They can all use Word at the age of eight these days. What we are talking about is how we develop people with computer science skills; that is the issue. How many schools in Northern Ireland currently teach A-level computer science? The answer may come as a shock to some people here: only eight.

Mr O'Dowd: I thought they were brilliant.

Mr B McCrea: The schools are brilliant. The teachers are brilliant. But here is what happens when you get into a centralised issue. If they get direction to go along and do applied ICT — and I love this bit — this is the specification:

"use information and communications technology where appropriate".

"Where appropriate", in the ICT A level? Is that not ridiculous?

I look at the issue and say that we are not able to respond, at this stage, in the right way to teach our children, and we are not able to provide the type of pupils that our universities and industries need, because of the structures that are in place. I really do not believe that more control from the centre is going to deal with that.

I will conclude on the key points I think the Bill should have dealt with. Given the language that I and my colleagues have used, it will come as no surprise that those points are probably diametrically opposed to the ones put forward in the Bill.

I believe that we need diversity in our school provision. It should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. We should celebrate the fact that our children are all different; that certain people are more orientated towards academic studies and others towards vocational or music studies or whatever. We should have appropriate learning centres for those people. I cannot deny that, in certain areas, there are not enough student numbers to command an entire course, so we need to look at innovative ways of dealing with that. It is not an answer to say that the Department of Education knows everything, that the Department of Education will tell you how to do it or that the inspectorate will tell you how to do it.

The fundamental belief I have is that good schools are the corner of our society. They kept us going through thick and thin, when times were really hard. They have produced people with outstanding skills and ability. They are to be celebrated. They are to be encouraged. They are to be given free rein. We should allow teachers to teach. We

should allow heads to lead. We should allow governors to provide the type of ethos for our schools that actually makes them great.

I look at each and every one of you around the Chamber and say that there are great schools in each and every constituency. It would be really surprising if you did not acknowledge the contribution they make. I say to Members that, when it comes to this, I understand the difficulties and am sympathetic to some of the positions people find themselves in. I have worked with people from this side of the Bench on the Education Committee. I know that they are genuine. I know that they are informed. I listened to the Chair of the Education Committee talk about the engagement he has had. I know he does all those things, and I applaud him for that. I ask him to listen to what the schools in his wider constituency are saying. I say to him: we will stand with you when you say that this is not the right way forward.

There are some here who will argue, and I have heard it from a number of sides, that we will deal with this in Committee and somehow bring in amendments. You will not be able to deal with this in Committee. It will be railroaded through. It will be lost in the complexity of the issue. This Bill is not the right way to go forward. It is a political fudge. It is something that is being done as a trade-off for something else. It has not been clearly thought through. It is not the way forward. I ask Members to look at their consciences and understand that this will not do them any good. There will come a time, as has happened in the past, when Members will say: this is not working.

7.15 pm

Please do not misunderstand me: we will find a way of tackling some of the issues that people bring forward. The Minister and his colleague stood up and asked whether I was saying that everything is perfect. The answer is that we live in a dynamic, changing world, and there are other things that we can do. There are always things that we can improve, but taking our very best, throwing it out, and replacing it with something uncertain seems to me a very strange way of going forward.

I will conclude by saying that this is not my brief; my colleagues beside me are going to look at these issues, but I have had discussions with them, I have had representations from schools, and I do not accept the tokenism that is on offer here.

Mr Storey: Can the Member just clarify what discussions he and his colleague had with the transferors on Friday? What did he say to them about the position? I notice that, throughout all that he has said, he has not made reference to the controlled sector, which is very important for our community.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for the intervention. I do not know whether he thinks that that catches me out, but I have already explained that this is not my brief. I understood that my colleague Mr Kinahan addressed the matter, but I will venture my opinion, such as it is. I heard the Chair of the Committee say that he expected a statement from the TRC. I do not have the privilege of understanding where that statement is, but even they must say that there is a certain lack of clarity about what is going on in this Bill. Those who rely on assurances and

nods and winks ultimately run the risk of being severely disappointed.

I am quite sure that Mr Storey will agree with me that, at the very least, we need to get into and understand the detail of all of this. I take his point. I am not trying to make life difficult for people who are honestly engaged in this endeavour, but I will tell you that what is in front of me at the moment leaves me with a sense of foreboding. I probably do not have the words quite right, but the sentiment expressed by Mr Storey — he will correct me if I am wrong — is that he said that the Bill was just about OK to go forward to Committee Stage. I think it is on the other side of that. I do not see enough in this. I do not see the thing being addressed, and I think we should go back to the drawing board. You can take that on board.

Nobody is more committed to education in this part of the world for all of our children, for all of our sectors, for all of our people than I am. *[Interruption.]* I have made it clear that I am prepared to take interventions if Members from a sedentary position wish to say something.

Mr O'Dowd: It has been pointed out even by one of the unionist representatives here that the Member intervened in this debate twice and has spoken about the needs of a certain section of grammar schools and nothing else. Not one other section or sector has he mentioned. He told the House that he would tell us what the Bill needs. He failed to do that. I wrote down what he said. This is what the Bill needs, according to Basil McCrea: it needs "diversity in school provision", and to "celebrate difference". That was it.

Then, he went on to tell us what a good school is. I think he got that from the first paragraph of my introductory speech because I outlined what a good school is. You do not have to be selective to achieve that. It does not take an elite grammar school to achieve that. I sincerely suggest to the Member that he visits a number of non-selective schools in his constituency to see the excellent work that they are doing in education. I am sure that they would appreciate the support.

Mr B McCrea: Not for the first time, I am not sure that I follow the Minister's line of argument. *[Interruption.]* I gave the Minister the chance to say something if he wants to say it. If he wants to carry on talking, he can carry on talking.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member wish to give way again?

Mr B McCrea: If the Minister has something useful to say, I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not sure which part of what I outlined he did not understand. He may not agree with it, but I am pretty sure he understood it.

Mr B McCrea: I am really pleased that you know better about what I think than I do. Is there some sort of mind transfer going on here? Are you able to do that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks through the Chair, please.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I have to say that that is a ridiculous statement. In what has been a debate full of ridiculous statements, that one takes the biscuit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we get back to the Bill, please?

Mr B McCrea: As you direct, Mr Deputy Speaker. You know me.

I have reiterated our fundamental principles. We see good schools tackling the really challenging issue of preparing our young people for the future. We would like to build on success and to recognise that there are differences. I do not know whether the Minister heard me talking about vocational education or the other issues. As you know, I have the privilege of being the Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning, in which we deal with further education colleges and various other issues. Perhaps enough has been said. It is obvious from our exchange that the Minister and I are not going to see eye to eye on this.

I will conclude by asking those Members whom I know to be sympathetic to our stance to consider whether they are going down the right route. There are real, serious problems with the Bill, and I fear that if you get sucked into this, you will end up in a place that you do not want to be. The Bill will be salami sliced. After a few minor amendments have been made to it, people will triumph it and say, "There you go. We have got it sorted." But, do you know what you will end up with? You will end up with a single authority, controlled by political intervention, in which we will have no interference, and we will have no say in issues such as academic selection, area based planning, the curriculum or any other things. There will be a fig-leaf defence about how this has been done through democracy, but the power will rest elsewhere.

On that point, I have to say to Members of the House that the Bill should be rejected, because the principles on which it is based are deeply and utterly flawed and because it will not do anything positive for our children or our schools. I oppose the Bill.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltáí a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht. Ardaíodh pointí sainiúla, agus freagróidh mé oiread acu agus is féidir liom. Ar ndóigh, scríobhfaidh mé chuig Comhaltáí faoi na saincheisteanna nach féidir liom a chlúdach anois.

I thank the Members who contributed to the debate today. Many specific points were raised, and I shall address as many of them as possible. I shall, of course, write to Members on any issues that I am unable to cover now.

The debate on the Second Stage of the Bill to establish the Education and Skills Authority has, by and large, been informed and informative. As I said in my opening remarks, the Bill is the outworking of the heads of agreement, which were agreed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister last November, and puts in place actions outlining those heads of agreement and the principles and policies agreed in the public consultation on the reform of public administration in education, which, I admit, took place several years ago. However, the consultation continues. If the Bill passes its Second Stage today, the Education Committee will, in effect, take ownership of it. It will decide how long the consultation process will be, who to call in and from whom it will garner information. So, consultation on the Bill has not closed. The Bill will not be in the same shape if it reaches Final Stage, and I hope that it does reach Final Stage, because I believe that the education sector is desperately crying out for it.

I wish to respond to and outline a number of the points raised by Members. I will deal with the grammar issue at

the head of this to get it out of the road. There is nothing in the Bill that deals with the management type of any school, including grammar schools. I will be open and frank here. If I could get away with it, I would bring a Bill to the House that would see radical realignment of our education system. However, we are not going to get away with that, because we work in a coalition Executive. So, we have brought forward a Bill that reflects the principles of ESA and allows us to move forward, through a managed transition, to a new management type, which, at its core, is about raising standards, as Mr McCrea said. For that, I do not apologise to anyone.

I have to say that a number of elements have been disappointing. I pointed out to Mr McCrea that he did not mention any other sector. However, when Members reflect on the Hansard report, they will also note that a significant number of Members did not mention any sector other than grammar schools. Members need to understand that we cannot plan our school system based on the needs of one sector. We cannot do that, and I believe that it would be a fundamental mistake for our schools if we were to continue to do that.

The ESA programme of work allows all sectors to have a fair say and fair play and to make representations on the administration of education. Some Members suggested that ESA is bureaucratic, undemocratic and will have all sorts of powers, particularly in relation to academic selection. The Bill will govern how ESA works. No other legislation will govern ESA. ESA will be governed by this Bill in reference to other legislation, but, if Members are not sure what ESA will do, let me point out that it is set out in this Bill.

I also want to point out to Members the issue around the Irish language. The Irish language was mentioned by, I think, everyone from the opposite Benches who spoke.

Mr B McCrea: That is not true.

Mr O'Dowd: Apologies to Mr McCrea. He did not mention the Irish language. I accept that. However, I suspect that it was mentioned by everyone else. It is useful for Members from the opposite Benches to reflect on this point, which fits into the issue around grammar schools: only one Member from the opposite Benches mentioned Protestant working-class boys. Only one Member, and that was the Chair of the Education Committee, Mervyn Storey.

Throughout six hours of debate on raising educational attainment and protecting the rights of schools and the community, Members from the opposite Benches were more interested in the Irish language provisions in the Bill than in what it would do to raise educational attainment for Protestant working-class boys. The Members opposite need to reflect on that. If they are serious about raising educational attainment across our society, they will have to focus on education in its entirety and stop focusing on the needs of a small number of schools and having paranoid attacks about Irish-medium education.

There is nothing in the Bill about Irish-medium education that is not already covered in other legislation. It is a read-across to make sure that the legislation is correct. Mr Storey, quite rightly, asked why there is no duty on the governors on the boards of integrated schools, and Anna Lo had concerns about that matter, as did a number of other speakers. As I pointed out earlier, the answer is simple: that duty is already in law. Article 64 of the 1989

order covers the role of integrated schools. What will be brought forward in this Bill will bring that sector into line with the Irish-medium sector. I ask Members to reflect on that and, in looking at the needs of education, perhaps tell us what they are going to do rather than what they are not going to do.

The Chair of the Education Committee quite rightly pointed out that the Committee will take its time to study the Bill, going through it clause by clause. As I said about consultation, the Education Committee will set its own parameters in relation to legislation and will investigate all elements of the Bill thoroughly. I look forward to working with it on that.

I will deal with a number of issues that the Chair raised. The inspection powers, which no doubt will be interrogated closely, are a reflection of what is happening in England with Ofsted, which is, perhaps, strange coming from me. It was felt that they were useful powers to have in place to carry out the normal practice of inspections. There is no underhand method or motivation in relation to that. It is simply a transfer of powers that we believed were useful at that time. In fact, they do not go as far as the Ofsted powers; Ofsted powers are quite robust. However, before I go down that road and strengthen the powers to even that degree, I would like a separate consultation. Again, it is an open and transparent matter.

With regard to Mr Kinahan's presentation, I share the view of my colleague Caitríona Ruane: I believe that someone else presented Mr Kinahan with that speech, because he started off by telling us that the ESA Bill was actually a fifth column attempt to reunite Ireland. Even the most conspiracy theory-minded person would not go there — even Mr Allister did not go there. He claimed that this Bill is an attempt to unite Ireland. I will read the Bill and the explanatory notes again, but how you come to the conclusion that the ESA Bill is an attempt to reunite Ireland is beyond me.

His speech went downhill from there on in. It had no relative correspondence to the Education Bill whatsoever. It was an attack on the legitimacy of Sinn Féin to hold Government seats, but I remind Mr Kinahan that the Ulster Unionist Party signed up to the Good Friday Agreement 14 years ago, so it recognises the legitimacy —

7.30 pm

Mr B McCrea: Did you sign up to it? Did Sinn Féin sign up to it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: I am standing here as a Minister.

Mr B McCrea: Sinn Féin did not sign it.

Mr O'Dowd: I have a wee history lesson for the Member. If he examines the Good Friday Agreement, he will realise that there are no actual signatories to it, other than those of the two Governments.

Mr B McCrea: You just said that we had signed up to it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: And I did not go to one of his elite grammar schools to work that one out.

Mr Kinahan's was an intemperate attack on Sinn Féin's right to hold Ministries. He took the ill-informed position that perhaps the ESA Bill will give the Education Minister powers because the Education Minister does not have any power. The Education Minister currently has a wide, wide range of powers. I have authority over the education and library boards. I sign off on their budgets, and if I do not agree with them, they will not be signed off. There is power.

I have power of appointment to boards of governors, which I am handing over to the ESA. I have power under article 101 of the Education and Libraries Order 1986, which is a stronger power than any contained in this legislation.

Mr B McCrea: So you are reducing your powers?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I am not giving up article 101. Article 101 is in place, so all those powers that Mr Kinahan — or whoever wrote that speech for him — kept himself awake at night worrying about, I already have. If I wanted to use them and abuse them, I would, but that would not be a responsible thing to do as Minister.

I commented to him during the debate that I suspect the tribunals will have many hearings in the first number of years. That is not because there is something hidden in the Bill but because I believe that, as with any new legislation, this legislation will take time to bed in. There are going to have to be confidence measures here, and schools will test the ESA and the ESA will test schools over the legislation. I did not suspect that there were going to be many, many battles over the tribunals because all of a sudden schools would discover something hidden — something that is not open and transparent — in the Bill.

A number of Members spoke about tribunals, including Mr McDevitt, who asked why OFMDFM is involved in such matters. I covered that in response to him. It is a confidence measure. It is up to the Assembly whether it keeps that clause in the Bill. If Members believe that that confidence measure is not required, I as Minister will not stand against it, but, as I said, that is a matter for the House.

Mr Kinahan suggested that there are fears and rumours spreading through education over the ESA legislation. I ask him to reflect on his contribution and answer to himself the question of whether his contribution has eased any of those fears and rumours that are spreading through the education sector at this time, because I believe that the remarks by his good self actually added to an ill-informed debate.

What I will say to Mr Rogers is similar to what I said to Mr Kinahan. Mr Rogers said that the ESA will implement education policy implemented by the Department of Education. There is no arm's-length body in any Department that does not do that. That is the role of arm's-length bodies: to implement the policies set out by the sponsoring Department. Members cannot seriously suggest, although a number did, that we hand authority over to an unelected body. I think that such bodies are called quangos, which, I believe, most Members and parties are opposed to, instead believing in democratic accountability to the Department and the Minister. The Minister is held to account both by the Assembly and the Education Committee. A Department's spending is held to account by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. Therefore, there are enough checks and balances in place for Members not to be handing over their hard-won democratic authority to an unelected body.

The current state of our schools system we can debate at length. I argued with Mr McCrea about the state of our schools system. He suggested that everything is rosy. I do not believe that everything is rosy, but nor do I believe the bleak picture painted by Mr Rogers. He painted a picture of the schools estate that was creaking at the edges and issues from truancy to imprisonment. Yes, there is truancy. Yes, some young people lose out in their education and end up in prison. However, that is not the overall picture of the education system.

When I visit schools, they show me the good, the bad and the ugly of the school. That is why I visit them. I want to see a picture of what is happening in our education estate. I can assure Members that I have not met a principal or a board of governors yet who are shy or behind the door in coming forward and telling me exactly what is going on.

A number of Members raised area planning. We are actually placing area planning on a statutory footing. We are ensuring that area planning has to be consulted on and that we have to engage with the various sectors. Members may not be happy with the principle of area planning for a variety of reasons. Privately, however, they will admit to me that the schools estate needs to be modernised — which, in fairness, Miss McIlveen admitted here today. The schools estate needs to be modernised. That may be uncomfortable for some Members because it is easy, sometimes, to go and listen to lobby groups and agree with everything that they say — to nod in agreement and to visit schools and promise them the earth, the moon and the stars. That is very easy. But you see when you are a Minister? You have to make decisions. I am going to make decisions. Those decisions will be based on the ongoing consultation on area planning. When that consultation is complete, I will make decisions. Members opposite will still be able to go around with all the lobby groups and everybody who is opposed to everything and say, “Yes, you are right.”

However, what they will also have to do is this; they will have to give them an alternative. There is where the difficulty would build in for Members. They would have to give society an alternative. There is no point in sitting agreeing with all the objectors and not being able to offer an alternative. That is our situation. It was easy when we were all in opposition to direct rule Ministers. We were all able to say, “That is awful”, “That is terrible” and, “You should not be doing that.” We are not in that position any more. When you oppose something, you have to offer alternative measures. I have not heard any alternative measures coming from those who are opposed to area planning; none whatsoever.

Mr B McCrea: Are we talking about the same Bill?

Mr O'Dowd: There is nothing hidden in the Bill. If the Member goes through the Bill, he will find area planning in it. It is not hidden; it is there. That is why I am referring to it.

Mr B McCrea: So, it is there in detail, is it?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. It is there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All comments must be made through the Chair.

Mr O'Dowd: I apologise, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It appears that the Member has not read the Bill. Area planning is in the Bill and its explanatory notes. The Bill sets out the statutory provision on how area planning will

work in the future. Area planning will be dealt with by the ESA board in consultation with sectoral support bodies, etc. Thank you, Ms Ruane. Clause 24 of the Bill deals with area education plans. Clause 25 deals with preparation and revision of plans. Clause 26 deals with —

Mr McCallister: Are you just writing them now?

Mr O'Dowd: It is all there. You will be able to go through it in your own time.

The Bill also covers the role of boards of governors. We are putting in place a supportive measure. We want to give authority to boards of governors. It is a voluntary role. I accept that, at times, it is a very difficult role because difficult decisions have to be made. We also want to encourage more and more people to become members of boards of governors. It is an important role. I would like to take the opportunity to encourage people to look at where they could be a member of a board of governors. Leading businesspeople, those in law, senior civil servants, etc, should take a look around and ask themselves where their skills as governors would be best placed. Are they in the local grammar school, which looks good on your CV, or is your role as a governor better placed elsewhere where your skills, leadership, knowledge, etc, may help a school and a community to fulfill its educational outcomes? The role of boards of governors is carried through in the Bill.

The relationship between the Catholic certificate and employment matters is a cross-departmental issue. I have already pointed out to my Department that I want the review of the Catholic certificate to be brought to me. It has to be brought to a conclusion. It has been debated long enough. Members, quite rightly, want to know where it is. I accept that. Therefore, I have asked for it to be brought forward.

At the end of the day, there will have to be a role in the matter for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister as to what action that they want to take on future employment provision. It falls outside my remit. I will bring forward my part of the review to ensure that.

That brings me to the role of the transferors in ESA. Members of the Education Committee during my time will be aware that this was debated at length, and, time and again, we ran into legal advice that suggested that we could not provide clauses that would recognise the rights of the transferors on boards of governors or on ESA. I welcome the fact that that legal advice has been clarified and advanced so that we are now able to meet the needs of the transferors on the boards of governors and ESA. ESA and the boards of governors will be better for it, so I welcome the fact that we will be able to move forward on the basis of the new legal advice that Committee members received.

I am scanning through my notes to see whether Members brought up any issues that I have yet to touch on. I apologise to Brenda Hale for leaving the Chamber when she was speaking. I will check Hansard and with my officials for any points that you raised that I am not able to cover this evening.

My colleague Caitriona Ruane raised the issue of the equality of SEN provision across the North when ESA comes into place. The disappointing fact is that the boards approach SEN in different ways and within different time frames, etc. One thing that the SEN review and

ESA will achieve is equality of SEN provision across all geographical areas. That is to be welcomed.

Dolores Kelly touched on the subject of young women and girls involved in education. She referred to the demonstration today in —

Mrs D Kelly: Roscommon.

Mr O'Dowd: Roscommon. I wonder how you heard about that. You mentioned the shooting of the young girl, Malala, in Pakistan. It brings you back to reality when you look at other societies and nations and how they strive to get to education when, sometimes, our society becomes turned off it. Some communities have to go through battles and turmoil to get into an education system. That brings you down to earth with a shudder, and you realise that education is a gift. ESA will help us to advance education provision across the board.

Dolores, you also referred to the Youth Council. The Bill places a statutory obligation on ESA to provide adequate youth services. I am also involved in a review of youth services provision, which I encourage Members to respond to.

I challenged Mr Allister's comments about the Bill and about the powers of ESA and the Department to change it without reference to the Assembly. I hope that he has now satisfied himself by reading the necessary clauses. On a broad principle, I am sure that the Member accepts that it is beyond the power of any Minister or public body to change primary legislation without reference to the Assembly. It is impossible to do so.

Mr Allister also spoke about the relationships between the Minister, the Department, ESA and schools. I said earlier that ESA will be in charge of somewhere in the region of £1.8 billion of public funding. I am sure that he is not seriously saying that we should allow a body with £1.8 billion of public money to have no democratic accountability to the Department of Education or the Minister. Regardless of Mr Allister's view of the Minister, the Minister is governed by legislation. The Minister is also governed by a number of codes of conduct, etc, so Mr Allister's point is irrelevant. We cannot give up the premise that we have and should have democratic accountability for all public funds being spent now and into the future. I also emphasise to him that the public appointments process that will be effective for ESA will be open and transparent. I can assure him that the recent mistakes that were made by my Department have been rectified and will not be replicated in any further public appointments process or with ESA.

7.45 pm

On his assertion that I may appoint a chairperson who is favourable to me — I think he said a chairman — I want to emphasise that I may appoint a chairman or a chairwoman, but they will be appointed on merit and not on what their views are of me or any other Member.

I think that he should get a copy of this Saturday's 'Irish News'. I read Patrick Murphy's account of the Education Bill. In it, he made a number of suggestions, and I did not take great heart from them. I suggest that he reads this Saturday's 'Irish News', because Patrick Murphy has a very dim view of us all. Frankly, he referred to us — the lot of us — as wasters. If you are looking for comfort in Patrick

Murphy's columns in the 'Irish News', you will not find it; he does not speak highly of any of us. I do not agree with him on that point and I do not necessarily agree with him on his review of the ESA legislation either.

It has been a lengthy debate, as should be the case, but it is not the end of the debate. If its Second Stage is agreed by the Assembly this evening, the Education Bill will go to the Committee for further scrutiny. I believe that the Bill presents a fair and equitable way forward. If its Second Stage is passed this evening, I urge Members to go about the business of future discussions on the Bill based on the needs of all our children and all our schools. If we do not get it right for all our children and all our schools, we will, quite frankly, be storing up a series of problems for ourselves in future. I believe that we can begin the journey of getting it right under the ESA legislation. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 77; Noes 15.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Byrne, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Rogers, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Boyle and Mr Hazzard

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Kinahan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Education Bill [NIA 14/11-15] be agreed.

Adjourned at 8.01 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 October 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make a statement on the thirteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in transport sectoral format, held in Armagh on Tuesday 16 October at 10.30 am — no; this is Tuesday 16 October. It was held some time in September, and it was really good. *[Laughter.]* I attended the meeting with the Environment Minister, Alex Attwood MLA, who will make a separate statement covering issues that relate to his Department. That will follow directly after my statement, and question and answer session. Minister Leo Varadkar chaired the meeting, with Minister Attwood and me in attendance.

The Council noted the conclusion of the work of the all-island freight forum. I welcome the relationships and co-operation that have been developed through the freight forum and look forward to those continuing.

The Council noted that the necessary orders have been made regarding construction on two sections of the A5. We also noted that, in line with the procedure for payment of the Irish Government contribution agreed at the July 2009 NSMC plenary meeting, an updated project milestone and payment schedule for the period to the end of 2016 will be prepared for agreement at a future NSMC transport meeting. We also noted that construction work has commenced on the A8 project and is expected to be completed by early 2015.

On EU matters, we noted some of the current significant EU proposals with implications for the transport sector affecting both jurisdictions. We also heard the priorities for the Irish presidency of the EU in the first half of 2013 relevant to transport, and Departments will liaise on relevant issues in the coming months, specifically before the EU transport council meeting in March.

The Council also noted that events are being organised in the Republic of Ireland during the EU presidency that may be of interest to Departments with responsibility for transport safety. Minister Varadkar invited me, Minister Attwood and relevant officials to attend EU presidency events relating to road safety and intelligent transport systems.

The Council agreed to hold its next NSMC transport meeting in spring 2013. I confirm that the meeting on which I am reporting took place on Friday 5 October.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for the statement, very short though it was.

I note his comments regarding EU matters, which are timely given that he will host the chair of the EU Committee on Transport later this week. Will the Minister expand on the priorities of the Irish presidency of the EU in respect of transport? Do those tie in with the priorities that he will present to the chair of the EU Committee on Transport this Friday? Is he content that the Department of Transport in the South is on board in representing the needs of the North of Ireland during the negotiations on TEN-T and the connecting European facility?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The Member will know that the Irish presidency comes at a most opportune time, as a range of EU proposals, particularly the Trans-European Transport Network or TEN-T regulation, will go some way to determining how we travel throughout the European Union well into the future.

The Member mentioned that Mr Brian Simpson MEP, who is chair of the Transport Committee of the European Parliament, is coming as my guest later this week. We will take the opportunity to look at a number of projects and have some discussions, including with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development. That is very welcome. Any influence that we can have on European matters, particularly in relation to TEN-T, will be very important. With the presidency being held by the Republic of Ireland early next year, there will obviously be further opportunities.

Mr Easton: Was the proposed bridge from Warrenpoint across Carlingford lough, which was mentioned on the BBC website yesterday, brought up at the meeting? Will that issue have to be raised at the Executive?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I can confirm that there was no discussion at the transport sectoral meeting of the Narrow Water bridge proposal. That is the factual position in relation to the meeting on which I am reporting this morning.

Mrs McKevitt: Planning approval has been granted for the Narrow Water bridge on both sides of Carlingford lough. Will the Minister join me in welcoming that decision as an improvement of the road strategy on this island? I hope that he is more enthusiastic about this project than his predecessor.

Mr Kennedy: I think we are stretching the report on the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting. However, it is important for me, as the Minister for Regional Development, to say that my Department has not had any direct involvement in the Narrow Water bridge proposal. It is not on any of our future work programmes, nor has the Department made any commitment to contribute to it. The southern relief road would be a better strategic option than the Narrow Water Bridge proposal. Nevertheless, there are a number of significant issues around the Narrow Water Bridge proposal, particularly in relation to the navigation of the channel and the potential for queues to build up on both approaches to Narrow Water roundabout on the A2 Warrenpoint Road. My Department's position on the Narrow Water Bridge proposal thus far has been to offer co-operation to those developing and taking forward the project, but, I repeat, it has not had any direct involvement, nor has it made any commitment to contribute funds to it.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his short statement. It is so short that it is very difficult to get a question out of it, but I will try to throw something in his direction. The A5 and A8 schemes are mentioned in this brief statement. Is the Minister happy that, by proceeding with both schemes, there will be opportunities for our local construction industry to get involved and provide local employment?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I will avoid the temptation to simply give a one-word answer and reduce even further my contribution. The Member raises an important issue about the potential for both the A5 and A8 schemes to provide employment opportunities and sustained work, particularly in the road construction industry. It is therefore important that I had the great privilege of officially cutting the first sod of the A8 scheme last week. That is a scheme that will provide opportunities. It will open up the road from Belfast to the Port of Larne and will improve the capacity for the movement of people and goods. I do not underestimate the huge benefit that that scheme and sections of the A5, when we are able to proceed with them, will have for local economies and the employment that they will give to people in the construction industry.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement, particularly for the large font size that helped stretch it to two pages. The Minister will be pleased to know that I am not going to ask him about the Narrow Water proposal, as another question on that might be a bridge too far. His statement mentioned the events that are being organised during the Republic of Ireland's EU presidency. Will he give us some more detail on that? Are there particular events that are of importance to transport issues in Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. We were faced with the choice of either making the font size bigger or leaving room for people like him to colour in. We chose a bigger font size this time.

As the Member knows, the Republic of Ireland will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union from January to June 2013. The presidency's function is to chair meetings of the council, determine its agendas, set a work programme and facilitate dialogue both at council meetings and at meetings of other EU institutions. It can therefore be a very influential position, helping to broker compromise between European institutions so that they reach a consensus on regulations.

Certainly, the presidency period puts Northern Ireland in a strong position to influence policy so that regional variance is taken into account. My Department has well established contacts at official level with the Republic of Ireland, and I am keen to continue building on those good relationships in the run-up to, and throughout, the Irish presidency. However, although events being organised in the Republic of Ireland during its presidency will be of interest, any request to hold meetings in Northern Ireland or at the Executive's office in Brussels would have to be carefully considered before it was agreed to. However, there will be, of course, cases where it would be mutually beneficial to facilitate some events.

10.45 am

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As recently as yesterday, I was speaking with representatives of the construction sector about the A5. Obviously, they are very anxious that the project goes ahead as soon as possible, because it is estimated that as many as 800 jobs are on hold pending the legal challenge that is ongoing. Has the Minister had any direct engagements with the successful companies who tendered for the scheme to keep them updated with developments? Does he have any indication of when the legal challenge may commence and, indeed, conclude?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for raising a very important point. I suppose, effectively, the question is this: has the legal action the potential to cost jobs? That may depend on the duration of the legal process. Any delay in starting the scheme will prevent construction for the current programme. If the scheme does not proceed, there will be very significant implications for jobs across the Province. As he said, the construction industry has estimated that the sections that are being taken forward at this time will, at their peak, provide direct employment for over 800 workers. Therefore, that will also help to safeguard existing jobs in the industry. In addition, there will be a significant effect on jobs that are associated with the supply chain, although that is harder to quantify. Obviously, in such a situation, the preservation of jobs overall will be dependent on the reallocation of funds to other construction projects. That is not necessarily guaranteed, but my officials continue to liaise closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) on the financial implications of the legal action. Of course, I confirm again that we will defend robustly the legal challenge that has been presented to us.

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned the significant EU proposals affecting the transport sector, one of which is switching funding towards encouraging rail freight. That, of course, would disadvantage Northern Ireland, owing to the short distances that are involved in our freight movements and the economics of that. Has there been any recognition that that proposal will disadvantage Northern Ireland, and have allowances been made for us?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. That issue has not been discussed at sector level. I am aware of the issue, and I will seek to carry it forward through further discussions with various agencies.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his very informative, albeit short, statement. The Member who spoke previously touched on

what I was going to ask. When the Minister spoke about EU matters, he said that there were implications for the transport sector that would affect both jurisdictions. Can you elaborate on that?

How often does the transport sector get feedback from you about what goes on in these sectoral format meetings? There is a worry and a fear in the transport sector. I declare an interest in the transport sector. If that sector goes down, the economy will go down too as it is the biggest provider to the economy.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I agree with him about the importance of the transport sector, particularly the freight sector, and its role in the local economy.

The Member will know that, until recently, work was carried out by the all-Ireland freight forum. That forum was established to encourage co-operation on freight issues to help to develop a more sustainable freight sector. Much of that very good work has now been completed, and the freight forum is no longer being continued. I am satisfied, as is my counterpart in the Irish Republic, Minister Varadkar, that sufficient contacts have been made North and South for important issues to be carried forward as necessary. We endeavour, through officials, to keep representatives of the freight sector and transport sector updated on ongoing issues.

Mr Byrne: Like others, I welcome the statement and congratulate the Minister on some of the topics that are included. I welcome the fact that the A8 project has commenced. Can the Minister confirm that the Department for Regional Development project team is still intact and is working in a committed way on the A5? Secondly, does he have any comment to make about the moneys that had been earmarked for the project each month? Where will they go? Can he give an assurance that there will be no diminution of the project?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his encouraging remarks about the statement and its content. I am happy to confirm that my departmental officials are in ongoing contact with officials from DFP to manage the financial resources as a consequence of the current legal situation. We hope that we can move quickly. As I have said, it is our intention to robustly defend the legal challenge to us, and we very much hope that we can resolve those issues. That is dependent on work in another place through the courts.

In the meantime, we are using our resources wisely in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel so that we can carry out necessary structural maintenance, which is an ongoing matter, and can then reallocate finances at a later date to the sections that we are carrying forward. It is our intention to continue to carry those sections forward as quickly as possible.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Were any of the discussions in the All Ireland Freight Forum about rail freight, particularly the deep water port of Lisahally, through which, as the Minister knows, the railway line runs?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will know that, effectively, little or no freight is moved by rail in either Northern Ireland

or the Republic of Ireland, and, frankly, for reasons of economics, that seems likely to continue to be the case.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I understand that £10 million a month will be taken from the A5 budget and is earmarked for other schemes. Can you guarantee that that is the case and that there is no danger that it could return to the British Treasury?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. I simply laugh at any suggestion that I would give money back to the British Treasury — give money back to my own country. *[Interruption.]* We hope to manage the situation that is before us. It is a challenge, and we very much hope that we can resolve the legal issues surrounding the challenge to us. We are seeking to work with DFP to ensure that no money has to go back or remains unspent.

Mr Allister: Minister, is the statement remarkably short because, in truth, there was remarkably little business, even after a six-month gap, to complete on that occasion? Even with the participants spinning out the event as much as they could — I am sure that Mr Attwood's ability to talk endlessly on any subject was a great assistance — what was the duration of the meeting? How much do the meetings cost? Was anything done at the meeting that could not be done by telephone or video link?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's question, and I do not underestimate my own ability to talk at length on very little. I did not get where I am today by not talking at length about very little. *[Laughter.]* The meeting lasted approximately an hour, and it was a useful discussion. For the Member's interest, and perhaps for the interest and curiosity of others, we arrived early enough to be welcomed with tea, coffee and shortbread. I mention this simply to encourage the Member to attend, if he wants to. Also, we concluded with a very nice brunch, because it was too early for lunch and too late for breakfast.

The Member can be satisfied that there was important dialogue. I do not know what the cost was, but I do not underestimate the importance of the issues that were discussed for our mutual benefit. If the Member wishes to become an observer at such events, we will try to facilitate that.

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): In advance of reading through the statement, given that some of it touches on road safety issues, I record and send the condolences of the House to the family of a further victim of our roads, who was killed in recent hours. Our roads are in the North, on the island and across the island, so the more that we do on an all-island basis to protect people on our streets and roads, and on our highways and byways, the better. People should maybe think about that.

In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I, too, wish to make a statement on the thirteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format, held in Armagh on Friday 5 October 2012. As Members have heard, the meeting was chaired by Minister Varadkar TD, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, and attended by the Regional Development Minister, Danny Kennedy, and me. I will address the agenda items for which my Department has responsibility: mutual recognition of penalty points; road user safety; and vehicle safety.

I advised the Council of the Department for Transport's decision to introduce legislation that would lead to heavy goods vehicle (HGV) road user charging in the UK. It had been understood that the legislation was on the back-burner, but it recently transpired that it has been brought forward and, indeed, accelerated. That will have consequences for HGV traffic on the island, not least because of our particular and unique circumstance of sharing a land border with another jurisdiction. Those matters were discussed at the meeting, are discussed around the meeting and are being raised, through Dublin and through me, with the London Government.

The Council also noted that the European Commission has been asked for clarity on matters relating to bus cabotage. Members will be aware of the situation that arose with cabotage in the north-west and that this was an inter-jurisdictional matter. There is a lack of guidance from the European authorities on what "temporary" might mean when it comes to the conduct of cross-border cabotage, and the European authorities have yet to provide further information. Nonetheless, we have to manage the situation that we face and append any further advice, if there is any further advice, from Europe.

We also discussed the potential implications of the EU roadworthiness package, the scale of which is very significant. Minister Varadkar, Minister Kennedy and I are at one that the scale of roadworthiness proposals is beyond what might be necessary. We are mindful that the need to improve the roadworthiness of vehicles is essential given the scale of deaths in the European Union that arises from vehicles not being roadworthy.

The Council also noted that the terms of reference and membership of the steering and working groups have been agreed to take forward work on the mutual recognition of penalty points. This demonstrates why ministerial involvement is needed, as the advice given to me, at an official level, was that we could not do this. I was advised that it could be done only on an all-islands basis, as with the mutual recognition of driver disqualification that is now in place. However, through the efforts of Minister Varadkar

and me, we ascertained that we had the ability to do this on all-island, not on an all-islands, basis.

Given the need for mutual recognition of penalty points as a means to improve driving and to protect road users, we have decided, through the NSMC, to take that forward. We agreed the timetable of key milestones for having necessary primary and secondary legislation in place by 31 December 2014. I welcome the advancement of that very difficult work. There is no place in Europe where two jurisdictions have mutual recognition of penalty points. This is groundbreaking, technical, difficult and logistically demanding work, yet it is being advanced on this island, and, in the fullness of time, it will be a template for other members of the European Union. It was noted that an update on the matter would be reported to the next NSMC transport meeting, scheduled for April next year, but we hope that the respective legislation will go through the Dáil and the Assembly in 2013-14.

11.00 am

We also discussed road user safety. The Council welcomed the continued sharing of knowledge and experience between officials from both jurisdictions on the development and delivery of our respective road safety strategies. That will ensure the best approach to reducing the number and severity of injuries across the island.

We discussed progress on the reduction of drink-drive limits in each jurisdiction, and I shared progress on the drafting of legislation to improve Northern Ireland's driver training, testing and post-test regime, which I hope to introduce in the Assembly before the end of the year. Those proposals were enthusiastically welcomed and supported by the Executive, including Minister Kennedy, at our meeting in the first week in July. We hope to have that legislation introduced in the Assembly before the end of this year, passed before the summer recess and operational during 2014.

I move now to vehicle safety. The Council welcomed the continued proactive co-operation to target a wide range of illegal activity within the goods haulage and passenger transport industries, including an increasingly targeted approach towards enforcement; continuing liaison on cross-border enforcement operations, of which there will be five in 2012 in both jurisdictions; and co-operation in relation to vehicle standards, including the mutual recognition of vehicle type approval, which will allow for simplification of the registration process. That matter is being taken forward on an all-island basis. There is also continued co-operation on the exchange of data and follow-up on unroadworthy foreign vehicles in either jurisdiction.

The Council also noted the excellent co-operation on the enforcement of EU tachograph and drivers' hours rules and the proposed training exchange for enforcement officers that will take place in 2013.

Given that we have a land border and that we share this island with people in the Republic, those sorts of interventions are very important to ensure that those who are on the road are fit to be on the road.

Mr Hamilton (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister mentioned drink-driving levels and said that the Irish were proposing to change

their system as well. Can he confirm whether they are proposing to drop their acceptable levels to the same level as the Minister is approving? Is there any contemplation in the Irish Republic of some of the policies that he is suggesting for learner drivers and restrictions immediately after they pass their test?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I can confirm that the Southern authorities have already changed the law in respect of alcohol limits in people's blood giving rise to prosecution. That went into effect on their October bank holiday last year. Therefore, it is almost the first anniversary of that law. We are following their lead in reducing alcohol limits for novice drivers, professional drivers and, generally, all drivers in the image of what has been done in the Republic. We are doing that in the image of what, increasingly, is the tendency and practice in other European states and around the world. We are, therefore, deploying best practice for all the obvious reasons.

In some ways, the South is ahead of us. For example, they already require a minimum number of lessons for a novice driver to complete in advance of doing their test. I looked at that option here in the North. In my view, given the economic circumstances that we face, that might have imposed an undue financial burden on novice drivers in advance of doing their test. On the other hand, the proposals that the Executive endorsed in July are some of the most advanced and bold driver training regime proposals that have come forward on these islands and, indeed, in Europe. Just as there might be a template for the all-Ireland recognition of penalty points, I would like to think that what we are doing, subject to the endorsement of the Assembly when the Bill comes before the House later this year, will set a template for driver training going forward to improve driver performance, reduce the risk of injury and death and, on the far side of that, ensure that there are opportunities to reduce driver premiums. That is the family of reasons why we are doing this. I would like to think that, in the fullness of time, Minister Varadkar will embrace some of our thinking.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá a fhios ag an Aire go bhfuil an-suim ag Sinn Féin i ndroichead Chaol Uisce. The Minister knows that Sinn Féin has an interest in the Narrow Water bridge. I welcome the decision made by the Minister and pay tribute to Louth County Council and the Rostrevor, Warrenpoint and Kilkeel Chambers of Commerce. I also welcome the Bord Pleanála decision in the South. Indeed, a couple of months ago, I gave evidence to a Bord Pleanála hearing in Carlingford. This is an important project. In the light of that importance, will the Minister outline the next steps that his Department will take to ensure that we all lobby INTERREG to ensure we get funding for this important project?

Mr Attwood: I hope that we are all already lobbying INTERREG and have been doing so for a very long time. I hope that nobody in the House is coming late to this issue. DRD has had an input into the decision. I say that because it was raised in Minister Kennedy's contribution. Roads Service is a consultee on the decision, just as many other people, organisations and agencies are consultees. Similarly, in respect of the Bord Pleanála decision, it has to go off and consult a wide range of agencies. No doubt that includes the relevant road authorities in the South. If Roads Service had flagged up fundamental, impossible difficulties with the proposal, that would have been

taken into account in the planning decision that I issued. However, that was not what it was saying to us. No issue raised by Roads Service or the relevant Departments in the North of Ireland, of which a number fed into the proposal, was an obstacle to planning permission being issued. Yes, this has to be managed properly, but the management issues on the Northern side are much less than on the Southern side, given that we already have the road between Newry and Warrenpoint and the point at which the bridge would cross the river is at the roundabout on the northern side of Warrenpoint. Therefore, although those are important matters logistically and managerially, the Northern side has, it seems to me, less burden than the Southern side.

I hope that a single message comes out from the Chamber, the Executive and all the representatives in the South that, after the decades of effort by the McGrady's and the McCart's and the Bradley's and all the other political, commercial and business representatives in that area, we are within touching distance of having a bridge by the end of 2015. Last Thursday evening, I spoke to Pat Colgan, chief executive of the SEUPB, to flag up that the decision was about to issue. He could not say one way or the other where the board would be come the end of the month, but he did not give me any indication not to be encouraged. That does not pre-empt any decision that might be made in the next two or three weeks. We all have to put our shoulder to the wheel and get this over the line. The opportunities for trade, tourism and relationships in that part of Ireland can only be enhanced by the project.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. I am conscious of the road safety aspect. Are there standard MOT and PSV standards or at least similar standards in Northern Ireland, the remainder of the UK and the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. It is a broad question: MOT and road standards can affect motorcycles, cars, minibuses, coaches and other vehicles, including heavy goods vehicles. So, the question is very broad because it covers a vast range of categories. However, as I indicated in my earlier answer, when it comes to the recognition of motor vehicle type approval, the Department for Transport (DFT) in London, on behalf of the other jurisdictions in Britain and Northern Ireland, is trying to develop the mutual recognition of motor vehicle type through an MOU, which would essentially allow mutual recognition of approvals that issue to vehicles in the Republic and in the other jurisdictions of Britain and Northern Ireland. The principle behind the question was whether there would be a common system. The answer is, unfortunately, no, not at this stage. Will there be recognition of approvals issued to vehicles in the South in respect of our authority, and will they recognise the approvals issued here or in Britain in respect of our authority? That is where we hope to go.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. Can he provide further details on the planned scale of all-Ireland recognition of penalty points? Can he reaffirm that this will be the first time that jurisdictions in Europe will co-operate on this formal recognition?

Mr Attwood: As I said earlier and confirm again, there is no model in Europe for the mutual recognition of penalty points by two jurisdictions. Therefore, this is groundbreaking work. As I indicated in my statement, the terms of reference and the membership of the working

group have now been agreed to take forward this difficult work. We will not be able to capture all penalty points on the island in the first phase, so we are trying to capture the penalty points that most impact on people's safety. So, penalty points in respect of the use of mobile phones, the wearing of seat belts, alcohol-related convictions and two other categories will be in the first phase. Those are the critical issues that demonstrate where there is the greatest risk of road death and injury. Logistically, it will be difficult because there are different systems. In the South, penalty points are an administrative process; in the North, it is a judicial process managed through prosecution in our courts. So, it is not a straightforward one-size-fits-all system. It is logistically complex to get mutual recognition and equivalence between offences in terms of the penalty points system that might then be imposed on an all-Ireland basis. However, we were able to do it in respect of the all-island recognition of driving disqualifications. There is huge political commitment behind it, and I am impressed by the work of respective officials in the North and South to get this over the line, and, as I indicated, I would not give a date of 2014 for legislation unless we were minded to get to that point.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his short statement. I could not help but notice the Minister's enthusiasm in his response to a question from Caitríona Ruane about the new bridge. I remind the Minister that, since long before his time, we in the Strangford constituency have campaigned for a bridge between Strangford and Portaferry — for 50 or maybe 60 years; long before my time — and it has not arrived.

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member comes back to the statement.

Mr McCarthy: OK. The Minister also mentioned road user safety. We very much welcome efforts along those lines, but does the Minister regret the abolition and withdrawal of funding from the road safety committees that performed an excellent service for many years in preventing road accidents in Northern Ireland?

11.15 am

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his questions. I note his comment about this being a short statement. There is a rather bizarre convention — the Speaker knows this and is nodding in anticipation of what I am going to say — that what is issued in the communiqué following an NSMC meeting or sectoral meeting has to be reflected in the body of the statement. I would like to have much more elaborate statements, but then we would have to issue communiqués after meetings that would be the scale and length of the Hansard recording of this debate, and that would not help anybody to understand what is happening. So the statements are short because of that convention. That is why I certainly try to add colour and detail by commenting at length. *[Interruption.]* This is a serious point, Mr Speaker. Most of the people from the North who went to the meeting in Leinster House last Friday that you chaired along with the Cheann Comhairle, which was a fortunate event, or went to the unfortunate events at the Aviva Stadium later that night got there by way of a road that was built with a contribution from Dublin and agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format and the North/South Ministerial Council itself. Those not here who decry the workings of

the North/South bodies, say these statements are short and a puff of smoke and giggle in the back corridors of this Building about what is happening should remember what the Irish Government did in co-operation with the Northern Government to improve relationships and transport on a North/South basis to the benefit of every person in the Chamber. Whether there are a lot of words or few words, enormous work needs to be taken forward on the far side of the long-awaited review of North/South arrangements, which was commissioned nearly six years ago after St Andrews. To date, not a piece of paper has been issued on that. We and the Dublin Government should challenge ourselves to ensure that, come this December, when the NSMC meets in Farmleigh or in Armagh, there is a new acceleration of North/South opportunities. In my view, such opportunities have been strangled over the past four or five years for political reasons, and they now need to be liberated in this time of difficulty on the island of Ireland, so that all the people of Ireland can go forward with some sort of hope and opportunity.

I note what the Member said about a bridge between Portaferry and Strangford. That is the first time that that issue has been raised with me. I will refer it to the other Minister; maybe he will have more enthusiasm for that bridge than he demonstrated earlier for the one at Narrow Water.

We have to recognise that the road safety committees did great work — I do not deny that, and I appreciate it — but what is the best way of getting the road safety message out to all generations, especially the young? There are other better, newer models. For example, the highway code has been published in Irish, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish and two other languages. There are ways and means of getting the road safety message out, as well the traditional ones.

Mr Weir: I will not ask the Minister about any bridge in Strangford. If that were being dealt with by the North/South Ministerial Council, as a unionist, I would be slightly worried that the border had shifted overnight.

I refer the Minister to an important element of the statement on vehicle safety. He talked about:

"co-operation in relation to vehicle standards, including mutual recognition of vehicle type approval, which will allow simplification of the registration process."

What steps will need to be taken to bring that about? What is the timescale for implementation?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The work on the MOU by DFT in London in respect of that recognition, which he referred to and which I spoke to earlier, is at an advanced stage. The DVA in the North had some questions about whether the mutual recognition of the approval regime would mean that people could go to the North to get their vehicles approved because the regime here is cheaper. That is a point to be raised, but it is not an impediment to that MOU being deployed. The DVA has accepted that that is an issue that it can keep under review but it should not be any impediment to mutual recognition in the way that I spoke about. The time frame is, I think, short. I am not certain whether it is very short or merely short, but I will confirm that in writing to the Member.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. A TV campaign was launched last week in the South highlighting the dangers of

driving under the influence of cannabis. Bearing it in mind that, after alcohol, cannabis remains the psychoactive substance most associated with road traffic accidents — indeed, cannabis users are more than three times more likely to be involved in a road traffic accident — does the Minister have plans to replicate such a TV campaign here in the North?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I think that the Member would agree and certainly Stephen Nolan agreed in a recent tweet — not that I would necessarily rely on all of Stephen Nolan's advice, but, in this regard, I think that it was a Saturday night when, presumably, he was not doing some radio programme in Manchester or Birmingham — that the recent ad here in the North that captured a range of road safety issues was very powerful. It is very powerful. We had to decide to put it on the TV after the 9.00 pm threshold because, in our view, the message was so powerful and, I recognise, can be so upsetting that we needed to be careful about the audience that might see that.

I acknowledge the work of Lyle Bailie, the Department and all the families and others who contributed to those ads. The Northern Ireland campaign, whilst it does get noticed very often, gets international awards. It recently got an award for the second ad in history that was in 3D for road safety. That was in cinemas in advance of the recent Spider-Man movie.

There are technical issues about testing people for drugs. That is work we are taking forward with the London Government in order to have the best science and scientific equipment deployed to be more able to deal with the issue of drug-related driving incidents. That is difficult work, and we hope to get something over the line in that regard.

The ads that we display do not differentiate between drug- or drink-related incidents, convictions or events. There may be an argument for doing something in respect of drug-related — cannabis-related, in particular — events. I will certainly take that up with the people in the Department and with Lyle Bailie.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister agree that standardisation of legislation and tougher enforcement are key components of integrated vehicle safety schemes?

Mr Attwood: Yes. That is what we are trying to do. If you look across the life of the Department, you see that, although some of these things are difficult because in the short term there may be some expense to be incurred, we are trying to roll out regulation, be it in respect of taxis, heavy goods vehicles, party buses and so on. If you have good regulation, good business prospers, the customer is protected and the illegal, if not the criminal, has more chance of being driven out of the business. If you ask hauliers, taxi people or people involved in the hire of coaches or minibuses, they will tell you that it is the illegal that is one of the big threats to the viability of their business. If you have regulation with enforcement against the worst offenders and an appropriately light touch against lesser offenders and at the same time send out the message about road safety across all categories of road user, you have an integrated approach. However, people need to appreciate that, in order to get to the integrated approach, to have best practice, to drive out illegality and to have greater opportunities for businesses in the North,

it may require some regulation at some cost in the first instance. On the far side of that, however, all those who run good business of whatever character can prosper.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin. I thank the Minister for his statement. Although it was only a short statement, it is all about the content, Minister, so you are fine.

In light of recent accidents and given that we are moving into darker evenings and weather conditions that will lead to more treacherous road conditions, I am sure that the Minister will join me in appealing to road users to be more careful and mindful.

What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Transport and the Minister in the South on the implications of the EU roadworthiness package? What measures does he propose to introduce here to reduce the impact of the proposals?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question and agree completely with his comments. As of today and arising from a range of factors, 33 people have been killed on the roads in this calendar year. This time last year, the equivalent figure was 42. However, any number in and around 30 or 35 is still very high, and that does not tell the story of the pain and trauma suffered by the bereaved families. As we speak, however, the figures are better than they were last year and the previous year. They are the best of any year to date. That is a consequence of very good work by the Department and my predecessor. I note that he is in the Chamber. I recognise that the deployment of road safety advertisements, for example, was a very wise intervention. We all know that bad weather and dark nights increase the risk. Therefore, it is timely to send out the message today in advance of the bad weather and darker nights.

As I said in my statement, at the meeting, both Northern Ministers and Minister Varadkar spoke about the EU roadworthiness proposals. It may be that, as is its character, the EU is testing the waters, as the scale of its proposals appears, on the face of it, disproportionate to what it wants to achieve. Therefore, the EU may be aiming high but prepared, in the fullness of time, through conversation and negotiation, to come back to a more moderate place.

More roadworthiness is needed. Over a number of years, the scale of deaths in Europe because of roadworthiness issues has been measured in thousands. Indeed, my information is that, over a number of years, there could have been 15,000 such deaths. So I accept that roadworthiness has to be addressed. However, in my view and in the view of Mr Varadkar, the proposals are extravagant. The cost of installing the equipment for the new road testing in our centres and of having roadside inspection and detection and the cost to the industry of compliance by those with trailers or caravans seems extravagant. Minister Varadkar, Minister Kennedy and I will continue to make representations to Europe through London and directly from Dublin to Brussels to mitigate proposals that seem beyond what is reasonable.

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes questions. Sorry, I call Mr Joe Byrne.

Mr Byrne: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Further to what the Minister said about HGV user charging in the UK, does he

accept that it is important that the Northern Ireland road haulage industry is not disadvantaged when competing with hauliers in the Republic? Secondly, will he give consideration to the fact that the national car test in the Republic is more stringent than the MOT in the North?

Mr Attwood: On the former point, representations have been made to London — I know that Minister Varadkar continues to make the same representations — about the scale of HGV tolling proposals for foreign operators outlined by the London Government, not least because we share a border with a sister jurisdiction on the island of Ireland.

11.30 am

Thus far, the only flexibility that has been flagged up concerns some minor roads that criss-cross the border at certain points, where the regulation of HGV tolling would not be practical. That does not go far enough. Given what I indicated earlier about the Irish Government contributing to the development of roads infrastructure in the North, it seems to me that that should be recognised by the London Government in their management of the tolling proposals. As I understand it, there is huge support for the tolling proposals from the industry generally, and I understand why: vehicles from here and Britain that go to Europe will pay tolling charges, but vehicles that come from Europe to here or Britain will not be charged. There is an issue that needs to be looked at, but more flexibility should come from DFT than has been flagged up to date. The flexibility is of a technical nature, given the course of border roads; it does not deal with the overall strategic issue.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the outcome of recent investigations and reviews into matters relating to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS).

The Fire and Rescue Service is one of our most crucial public services. It is there to protect and help our community. Every year, many lives are saved and properties protected by professional and dedicated firefighters, who often have to deal with very challenging and dangerous situations. The community owes them all a huge debt of gratitude for the work that they do.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

In 2011-12, NIFRS handled over 43,000 emergency calls from members of the public who needed help. It responded to over 27,000 emergency incidents and rescued 173 people from major fires. It attended 576 road traffic collisions, and it has contributed to road deaths being approximately halved in Northern Ireland over the past two years. Only last weekend, firefighters rescued a 42-year-old woman from a house fire in Enniskillen. Sadly, she was later pronounced dead. In one recent incident, no fewer than 12 appliances and 60 firefighters were needed at a Newry bar to tackle a fire in which two people were trapped. In Warrenpoint, fire crews rescued a woman and a three-year-old from an apartment fire. We should not forget that firefighters face some very tragic scenes on our roads, like the recent traffic collision on the main A1 Belfast to Dublin road, where there were four casualties and, tragically, a 22-year-old woman lost her life.

Firefighters on the front line need to work in an organisation that commands the respect of all: an organisation that is managed effectively and efficiently with integrity and transparency, and with a clear sense of the need for clear accountability to the public it serves. Unfortunately, however, over recent months, there have been many instances in which the management and governance of the Fire and Rescue Service have been called into question.

The media have carried stories about whistle-blowing, and Members have tabled questions on a wide range of concerns.

Over recent years, a number of reviews and investigations have had to be carried out into the affairs and running of the Fire and Rescue Service. On foot of those reviews, Members will know that, earlier this year, I authorised the appointment of an interim chief executive as one of a series of measures to strengthen the management of NIFRS. I took that step because it was clear that robust intervention was needed to address significant issues at NIFRS headquarters that were threatening to drag the whole organisation into disrepute and deflect it from its core and crucial responsibility of ensuring the safety of the community it serves.

I am today publishing a number of reports that deal with investigations into allegations of irregularities at NIFRS, as well as a review of last year's firefighter recruitment exercise. I do not intend to cover the full detail of those reports in my comments, although I shall of course be happy to deal with any points that Members raise.

The reports will also be made publicly available on the departmental website.

In general, the reports contain a wide range of recommendations for change, which I will expect NIFRS management, working closely with my officials, to take forward expeditiously over the coming months. The report also points to the need for a radical improvement in the way that complaints and grievances are dealt with, for strengthened corporate governance arrangements, for better team working, for improved recruitment procedures and for a culture of change that is led from the top. The nature of the issues covered and the breadth of the recommendations for action make it crucial that a number of things happen.

First, fundamental change at NIFRS headquarters should be taken forward as a matter of absolute urgency by management there, and I have already indicated my expectations in that regard to senior NIFRS personnel. That process of change needs to be embraced at all levels of management, and my Department will give every assistance to NIFRS to ensure that that takes place.

Secondly, all existing grievances and complaints need to be drawn to a conclusion as soon as possible. It is not acceptable that those matters should remain unresolved after long periods of time. I shall not seek to defend NIFRS on those issues, and I shall look to NIFRS management to expedite outstanding cases, utilising external resources and expertise where necessary.

Thirdly, all NIFRS employees need to get behind their management team and work with them to move the organisation forward. We need to draw a line under what has been done in the past and move on, even though people may have divergent views.

Finally, I want to make it clear that I expect full and open accountability from NIFRS in the future. There have been failings in the past, and I will not tolerate them in the future.

I hope that the reports I am publishing today represent a watershed in the recent history of NIFRS. I have received assurances from senior NIFRS management that the issues and recommendations covered in the various reports will be acted upon with speed and vigour. I give them my full support in that regard, and I am confident that they can deliver.

I also want to acknowledge the whistle-blowers. I recognise that this has been a difficult process, and I am very conscious of the anxiety that the experience is likely to have caused them. I hope that they will recognise my commitment in taking forward a comprehensive investigation. Although not all of the conclusions will meet with their agreement, I thank them for coming forward and wish them well for their futures.

The time for investigating and reporting is over. The time for moving forward has come.

Two of the reports I am publishing today concern whistle-blowing and were carried out by officials from my Department's internal audit group. The first report concerns allegations of irregularities by a member of NIFRS staff. The report largely substantiates the allegations made concerning a range of financial issues. It also identifies serious weaknesses in the way that the whistle-blower was treated. The report recommends that the Fire and Rescue Service reviews its procedures for

investigations of any kind under grievance, harassment, disciplinary or other policies.

The report points to the need for improved processes. Securing those improvements will require a determined and transparent programme of change, which is underpinned by strong and consistent leadership with human resource dimensions at its core, in order to effect a step change in culture.

It is disappointing that such issues have had to come to light in the form of whistle-blowing, rather than being picked up through proper controls and governance arrangements. Weaknesses identified in those areas need to be put right. At the same time, I want not just to defend the right of staff to whistle-blow but to encourage it where they have genuine concerns and do not feel that they can raise an issue with their manager in the normal way. That is clearly what happened in this case. I want a climate of openness in our Fire and Rescue Service and a culture in which it is safe and acceptable for staff to raise concerns at any level and at any time.

The second whistle-blowing report relates to allegations made about a conflict of interest. Those related to the reconciliation of NIFRS stores and, in particular, to a former NIFRS store manager who ran his own company selling personal protection equipment. The internal audit investigation found that there were weaknesses in managing conflicts of interest. It made three recommendations that will enhance the management of NIFRS's stores. Again, those recommendations must be implemented.

The third report relates to a review of a firefighter recruitment exercise last year. Concerns were raised about that recruitment exercise, some by Members of this House. For that reason, I asked Sir Ken Knight, Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser to the UK Government, to assist with an independent review of the whole process. The review was undertaken by officials from the London Fire Brigade under Sir Ken's direction. I am grateful to Sir Ken and to London Fire Brigade for their assistance and expertise.

A separate element of the review was carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's central investigation service, and I am grateful to it for its assistance. That element examined the payment arrangements for claims submitted for overtime and expenses by staff assisting in the recruitment exercise.

Although I was encouraged to note from the report that proper and appropriate governance arrangements were adopted for the commencement of the recruitment campaign, I have deep concerns that an appeals process was introduced later and without the endorsement of the Fire and Rescue Service Board, which the report acknowledges should have formed part of the governance arrangements at the outset.

One issue raised in the complaints was that the process was biased towards relatives of senior managers in the service. Based on a review of the documentation available, no direct evidence of nepotism has been found, however, neither is there evidence that there was a clear separation of personal interest from decision-making.

The review into the payment arrangements and claims for overtime and expenses concluded that there was insufficient evidence to categorise the claims as being

actual, attempted or suspected fraud. However, the report is clear that management in the Fire and Rescue Service did not fulfil their responsibilities to ensure the correct handling and use of public funds. As a result, financial control over the whole-time recruitment project was inadequate; payment arrangements were not appropriately approved; there was no written overtime policy and no written guidance on detached duties; and staff were able to claim overtime and subsistence over the hours they actually worked. These are significant weaknesses and will need to be put right at the earliest possible moment.

Too much time and effort have been spent on dealing with and investigating problems associated with the delivery of the corporate functions in the Fire and Rescue Service. That has to change. It is very clear that major mistakes have been made in the past. NIFRS now has an opportunity, with new leadership, to learn from these mistakes and ensure that they are not repeated. Procedures have not been followed correctly, and that must not happen again. Working practices need to be altered and modernised to reflect best practice. Working relationships have been soured and must be renewed.

The Fire and Rescue Service needs strong, visible leadership, with clear direction from the top of the organisation. I want to see the application of best practice in management and a team-based ethos and approach. I want staff to have confidence in the leadership of the Fire and Rescue Service, and that needs to be restored in light of recent events. I expect the highest standards of corporate governance and financial probity, and, at the same time, I expect all those who work for NIFRS to demonstrate loyalty and integrity.

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has served and protected our community well through times of conflict and peace. We rely on it not only to fight fires but to cut people out of road traffic accidents, to drain flooded homes and, of course, to remind us to fit and test smoke alarms. The problems at Fire and Rescue Service headquarters should not be allowed to detract from that. I want a modern, dynamic Fire and Rescue Service, one that is the envy of other organisations. Today, NIFRS has an opportunity to take the first steps in that direction, and it has my full support as it moves ahead.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement.

Over the past few years, we have all heard stories, a number of them through the media, regarding the Fire and Rescue Service. Like the Minister, I take this opportunity to commend the firefighters who are out there on a daily basis, sometimes putting their own lives at risk to save others. I highlight the fact that these reports are in no way a reflection on the work that they do for us in our community, but the reality is that it is a governance issue, and any negative stories that come out about the Fire and Rescue Service have an impact on staff morale.

As Members know, the Fire Service is an arm's-length body, but it is accountable to the Department. What changes has the Department made to its own monitoring arrangements since the issues have come to light? Does the Minister believe that the Department took too much of a hands-off approach in scrutinising the service, and, if so,

will he assure the House and the wider public that that is no longer the case?

You also stated in your report, Minister, that you received assurances from senior Fire Service management that the report's recommendations will be fully implemented. However, given that some of the same people there now were in charge when there were irregular payments, when the whistle-blower was suspended, and so on, how can you be confident that the same managers are committed to bringing fundamental changes to the Fire Service? Has the Department learned lessons about how it responds to whistle-blowers? Will those lessons be applied throughout the health and social care sector?

I, like other Members, have just received these reports, and they contain a substantial amount of information. I will raise this tomorrow at the Health Committee meeting to see what it can do on it, but I will also raise it formally with the Public Accounts Committee because there are still assurances that we need to give to people out there, especially to Fire Service personnel who put their life on the line, and we can ensure that staff morale is lifted.

11.45 am

Mr Poots: A number of issues are to be covered there. First, of the 85 recommendations that arose from the reports, 18 are yet to be implemented. We intend to work thoroughly to achieve a better Fire Service than has been the case heretofore.

The Department has been closely involved in supervising the Fire Service for some time, and that has led to some very significant changes. The separation of the role of Chief Fire Officer from that of the accounting officer/chief executive aspect of that role is something that we see as temporary but necessary, so that we can bring in a new broom to resolve a lot of the issues that were cultural in the Fire Service, have existed for over a decade and that have seen come and go quite a number of chairmen of boards and Fire Service chief executives. So, we recognise that there is a substantial need for change. We are very aware of the shortcomings in the senior management of NIFRS. We are also aware that there are vacancies at a senior level. There is a lack of strong central HR functioning, poor team working and weak corporate systems. Those are all issues that we cannot leave as outstanding.

My Department will, for example, conduct quarterly accounting meetings with the Fire and Rescue Service. My officials meet regularly with the chair, the chief executive and the Chief Fire Officer, and those meetings are used to monitor the organisation's corporate effectiveness in addressing areas of concern. They also focus on issues identified today, while ensuring that the Fire and Rescue Service continues to protect our community. It is a similar approach to that being used for the Belfast Trust under special measures.

I have been concerned at the length of time taken to deal with grievances, and my permanent secretary reflected that when he issued a letter of apology to one of the whistle-blowers in July this year. I certainly do not think that the experience of that whistle-blower encourages others, which I regret because I have written to every member of staff to say that they should not just consider whistle-blowing, it is their duty to do so if they are aware of issues that are not being dealt with appropriately and

properly and they cannot have such issues dealt with by their line managers. So, I consider it to be a matter of regret how Linda Ford in particular was dealt with, and I trust that that will not affect how other whistle-blowers deal with such issues in the future.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I gave a certain leeway to the Committee Chair in asking her question. I ask all other Members to keep their questions brief and stick to them.

Ms P Bradley: I also welcome the Minister's statement. Will he tell us why the director of human resources post has been allowed to lie vacant for two and a half years?

Mr Poots: The reports published today demonstrate the importance of a strong HR function. The previous director retired in April 2010, and my Department arranged for a secondment of a senior HR manager from May 2010 to July 2011, at which stage the Fire and Rescue Service indicated that it was ready to recruit. The recruitment process, however, has been protracted. I understand that it hopes to appoint a new director of human resources in the near future, but, again, it demonstrates governance weaknesses within the organisation.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to financial control over the whole-time recruitment project being inadequate, payment arrangements not being appropriately approved and there being no written overtime policy or guidance on detached duties, etc. Those are fundamental weaknesses in any organisation. They are very basic management procedures that should be in place, even in a community and voluntary group, never mind an organisation of this size. Has any disciplinary action been taken against any of the senior management team for their atrocious management?

Mr Poots: The Member puts his finger on a number of issues related to the recruitment process. The report is quite extensive on inadequacies and failures in that process. Regrettably, quite a number of things happened during it that should not have happened. Quite a number of things should have been cleared with either the chief fire officer as accounting officer or, indeed, the board, but they were not.

The report recommends that they look at discipline. I hear what the Member says, and perhaps that reflects where the House is on the issue. Too often, people are moved sideways and discipline does not take place, but we have a report that clearly identifies deficiencies, and there is also a recommendation that the human resources side should look at what disciplinary steps might be taken. I hear what the Member says very clearly, and I trust that the board will hear what the Member says and what, I suspect, other Members will say clearly as well.

Mr McDevitt: I echo the Minister's support for front line fire officers.

How does the Minister feel able to say that too much time has been spent dealing with these problems, given that the investigations have found a need for fundamental change; given that the investigations have largely substantiated the allegations made concerning financial irregularities; given that the review finds that there were clear gaps in terms of knowing when a conflict of interest was a conflict of interest; and given that, although there was no direct evidence of nepotism, there is clearly a suggestion in the report that there were issues around nepotism? How can

the Minister say that, and how can we accept it and move on, when the only person to have been held accountable for anything to date is the whistle-blower? Will he not ensure that individuals are fully held to account for their failures as identified in the report?

Mr Poots: The Member raises a number of valid points. I do not suggest that we should be moving on in a trivial way. I think that it is for the well-being of the organisation and the general public in Northern Ireland that the Fire and Rescue Service needs to focus on moving forward as opposed to investigating the past. A series of investigations have taken place. Do I want my senior fire officers to be concentrating on dealing with investigations or on dealing with how the fire service can best be managed in the future?

I am saying very clearly to the House — I trust that it is of some comfort to the Member — that what went on in the past is unacceptable and cannot happen in the future. We must concentrate our focus on it not happening in the future. I have great sympathy with the whistle-blowers on this issue. I have met two whistle-blowers in a private capacity and heard what they have to say, and I believe them to be genuine people. We need to deal well with those people and to show them due respect and courtesy for the service that they have provided and for their honesty and integrity.

However, we also need to try to ensure that the organisation is in a position to move forward without people constantly seeking to undermine others. I am not referring to whistle-blowers here. Others in the organisation appear to be seeking to undermine people in similar grades, and that is not good for the organisation's well-being. We need it to pull together and work as a team, and it will be a far stronger organisation for doing that.

Mr McCarthy: Surely this is the most damning report ever to come to the Chamber. People will have to be held responsible and accountable for what is contained in the Minister's statement. There can be no cover-up.

I reiterate what other Members said by paying tribute to the work and record of the Fire Service in saving lives. Firefighters put their lives in jeopardy to save others. Given what has been said in the statement, can the Minister assure us that he will not permit investigations or whatever else to deflect from ensuring that the Fire Service has the most modern, up-to-date equipment to carry on its work to help to prevent loss of life and property in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: I agree that it is a damning report. I am not sure that it is the most damning report, but it certainly is damning, and I do not want to move back from that position.

A culture has existed in the organisation that is unacceptable, and that culture stretches back a long time. I think that it stretches back more than a decade. Frankly, that is the case. However, we have brought someone in from outside the organisation to take control of the corporate side and to ensure that we can deal with matters honestly and effectively and put the Fire Service on a solid footing to move forward, particularly at headquarters.

I give this assurance not just to the House but to the public: the service that the Fire and Rescue Service provides to the public has not been diminished as a result of what has happened in headquarters nor will it be allowed to diminish the very good work that is carried out on the ground. The

Fire and Rescue Service responded to flooding cases, of which there have been a huge number; it responds to fires and saves lives; it responds to road traffic collisions; and, indeed, it was involved in the recent rescue at the Spence farm in my constituency. Firefighters go into very dangerous situations. Nothing in this report should detract from the individual fire officers who put their life on the line to provide a service that saves the life of many people in the country.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he advise whether geographical discrimination in the recruitment process is dealt with in the various reports?

Mr Poots: The report acknowledged that there were a considerable number of applications for a low number of vacancies and that consideration should be given to options that could reduce the volume of applications in future. It focused on equality issues, such as gender and community background, rather than on geographical discrimination during the recruitment process. Of the 36 appointments, 15 were from the Protestant community, 18 were from the Roman Catholic community, and three candidates were from other community backgrounds. Those figures, given the number of applicants involved, differ from the proportionality of those applying.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Reading the report, Minister, I think that those in the management of the Fire Service who are damned by the report and are listening to this today are getting a slap on the wrist. If we are to restore the public's confidence and that of firefighters at the coalface, we must address the one thing that is missing: disciplinary action. We have an assurance from the Minister, but no disciplinary action is being taken. I refer you to the correspondence —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr McMullan: — that I had with you some time ago on Sir Ken Knight's report. You told me that the report's findings would not result in disciplinary action. I call on you today, Minister, to instigate a full, independent public inquiry into the whole governance of the Fire and Rescue Service.

12.00 noon

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that there will not be a full public inquiry. We have seen enough of tens of millions of pounds being wasted on public inquiries. It is much more effective to carry out investigations and to act on those than to engage in public inquiries that, very often, come many years after something has happened and many years after the issues have been resolved.

What has been reported on today is the result of a long period of transition. Important posts remained vacant, there have been corporate failings to develop and implement appropriate policies and procedures, and there have been very poor internal working relationships in the corporate headquarters. There have already been considerable changes in respect of the board, the chairman and the Chief Fire Officer post in recent years. The organisation needs stability and additional leadership focus. We have approved a new interim chief executive whose priority is to address the corporate governance failings, working alongside the Chief Fire Officer, who has an equally challenging role. I expect the senior management team to be fully recruited shortly.

With regard to people who have not been disciplined, I heard what Mr Beggs said, I heard what you said, and I trust that the board will hear what the House has to say. Reflective of all parties, there will be a general message that the slap-on-the-wrist approach is not enough and we expect discipline to be applied when people act in a way that is not in the general interest of the service that they work for.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers thus far. How long is the new chief executive expected to be in post, and does the Minister have confidence that he can deliver the change that the Minister requires?

Mr Poots: The chief executive has been recruited for 12 to 18 months, which started in August. I am confident that he will provide a much needed focus on corporate governance and provide additional leadership as he takes the organisation forward. He brings with him a strong track record in these areas, and I trust that he will have the issues resolved over the next 12 to 18 months. If we are required to extend that period, we will look at that at the time, but I trust that that will not be necessary and we will be on top of the issues within that time.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his statement and concur with his opening remarks of appreciation for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. Will he detail whether the service now has a similar overtime policy for firefighters engaged in non-operational day-to-day duties as it does for operational incidents?

Mr Poots: I will have to clarify that matter for the Member in writing.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I also pay tribute to the firefighters of the NIFRS. In the body of his statement, the Minister said that the time for investigation was over. Given the culture of irregularities, does the Minister think that there were any governance or operational issues in respect of the death of Leading Firefighter Joe McCloskey in 2003?

Mr Poots: The Member knows that I met the McCloskey family and have great sympathy for them. Obviously, Joe McCloskey was one of the brave firefighters who went to carry out a job and lost his life while doing so. There was considerable investigation of that incident, and there is considerable suspicion about where the truth lies. However, the evidence is not there to substantiate that, and therein lies the problem. Although I very much desire that the McCloskey family will get the full truth of what took place that night, conflicting points of view have been expressed, and, at this point, it has proved impossible to achieve that. I am not abdicating my responsibilities in any way, shape or form; that is just a factual assessment of where we stand, and I regret that that is the case.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his statement. A common theme among all the Members who have put questions to the Minister has been to pay tribute to the work of our firefighters. On that particular point — it has been touched on to some degree — given that the issues were of a governance nature at the very top of the organisation, what further work needs to be done within the Fire Service, with the help of your leadership and the Department, to ensure that the firefighters who protect us and respond daily do not become more demoralised and challenged in carrying out their functions?

Mr Poots: Unfortunately, a lot of firefighters will look with disdain at what went on at headquarters. They have a job to do, and they will meet the challenges as those come forward. The acting chief fire officer, in particular, has a significant task in helping to win the respect of fire officers for the necessary work that goes on at headquarters. Firefighters will want to be assured that the shenanigans that some individuals got up to in the past are not the type of behaviour that is acceptable in the Fire Service, that it will not happen as we move forward and that people who wish to engage in actions and behaviours that are detrimental to the good work that is carried out on the ground will be dealt with.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for both his statement and his answers to date. I refer the Minister to the report as it relates to overtime and expenses claims. It appears from the introduction that the individuals involved were not questioned by the investigators. There is a list, but I will give just one example. On 2 September 2011, there was no afternoon session in Omagh, but staff claimed for a full day in overtime and subsistence. If the staff were not questioned about why that happened, how can we say that there was no actual or suspected fraud?

Mr Poots: The payment arrangements were developed at a senior level in the Fire Service, and they are totally unacceptable. I have no dispute with the Member on that. The staff were allowed to claim overtime and subsistence in excess of hours worked. People went home at 12.00 noon and were able to claim for up until 7.00 pm, which is clearly wrong. The payment agreement had not been approved by the Chief Fire Officer, who is the accounting officer, nor indeed by the corporate management team or the board. The assistant chief fire officer had responsibility for that.

It comes as no surprise to me that the report concludes that the organisation's financial control over the whole-time recruitment project has been inadequate. We asked DARD to take up the investigation because it has a specialist counterfraud team. It carried out a course of work for the Department. We also have BSO internal audit findings, which say that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that NIFRS managers did not fulfill their responsibilities to ensure the correct handling and use of public funds and that it may be appropriate for the NIFRS accounting officer to consider whether those failings merit the investigation of disciplinary procedures. That is the report in front of us. It suggests that disciplinary procedures and an investigation are merited.

I hear what Members say, and the board will have to hear it too. It cannot ignore what the House is saying.

Mr G Robinson: First and foremost, I commend all the firefighters who do such a tremendous job for us all. Does the Minister expect all the recommendations to be implemented?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. I fully expect that NIFRS management will take forward the recommendations in the reports. That will be closely monitored by my Department. The organisation is committed to doing so through an overarching change management programme that will address the cultural and governance improvements that are necessary. So, it may not be the case that every recommendation

is fulfilled to the last jot and tittle, but I expect that the recommendations will largely be fulfilled and that the spirit of the recommendations will be fulfilled as well.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement and accept that this has been a difficult situation and there have been specific difficulties in the Fire Service. That is not to take away from front line firefighters and staff.

Another difficulty for the Fire Service was the removal of the photo montage from Enniskillen fire station, which was put up in memory of those murdered by the Enniskillen bomb. Has that been reinstated? If not, are there any plans to reinstate it in the near future?

Mr Poots: I understand that discussions on the montage took place, led by the chairman of the board, and that a new montage was erected. That new montage includes the Fire Service crest, which was not in the previous montage, lists the names of those who lost their life on an appropriate memorial-type stone and has the crest of the British Legion on it. So, the replacement is considered to be largely acceptable. It may not be acceptable to everyone, but it reflects the magnitude of what happened that day. It reflects the fact that 11 innocent people lost their life that day, and it reflects the role of the Fire and Rescue Service and its attempts to save people's lives and deal with the mess, the devastation, the destruction, the pain and the misery caused by an unwarranted terrorist attack.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. I listened to his remarks about the need for a radical overhaul and a cultural change and his statement that the time for investigations is over. However, given the article in today's edition of 'The Irish News', will he give assurances on the procedures that are in place to protect whistle-blowers and give us detail on what procedures are in place to ensure that investigations are processed? Despite the Minister's earlier comments, I appeal to him to have an independent and full review on these serious issues.

Mr Poots: I am content to assure Members that investigations carried out by my Department into both sets of whistle-blowing allegations were conducted to a high standard. The investigations were led by professionally qualified auditors from my Department's internal audit branch. Where necessary, we utilised the services of professional accountants from the Department of Finance's directorate to investigate the allegations relating to financial irregularities.

I am conscious that it has taken considerable time for the investigations to be concluded. I make no apology for that, because, by necessity, they had to be thorough. I want the matters to be investigated in that thorough way, and I want to ensure that investigations are conducted properly. If that means that it took more time than expected, that is something that we just have to live with.

I am also aware of the amount of work that investigators put into considering the issues and commend them for their professionalism. I want to see these matters brought to a conclusion to allow the organisation to move forward, but I also assure whistle-blowers that I take whistle-blowing very seriously. Where people are not getting satisfaction from their managers on issues of corporate governance that are detrimental to the public being carried out by individuals, I encourage them to bring them to our

attention. We can only deal with these matters if they come to our attention. It is therefore a matter of regret that, at one point, one of the whistle-blowers in this instance was suspended. It has been accepted that that was wrong, and, as a result of that recognition, an apology has been sent to the individual by the permanent secretary. I hope that an employee would not be suspended if that were to happen again. I hope that the Department and, indeed, the Fire Service will have learnt how to handle these circumstances better in future.

12.15 pm

Mr Allister: It appears that, for at least a decade, there has been an endemic problem and culture in the management and governance of the Fire Service. Indeed, as long ago as 2003, one member of the Fire Authority, Mrs Craig, was sacked because of her persistent probing of procurement issues. That followed a report by the same Ken Knight who has now reported on this occasion. Can we have confidence that, on this occasion, matters will truly change on governance, including at and within board level, where, in the past, there were obviously failures right up to Fire Authority level and the brushing of matters under the carpet?

Mr Poots: The Member identifies that this is a very old problem. It has gone right back to the early part of 2000. Reports were carried out previously, and one has not seen actions flowing from those reports that would have made a demonstrable difference to the culture that existed in that organisation. I suppose that the test of this will be time. We have taken steps that, I believe, will be of help at this point. There are further steps that we wish to take to ensure that the organisation improves considerably, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I hope that, in 10 years' time, we are not talking about the management of the Fire Service still being a shambles. I hope that, in a relatively short time, people will be able to talk about the improvements that have been carried out and say that this organisation is one of the leading fire and rescue service organisations in the United Kingdom as a result of the steps that we are taking.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister on his statement. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.17 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Sports Clubs: Volunteers

1. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department provides assistance to help volunteers working with local sports clubs to acquire relevant skills. (AQO 2672/11-15)

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for her question. Sport NI, which is an arm's-length body of my Department, is responsible for providing advice and assistance to volunteers in local sports clubs to acquire the relevant skills. Over the past three financial years, Sport NI has invested approximately £2.8 million of funding to assist volunteer development skills in the areas of employment, coaching, club development and child protection. Sport NI assistance is provided through a range of programmes such as the Clubmark NI programme, the Investing in Performance Sport programme and a coach and volunteer development and education programme. In addition, my Department, in conjunction with four other Departments, has supported the recruitment, development, training and management of volunteers delivering Special Olympics programmes across the North.

Mrs McKevitt: Will the Minister, along with me, acknowledge the significant contribution that local sports clubs make in our community? Can she provide any information that will enable people from lower-income families, particularly in rural areas, to avail themselves of the programmes that she mentioned in her answer?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I support fully what the Member said. In the two big sporting bodies, the GAA and IFA, the work done by Ryan Feeney from the Ulster Council of the GAA and Michael Boyd from the IFA to promote volunteerism, outreach and education is second to none. I will take the Member's comments back, and if we can do anything else to promote those programmes, particularly to people who still do not know what opportunities there are, we all have a responsibility to do that. I am happy to forward that comment to our Department.

Miss M McIlveen: The Minister mentioned child protection in her initial answer. What child protection measures are in place to ensure the safety of children and young people working with volunteers and others in sport? Can the Minister assure the House that those measures are robust?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. An essential criterion from Sport NI, when giving funding and support to any sporting body or any group regardless of its size, is that it needs to see child protection procedures. Only by walking through the child protection procedures, can it assure everyone of their robustness. Child protection is absolutely imperative and non-negotiable, and the adherence to strict child protection guidelines is an essential criterion for the giving of any support.

Mr Swann: What targets has the Minister's Department set to increase the number of volunteers supporting voluntary sports clubs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The targets are in the Sport Matters strategy. For example, I have no targets for Sport NI's Clubmark NI programme for upskilling and recruitment, and I will get an update on targets for the Investing in Performance Sport programme, because I have two different figures here and I do not want to give the wrong one out. However, the coach and volunteer development and education programme has to offer at least 19 different workshop themes across each discipline. I am not too sure what the targets are for each workshop, but it is an important question that I will make sure the Member has the answer to.

Mr Allister: How could volunteers in Sandy Row Boxing Club get assistance so long as the Minister insists that that group will not be funded unless it re-affiliates to the group that has been discriminating against it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, I insist that the Member withdraws his remark. I want that for the record. The Member is wrong in what he said.

Sandy Row has not been refused any funding, and, for the record, when I came into the Department, I asked to meet Sandy Row and was refused. I then invited Sandy Row Boxing Club, when I received the allegations, to meet in the Department along with my officials. Again, it refused. I asked Sport NI to meet Sandy Row Boxing Club, and the club refused to meet it. I asked Sport NI again to try to meet Sandy Row Boxing Club about the allegations, and, again, the club refused. I then met community representatives in the Sandy Row area to find out what influence they could use to talk to Sandy Row Boxing Club about the allegations, which I am treating very seriously, but they were told where to go.

I invited boxers from Sandy Row Boxing Club, along with other boxers from all over, to Stormont for a boxing reception, but they refused to attend. I invited them up again for an event associated with the Olympics, Paralympics and pre-games training, but they refused.

So I would like the Member, who seems to be making an issue of this on behalf of Sandy Row, to facilitate a meeting with me and my officials to work through the allegations of sectarianism, which no one in the House will tolerate or support. If the Member is serious about getting to the bottom of the issue, he will take that invitation seriously.

Organ Donation through Sport

2. Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she is working with other Departments, agencies and sporting bodies to promote the Organ Donation through Sport campaign. (AQO 2673/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have always believed that sport can do much more to help to promote worthy causes such as organ donation. It was for this reason that I asked my officials — in association with Sport NI, the Public Health Agency and the Health Department — to take forward an initiative to promote awareness of organ donation through sport. The aim of that initiative is to encourage more people to register for organ donation and to make their wishes known to their families. I, along with officials from the Health Department, Sport NI and the Public Health Agency, attended the recent launch of the initiative at the Antrim GAA county football and hurling finals in Casement Park.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. Does she agree that there is much that sport can contribute to the health and well-being — physical and mental — of our population and that there is an onus and pressure on her and the Department to do as much to deliver that as they possibly can?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely agree with the Member. In fairness to the Minister of Health, we are developing several programmes to do just that, and it is a pleasure to work with someone who is receptive. I am also working with other Ministers — the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Minister of Education and the Minister for Social Development — on the whole area of how we link sport with better physical and mental health and well-being.

This is important. I think back to the campaign on the use of seat belts. Sporting organisations, particularly but not exclusively in this instance, were involved. Nuala Vallely, an organ donor who had made her wishes known to her family, suffered an untimely death in March of this year. The GAA — along with her family, the Ulster council and the Antrim board — have tried to encourage as many people as possible to become organ donors. It was a result of that that I registered as an organ donor. It is important that we do all that we can. It would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to send all our best wishes to Joe Brolly, Shane Finnegan and their families.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagraí go dtí seo. I wish to commend the Minister on promoting and launching the recent organ donation event at Casement Park. I was there, and it was a very good event. The Minister has just commented on Shane Finnegan and Joe Brolly. The regrettable news is that that organ donation has run into trouble and been unsuccessful. Would the Minister like to comment on Joe Brolly's decision and very generous gesture of donating an organ?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a ceiste. Yes, as I said, I would like to commend and pay tribute to Joe Brolly. Like many others who donate organs, he offered the greatest gift, that of life. I encourage everyone, where possible, but particularly through the use of sporting bodies and organisations, to look at how we can get more people on to registers, not just for organ donation but for blood transfusion.

It is fitting that the event in Casement Park was so successful. Nuala Vallely's family and other families are very grateful to the Assembly for lifting up such an important issue. I am happy, as Minister for sport, to do everything that I can to help to promote that cause.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answers. I also acknowledge the great sacrifice that Joe Brolly made in relation to Mr Finnegan. Sadly, it did not work out. Are there any other ways in which the terribly important issue of organ donation can be advanced through aspects of sport?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his sentiments, and I am sure every Member feels exactly the same way. The launch at Casement Park was the start of an initiative. The Member is correct: we need to use every opportunity and explore every avenue that we have at our disposal in promoting this, because it is very much a gift of life.

For the record, over half a million people have registered for organ donation. That has increased as a result of the

case of Nuala Vallely, and I am sure it is increasing as a result of the situation with Shane Finnegan and Joe Brolly. Unfortunately, around 300 people are waiting for transplants. If we can do anything through sport, the arts or any other avenue that we have at our disposal, we should do it. We need to try to reduce as much as possible the figure of 300 people who are waiting for transplants in the North. I commit to do what I can through sport, or any other means for that matter, to achieve that.

Ethnic Minorities: Cultural Identity

3. Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any action she is taking to promote and protect the cultural identities of ethnic minorities. (AQO 2674/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department continues to meet its statutory obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) arm's-length bodies provide a range of programmes supporting and promoting the cultural identities of ethnic minorities. The Arts Council, for example, launched its intercultural arts strategy on 13 June. It recognises the changing face of society in the North and its increasing cultural diversity. It flags up the need to promote cultural pluralism, develop good relations and tackle racism within and between communities and their cultures.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. Can the Minister assure us that minority ethnic languages, as well as sign language, will not be overlooked while the Department concentrates on Irish and Ulster Scots? Does the Minister agree that a comprehensive languages Bill would be the best means of ensuring that that does not occur?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member should know by this stage, but I will make him aware again, that I have a statutory obligation to look after the Irish language, Ulster-Scots culture and heritage, and sign language. I have no statutory obligation to look at other minority ethnic languages. The Member's proposition about a single language Bill has been raised before, but I can deal with, promote and secure only the languages for which I have a statutory responsibility.

Mr McGimpsey: In light of evidence given recently to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, as reported in Hansard, can the Minister confirm that the new Irish language strategy can be delivered without legislation and that the proposed Irish language Act has now been abandoned?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, the Irish language Act has not been abandoned by me. I am glad that the Member is in the Chamber for this question, and I will repeat this for his benefit: I will do everything I can to bring forward an Irish language Act, and I look forward to the Member's support in that. The strategies under the Programme for Government may need a legislative approach, but we will not know until that consultation finishes. At this stage, the consultations on both are still open, and I encourage every Member to use their influence to help people feed into those consultations.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Does the Minister know offhand how much funding her Department has awarded directly or indirectly via arm's-

length bodies to events or festivals that promote cultural diversity?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The intercultural programme that I spoke of has received over £300,000 in lottery funding. I will forward the Member details on what funding it has received until now and what funding there might be in future.

2.15 pm

Weightlifting

4. Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial assistance is available from Sport NI for competitive minority sports such as weightlifting. (AQO 2675/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither myself, my Department nor Sport NI recognises the term "minority sports". However, in respect of weightlifting, Sport NI, which is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport, is currently in discussion with the governing body of the sport, the Northern Ireland Weightlifting Association, over possible financial assistance from Sport NI in the future. The purpose of those discussions is to help weightlifting meet all the Sport NI criteria necessary to enable it to receive funding in the future. To that end, Sport NI, in conjunction with the Weightlifting Association, is carrying out a recognition review.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she join me in the House in sending congratulations to Mr Sammy Graham from my constituency — in fact, from Ballymoney — who recently won his eighth world title championship in weightlifting? He recently took part in a 55 age bracket, masters 3, 100kg category competition, whatever all that means. It means that he was very successful. Will the Minister ensure that those competitors from Northern Ireland engaged in weightlifting and other sports will be financially assisted through Sport NI in their participation in the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I, too, do not know what that means, but I know enough to know that I am impressed. You are claiming Sammy because not only is he in your constituency, he is from Ballymoney. Congratulations to him. Anyone competing at world-stage level is no mean feat. I also congratulate Peter McCallan from Carrickmore, recent winner of the strongest man of Ulster.

Mr McElduff: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Storey: It was not him, anyway. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: We will say nothing about that.

What is important is that Sport NI, in conjunction with the Weightlifting Association, helps weightlifting achieve what it needs to get the recognition. It helps people like Sammy, and others, who may want to compete in the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Weightlifting has become increasingly popular and deserves support. But the Member will agree that we need to make sure that it meets all the criteria as a governing body to get that support for the long term.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. For those other sporting bodies that may be considering approaching the Department for the first time, what specifically is involved in a recognition review?

Ms Ní Chuilín: A recognition review looks at the constitution of the group, its governance arrangements and — what the Chair of the Committee raised in the first question — its child protection procedures, as well as looking at risk and financial management. It is about making sure that those policies are not only in place but are active. Any governing body would be absolutely appreciative of the support from Sport NI to meet that achievement. For any body or group approaching my Department to get recognition, those are at least some of the essential criteria involved.

Mr Kinahan: Following on from the previous question, do Sport NI or the Minister's Department award financial assistance grants to any bodies that are not members of national bodies?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To my knowledge, no; they need to have an affiliation. There needs to be a recognition review for the body to go through the processes I outlined. However, I am not 100% sure, so I will find out and write to the Member.

DCAL: EU Funding

5. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any European funding opportunities that may be available to help in achieving her Department's objectives. (AQO 2676/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and its arm's-length bodies continue to be successful in securing EU funding opportunities. As an example of that, the Armagh Observatory has been awarded funding from the highly competitive FP7 stream for two innovative projects.

First, the Europlanet project is a new, low-cost meteor detector used by schools and amateur astronomers. Secondly, the Universe Awareness (UNAWA) programme brings awareness to children and young people, and includes specific training for primary-school teachers in STEM subjects and astronomy. The Arts Council is also in receipt of European funding to support a range of arts and culture projects, with a number of applications still in progress. Sport NI has also been successful in securing competitive European funds and is working towards securing further European funds to help build on that success.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. In relation to garnering additional support from Europe, can the Minister comment on the forthcoming Irish presidency of the European Council?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the forthcoming Irish presidency, which runs from January 2013 to June 2013. The presidency affords an important opportunity to promote policy ideas and agendas of culture, sport and leisure. As well as that, we all have a very significant year next year, with the European City of Culture and the World Police and Fire Games, and we need to build on the success of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Arts Council and the Arts Council of Ireland are currently collaborating on the scope of arts events, both performance and visual. I believe that we need to use every opportunity to try to maximise additional European funds for here.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a cuid freagraí. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad é an cuidiú atá ar fáil óna Roinn do na grúpaí sin ar mhaith leo cur

isteach ar mhaoiniú do spórt, cultúr agus ealaíona. What assistance is her Department or its arm's-length bodies providing to sporting, cultural and arts groups that wish to apply for European funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. That is a very important question. This year, as part of the Barroso task force working group, DCAL, along with the junior Ministers from OFMDFM, went to Europe to try to find out how we can best maximise additional opportunities. When those occasions arise, it is important that each Department sends officials with a view to those officials coming back and passing that experience and potential on directly to their Department or its arm's-length bodies. It is about maximising opportunities.

Local government, and Belfast City Council in particular, has been very successful in securing European funds for arts and culture. I am keen to maximise opportunities and to learn not only from Europe but from Belfast City Council and other local authorities.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister detail her Department's objectives to address the under-provision of sports fields in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. There is not enough money to deal with the demand across the culture, arts and leisure family, particularly in relation to sports. There are emerging sports that definitely need support. For example, I recently visited Bann Rowing Club in Coleraine, and it is quite obvious that it needs additional support. I also visited the Tyrone centre of excellence project at Garvaghy, and it is quite obvious that DCAL needs to give it additional support.

Additional support is needed in a whole host of other sports, and I need to look at future monitoring rounds and budget bids to try to meet those needs. Those sports bodies — they are just a few examples; it is not exclusively them — pass on so much to our children and young people. They keep them well, they keep them healthy, they keep them safe, and, in the case of some, they keep them alive. We need to do more to support further bids for those sorts of activities.

Mr McNarry: I was interested to hear the Minister's reply to some of the questions in this section. What plans does she have to use our armed forces to assist in major events, such as we have recently seen in the Olympic and Paralympic Games, when their importance was a great addition to the success of those events?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that relates to a previous question. The question we are on is about European funding. If the Minister wishes to answer briefly, I am happy to let her. If not, we will move on.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Just for the record, I do not have any armed forces, but I am happy to write to the Member about how we can secure additional support.

I am assume that the Member fully supports the World Police and Fire Games 2013. I welcome any additional advice that he thinks my Department or, indeed, the services can avail themselves of.

DCAL: Capital and Revenue Funding

6. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she intends to develop and target new capital and revenue funding opportunities. (AQO 2677/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am keen to ensure that the funding that DCAL delivers will continue to make an important contribution to the work of the Executive and make a positive difference to people's lives, be that in economic growth, education, health, well-being, suicide prevention, the environment or social inclusion.

I have asked my officials to ensure that new funding opportunities focus on the benefits that the culture, arts and leisure sectors can deliver, particularly in tackling poverty and addressing social inclusion, by providing interventions in ways that target socio-economic outcomes at sectors of the North that will be assessed on the basis of objective need. For example, my Department, through the stadiums development team, has been developing social clauses for inclusion in procurement and contractual documentation as the various stadia procurements have developed and progressed. Those clauses are aimed at maximising returns from the £110 million public investment in the stadia programme.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer and for her focus on social clauses, which we have looked at in the Finance and Personnel Committee. If additional funding became available to her Department, what would her main priorities be for existing and emerging needs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will just stick to the examples that I used before, because I am conscious that, if I mention anything else, I will be met by a stream of Members outside asking about their constituency. I use the examples of Bann Rowing Club, the Tyrone centre of excellence at Garvaghy and the boxing strategy, because they are recent ones that were not in the CSR round. There are emerging needs that we need to support, and that is quite obvious from the work that they deliver on the ground. It is important that we deliver where need is, particularly in areas that have been ignored for whatever reason in the past. It is incumbent on me to try to redress that imbalance.

Mr Humphrey: I declare an interest as a member of Woodvale Cricket Club. Will the Minister provide information to the House, now or in writing, on her commitments to the development of cricket and capital investment in that sport, which has become so popular across Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland in the past number of years, in order to help develop it at all levels?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member did not declare whether he played cricket; we all wait to see whether he does. The question of whether he plays well or badly is obviously the supplementary question.

The Member is right to raise the issue. There has been £3 million invested in cricket. We need to look at small capital investments, particularly in some cricket clubs. I have met representatives of those clubs. Things like, "Good fences make good neighbours": it is about looking at some small capital investment in areas like that. Those are the things that were not in previous monitoring rounds. If allowed to continue, small problems become bigger not only in relationships with neighbours but for people's physical and

mental health and well-being and, indeed, for social and economic benefits. So, I am keen to advance that. I will furnish the Member with the other plans that we have in writing.

Mrs Overend: I wonder whether the Minister would consider revisiting the need to provide for the Olympic legacy capital projects shelved by her predecessor.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is a bit late; it is almost as if the boat has passed on that one. The legacy projects will be met in terms of the 50-metre swimming pool, but the velodrome — if I am correct in assuming that that is what the Member is referring to — was not in the last CSR and is not in this CSR. Unless I get a huge demand for that, with evidence, I do not think that it will be in the next CSR either.

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that questions 1, 4, 9 and 12 have been withdrawn, and questions 1, 4 and 9 require a written answer.

DE: Savings

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education what savings his Department has made this year which have been or will be reported to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQO 2688/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): In setting the Budget allocations across the Budget 2008-2011 period, each Department was required by the Executive to deliver cumulative efficiency savings of 3% a year over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11. However, Budget 2011-15 was conducted on a completely different basis, as the Executive did not define or agree savings targets for each Department across the four-year period. Rather, it was left to each Minister to deliver their priorities from the resources allocated to them. In view of that, I consider it to be my responsibility as Education Minister to take whatever action is necessary to ensure that my Department remains within budget. In that context, I agreed and published a clear and transparent savings delivery plan that sets out the level of savings to be delivered by my Department between 2011-12 and 2014-15. The target for 2012-13 is £147 million.

There was no agreement by the Executive to impose savings targets on Departments. In view of that, I have not participated in any of the savings delivery plan monitoring exercises commissioned by DFP nor do I intend to do so. I recently wrote to the Finance Minister setting out my position.

2.30 pm

Mr Allister: Does that amount to the Education Minister declaring UDI in respect of the Department of Education? Surely, as a member of the Executive, he owes a duty to the oversight Department of Finance and Personnel to co-operate collectively in regard to savings and spending, rather than seeking to operate as an island unto himself.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not an island upon myself, but I do operate within the agreements, legislation, protocols and policies that adhere to my Department, and I am in full compliance with those. My Department faces many challenges. We have a significant work programme in play.

My officials are extremely busy delivering services to the public. A number of reviews are ongoing, which I wish to see ended. I do not believe that it is best use of my officials' time to review figures that they and I review monthly.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, in that sense. The Member may choose to look at my savings delivery plan, which is on the Department website — I am more than happy to send him one — or at the budgets on which we came in last year at under 1% on revenue and capital. We are in line with our savings delivery plan. I will continue to deliver on that and to engage with parties and Executive members on how we minimise the impact of the savings delivery plan on front line services.

Mr Elliott: On the other hand, has the Minister made any bids in the October monitoring round? If so, what were they and what are the consequences for individual schools if they are not met?

Mr O'Dowd: I made bids in the October monitoring round. I am cautious and conscious that I may not be in a position to mention them. I believe that they have been forwarded to the Education Committee, so, if they are public, they are public, but I do not have them in front of me. They are significant bids in their own right, in that I want to make a contribution towards the Arvalee project and to cover a number of maintenance programmes in schools. I would like to see them met, but I await the outcome of the October monitoring round.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. What are the benefits to the Minister's Department or, more specifically, for the schools estate of not participating in future monitoring exercises on the savings delivery plan?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta. The question should really be what will be the benefits to schools if I do participate in the monitoring of the savings delivery plan, and there are none. As I said to Mr Allister, I am in compliance with all Executive protocols and policies in regard to this matter. I am in full compliance with all legislation governing my role as Minister. It is my duty as Minister to ensure that my Department comes in on budget and the savings delivery plan is delivered. We have a significant work programme in the Department of Education. My officials are working hard at delivering that programme, and I would much rather that they were focused on delivering services rather than on delivering paperwork.

Donacloney Primary School

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Education for an indication of when he will make a decision in relation to the proposed development of Donacloney Primary School from eight classes to nine classes. (AQO 2689/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Any significant change to education provision in an area, such as an increase in the size of a school, requires the publication of a statutory development proposal. In the case of Donacloney Primary School, the Southern Education and Library Board is the statutory authority with responsibility for publishing the development proposal. Before doing so, the board is required to consult schools that might be affected by the proposal. The SELB has confirmed that the consultation on Donacloney

Primary School started during the week beginning Monday 17 September and is scheduled to last for three weeks. Following that, a proposal will be presented for final board approval. Subject to final board approval being granted, the SELB plans to publish a development proposal requesting an increase in enrolment numbers at Donacloney Primary School. A statutory two-month period will then ensue during which anyone who wishes to express an opinion may do so directly to the Department of Education. All comments received will be taken into consideration when I make a decision on the proposal.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I urge him to move as quickly as possible to allow the school and the parents to plan ahead at Donacloney. Does he agree that it is vital to ensure that class sizes are reduced in primary schools, as it is almost impossible for teachers to implement the activity-based revised curriculum, especially at Foundation Stage, P1 and P2, when class sizes are over 24?

Mr O'Dowd: We aim constantly to improve the teaching environment for teachers and pupils. However, I have to say that the quality of the teacher in the classroom is much more important than the number of pupils in the class. Certainly, we do not want that number to be excessive.

The Member will be aware of the area planning process in which I am currently involved. Part of that is to ensure that there is a sustainable schools estate built to meet the needs of the communities and pupils we serve. Central to that are the needs of pupils, including class sizes, the infrastructure of their schools, availability of resources et cetera.

If a development proposal for Donacloney Primary School comes before me, I will endeavour to reach a decision on it as quickly as possible, ensuring that I take into account all the representations made to me.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister has partly answered my question. I encourage him to come to a quick decision on Donacloney Primary School. The school definitely needs additional class space. If necessary —

Mr Deputy Speaker: May we have a question?

Mr Gardiner: Will he review the situation and get it through as quickly as possible?

Mr O'Dowd: I will, bearing in mind that, when you act in haste, you regret at leisure. I will ensure that, when I can make a quick decision, I do so. That is only fair on schools in general when development proposals come before me. Some development proposals are very complex and bring into play factors that deserve further interpretation and interrogation. However, I assure the Member that I will take on board all the consultation responses and come to a decision as quickly as possible.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Will the Minister outline what consultation the Department facilitates prior to setting a school's admission number?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta. Each year, the Department considers what admissions and enrolment numbers should be set for a school. That process takes into account a number of factors, including the school's long-term enrolment number and its available accommodation. The Department consults the school,

the education and library board and, where appropriate, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools before setting the numbers. That is the most appropriate juncture for a school to raise questions and concerns about its numbers. The Department carries out the consultation on numbers during the spring and summer months of the year preceding the year for which they will apply.

Primary Schools: Bangor

5. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department intends to take to ease the pressure on the demand for primary school places in eastern and central Bangor. (AQO 2691/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In September 2012, a total of 854 year 1 places were available in primary schools in the Bangor area for the 2012-13 academic year. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed that, currently, 87 year 1 primary school places are still available. There is no question of there not being enough places, and there are no plans to increase capacity in the area.

Of course, I am aware that, despite the fact that there were more than enough places in the Bangor area for 2012-13, some parents were still disappointed at the outcome of their application. Although an open enrolment policy enables parents to express preferences for the school that they wish their children to attend, admissions to individual schools are necessarily limited by the physical capacity of the accommodation available. When schools are oversubscribed, they apply published admissions criteria to determine which applicants they can admit. No child can be guaranteed a place at any school, and it is not uncommon for children to be admitted to schools other than their first preference. The area planning process will reshape the structure and pattern of education provision and will provide the basis on which popular oversubscribed schools will be allowed to grow further.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his response, although I am somewhat disappointed by it. Every primary school in eastern and central Bangor has been oversubscribed for the past couple of years. Although the Minister points to the long-term solution of area planning, is he prepared to see some degree of flexibility in the next couple of years in enrolments to try to cope with the fact that, for example, at one school in Towerview, pupils who go to the nursery school cannot even get a place in primary 1 in that school?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question?

Mr Weir: I have just asked a question.

Mr O'Dowd: Bangor is a fine and lovely place, but it is not a major metropolis. We are not talking about excessive travel distances, even for primary-school children. The Member has been in correspondence with me about the matter. I will visit Bangor and Holywood in the near future, and no doubt the matter will be raised with me again by schools in the area. I will keep it under review. In the previous answer, I discussed when schools should apply for enrolment number increases. I encourage schools to continue to do that. In the near future, we will publish the primary school area planning process, which will be another opportunity for the schools to make comments and proposals on the way forward. At the moment, I am not minded to change provision in the area, but I will keep it under review.

Mr Agnew: I appreciate that there have to be enrolment numbers and that we have to consider the impact on other schools in the area, but, on the point of Towerview, when it comes down to a matter of two or three children who attend a nursery school going to a primary school, surely there can be some degree of flexibility and common sense.

Mr O'Dowd: Flexibility and common sense are great things, and we should all possess them. However, when you are dealing with entrance to schools, flexibility and common sense for one school means that another school loses out. That school will not see it as flexibility and common sense; it will see its enrolment numbers falling again, and that may continue year after year. Admission to a nursery school is not and should not be a guarantee of admission to the adjoining primary school. Preschool education is an integral part of our education system, but placement at a nursery school is not a guarantee of placement at the adjoining primary school, if there is one. There are no easy answers. Once the Department makes an adjustment at school A, it has an effect on school B and school C. It has a ripple effect. Sometimes, it has the unintended consequence of putting a school's future sustainability in jeopardy.

Mr Cree: How wedded to the Bain numbers is the Department when reviewing the area planning of primary schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Bain has been superseded by the sustainable schools policy, which is now in place. My area planning process is in line with the sustainable schools policy, which largely draws from Bain. However, it is not a numbers game. Circumstances that perhaps prevail in an area of Belfast will not prevail in an area of Fermanagh, Tyrone or Derry, so you have to take into account the local circumstances that pertain to a school. There are several criteria on which a school will be judged, all of which carry equal weight and importance. I am certainly not involved in a numbers game.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Is the Minister aware that there is much pressure on primary school and nursery places in south Belfast? Could he tell us whether he has any plans to ease some of that pressure?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the question was very specifically about the Bangor area. We will move on.

Special Educational Needs: Classroom Assistants

6. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education how he envisages the role of classroom assistants developing in the context of the special educational needs and inclusion review being undertaken by his Department. (AQO 2692/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The proposals set out following the review of special educational needs and inclusion relate to changes to the existing SEN framework to provide a less bureaucratic and more streamlined process to meet the needs of children. The review has not made specific recommendations about the role of classroom assistants in how they support children with SEN. It will be a matter for the education and library boards and, in time, the Education and Skills Authority to ensure that they provide equitable SEN services that are determined and provided through commonly applied criteria.

2.45 pm

Miss M McIlveen: No doubt the Minister will be aware of the recent research carried out by the children and youth programme in the University of Ulster's UNESCO Centre. That showed that more emphasis should be placed on the specific role and functions of classroom assistants to support the effective inclusion of pupils with SEN. In light of that, will the Minister ensure that, via the education and library boards and, subject to the legislation being passed, ESA, specific steps are taken to maximise the training potential of classroom assistants as informed and valued members of staff?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no difficulty with that whatsoever. Our classroom assistants play a valuable role in the education of our young people, and the SEN proposals do not neuter them in any way. As I have done thus far, I will continue to engage with the Committee on the SEN proposals — I think that that has worked well for the Committee and the Department. The policy memorandum has received Executive approval. When we come to make more detailed proposals, which will include the use of classroom assistants and how best we use them to facilitate the education of our young people, I will come back to the Committee and discuss those.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister knows of my concern that a number of children are not being assessed. Will he put extra resources into the education and library boards, so that more children can be assessed for special needs?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member had a perfect opportunity yesterday to put more resources into the education of our young people by approving the ESA legislation. Instead, he decided to speak about everything other than SEN provision, the educational needs of our young people and the educational needs of our most socially deprived areas and went into a speech about his view of my party. That has nothing to do with SEN.

I can assure the Member that, through the SEN review, I will ensure that resources are targeted on our young people with special needs. As part of my savings delivery plan, I have protected special educational needs from further savings cuts. If more finances become available, I will endeavour to direct more resources towards SEN.

The Member should also be aware that one of the main driving forces behind ESA is to ensure that there is equality of delivery of services across the North, rather than what we have at the moment, where there can be major differences between the services that are received in different board areas. I hope that he reflects on that before making any further contributions to the debate on ESA.

Mr A Maginness: I concur with the Minister on the value that classroom assistants bring to education. In that context, is there proper management and training for classroom assistants in dealing with challenging behaviours by pupils in schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The training and skills of our workforce are increasing all the time, and programmes have been delivered to classroom assistants and others. However, we will keep that under review. Pilot projects are under way in early years etc on how we better use SEN in early years and allow classroom assistants to work better in those sectors.

There is a duty on us to ensure that we facilitate training in our workforce and allow our workforce to progress. In

general, the standard among our classroom assistants is excellent, but, of course, where training is required, we should be in a position to deliver that training.

Schools: Changes to GCSEs

7. Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education how he plans to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that students in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged when applying to universities in the rest of the UK, following the introduction of the English baccalaureate. (AQO 2693/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am in regular contact with my counterpart in the Department for Employment and Learning on a wide range of education issues. He has already stated that he shares my concerns over Michael Gove's proposed changes, as many students sit GCSE examinations in further education colleges here.

In my statement to the Assembly on 1 October, I stated that, following the review of qualifications, if it is decided to create new qualifications, employers and universities will be involved in the discussions. I will ensure that universities on these islands and employers will recognise those qualifications, and I can assure you that standards will be maintained and our learners will not be disadvantaged by any changes that occur in England or Wales. I will continue to work with my counterparts locally and with those in England, Wales, Scotland and the South of Ireland to ensure that our learners are not disadvantaged by qualifications policies in any of the local jurisdictions.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give me his assessment of the current system in Northern Ireland, which uses GCSEs, as opposed to the proposed baccalaureate system in mainland UK?

Mr O'Dowd: It is difficult to assess our GCSEs against the proposed changes that Michael Gove is introducing because full details have not yet been published. However, I can give the Member my assessment of our current examination system. I believe it to be robust and to be a fair challenge to the individual learner's abilities and skill sets. However, the changes being made in England present us with an opportunity to review that. I have set up a review under CCEA, and I will await the outcome of its report before proposing changes, if any, to our current examination system. I am satisfied that we have a robust examination system. I have said publicly that comments elsewhere may have damaged the brand, and I certainly do not want any of our young people leaving education or going on to further education believing that the examination they have taken is not up to standard. Anyone who has sat GCSEs or is sitting GCSEs should be proud of their achievement.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for something of an assurance on the challenging issue of ensuring that our pupils are not put at a disadvantage through changes in any other part of the United Kingdom. I want to widen the issue in relation to a concern back at home. There is a major concern around area plans because of the lack of co-operation and plans that include a working relationship between the post-primary sector and further and higher education colleges. What continuing work has he done with the Minister to ensure that the ultimate goal of improved educational outcomes for our young people is not disadvantaged?

Mr O'Dowd: I have touched on this matter with my counterpart. I have also met senior personnel from the further and higher education colleges who assure me that they are keen to be involved in area planning, that it is of benefit to them and that they want to be involved in the entitlement framework and the delivery of GCSEs and A levels, where appropriate. They want to be involved in the delivery of a broader skill set to our young people. Some of our further and higher education estate is excellent. The facilities available are world-class, and I want a joined-up approach between our post-primary schools and the further and higher education colleges in the locality. They want it to work, and I want it to work. When reviewing area plans following the consultation, I will be conscious of whether the role of further and higher education colleges in an area has been taken into account for future planning purposes.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister is reviewing GCSEs, but what discussions has he had with his counterpart, Michael Gove? Has he learned any lessons from that?

Mr O'Dowd: Have you not heard? Michael Gove does not want to talk to me. I have learned the lesson that, despite repeated requests to Mr Gove for a meeting, I will always get a refusal. However, I have agreed to a meeting with one of his junior Ministers, who is responsible for examinations. We are waiting for the date to be finalised. I had hoped to hold a joint meeting with my Welsh counterpart, Leighton Andrews. It may not prove possible, but we hope to do that. I will continue to correspond with Michael Gove, and I will meet his officials, despite the fact that I believe I should meet him face to face. However, I think that the outcome is more important.

Mr B McCrea: I will put in a word for you.

Mr O'Dowd: Right. That is good — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: I never thought of using local contacts to set up that arrangement. I will have to keep that in mind for future reference. Local contacts with the Tories would be useful on this occasion.

Communications will continue among Ministers across the islands to ensure that our qualifications system is recognisable and robust.

Mr P Ramsey: Minister, in your discussions with Dr Stephen Farry and possibly Ruairí Quinn, what progress has been made with the Central Applications Office (CAO) to ensure that students from Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged if they go to universities in the South?

Mr O'Dowd: I think I speak for all three Ministers when I say that it is a frustrating process. It is not political intervention that is required; universities in the South of Ireland need to take this matter more seriously and be more generous when they examine it. Universities in the South are an independent body. It is their representative organisation that has yet to make a definitive decision in regard to recognising a number of our qualifications. I accept that Minister Quinn has made representations on our behalf. I accept that Minister Farry has made his voice heard on the issue, and I have made mine heard on it. However, progress is frustratingly slow, and it is now time for the universities to act, as I often say here, on behalf of the students rather than the institutions.

Magherafelt Learning Partnership

8. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Education whether he has ever visited any of the post-primary schools in Magherafelt to observe the Magherafelt learning partnership in action. (AQO 2694/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Although I have not specifically been invited by the Magherafelt learning community to see their partnership working in action, I have visited a number of area learning communities. I have seen for myself the valuable work that they do in the shared delivery of education, the sharing of good practice and expertise, the identification of gaps or duplication in provision and, importantly, how those issues can be addressed. I am keen to ensure that a more strategic role for area learning communities, in the context of area-based planning, is developed, and I have set aside funding of £0.5m in each of the next three years to help them in that objective.

Mrs Overend: The six schools in Magherafelt include the Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt High School, Kilronan Special School, St Mary's Grammar School and St Pius X College. I think that I have mentioned all six, have I? All those schools have led by example and have been highlighted by many as delivering good practice. Can the Minister provide any assurance that he will not use the post-primary area plan to further entrench the various education sectors in Magherafelt?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I can guarantee that: I do not want to see an entrenchment of any sector that leads to people living in a silo mentality and not co-operating or working with their educational partners around them. The ethos of area planning is for greater sharing. We often talk about sharing in education across the communities here, but we have to encourage the sharing of education across sectors, often within the one community. There is no doubt about it: we have shining examples of area learning communities. I have told the shared education advisory group that I set up to talk to a number of the area learning communities, because they are, in practice, involved in sharing education, and there are things to learn from them. I want to continue to work with area learning communities. I have set funding aside for them, and I think that they are a good way forward for education.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister mentioned the good work of the Magherafelt learning partnership. In light of that great work, will he assure me and the schools involved that he will not use area planning to have a negative impact on those schools, which are working together? Will he ensure that they remain open?

Mr O'Dowd: The area planning process is out for public consultation. I do not see it as a negative exercise; I see it as a positive exercise in which we have the boards and CCMS coming together in conjunction and consultation with the other sectors to discuss the way forward for the sharing of resources, facilities and schools in going ahead with education. I await the outcome of the area planning consultation. I will study the proposals closely, and I will only sign off proposals that are to the educational benefit of young people in the area.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What resources is the Minister making available to ensure that area learning communities can continue to function effectively?

Mr O'Dowd: In my first year in office, I visited a number of area learning communities, listened to their stories and observed their work. I was very impressed. I set aside £0·5 million — £1·5 million over the next three years — to facilitate the work of area learning communities. Part of that is to focus on raising educational standards in the area. My Department is drawing up a programme for area learning communities to bid for and receive that funding. So, I am committed to the future work of area learning communities.

3.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill [NIA 15/11-15] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on the motion, which will enable speedy progression towards the elimination of air passenger duty (APD) on direct long-haul flights departing Northern Ireland airports.

As far as Bills go, this is relatively straightforward, and the policy context has been the subject of much debate and has been widely consulted on. As well as the Government's wider consultation on air passenger duty, the Executive's commitment to eliminate air passenger duty on direct haul flights has been consulted on as part of our wider consultation on the draft Programme for Government and economic strategy. That is why I do not plan to do a separate consultation on this Bill.

I appeared before the Finance and Personnel Committee on 3 October to explain to members — as I am required to do under Standing Order 42(3) — why it is necessary for this particular Bill to proceed by accelerated passage and the consequences should it not be granted. I had a productive session with the Committee. I would like to thank the Committee members for recognising the need to expedite the process for the Bill and also for their support in seeking Assembly approval for accelerated passage.

The use of accelerated passage is not something that I take lightly. I believe that the best way to take forward legislation is to have a full Committee procedure in which legislation can be scrutinised and any outstanding issues resolved to the satisfaction of the Committee. That is undoubtedly the way that legislation should be brought forward. However, given the commitment in the Programme for Government to eliminate air passenger duty on direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland, the Government's action on the Belfast to Newark flight and the commitment given to Continental that the Executive would act quickly to reduce the duty on those flights to zero, the measures contained in the draft Bill need to be in place as soon as possible.

I will now take the opportunity to explain to the Assembly — as required under Standing Order 42(4) — why I am seeking accelerated passage, the consequences of it not being granted and how I will minimise future use of that mechanism.

As many Members will be aware, the core provisions in the Bill arise from a request from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on behalf of the Executive to the Prime Minister that urgent action be taken to ensure that the existing direct flight from Belfast International to New York would continue. In response, the Government announced that APD for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland would be reduced to the short-haul rate from 1 November

2011 and that the process of devolving powers to set those rates to the Assembly in line with the EU Azores criteria would commence. The legislative changes required in Westminster to enable that were made in the Finance Act 2012, which received Royal Assent in July. This Assembly Bill represents the next stage in the process. It is therefore vital that it is introduced as soon as possible.

In terms of timing, we are working towards Assembly passage of our Bill to eliminate APD on direct haul flights on 6 November, with Royal Assent as soon as possible after that. That usually takes up to a month. HMRC has indicated that there are no provisions for making the appointed day order retrospective, so a new zero rate could only be affected after the process has been completed. It is our aim to have an effective date of 1 January 2013. That is clearly challenging, but I believe that it is possible.

I wrote to the Speaker on 25 September confirming my view that the APD Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly. I am satisfied, as are the Government, that the arrangements to devolve direct long-haul APD rates satisfy the EU Azores criteria. However, having the provision effective from January 2013 can no longer be achieved by normal passage of the Bill. To my mind, it would be wholly unacceptable if the key measures in the Bill were not operational until a much later date, which would be the case if we pursued the normal Bill process in the Assembly. It would also be a bad reflection on the functioning of both the Executive and the Assembly. I am conscious that accelerated passage should not be used lightly or unnecessarily. This is not an attempt to shield the Bill from the proper scrutiny that should be undertaken. It is a vital measure, and one that has already been subject to Assembly scrutiny as part of the process of obtaining agreement to the legislative consent motion to devolve the powers.

Again owing to my obligations under Standing Order 42(4) (c), I have already indicated that I believe that legislation should be taken through the normal process where possible, as it ensures that due process is followed and the Committee is afforded adequate time to scrutinise the Bill clause by clause. I will take all necessary steps to ensure that the accelerated passage mechanism is not unnecessarily exercised. I will resort to this approach only in exceptional circumstances. Bearing in mind that Members will have an opportunity to raise issues on the detail of the Bill at its Second Stage, I seek the House's support for accelerated passage, and I look forward to hearing Members' comments. I also look forward to the Assembly showing the same all-party support for accelerated passage that was demonstrated by the Committee.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for missing the beginning of the Minister's contribution.

On Wednesday 3 October 2012, the Minister briefed the Committee on the reasons for seeking accelerated passage for the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill. At the meeting, the Minister reminded Committee members of the background to the Bill and explained the need for the changes in the rates of duty for direct long-haul flights, as provided for in the Bill, to take effect by 1 January 2013.

The Committee is mindful that Committee Stage is a key element in the legislative process and an important Committee function, so the decision to support the Department's request for accelerated passage has not been taken lightly. The Minister assured the Committee that he recognised the benefits that scrutiny brought to bear in the formation of Bills, expressing that, if time constraints had allowed, his desire would have been for the Bill to go through Committee Stage as normal. However, the Committee has already examined the issue of air passenger duty in considerable detail.

On 5 March 2012, the Minister wrote to seek the Committee's view on the provisions in the then Finance Bill at Westminster, which would transfer direct long-haul rates of APD to the Assembly. In advance of the necessary legislative consent motion coming before the Assembly, the Committee undertook a detailed analysis of the policy proposals. It received written submissions from a range of key stakeholders and held oral hearings with the Department, the two Belfast airports, the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA), the NI Hotels Federation, the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB), the Consumer Council, the NI Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). That exercise established a sound evidence base for the Committee's report, which was published on 16 May 2012. The evidence-gathering and scrutiny that underpinned the report were therefore comparable with the work that would be undertaken if a Committee Stage of the Bill were to take place.

Moreover, having conducted that scrutiny, the Committee is aware from the Minister's evidence on 3 October that the North could lose one of its key international flight routes if the Bill is not in place by 1 January 2013. The Minister also affirmed that setting direct long-haul rates of air passenger duty at zero will not only retain economically productive routes but could promote opportunities to create new routes. Given the time constraint and the current economic climate, the Committee is conscious of the need for prompt action to be taken to boost tourism and encourage inward business investment to the area, and the case for setting a zero rate of duty on direct long-haul flights is particularly compelling in that regard.

In light of the Committee's scrutiny to date, and the explanation and assurances received from the Minister, the Committee agreed that it was content to support the Minister in seeking approval for the Bill to proceed by accelerated passage. On behalf of the Committee, I therefore support the motion that the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill be granted accelerated passage.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Bill will devolve to the Assembly and the Executive the power to set the rate of air passenger duty to be applied to passengers on direct long-haul flights that take off from Northern Ireland and are designated as band B, C and D flights. This was spurred by the need to ensure that the transatlantic flight from Belfast International Airport to Newark continued.

The Westminster Government and the Executive worked rapidly together to ensure a speedy process of the transfer of powers. The SDLP will support the use of accelerated passage. We are happy that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has scrutinised the Bill sufficiently in receiving evidence and submissions. The Committee has also published a comprehensive report. We welcome the

Minister's reassurances today that he will not resort to the use of accelerated passage in future, except in extreme circumstances.

Mr Wilson: There is not a great deal to be said other than to thank the Chairman and Deputy Chairman for the support that they have expressed, which reflects the Committee's view. I accept the Chairman's apology for coming in late. He missed a treat in the first part of my speech, but that is the penalty he must pay for coming in late to the debate. He pointed out — I do not think that I need to reiterate it — that the Committee has had an opportunity to look at this issue. When we looked at it as part of the legislative consent motion on the Finance Bill, the Committee took considerable evidence on the issue. The Committee produced a report, many of the recommendations of which we are following up positively in the Department.

I thank the Committee for the time that we spent discussing this together the week before last, and for the support that it has given for the use of accelerated passage. I re-emphasise that I do not believe accelerated passage should be used lightly, but there will be occasions when it is unavoidable. I appreciate the Committee's indulgence in this case and ask for the Assembly's support for the position that has been adopted by all the parties on the Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA 15/11-15) proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill [NIA 15/11-15] be agreed.

I very much welcome the opportunity to open the debate on the Bill, which will allow the elimination of air passenger duty (APD) for direct long-haul flights departing from local airports. Before turning to the detail of the Bill, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its work on the issue in recent months and, in particular, for the extensive evidence sessions and research that it has undertaken. The recommendations in its report were very useful in informing our forward thinking on the issue.

As Members will recall, at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, we were faced with significant concerns about the viability of the direct link between Belfast International and Newark. That was a direct result of the difference between the rate of air passenger duty here and that in the Republic of Ireland. It was very clear that, without early action, the route would have been lost to Northern Ireland. It was the Chancellor himself who eventually took the decision to, first, reduce our long-haul APD to the short-haul rate, and then begin the process of devolving the necessary powers to us. I would like to again put on record my thanks to him for that.

The reduction of the short-haul rate prevented the immediate loss of the route, but it was recognised at the time that it still left a rate of duty that was significantly higher than the rate in the Republic of Ireland. So, a commitment was given in the Programme for Government that the Executive would act quickly to reduce the duty on those flights to zero.

3.15 pm

Fundamentally, I am aware that many of you have a general concern about the adverse impact of APD, and I can assure the Assembly that I share that concern. I firmly believe that it is a tax that no longer meets the basic requirements of being fair to everyone, having a simple structure and not unduly impeding consumers and businesses. Unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, our access to other regions is not as easy and is heavily reliant on air transport, as we are without rail or car alternatives for wider travel within the UK. So, we are clearly the hardest hit by this tax.

I made my position on this duty clear in the strongest possible terms in my Department's response last June to the Government's consultation on APD. Members can rest assured that I will continue to press the Government for the abolition of APD or, failing that, a significant reduction in APD rates.

I am realistic about this, and, with the Government very much in revenue-raising mode, I do not have any immediate expectation of material change. That said, significant pressure is building on this issue, politically from other devolved Administrations and from the aviation and tourism industries. Indeed, APD formed part of the discussion at the recent Joint Ministerial Council plenary meeting, where Ministers debated a range of

aviation issues. I will also be working with the Regional Development Minister and other Executive colleagues to include this matter in the Executive's formal response to the Department for Transport's consultation on this.

Work has already begun to examine how we can maximise the opportunities from the devolution of APD powers on direct long-haul flights. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Tourism Ireland are liaising with Belfast International Airport on that, and the ETI Minister has been in touch with a Canadian airline. Work has already begun with DETI and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to develop terms of reference for a study to look at further ways in which we can improve our connectivity. That will include an examination of all aspects of APD as well as non-APD options. However, devolving powers to vary the rate of APD across all bands would be relatively expensive: £60 million to £90 million per annum. There may be better ways to spend that amount of money.

So, as the Assembly can see, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), along with other relevant Departments, is looking at a broad range of issues on how we can improve our connectivity. It is an important element of the economic strategy.

I turn to the detail of the legislation. Clause 1 sets the rate of air passenger duty at zero for the purposes of subsections (3)(a) and (b), (4)(a) and (b), (5)(a) and (b) and (5A)(a), (b) and (c) of section 30A of the Finance Act 1994. Essentially, that provides for a zero rate of duty for passengers on direct long-haul flights that take off from Northern Ireland: that is, those in bands B, C and D. It is the Department's intention that the change will be given effect as soon as possible after Royal Assent is given to the Bill on 1 January 2013. That is the date that we are aiming for.

Clause 2 permits the Department to pay to HMRC:

"such sums as the Department thinks fit towards any expenditure incurred by HMRC in connection with air passenger duty".

That is chargeable at the rate set in the Bill or at a rate that may be set at a future date. The clause will enable payments to be made to HMRC for collecting information on behalf of the Department, for relevant administration costs that are incurred, for functions related to the register of companies for Northern Ireland purposes and any other costs that HMRC may incur in connection with the exercise of the devolved powers.

Clause 3 provides for the commencement of the clauses in the Bill, and clause 4 sets out the title of the Bill. I look forward to the support of the Assembly in taking forward these important measures.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak again on behalf of the Committee, this time on the general principles of the Bill.

As has been discussed, the Bill has been brought before the Assembly following extensive scrutiny by the Committee and valuable engagement with key stakeholders on both the principles behind the Bill and the wider considerations around APD. I take this

opportunity to thank the Minister and his officials for the constructive way in which the Department engaged with the Committee during this scrutiny and in the development of the proposals that now form the content of this Bill.

The Minister recently provided a formal response to the Committee's report on the legislative consent motion on air passenger duty, accepting many of the Committee's recommendations, which I will come to later.

As outlined by the Minister, the primary purpose of the Bill is to set a zero rate of APD on direct long-haul flights from the North, following transfer of the necessary power to the Assembly, as provided for by the Westminster Finance Act 2012. Members are very mindful of the importance of aviation to the local economy in terms of not only reliance on air travel in the North but increasing tourist numbers and attracting business investment. Although direct long-haul flights represent only around 1.5% of all flights from the North, the policy intentions behind the Bill include the aim of retaining the North's strategically important long-haul flights, especially the United Airlines Belfast to Newark connection, which Members will be aware of and which has been crucial to tourism and business investment in the North's economy.

Under the current rates of air passenger duty, airlines were being forced to absorb the costs of the duty to prevent customers from switching to Dublin and the rest of the island. The Committee heard that the long-term viability of such routes was being harmed. For example, air passenger duty is costing United Airlines around £3.2 million for the Belfast to Newark route. The risk of losing these long-haul routes if the Bill is not enacted by 1 January 2013 places an urgency on the consideration and passage of the Bill.

During its scrutiny of the provisions in the Westminster Finance Bill to transfer the power over direct long-haul rates of APD, the Committee identified an anomaly whereby luxury private aircraft would enjoy a zero rate of APD if the direct long-haul rates were set at this price. The Committee welcomed the subsequent amendment to the Finance Bill that gives the Assembly the power to set a different rate for luxury private aircraft should it wish to do so. In picking up on this issue during the Minister's briefing on the Bill on 3 October, the Committee sought information on the availability of figures for the revenue that will be lost to the Executive as a result of a zero air passenger duty rate applying to private jets or direct light aircraft. It was suggested to the Committee during the briefing that, while the amount of this revenue has not been separately calculated, it would be very small. The Minister may, therefore, wish to respond on that issue when closing today's debate.

In welcoming the proposed measures that now form the principles of this Bill, the Committee was concerned to ensure that the Executive should develop a co-ordinated action plan to maximise the economic opportunities arising from the transfer of direct long-haul rates of APD, including the aim of establishing new direct long-haul flight connections to key business and tourism hubs. The Committee welcomes the Minister's assurances that his officials are liaising with counterparts in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Regional Development in the first instance to take this forward. Additionally, the Minister confirmed that direct long-haul APD rates are part of DETI's major programme

of trying to expand exports from the economy by 20%. I therefore look forward to early signs of positive economic outcomes from the measures resulting from the Bill.

It is important that we also consider the principles of the Bill against the wider policy context in which air passenger duty operates. In its report in May of this year, the Committee recognised this duty as a:

“regressive tax which is particularly disadvantageous to businesses, consumers and the wider economy”.

The Committee believes that the current rates are a disproportionate burden, primarily due to the peripheral location of the area and its subsequent dependency on air travel. Additionally, the North's airports are at a competitive disadvantage with those in the South due to the proximity of the latter's airports, a much improved infrastructure in recent years and the much lower equivalent air travel tax of €3 on the rest of the island. The Committee also noted that a number of European Governments, including those of Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, have reduced, withdrawn or not implemented aviation duties because of the potential damage caused to their air transport industries.

In light of its findings, the Committee called on the Executive, in the first instance, to campaign for the abolition of air passenger duty, and the Committee welcomes the Minister's recent assurance that he will continue to press the British Government on that matter. However, I note that, during his evidence on 3 October, the Minister advised that there has been no sign of a softening in the British Government's commitment to maintaining or increasing APD as a revenue-raising measure.

In my view, there has been a misconception that air passenger duty is a minor issue in comparison with corporation tax, which seems to have been the main focus of public debate on the economy. In a paper on devolving air passenger duty in April this year, PricewaterhouseCoopers concluded that APD needs to be given equal prominence with the potential corporation tax-varying powers, which ultimately seek to help rebalance the North's economy.

From the evidence received by the Committee, it was clear that stakeholders regarded the transfer of power over direct long-haul rates of air passenger duty as a positive move. However, there was a notable call for the scope of the transferred powers to include short-haul band A flights. Those flights, which are obviously not covered by this legislation, represent 98.5% of all flights from the North. For example, the Consumer Council argued that the planned transfer of only bands B, C and D falls far short of adequately addressing the air passenger duty burden borne by the North's consumers, whilst the chief executive of George Best Belfast City Airport said that the transfer of those rates in their current form has left 98% of that problem untouched.

The Committee's report recommended that the Executive should commission independent expert research into the business case for reducing or abolishing APD on band A flights to inform Executive consideration of whether or how wider transferred powers over the duty should be exercised. They were advised that that research should include an assessment of the opportunity costs of non-action; rigorous economic modelling and forecasting of

options; and lessons from EU states that have reduced or abolished air passenger duty, including examples where Governments have attached conditions to APD reductions to ensure resultant benefits for consumers or the wider economy. The Committee also recommended that, as part of the initiative, the Executive should proceed with a strategic decision on whether to press the British Government for the transfer of the wider air passenger duty powers at the earliest opportunity.

The Committee welcomes the Minister's agreement that research should be undertaken to explore how improving the North's connectivity might be achieved, including air passenger duty and non-APD-related actions. Departmental officials are in discussions with counterparts in DETI and DRD to consider how that work can best be commissioned. In that regard, the Committee has requested sight of the terms of reference for the research, and I look forward to examining that in due course.

Arising from its investigations, the Committee also concluded that, given both Treasury's insistence on devolution rather than exemption of APD and the determination of the British Government to retain APD as a revenue-raising measure, any future reduction in APD on band A flights from the North is likely to be achieved only through the further transfer of powers to also cover band A rates. In examining that scenario, the Committee was advised by the Department that transferring the rates for all flights from the North and setting a zero rate across all bands would lead to an anticipated cost to the Executive of around £60 million per annum in block grant reductions. While concluding that a cost-benefit decision on the transfer of powers over band A should take account of the fact that that maximum cost would apply only if a zero rate was set across all the different duty bands, the Committee pointed out that the Executive could take an evidence-based approach to reducing the rates for particular bands, with decisions taken on the basis of forecast return on investment.

I note that the Minister recognises that option in his formal written response to the Committee's report, and that is to be welcomed.

I return to the principles of the Bill. The Committee has been supportive of the policy objectives that the Minister has set out. It is imperative that the Bill progresses urgently to address, in so far as direct long-haul flights are concerned, the competitive disadvantage faced by airports in the North and to contribute to the Executive's strategy for stimulating economic growth.

The Committee will continue to engage with the Minister and the Department in their ongoing work regarding air passenger duty, particularly in respect of the efforts by the Executive to maximise the economic opportunities arising from the Bill and any work on the devolution of band A flights or the abolition of APD altogether. In the meantime, given the assurances provided by the Department, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion and the general principles of the Bill.

3.30 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the House. I appreciate that quite a bit of work has been done already in Committee on the matter. Reference has been made to the fact that air passenger duty brings in revenue.

It was a tax-generating scheme intended, probably, to address carbon offsetting — if that is the proper term. Unfortunately, however, air passenger duty was just used to generate another revenue stream.

Interestingly, most of Europe has set this option aside. They used it for a time and have now abolished it, as has the Republic of Ireland. That puts Northern Ireland in a difficult position, because, within one hour and 40 minutes, you can be at another airport, which can ultimately show some savings. It also allows routes to become more profitable and encourages additional routes into that area. We are looking to do the same for the Northern Ireland economy, and it is vital that we address the matter and appreciate that this is one of the tools for achieving that.

The granting of Royal Assent to the UK Finance Bill on 17 July this year has allowed us the opportunity to address some of the issues. I appreciate that that was done as a result of representation made by the Executive and the Minister of Finance to Westminster to allow us to move ahead on the matter. It is vital that we grasp the opportunity, use it to its maximum potential and get it in place before January next year. If so, we may be able to encourage additional airlines to come on board and make use of the wonderful resource that Northern Ireland has in Aldergrove. I know that a lot of people make representations on behalf of Belfast airport, but let me tell you that we have one international airport and it is based in south Antrim.

Mr Weir: There is one airport in Belfast, and another based in south Antrim.

Mr Girvan: No. Unfortunately, I am not going to enter into any slanging match over the airport in Belfast. We have Aldergrove international airport, and it is vital that we keep it going and sustainable.

This is as a result of wanting to ensure that we retain the link, through the Continental/United airline, to Newark. That is one of the bands covered under the direct long-haul flight category and that airline could take advantage of the savings that it could make.

I appreciate that there is a cost to our Executive as result of taking on and reducing APD on every measure. We accept it at a minimal cost of £5 million. I know that a lot of people might think that £5 million goes quite a way. However, we believe that we can pull in a lot more value than the £5 million that it will cost the Northern Ireland Executive. As a result, that is what we will focus on.

I appreciate that it is a four-clause Bill and there are other areas to consider. Some Members referred to asking for a reduction in band A, but that was not included in the Finance Bill passed at Westminster. There is a lobby for that, and pressure needs to be brought upon the Exchequer in Westminster to reduce APD across the board. I do not particularly want to be the person who drives it through at a cost to the Northern Ireland Executive when, ultimately, there might be an opportunity for us to put pressure on the British Exchequer to reduce it to zero across all bands. If that were the case, we would be happy to accept it.

We have to compete against what is happening 100 miles down the road. I would prefer people from Northern Ireland to fly from Northern Ireland and that we gained the advantage from that, as opposed to spending money

on rail routes to Dublin and improving the road scheme so that people can make the journey to Dublin. I would prefer that people departed from and returned to Northern Ireland. However, I appreciate that we want to focus on the business routes, and it is those that we want to achieve.

There is also an argument about the hub airports in the United Kingdom that we could, ultimately, go to. However, associated with going down that route would be a cost for indirect long-haul flights, and it could be up to £20 million. I appreciate that the figure of £60 million was mentioned by the Chairman of the Committee, but, ultimately, that £60 million could rise as high as £90 million by 2016. I appreciate that the Committee has work to do. There is evidence to come forward, and this allows us to get on with the business. I support the Bill, as presented.

Mr Cree: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. As was pointed out, accelerated passage is not an ideal scenario for any legislation. However, in this case, it is necessary to ensure that we get the benefits as soon as possible and certainly before the end of January next year. It is also the case that relevant scrutiny has taken place in Westminster. However, I urge the Finance Minister to ensure that, as far as possible, any legislation that he brings to the House can be afforded the scrutiny of the full legislative process. I think that he has agreed that this afternoon.

Some in the House would like to devolve all fiscal powers to Northern Ireland or, in the SDLP's case, set up yet another quango to consider the issue. That is not the view of my party. The Finance Committee must consider any proposed change to fiscal autonomy on a case-by-case basis, and any support offered by the Ulster Unionist Party is qualified and is not to be taken as an opening of the floodgates for the devolution of fiscal powers. That said, the Ulster Unionist Party has looked carefully at the proposal to devolve the power to set air passenger duty to Northern Ireland and is content that it has the potential to deliver significant benefits.

As Members will know, air passenger duty is a revenue-raising tax. As the Minister said, it started life as an environmental tax, but that is certainly not the case now that it is a major fundraiser for the Government.

Members have referred to the four bands, A to D, which increase according to distance from the UK, with the rate payable ranging from £13 at band A through to £184 at band D.

By way of background, it is important to note that much work has been undertaken in this area, not least by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which conducted an inquiry. The Finance Committee also took evidence. The Chairman referred to the extensive work carried out by the Committee, and I pay tribute to the staff in that regard.

The legislative provision stems from the UK Finance Bill 2012, which was introduced in Westminster and received Royal Assent on 17 July. As the Minister mentioned, the necessary legislative consent motion, which has already gone through the Assembly, devolved direct long-haul rates of air passenger duty to Northern Ireland and enabled us to set the rate for bands B, C and D. Powers to set the rates for short-haul flights — band A — have not been devolved. As Members have said, that may happen in future.

The Bill sets the rate of APD to be applied to passengers on direct long-haul flights that take off from Northern Ireland at zero, and it is the next step in the process of fulfilling the commitment set out in the Programme for Government. It is important that we set out exactly the benefits of the change. I want to highlight two in particular. First, it addresses the inequality around competition with the Republic of Ireland. That follows a similar argument with regard to corporation tax, in that the Republic has a more favourable rate than here. Given the land border, close proximity and choice of airports, I am glad the House accepts that we are in competition with the Republic of Ireland. We are working, through the Bill, to outperform the Republic in business and economic terms. Secondly, a reduction to zero APD for direct long-haul flights can boost our tourism sector. We know that that is a key driver of the economy. According to the Deloitte report 'The economic case for the Visitor Economy', to which the Chairman referred, around 20% of business units in Northern Ireland are part of the visitor economy. The report states that 30,000 jobs here depend on tourism. Those jobs must be protected and, indeed, built on.

Perhaps the most important element in making the decision is the practicalities around the cost to the block grant. As the process involves the devolution of tax-setting powers, the Finance Committee has been informed that there will be a resulting cost to the block grant of a maximum of £5 million per annum, if the relevant rate is set to zero. I believe that £5 million is a cost that we can absorb, given the various benefits that I and others have outlined today. Indeed, we do not have a choice: compliance with state aid rules is not optional.

I will now look more specifically at the Bill. Despite the extensive work that has been done, it is a fairly simple Bill, with just four clauses. The third and fourth clauses are consequential, and the first clause simply has the effect of setting the rate of APD at zero for the appropriate bands. Therefore, I will look briefly at clause 2, which concerns payments to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. According to the explanatory notes, clause 2:

"permits the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to pay to HMRC such sums as DFP thinks fit towards any expenditure incurred by HMRC in connection with APD".

I would welcome clarification on what potential extra costs the Minister envisages, outside the expected administration cost. It is important that we are fully prepared and that the Executive are not hit with a substantial bill further down the line.

It is important to look at the way forward for the devolution of air passenger duty, assuming that it passes through the legislative process. It has been mooted in Committee that we should look at devolving APD for short-haul flights, which are currently band A. The simple fact is that we need a sufficient business case before there can be any further movement. I said at the outset that my party does not support the full devolution of fiscal powers as put forward by others. Lastly, I impress on the Minister the need for an action plan to maximise opportunities from the devolution of long-haul APD. We must be clear about how we intend to take advantage of the devolved powers and capitalise on the potential benefits, such as tourism and employment, as I outlined.

3.45 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat arís, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don Bhille seo. I support the Bill. We in the SDLP do so in the knowledge that, with the devolution of the powers comes an economic driver, partial and all as it is at this stage, that is essential to the future of our economy. The particular route that has given rise to the Bill is vital in maintaining the link between Northern Ireland and North America, especially in relation to the continued development of business and tourism.

Other powers over APD, specifically band A, will continue to be reserved. As we know, under the Azores judgement, any devolution of revenue-raising power to a region inevitably brings a cost. In this case, as was mentioned, the cost is estimated to be around £5 million. That is against an estimated benefit to the region of £100 million in the space of seven years, with further potential from other routes in the future. During the evidence sessions on the Bill, the Finance and Personnel Committee heard that three new carriers with similar numbers of passengers could create £300 million in extra revenue and generate thousands of jobs. This is a measure that has potential that we should exploit. There is a market out there, obviously, and I hope that DETI is making suitable preparation to exploit the benefits of this measure to the full.

In Committee, we were told that the further someone is from this island, the more irrelevant the point of entry becomes. If we can encourage people to fly to Belfast, the likelihood is that they will remain in this part of the region and we will get the full economic benefit from it in many ways. It is interesting to note, as other Members mentioned, that some of the continental countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark, introduced APD schemes similar to ours but abandoned them or drastically reduced the duty, due to the impact that it was having on inbound visitor numbers. The lesson for tourism from that for us is clear.

Today's debate centres mainly around long-haul flights, but we cannot ignore the impact of passenger duty on short-haul flights as well. As the Chairman of the Committee pointed out, band A flights make up the vast majority of flights — 98.5% — from Northern Ireland. That compares with a figure of 17% in the UK and clearly demonstrates how dependent we are on air travel. We are as dependent on air travel as the Highlands and islands are in Scotland, but we do not have the lower rate of APD that has been afforded to them.

As was said earlier, we are in direct competition with Dublin, which is little more than an hour down the road from both airports. The domestic rate for APD here is £13, compared with €3 in Dublin, so we are not by any means playing on a level pitch there. The representatives of the airports told the Committee that a family of four from, say, Newry would pay £100 in taxes to fly from Belfast, compared with €12 from Dublin. That says it all. It is clear where the advantage lies. As you move up the bands, the rate increases significantly. It is predicted that rates will eventually double, so it is clear that we may end up at an even greater disadvantage. Our main market for connections is the UK and Europe, and that is by a huge margin. We must remember that they are also our main sources of tourism and business.

We are told that the cost to the block grant of removing APD from the band A flights would be in the region of £50 million to £60 million. That seems to be a huge amount, but we have to remember that an accurate cost-benefit analysis has yet to be done on that issue. I urge the Minister to have such a study done so that we know exactly what we are talking about. We should also try to establish the financial facts about the situation rather than merely dismissing the idea out of hand, as Mr Cree would do. If we are to be as competitive as we can be, we need every tool in the economic tool chest, as has been said earlier. It should be remembered that the transfer of powers would give us the opportunity to vary APD and that the figure of £60 million per annum would apply only if the Executive set the rate at zero across all the bands.

As I said, there is potential in the measure before us in the Bill, as well as further potential right across the bands. However, let us begin with today's measure, which the SDLP is happy to support.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak to the Bill on the devolution of air passenger duty for long-haul flights. Although I do not want to simply restate what has been said by others, I would like to make it clear from the outset that I see this as a welcome development for our Assembly, and I firmly believe that it represents a significant step forward in enhancing our competitive edge. The culmination of the Bill helps to validate all the work that has been done at departmental and Committee level along the way, and I commend the Minister for bringing forward the motion today.

It has been well documented that, due to our unique geographical position, we face stiff competition in aviation from our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland, while, from a United Kingdom perspective, we face a different challenge due to our separation by sea from GB. With the rate of APD in the South already substantially lower than ours, not to mention proposals to abolish it entirely, the intended mitigation of APD for long-haul routes from Northern Ireland should help somewhat to offset the current shortcomings in our international marketability. This year, we have already seen the importance of air travel to business and tourism in Northern Ireland with the ni2012 celebrations. More than £300 million was invested in our tourism sector in anticipation of those events. However, if we truly wish to develop our long-term prospects and build on our successes, we must continue to enhance regional air travel regulation in order to accommodate our goals.

It is worth noting, as others have done, that the current short-haul APD rates continue to have a detrimental impact on what we pay for regional flights within the UK, and that impacts on our connectivity. Local businesses and consumers are further hampered by the double payment of APD on flights to other short-haul destinations, such as when people have to pass through one of the hub airports when not on a through connection, owing to limited access to direct flights and through-carriers. So I, too, am keen to have further discussions on addressing that issue in the future, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to that.

The devolution of APD rates for direct long-haul flights signifies a progressive step in addressing the disparity in Northern Ireland air travel. As stated, I welcome the motion and support the Bill's passage today.

Mr Weir: I, too, support the Bill. It will lower the cost of long-haul flights and will obviously have some impact on our carbon footprint, which the Minister would be the first to acknowledge. Despite that, any rumours that we have had Steven Agnew and Jim Wells locked up for the day to make sure that this gets through without any concerns being raised are, of course, entirely fictitious.

I support the Bill. First, it is important that we acknowledge the work that this Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and other members of the Executive have done with the Westminster Government to bring us to this point. What we have reached in the Bill is very sensible. As others have pointed out, we are in a unique situation in Northern Ireland, in that we have a land border that gives people the opportunity to go down to Dublin to get a long-haul flight. I suspect that most Members — if not every Member in the Chamber — have at times gone to Dublin to get a long-haul flight. *[Interruption.]* What? Sorry?

Mr Humphrey: We have always come back.

Mr Weir: I know. That is right. There may be some folk in Northern Ireland who hoped that some of us were going on a one-way ticket.

We face a situation that is different from most of the rest of the UK. The Highlands and islands issue was mentioned. However, there is a need to do something in connection with this.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. I came back onto the Finance Committee only recently, and I thought the Committee's report from earlier in the year was excellent. I commend it to all Members.

The Member referred to how close we are to Dublin. An important piece of evidence that the FSB brought forward as part of that report was that tourists rarely travel more than 100 kilometres beyond their point of arrival. In terms of the rate across all bands, PwC referred to the fact that as many as 40,000 jobs could be at stake. Does the Member agree that, in moving this issue forward, we should take cognisance of that evidence?

Mr Weir: We should always look at all evidence. I will come to the wider issue of APD later. I am sure that the earlier report produced by the Committee was excellent. Obviously, I cannot give it too much praise as I was not on the Committee at that stage, so I do not want to lower expectations for future reports.

The fact that there is within roughly 100 miles of Belfast a large international airport in a different jurisdiction with a different financial regime and access to a larger number of international long-haul flights will, clearly, have an impact. The Bill is about trying to create a certain level of level playing field. To that extent, it is clear that the reduction and removal of APD on long-haul flights can have positive spin-offs for Northern Ireland. It can help to protect existing routes. As Mr Girvan mentioned, we need to ensure that it is very much concentrated on the business routes. Hopefully, it can help to expand horizons for the International and City airports in bringing in additional business and looking at new routes. If this can lead in the long run to any increase in routes, it will be well worth the investment.

As was indicated, the cost of the steps we are taking today is relatively small. It is important that we proceed with a certain level of caution to ensure that any step that we take

is to the clear financial advantage of Northern Ireland. That is clearly the case with the Bill. The positive spin-offs from ensuring that those long-haul flights continue and expand will have a strong impact on our tourism potential and the profitability of our two major airports, and, indeed, a lot of employment is tied in. Aldergrove and the City Airport generate a vast amount for the economy. At times, we do not show enough gratitude or acknowledge the good work that is done there, which is work that can lead to sound financial foundations for the whole of Northern Ireland.

There is a wider issue, which Mr Girvan touched on. There is a challenge for the UK Government in that what was presented as a well-motivated, at least on the face of it, initial decision on APD to try to look at its impact on the broader environment quickly became for the Labour Government and Conservative Government something that is simply seen as a revenue stream. However, the level at which APD was set across the UK is not helping the overall UK economy. The Government need to look again at whether the short-term advantage of a certain amount of revenue is being more than offset by the loss of business to the UK as a whole.

Members opposite mentioned widening the scope of a reduction of APD. In the very short time that I have been on the Committee, when the Minister appeared before us, he gave indications that there was an issue being examined as regards that. Mention was made of a potential cost of anywhere between £60 million and £90 million if we were to move wholesale on APD. I am somewhat sceptical of that wider move.

However, irrespective of whether you are an enthusiast for that or, indeed, someone who is much more sceptical or hostile to it, whatever action we take or do not take should be based upon very clear-cut evidence. Obviously, the views of important organisations such as those that the Chair has mentioned need to be borne in mind. Evidence needs to be examined carefully before any further steps or examination is taken.

4.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Many of us share the concern that was outlined by the Minister, which is that although there is a very clear advantage on the long-haul side, there is a question mark over whether spending £60 million to £90 million would achieve the same level of advantage from some short-haul flights. It is clear that short flights can be advantageous to businesses. I know businesses in my constituency, for example, that value greatly the use of the George Best City Airport to get across quickly to London and back to do business.

The problem is disaggregating what would be the business benefit from, shall we say, the more externally driven, short-term tourism benefit that would emanate from Northern Ireland and whether, effectively, the principal beneficiary of cheaper flights would be other parts of the UK because it would actually mean that more money is spent on hotel rooms in London and other parts of the UK and that shopping is simply boosted in those areas. There is undoubtedly an issue that, to some extent, we may simply be taking money out of Northern Ireland and not getting the same level of advantage.

To some extent, any of that is supposition at present. It will be a matter of actually testing the evidence. If, in the future, we will potentially spend anywhere in the region of up to £60 million or £90 million to reduce APD simply down to zero, we need to ensure not only that we get an economic return for that, which benefits the Northern Ireland economy as a whole, but that we get the best bang for our buck. The question is whether, if that money is to be spent, other forms of regional infrastructure would actually prove to be more economically beneficial.

As I said, I suspect that that has got to be evidence-based, one way or the other. I suspect that, to some extent, it is a debate that we will come back to at a later stage.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Member for giving way. He has mentioned people who might use flights for visits or holidays. In fact, there is also a case, which similarly has to be evidence-based, that we could open up access to export markets for local, indigenous businesses by looking into airports in, for instance, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and London. We should explore that. The decision should be evidence-based. However, let us not deny ourselves opportunities to achieve the objective of rebalancing and expanding the local economy.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. That is why, ultimately, the evidence base has to be examined closely. With the best will in the world, I would question the benefits of flights that are not long-haul. For example, people who go to Lanzarote or Gran Canaria may not necessarily bring too many exports out with them or, indeed, tourism jobs back in.

One of the problems with this is that we can all see situations in which there is a certain level of advantage, where, indeed, if you could disaggregate that advantage in some way, there could be benefit. We can also see where a lot of it may be money that is not all that wisely spent. That is where the evidence has to come in.

I am trying to keep a reasoned, open mind. I have to say that I am sceptical at present. We will await the evidence. Whatever the long-term response is with regard to air passenger duty, it is clear that there is a step today that could cost little to Northern Ireland but could be of massive financial benefit. Consequently, I urge the House to support the Bill that is before us today.

Mr D McIlveen: I also rise to support the motion. I think that we probably spend a fair bit of time in the Assembly criticising Ministers for what they do not do — sometimes, justifiably; maybe sometimes not so much. We really have to take the opportunity today to pay tribute to the work that has been done on this issue, particularly by the Finance Minister and the Enterprise Minister. When we were on the cusp of losing that very important flight, they stepped up to the mark. They lobbied heavily the Secretary of State and the Minister in Westminster. I believe that that brings us to a point now where we can look at consolidating that and ensuring that the future of that particular route and, hopefully, other long-haul routes can be secured.

The New York flight, in particular, has been vital. A number of American companies will bear testimony to the fact that the connectivity between Belfast and New York has been one of the major factors in their choice to invest here, along with, obviously, the unique skills of the workforce in Northern Ireland. This is something, like the corporation tax argument, that gives us a unique niche that we can sell to investors who come from further afield when we try

to encourage direct inward investment. We should not be ignorant of that.

I am very heartened that we are having a debate — I think that I mentioned this the last time that we spoke on this issue, and I mention it again — around how we now see Dublin as our competitor rather than our partner. I take great heart from that. We sometimes spend too much time talking about the partnerships and synergies rather than looking at the opportunities that competition brings. Those of us who come from a private sector background know that there is nothing like competition to make us step up to the mark and deliver a very good and effective service. I welcome the fact that we are having a conversation about Dublin being a competitor rather than a partner. Long may that continue.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. A contributor from the other side of the House made the point earlier that this is about levelling the playing field. The Member for South Antrim referred to tourists coming into the International Airport in South Antrim. I want to compete with South Antrim; I want those tourists to go to North Antrim. We can all be parochial, but this is about levelling the playing field.

Mr D McIlveen: I welcome the Chairman of the Committee's comments, which are quite different from those he made in the 'Antrim Times' a number of weeks ago. I am glad that there has been a change of heart. I certainly welcome that, and I completely concur with what he is saying.

On a slightly more serious note, there are other advantages. I understand that there are some technicalities involved in visa regulations. If somebody enters Northern Ireland, they can freely travel across to the rest of the United Kingdom or to the Republic of Ireland without a visa, whereas that cannot be done if they enter through the other ports. A whole range of benefits and advantages can come from this.

Most of the issues that I wanted to address have already been raised, so, for the purpose of saving time, I will resume my seat. I support the Bill.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. I thank the Minister.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has closely followed the ongoing debate on the devolution of air passenger duty. The Committee's interests lie primarily in the implications for business and tourism here of the Irish Government reducing the APD rate in the South to zero. Business here is heavily reliant on air links to access markets across the world. The fact that the UK currently levies the highest rate of aviation duty in Europe has not been lost on the Committee, as high APD has had a greater negative impact here than in England, Scotland and Wales. The Committee is in agreement that there is overwhelming evidence that the high level of APD is having a significant negative impact on tourism and the economy.

The retention of the route between Belfast and Newark is essential to support existing investment from the United States and, very importantly, to attract future investment opportunities. We hope that setting the APD to zero in

primary legislation will send out a clear and unambiguous signal that we are not only open for business but in this for the long haul — pardon the pun.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel, in its report on the legislative consent motion on the Finance Bill, which included the provision to devolve direct long-haul rates of APD, recommended that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive develop a co-ordinated action plan to maximise the economic opportunities that arise from the devolution of direct long-haul rates of APD, with the aim of establishing new direct long-haul flight connections to key business and tourism hubs. The Committee will be interested to hear how the Executive respond to that and, in particular, about the role that DETI will have in the development and implementation of the action plan.

In supporting the Bill, the Committee urges the Executive to use the opportunity to redouble their efforts to attract flights to Belfast from other long-haul destinations in the United States and Canada, and destinations in the fast-developing Asian economies where — in the words of Tony O'Neill, the chair of the Agri-Food Strategy Board, who presented evidence to the Committee two weeks ago — "natural demand is unbelievable."

I now move to wear my party's hat, and it falls to me to respond to Mr Cree's comments about the SDLP setting up another quango to look at rates of taxation in the North. We could go down the route of his Tory buddies and try cuts, cuts and maybe even more cuts, but we all know what happens with those. There is a fall in disposable income, more unemployment, fewer flights and less money to go around. However, then again, if you are a true blue, you stand by your colours and you implement those cuts. Anyway, I will leave Mr Cree to pursue that option.

The SDLP is content to allow the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill to proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. We welcome the devolution to the Assembly of the setting of the rate of air passenger duty for all direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland and the decision to set the APD rate at zero for flights in bands B, C and D. That will help to secure our only direct transatlantic service and, with it, opportunities for growth in tourism from North America and greater ease of access to current and prospective industrial and business investors.

However, we have some concerns. Our first concern — it has been mentioned — relates to the cost to the block grant of the zero rating on long-haul flights, which is expected to be in the region of £5 million per annum. The SDLP is fully aware of the need to recover any cuts to the block grant through improved economic activity. In this case, that is the economic activity that will result from the zero rating of long-haul flights.

Maximising the impact of the new zero rating will require imaginative strategies to be put in place to increase tourism in particular. Unfortunately, we feel that the Minister for tourism has missed a number of tricks in that regard, even before zero rating will come into play. "The Gathering" 2013 provided a golden opportunity to promote the entire island of Ireland as a tourism destination in the global market. The zero rating on long-haul flights would be an added incentive for new visitors to come to the North when visiting the island. But, to date, the Minister has

failed to properly engage with her counterparts in Dublin to take advantage of the work that they have been doing.

The development of a common travel area visa could also assist in promoting Northern Ireland as a tourism destination: one that could become the arrival point for many visitors to these islands. Instead, the emphasis from the Minister's Department, and from her party, has been on the different requirements for visas, North and South. While that may be a factual difference, we need to see more progress on a common visa and more involvement by the Minister in those discussions.

A further concern is the exclusion from the Bill of band A: short-haul flights. In July 2011, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was:

"not convinced of the viability of pursuing the option of devolving the power to set Air Passenger Duty".

However, it did:

"recommend that for flights departing from Northern Ireland airports, Bands A and B should be merged, with the resulting merger being zero-rated all for flights departing from Northern Ireland airports, and for those direct flights to Northern Ireland from Great Britain."

It is possible, if unlikely, that zero rating on short-haul flights might yet emerge as a result of the current discussion elsewhere of an air transport strategy. However, the Bill misses that opportunity and falls short of addressing the very real impact of air passenger duty on local businesses and society here.

We believe that the Assembly should be able to set the rate of air passenger duty on short-haul flights, as well as long-haul flights. We agree with the Consumer Council, which recognised that:

"for many people in Northern Ireland travelling by air is not a luxury, but is an essential element of family and economic life."

The current air passenger duty rate on short-haul flights is an unfair taxation on consumers here.

4.15 pm

With responsibility for the short-haul duty rate devolved to the Assembly, we could fully co-ordinate our policy on air passenger duty with our counterparts in Dublin to remove the disparity, not treat it as competition, as, frankly, we are too small to compete. Consider the opportunities that it opens up from Donegal to Derry. They are huge; we should take advantage of them. We actually should move with businesses; they are already taking advantage of those opportunities. We could remove those disparities for the benefit of the economy across this island and, in the process, we could remove the unfair taxation faced by consumers here when travelling to UK destinations when compared with consumers in Britain. That would not need to result in an uncontrolled expansion of both air travel and local airports. Regulation exists to manage such pressures in a sustainable manner to mitigate any adverse impact on the environment.

The Bill represents a step forward in taking more responsibility for shaping our own economic recovery, but it lacks a comprehensive approach. Once again, I point out that such an approach requires the maximum possible

devolution of economic levers into the hands of locally accountable representatives. That increased responsibility for economic policy would help make this Assembly more relevant to the real concerns of the people we represent.

The starting point for further discussions on this issue with the British Government should be the establishment of a commission — Mr Cree is still here — to present an evidence-based argument on how further devolved powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to boost our economy; to encourage job creation and progressive taxation; and to ensure protection of the most vulnerable and the provision of first-class, front line public services.

Mr Allister: I have two or three points to make on the Bill, the first of which I am almost reluctant to make. Often, in Bills such as this, we see provision for subsequent regulations. We debated a Bill yesterday that was pregnant with that opportunity of multiple regulations being made down the line to change things that are in it. We have set the rate on duty as zero in this primary legislation, and there is no clause that affords the Department the opportunity to subsequently revisit it. I am not criticising that, because obviously zero is the best option for consumers, but it struck me as unusual in terms of how these Bills are drafted. Maybe there is a particular explanation for that. I am not recommending that it be altered; I am merely drawing attention to the fact that, if the rate was to be changed in an upward direction, it would have to be done by amending legislation. Perhaps the Minister can explain why that is so. Maybe it is to send a very clear signal that Northern Ireland is open for business on a zero rate. I do not know, but the point occurred to me immediately on reading the Bill.

The second point I want to explore concerns who has been benefiting from the already implemented reduction in passenger duty. Since last November, as I understand it, the British Government has been picking up the tab. The operator — I think it is now called United Airlines — has been benefiting from a situation whereby there is no extra surcharge. I ask who has been benefiting because it does not appear to have resulted in any reduction in the cost of air fares.

I took the opportunity this morning to check flights: in case some get too excited, I might say that I checked return trips and not single trips. I discovered that, for example, if you pick a date in mid-January to fly to New York with United Airlines, or Continental as it used to be, from Belfast, a return flight will cost £472. However, out of Dublin, with the same airline going to the same destination, it will cost you £386; a difference of something like £86.

If the airline is already benefiting from the set-aside of this duty, why is it that there has been no resulting benefit to the consumer? Surely, one of the desirable objectives of this legislation is that we make Northern Ireland and Belfast International Airport a more attractive destination and a more attractive place from which to fly. However, if, in consequence, the same airline is charging substantially more — something like 20% more — to fly out of Belfast rather than Dublin, why is that? Is it simply exploiting the lack of competition or is it pocketing, so to speak, the benefits that flow from the removal of the airport duty, or is there some other explanation? What monitoring will there be to make sure that it is, indeed, the consumer and not the airline companies that derive all the benefit from this?

I will be interested to hear what the Minister might have to say about that.

I thought that the explanatory document was a little sparse on the question of the £5 million potential cost to the block grant, in that it states:

"This block grant adjustment would be increased over time to reflect general growth in the economy but the precise mechanism for this has not yet been finalised."

There are two points arising from that. First, we are told that it is likely to be:

"in the region of £5 million per annum".

I do not quite get how the resulting Exchequer loss is £5 million, given what seems to be the number of seats that are available out of Belfast International on an annual basis — if they are all taken up — and the rate of airport duty. Maybe the Minister will explain that. Indeed, he may already have; I apologise for not being here for all of his introductory speech. How do we get to that £5 million? Is it satisfactory that, as we move forward, the explanatory memorandum is couched in terms of:

"the precise mechanism for this has not yet been finalised"?

Five million pounds is a modest amount that, my goodness, the Executive could make up with a few less photographs, a bit less hospitality and by dropping a spin doctor or two. Making a saving of £5 million would not be a great demand on the Executive. However, whereas it is a relatively modest amount, my deeper concern is whether it will shape the template if we have corporation tax devolved. Surely, there is read-over from how you calculate the impact of devolving airport duty to Stormont and the impact on the block grant of what would happen if you devolved corporation tax. Are there issues there that read across? If there are, is it satisfactory that they are left in this equivocal state of saying that matters have yet to be finalised? One suspects that, were we to be too generous on this particular Treasury reduction in the block grant on a certain basis, it would not be too long until the same argument would be used if we get to the point, which I, of course, hope that we do not get to, of transferring corporation tax. So, the template, I think, is important. And what is the detail of the template, and does it have a read-over to the corporation tax debate? Those are my observations; thank you very much.

Mr G Robinson: I am hopeful that such a move will be of great benefit to the people of Northern Ireland and its economy. Therefore, I support the motion and the accelerated passage of the Bill.

Air passenger duty is not payable on flights departing from airports in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, which means a 50% reduction for passengers in those isolated locations. Why can the same not apply to Northern Ireland? Here, we have only air or ferry connections to the rest of the UK and the rest of the world, so it is paramount that we minimise the costs involved in travelling to and from Northern Ireland. We are all aware of the Continental service from Belfast International Airport, which was threatened in recent months. Those links with the USA are a vital strand of our business and tourist future, and must be protected.

I am aware that the reduction in long-haul APD will come with a price tag for the Executive. However, I feel that a reduction in APD will be beneficial to our economy, especially as there are now airlines prepared to trial new services, as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment informed me recently. I believe that Lauda Air is to operate a service from April to June 2013 from Belfast International Airport. Such steps are welcome and progressive, and demonstrate the ongoing battle for jobs and passenger services that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment constantly pursues. The reduction of APD would surely only benefit that. I urge all Members to support the motion, as it can only bring positive results for Northern Ireland.

Mr Wilson: I thank all Members who took part in the debate, and also — as pointed out by the Member for North Down — the Members who absented themselves from the debate. I welcome the fact that all parties have welcomed the Bill. I am sure that there is one party that probably laments the Second Stage and will lament the passage of the Bill, because it will see it as contributing to the destruction of the world as carbon emissions are increased because we have done away with one of the vital environmental taxes that it believes should be imposed on the populace of not only Northern Ireland but the whole of the United Kingdom in the effort to ensure that we do not heat the world up through going on our holidays or flying in an aeroplane. But enough about Mr Agnew. He has kept himself out of the debate. Maybe I will provoke him to come to the debate on Consideration Stage so that we can debate the issue face to face, but at least it has had widespread support from —

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will be more than happy to give way. I hope that this is not a proxy for Mr Agnew.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, but perhaps you could clarify something. I am not sure whether you said "Consideration" or "incineration". *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: It was Consideration Stage. I hope that the Bill is not incinerated because I want to see it passed, and passed as quickly as possible; hence, the accelerated passage.

Members quite rightly pointed out the benefits of the Bill. We lobbied so hard because we believed that there were great benefits from having direct connections between Northern Ireland and New York. It was not primarily for the tourist trade but for the links that that gave for direct investment, for investors who were already here, investors who we are hoping to attract here and investors who were looking to expand here and needed to have direct flights for their senior management to come in and out of Northern Ireland.

4.30 pm

I believe that the cost of the measure will, as Mr Bradley pointed out, give us a great return. Of course, as with any of those economic models, it is difficult to put an exact figure on the benefits of additional tourism, additional investment opportunities, etc, but I think it is a measure that will more than pay for itself, and which, of course, is a very important part — if the Enterprise Minister was here she would explain why — of the economic strategy that we have for the future in Northern Ireland.

The Chairman and a number of other Members — Mr Bradley, Mrs Cochrane and Mr McGlone — spoke about the Committee's report and its desire to see the legislation be built on as part of a wider strategy to include a large number of other flights. That is something that we are currently looking at with DETI and DRD to see how we can commission work and what work can be done.

As I pointed out in my opening remarks, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is already in contact with airlines, and I think that she has made it plain that she is in contact with one Canadian airline. Given that, at one stage, 50,000 people every year flew to and from Canada from Northern Ireland, there is great potential for re-establishing such links, whether they be for families or for investment purposes.

There are immense benefits to be derived from having such links. If we are to grow our economy's export potential, the more links that we have, especially with those parts of the world in which there is economic expansion, the better. All the evidence shows that you dramatically increase your business with the part of the world with which you have direct transport links. That is why it will be important to pursue any advantage that the devolution of the tax gives the Assembly. We can then try to get additional flights as a result.

The Chairman mentioned private flights and their exemption. The main difficulty there is that private flights are registered by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). There were 2,708 private flights from Belfast International Airport in 2011. Their destination was not registered. The cost of collecting the information on where those flights were going to would have been quite high, because the measurement would have had to be a manual one. The reason that those flights were excluded was because of the high administration costs as a result of our not having a computerised system.

A number of Members spoke about increasing the scope of the legislation to include all flights. The arguments have been well rehearsed, and I do not want to go into them. The cost would be around £60 million, rising to £90 million. First, had we attempted to get full devolution, we would still be talking about APD, because I do not believe that the Government would have fast-tracked the changes. Had we sought full devolution, we would probably have lost the opportunity that we were most looking for, which was to keep Continental in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, I am not convinced that the costs incurred would have been less than the resultant benefits. Although we will of course undertake studies, the arguments have been put forward by a number of Members already, first to do with short-haul flights. Once you include short-haul flights, you are including all kinds of business and many people who may just be going on their holidays outside Northern Ireland. There would be no direct benefit to the Northern Ireland economy, yet we would be picking up the bill.

Most Members were measured in their remarks. They recognised that this is a balancing act and something that can be done — if we are going to do it — only if there is a very strong evidence base for doing so. The only Member who seems to think that we should do it and, indeed, who is unhappy that we did not include it in the Bill even without the evidence, is Mr McGlone. I was interested in his exchange with Mr Cree. I was disappointed that Mr

Cree did not rise to the bait. He sat and took on the chin a lecture in financial prudence and the proper approach to economic strategy from a member of the SDLP. Mr McGlone blithely waived aside the consideration of up to £90 million of expenditure, asked why it is not included in the Bill and said that he is disappointed that it is not included in the Bill without giving any indication of where the money will come from. That follows on from the SDLP's position last week, when it was quite happy to vote down the Welfare Reform Bill at a cost of £250 million in this session of the Assembly and with the potential loss of 1,300 jobs and the abandonment of the social fund next year.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will in a wee minute.

I do not think that we should take any lectures from the SDLP about the adequacy or inadequacy of this Bill on the basis that that party has a sound understanding of the economics behind what it is proposing. Quite clearly, it does not.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. I got rather nervous when the Minister was praising me at the beginning of the speech, as there is usually a sting in the tail on those occasions.

If the Minister had listened closely to what Mr McGlone was saying, he would have heard that he was proposing that there is potential in the Bill for the powers to be included but that that does not necessarily mean that they have to be used or used immediately. I pointed out in my speech — and Mr McGlone reiterated what I said — that there is a need for an evidence-based examination of the costs associated with the extension of this measure.

Mr Wilson: He was much stronger than that. He was much clearer that we should be doing the same for band A flights as we are doing for the other flights. In fact, he actually used the example of not being in competition with the Republic but removing the disparity that exists between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

If we are looking for evidence of the true intent of that inclusion in the Bill, then getting down to the same level as the Republic would mean that we would have a uniform rate across all flights of €3 or next to no tax. The Republic, unfortunately, was able to do it as a result of a £7,500 million bail out from the UK Government. When it got that money, it immediately used it to reduce the rate. Therefore, the Republic is using our money to do it. It is a case of us providing the Republic with the means to compete with us. Nevertheless, we have said — and, in fact, we said it in response to the Committee — that we will study what alternatives there might be.

Mr Cree asked about the extra cost involved. Most of the costs will be administrative, but there may well be some legal costs and costs for research if changes are made in the future. The important thing, which also brings in Mr Allister's point, is that any costs will have to be agreed between us and the HMRC. It is not a case of the HMRC saying, "Here are the costs that we are imposing on you." The agreement is that the costs have to be agreed between the two parties.

Mr Allister raised a number of issues, the first of which is that there is no clause or regulations varying the rate, and

that what the rate will be reduced to is simply stated on the face of the Bill. There are two simple reasons for that.

First, the clear intention of this power, and the only reason we took it, was not to allow us to vary the rate but to bring the rate down to zero and use that, as a number of Members have said, to try to entice other carriers to fly long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. So, it is not unusual for us to put the rate in the Bill. If, at some stage in the future, we are awash with flights flying in and out and Mr Agnew is tearing his hair out because of the number of aircraft flying in and out of Northern Ireland and the environmental impact of that, there may well be some case for trying to raise additional revenue. That would be a case of taking legislation through the Assembly in the same way as we have done today.

He also talked about who will benefit from the reduction and who has benefited from the rate reduction that is in place already. That issue has been raised before. Of course, as Mr Allister rightly pointed out, the rate has been reduced, and we have to pay for that. That was the concession that the Government made: to reduce the band-A rate and leave it to us, once the power was devolved, to reduce the rate to whatever level we wished.

He quoted two prices. I would be very cautious about looking at the cost of airline tickets at any one time. I am not one for ploughing through computers to find out flight rates — that is a bit beyond me — but I am well aware that at different times of the day you can get different prices because people tell me that. For example, at one time in the day you might get an airline ticket for half the price that you would get it at another time of the day. Even looking ahead, sometimes you can do that. So, the actual price and the price differential could vary, maybe even from the time that Mr Allister looked this morning to when he looks tonight.

However, and this might sound very harsh, this reduction was never intended or designed to bring down fares for passengers. It was a response to the airline indicating that it was losing money on the flight and that, if it did not find a way of reducing the costs, the flight would go. One way to reduce the costs was to take away the tax burden on the flights. If the company still decided that, given what it knew about passenger behaviour, it could impose the value of the tax but not have to pay the tax, and so increase its revenue or, if you want, reduce its costs, to keep the route viable, that is what would happen. Clearly, from the information that has been given today, and I understand that the flights are very well used, the commercial decision has been to, even with the tax reduction, keep the price at a certain level. That gives more revenue to the business, which keeps the route viable and operating in Northern Ireland.

That is a commercial decision — I will give way to Mr Allister on that in a moment or two — and no one would suggest that we should start regulating the fares that are set in a market and saying to airlines that their prices here must be commensurate with the prices that they charge from other airports. The whole point is that the airline had to have commercial freedom, and it has exercised its commercial freedom in the way in which he has suggested.

4.45 pm

Mr Allister: I follow what the Minister is saying, and I understand that the short-term purpose was to protect that particular route. However, surely, behind this legislation, there is also a long-term objective of increasing the passenger base, growing that base and making it more attractive and desirable for people to fly to and from Northern Ireland. Consumers also make commercial decisions, and, if the consumer is faced with the fact that he can fly to the United States for £80 cheaper by going 80 miles down the road, he is more likely to do it. Surely, we have to get to the point where pressure is applied through this legislation and otherwise to make the fares more attractive. It is the same operator flying to the same place but flying from two different locations: one in Dublin and one in Belfast, and charging 20% more out of Belfast. Surely that has to, ultimately, be addressed.

Mr Wilson: I do not think that that issue can be addressed by this Assembly through some form of price control.

That has to be a decision that the airline then makes on the basis of the information that it has about passenger behaviour and consumer choices. It may well be that there are other things that the airline has to decide to do to promote those flights. I suspect that, if numbers were to start to fall, the airline would have to adjust the prices that it charges to customers to maximise the revenue that it retains from the flight. Those remain to be commercial decisions. All that we have done is to aid the viability of the route by removing one of the big costs that the airline was experiencing on a year-to-year basis and which was contributing to the losses that it was making.

The Member is quite right that the whole point of this reduction is to find ways not only of growing the existing business but of attracting other business. I believe that one of the spin-off effects of this will be that it will make us more able to attract businesses to fly in and out of Northern Ireland. That competition in itself may well then bring about the kind of scenario that the Member has referred to. Knowing his economic philosophy, I suspect that he knows full well that that is the way to ensure that consumers get the best possible bargain, and that is through increasing the amount of competition on a particular route or from a particular airport so that people then have a choice.

He and a number of other Members raised the issue of the £5 million cost of devolving the power and the fact that it is open-ended. He asked what the implications were because, as the explanatory notes say, some issues need to be resolved.

There are two points on that. First, as I said to Mr Cree, the final cost and any additional costs have to be agreed between us and the Treasury. There is a crossover between this debate and the debate on corporation tax in that the mechanism by which the change in costs over the years are measured has not yet been decided. We have a number of options with corporation tax, and that is one of the things that we will want to talk to Treasury Ministers about on Thursday. Equally, of course, there will be some crossover between that and the issue of air passenger duty. However, we understand that the £5 million figure is likely to be the upper limit of that.

Any final decision, of course, will have to be agreed between us and HMRC, and any increase in the figure over

the years as a result of changes and escalators will, again, be agreed. I do not want to go into now the various models and mechanisms that have been talked about in relation to corporation tax, but there will be some implications. If and when we agree the mechanism for the escalation or the change of costs over time with corporation tax, a read-across will be brought to air passenger duty.

I hope that I have dealt with most of the points that Members have raised. I thank Members for their contribution to the debate and ask them to support to the Second Stage of this important Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill [NIA 15/11-15] be agreed.

Committee Business

Standing Order 59

Mr Speaker: The House will know that such debates are not time-limited.

Mr Clarke (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 59 and insert

"59. Assembly and Executive Review Committee

(1) There shall be a standing committee of the Assembly to be known as the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

(2) The committee may -

(a) exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;

(b) report from time to time to the Assembly and the Executive Committee.

(3) The committee shall consider -

(a) such matters relating to the operation of the provisions of Parts 3 and 4 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as enable it to make the report referred to in section 29A(3) of that Act; and

(b) such other matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive Committee as may be referred to it by the Assembly."

On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to amend Standing Orders to the House today.

Standing Order 59 relates to the powers and functions of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC), and paragraphs (3) and (5) specifically relate to the Committee's consideration of sections 16A to 16C of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Last year, the AERC completed its review of the operation of sections 16A to 16C of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and the Committee report was subsequently debated by the Assembly. As the duties placed upon the AERC by Standing Order 59(3) and 59(5) have been discharged, those paragraphs are spent and can be deleted. This is a very straightforward amendment to Standing Orders, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 59 and insert

"59. Assembly and Executive Review Committee

(1) There shall be a standing committee of the Assembly to be known as the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

(2) The committee may -

(a) exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;

(b) report from time to time to the Assembly and the Executive Committee.

(3) *The committee shall consider -*

(a) *such matters relating to the operation of the provisions of Parts 3 and 4 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as enable it to make the report referred to in section 29A(3) of that Act; and*

(b) *such other matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive Committee as may be referred to it by the Assembly."*

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, I remind Members that they have a general duty to behave responsibly and to ensure that nothing they say may prejudice any future proceedings that may be taken on these matters.

Mr Humphrey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that it is 40 years since the first abduction of what would become known as "the disappeared" occurred; acknowledges that, to date, seven families have been denied the right to bury loved ones because of the actions of republican paramilitaries who abducted, murdered and hid the victims' remains; commends the dignified perseverance of the families and the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR); pledges its support to those families in their ongoing fight for justice; and calls on all those with information to co-operate fully with the ICLVR so that this harrowing chapter of our history can be closed.

I move the motion on behalf of my colleague and I and my party. The issue of the disappeared was discussed during the previous Assembly session in October 2010 and, indeed, earlier in that mandate. It could be said that there is a distinct feeling of déjà vu about today's debate. However, that is not to say that it is a waste of time; far from it. The issue is a fundamental one, but words are simply not enough, and actions are now needed. Yesterday, a journalist asked me what is the point in raising the issue again. The answer is very simple: the issue needs to be continually raised until it is resolved and the remains of those abducted, murdered and dumped are returned to their loving families.

The motion in 2010, like the one that we are now debating, called on those who had knowledge of the location of the victims' remains to bring that information in confidence to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains without further delay. Immediate action and not words is the key. It is absolutely vital that those who have any information — and I stress, any information — should come forward without any further delay. Surely, anyone with a shred of compassion who knows something about any of the missing victims, would want to provide information which will identify the locations of their remains and bring some long overdue comfort and closure to the long-suffering and grieving families.

Just a short time after the debate in this Chamber in October 2010, the remains of Peter Wilson were found at Waterfoot in County Antrim. He was 21 when he was murdered, and he had learning difficulties and the intellect of a child of 13 or 14 years of age. Since then, progress, which was always painfully slow, seems to have come to a complete halt. Although 12 bodies have been found, and some closure given to those grieving families, seven victims remain to be found. That represents seven families still waiting to give their loved ones a proper funeral, still

living a nightmare that has gone on for decades, in some cases for 40 years. Some of the members of these families have passed away without ever knowing or finding out what happened to their loved ones.

The 19 disappeared were all very different people, with different backgrounds, outlooks and lifestyles. Jean McConville was a mother whose crime, it seems, was simply to offer comfort to a dying soldier. Charlie Armstrong was an innocent man who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Columba McVeigh, whose body is yet to be found, was 17 when he died, or, I should say, was murdered. His mother worked tirelessly for the recovery of his remains until her death in 2007. She went to her own grave without knowing what had happened to her son and without having been given that peace of mind.

I note that, only last month, the digging to try to find that body started. That work could continue for 10 to 12 weeks and I hope that they are successful in locating his remains. Captain Robert Nairac, whose body has never been found, was a soldier in the army doing his job in the battle against terrorism.

I could go on, for each victim's story is unique to them and all of them are tragic. No matter who they were, or what they were, there is absolutely no justification for whatever happened to them, for the illegal abduction and the murder of any of them. Such a situation is not acceptable, particularly in a democracy.

I strongly suspect that there are some Members of this House who might have a fair idea about some of these outstanding cases and know where the bodies are buried. Or, if they do not know personally, I believe that some of them will know people who will know and who can provide vital information to the authorities on this side of the border or in the Irish Republic.

We hear much talk of moving on, but how can the families of the disappeared move on? If we are to move forward in Northern Ireland, it is crucial that everyone, and I mean everyone, is honest and open about the past. I do not believe that we need a truth commission. I believe that we simply need people to tell the truth. Sadly, it seems to me that the Members opposite are only interested in highlighting the perceived crimes of our national Government. They are not so keen to have the spotlight shone on their past or on that of their friends. Indeed, I often wonder just to what extent Sinn Féin has really moved forward.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: Yes.

Mr A Maginness: The Member referred to people telling the truth and that, in his opinion, one does not need a truth commission. However, surely, one needs some body that can receive the truth that the Member seeks to establish. Whether you call it a "truth commission" or not, some body should be set up to receive it.

Mr Humphrey: I hear what the Member says and I absolutely understand that he says it with some authority and dignity. However, if people have information, it should be passed on immediately, without having to set up a commission to do so.

If I may continue, I often wonder whether Sinn Féin has really moved forward. Take for example the treatment of

my party colleague Councillor Sammy Brush on Monday of last week in Dungannon and South Tyrone Council. Councillor Brush survived an IRA assassination attempt, for which Mr Gerry McGeough was found guilty and imprisoned.

Last week, Councillor Brush had to endure a motion proposed in the council chamber by Sinn Féin and, very sadly, supported by the SDLP calling for that same Mr McGeough — the man who tried to murder him — and fellow terrorists, including Marian Price, to be released from prison. Such actions are an affront to decency and a studied insult to the victims of republican terrorism, including the disappeared. I quote that example simply as a reminder that we have a long way to go in Northern Ireland. Many of the people I represent are very sceptical about Sinn Féin and about its sincerity about resolving the past. Information that will identify the location of victims remains vital but so too is information that might cast light on the decisions that led to each person being abducted, murdered and dumped.

There is an old Scottish saying that confession is good for the soul, but the full saying is, "Open confession is good for the soul". It is time for open, honest and forthright confessions from some key people. Justice demands it; common decency demands it; grieving families demand it; and the blood of the 19 murdered people known as "the disappeared" demands it. It is time for people to do the decent thing. It is time for people to do the right thing. It is time to be humane. It is time to be Christian. It is time to allow those families to end what has been a nightmare, to bury their loved ones and to bring some closure to a seemingly unending chapter of evil in their lives.

5.00 pm

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In supporting the motion, I thank our colleagues for tabling it for discussion. We have, of course, debated the issue before, as the Member said. What characterises the issue is not the obvious differences in perspective, understanding or history, although I was struck by the irony that many of the issues that were addressed to my side apply equally to others. We all have to deal with issues arising from the past. The moot point is around truth recovery, and if, this far removed from the Good Friday Agreement, we have made no progress on that issue, that in itself is the strongest possible argument for taking initiatives and coming up with suggestions for how we address that. My party has made concrete and specific proposals about an international and independent truth recovery commission. Other parties who think that they have better ideas should at least attempt to bring them forward for consideration.

The issue that characterises this discussion, when we have it and when we revisit it, is that there is agreement across all the party ranks. That is not to ignore the fact that we will repeat many of the points already made each time we discuss it. There is agreement that there is a requirement on those who have information, no matter how little, to make it available to the families or to the commission, so that the continued agony of the families of the disappeared can be alleviated.

It may be helpful to remind ourselves of the stated IRA position on this tragic matter, and I do this simply to help the discussion. In April 1999, the IRA issued a statement

accepting responsibility for the death of a number of people it had killed and secretly buried. At that time, it outlined its position and its commitment to co-operation with the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. The IRA stated:

"Our intention has been to do all within our power to rectify the injustice, for which we accept full responsibility, and to alleviate the suffering of the families. We are sorry that this has taken so long to resolve and for the prolonged anguish caused to the families."

Since then, republicans have worked closely with the commission for the recovery of the disappeared in attempting to locate the remains so as to make it possible to arrange family burials.

Mr Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, if you do not mind.

I commend and support all the families, who have suffered a grievous injustice and have campaigned with dignity for many years to locate the remains of their loved ones. I thank everyone who has helped the families and worked with them, including the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, the PSNI, an Garda Síochána and the experts and staff who have been brought in to assist that work. They deserve our full support.

For its part, the IRA apologised for the grief it caused. It acknowledged that its intention in working closely with the special forensic investigating team has been to rectify this injustice. It has accepted full responsibility for its actions. I know that that will not cut much ice on the Benches opposite, but I also know that, despite the fact that it will not be any great consolation to the families of those involved, it addresses their very sincere desire to arrange a Christian burial for their loved ones. Clearly, opinions in the House matter. Differences matter. I firmly believe that the IRA has provided full disclosure of all the information available to it and that republicans —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, if you do not mind.

Republicans will continue to work diligently on this important issue. That was recognised some time ago by the forensic science investigative consultant, Geoff Knupfer, who worked for the independent commission. He said:

"in a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation they are trying to help in every way they can."

He went on to say:

"I am absolutely convinced that they are doing everything they can to assist. The support we have had from them has been absolutely 100% from day one."

Let me make it clear that none of this minimises the IRA's responsibility for the suffering endured with great dignity by the families. However, we have to acknowledge that, as the person who is directly involved —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am sorry, but I think I have made it clear that I am not giving way.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: When reviewing the issues, all of us should work together rather than attempt to score points off each other. The key issue here is the families and what we can all do, using all our influence, to help them in their suffering.

Mr Hussey: Between 1972 and 1985, the IRA had a policy, sanctioned by its army council, of keeping the bodies of some of its victims. I say that the policy was sanctioned by the IRA army council because there is no way that the IRA, which was such a ruthless machine, would have acted without the authority of its army council. The fact that it went on for so long is also an indication that it had the approval of the army council. The fact that the IRA hid human remains from families over the period clearly indicates that that was part of the policy of the IRA. Why was it the policy of the IRA? What was to be gained by the retention of human remains?

For families, there was always the hope that their loved one would come home. Many mothers and fathers went to their grave waiting for their son to return home. I am sure that the McConville family held the hope in their hearts that their mother might one day come home, even though they knew deep down that that day would never come. Someone, at some stage, decided that those families had to suffer not only the loss of their loved one but the day to day thought that their loved one may return. We remember all those victims and their families today. It is appropriate, as we approach remembrance week, that I quote from the ode, 'For the Fallen':

"At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them."

That is what the families had to endure. From sunset to dawn, thoughts of their loved one were constantly in their hearts, and, from dawn to sunset, the hope was always that there would be a knock at the door.

The IRA army council consisted — some would contend still consists — of political and military representatives: members of the Provisional IRA and their political masters. So, some politicians, some of whom may be sitting on these Benches and some of whom have sat on these Benches, played a part in allowing this ghoulish scenario to develop. Those who murdered those citizens, those who helped detain them and those who buried them all have a heavy burden on their soul. I hope that every one of those individuals is still alive today and that the souls of the departed haunt them for every day they have left on this earth because of the callousness of their actions.

If this was an act of the security forces, we would have squeals from the far side of the House for an inquiry and demands for justice and for apologies from Her Majesty the Queen and the Prime Minister. Rightly so. We cannot have an inquiry into these acts, because those who did them are in the shadows. They do not want the world to see them in the sunshine of day.

The families of the disappeared would like to see the mortal remains of their loved ones given a Christian burial. They would like to see their brothers buried beside mothers who cried lakes of tears for their lost sons. Columba McVeigh's mother Vera, who died in 2007 aged 82 and was refused the right to see her son laid to rest

before she herself passed away, is a case in point. Fathers lost sons, but they could not give them the burial rites their church would demand to allow their sons to rest in peace. The families would like a place they can visit to remember their loved ones as if they were still here. For many of those families, the world stopped turning the day their loved ones were taken. Nothing — absolutely nothing — justified the retention of those bodies. Throughout the Troubles, we saw bodies shattered by acts of terror. In some cases, remains were almost so badly mutilated that they could not be identified. However, remains were given a Christian burial. Why did the IRA not want those bodies to be seen? What act of barbarity did they carry out that they wanted it hidden from public view? To many mothers who have lost a son, the final kiss on the forehead is enough to let them know that their child is resting in peace. What right do these cowards have to take that away from a loving mother?

The motion states that seven families have been denied the right to bury a loved one because of the actions of republican paramilitaries, who abducted and murdered the victims and hid their remains. The seven families are those of Kevin McKee, who has been missing since 1972; Columba McVeigh, a 17-year-old missing since 1975; Brendan Megraw, missing since 1978; Seamus Wright, missing since 1972; Seamus Ruddy, missing since 1985; Joe Lynskey, missing since 1972; and Captain Robert Nairac, who has been missing since 1977.

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them."

We must remember them, and we must, as the motion proposes, commend the dignified perseverance of the families. Those who have allowed this to go on for up to 40 years must look into their own heart and see the hurt and pain they have caused the families to endure.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Hussey: No one has the right to play God, least of all republican terrorists. What cause can justify those actions? If, to be a nation once again, this is the type of sanctioned behaviour Sinn Féin can support, their nation is not one fit for decent people to inhabit.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Hussey: I support the motion.

Mr Eastwood: I will begin by acknowledging the tremendous loss suffered by the families of the people who were brutally murdered and whose bodies were disappeared. I offer my sympathies to them and to all those still suffering today as a result of our tragic past. When I think of the 16 disappeared and the denial of their families' right to a Christian burial, I always think of a quote from Patrick Pearse. Giving the oration at O'Donovan Rossa's funeral, he said:

"The fools, the fools ... while Ireland holds these graves".

He was one of the fathers of Irish republicanism signifying the importance of the place of rest in Irish culture and Irish republicanism. It is a demonstration of just how much contempt the Provisional IRA demonstrated towards the

Irish people that they strayed from the basic dignity of a grave. They carried out a deliberate policy of disappearing people, people whom they had taken it upon themselves to murder and, in many cases, torture.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: I will.

Mr Clarke: I wonder will the Member draw a parallel between that and the person whose coffin he carried, who was also a terrorist and a murderer. The people that individual may have murdered may have got a Christian burial, but is it still acceptable for him to have murdered people in cold blood?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Eastwood: First of all, the Member used very colourful language such as "murder". I do not think that there was ever any charge or conviction around that, but the point that I want to make is that each and every one of us has a duty to try to move forward. Each and every one of us has a duty, just like the members of your party who sit in the Executive with former paramilitaries, as representatives of our communities to reach across and try to build friendships and relationships across any political divide. I do not have to apologise one bit for any friendship I have or for any hard and difficult conversations I had with somebody who had put their past long behind them and had given as much — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Members should not debate across the Chamber.

Mr Eastwood: — and given as much to the peace process in terms of moving forward as many other famous people who now sit in the Executive of this House and in other Parliaments. I do not need to explain my actions or those of my party, which has supported the peace process from the very beginning. My party is not only non-violent but has been against violence from its inception. I have stood at the forefront against dissident republicans in the city of Derry every time they have attacked our city and people. I do not have anything to apologise to you for.

5.15 pm

I will move on. I do not want to continue down the road of using the past as a stick to beat political opponents; we are all much too fond of that in here. I want to follow the lead of the families of the disappeared and call for information on the whereabouts of their loved ones. That is what they seek. They seek not revenge but information. It is essential that anyone who has any information comes forward to the relevant authorities or to the commission set up to try to find the remaining seven victims. There is no reason in the world why that information cannot come forward. The people who have refused to give information need to come forward, and the people who have given some information need to give more. I make a direct appeal to them to please come forward to allow the remaining families to give their loved one the dignity of a Christian burial. All those families ask for is information. They are entitled to ask for much more, but all they want is to give their loved one a proper Christian burial, which is so important in our culture and community.

Mr A Maginness: Mr McLaughlin talked about the injustice visited on the families. He said that the IRA had

apologised and that his party accepted that apology. Is that apology sufficient, in so far as he did not identify what that injustice was, whether it was the murder of these people or the disappearance and hiding away of their bodies?

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for his intervention. I cannot speak for Mr McLaughlin, but, what I will say is that I hope that he was talking about the murder and the disappearance.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: I will, surely.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I make it clear that I was quoting directly from the IRA statement. I quoted the IRA statement to the House, and I made it clear that, in that statement, the IRA apologised for the injustice done to the families. I do not have the authority to take that any further.

I would not have minded the opportunity to mention another victim, Lisa Dorrian, whose remains have never been discovered but whose name seems to have dropped off the list. I hope that you will take the opportunity that I did not have to mention that.

Mr Eastwood: I will gladly take that opportunity. Many people were murdered, and quite a few were disappeared. Whether it was a murder or a disappearance —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Eastwood: — in my view, they are all crimes and all injustices. I wanted to talk a little more about the need for the Assembly to get to grips with our past —

Mr Speaker: Time is gone.

Mr Eastwood: — and to deal with the difficult issues that surround it. We will continue to have such debates in the House unless we properly grasp the issues of our past.

Mr Lyttle: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion and, most importantly, the families of all the disappeared. It is genuinely very difficult to comprehend the scale of the heartbreak and trauma that the families of the disappeared have been forced to endure over what, for some, has been a lifetime.

I can only pay tribute, as the motion does, to the dignified and courageous perseverance of the victims' families in locating the remains of their loved ones, and the Alliance Party and I fully support their campaign. The families have been denied the most basic human dignity of being able to bury their loved one. They have had no opportunity to choose a final resting place at which they can mourn and remember. Some families have even had to endure malicious and false accounts of their loved one's activities. The story of each individual disappeared person highlights the sheer inhumanity and brutality of the violence in Northern Ireland. The forcible removal of people from their family and their murder and burial in an unknown location must be among the worst human rights abuses imaginable and an indelible evil in the history of this community. Therefore, I acknowledge the work done by organisations to support victims and survivors — the WAVE Trauma Centre, for example, is a pillar of support for many families — and I recognise the contribution that support groups and organisations have made to help families to deal with such devastating trauma and loss.

I echo the recognition of the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. It has worked tirelessly and sensitively with families in the most difficult of circumstances. Its work has been complex and requires the highest quality of technology and expertise. The dedication required from the engineers, archaeologists, surveyors and other professionals who deal with each case is not to be underestimated. Most importantly, as stated in the motion, there is an obligation on anyone with any information that will help the work of that body to make it available without delay. There is absolutely no impediment to people providing information to the commission. The legislation that created the commission ensured that any information found by the commission is not admissible. There are no excuses, and there is nothing to be gained by withholding vital information that will afford families a dignified burial of their loved ones. I support the renewed call of the Assembly for anyone who may have been reluctant to provide such information to do so, before it is too late.

I also appeal to anyone with information about the disappearance of Lisa Dorrian to come forward. Although her disappearance is not covered by the terms of the legislation relating to the disappeared, the Dorrian family has endured the same torment. They have been unable to give Lisa a dignified burial and have many unanswered questions about what happened to their daughter and sister. There are people who know what happened to Lisa, and I appeal to them to come forward with any information on her disappearance.

This is a very personal issue for the families of the disappeared, but it is part of the wider issue of how we deal with the legacy of our past in Northern Ireland. The approach to date has, regrettably, been painfully piecemeal. The Alliance Party has consistently held that the legacy of our recent past is too important and affects too many people to be dealt with in that way. My party has called on numerous occasions for the British and Irish Governments to convene talks with all parties on how to deal with the legacy of the past in a comprehensive manner. To date, they have failed to respond to that duty.

As the motion states, the families of the disappeared and all the victims and survivors in this community deserve much better. I hope that we start taking action that delivers what they deserve.

Mr G Robinson: All of us have lost relatives and friends and have had the opportunity to attend a dignified funeral as a mark of respect to the deceased. It is now 40 years since the first of the disappeared was abducted and, doubtless, killed by cowards. The grieving families have been denied the right of laying their loved one to rest with dignity, which every family deserves. It is only right that the families that have suffered for so long have that situation reversed and are able to bid a dignified farewell to their relative. The hiding of remains in peat bogs or sand dunes shows the utter contempt for the human beings who were killed by the person or persons guilty of the barbaric and cruel murder of a loved family member.

I ask the perpetrators to do the honourable thing and give the families their relatives back so that the torture can be ended and a dignified closure given to the currently disappeared. I do not care how information about the location of the bodies is passed on, but it must be given to the relevant authorities so that that part of Northern

Ireland's violent past can be eradicated and the culprits made to face the full rigours of the law.

Many people talk of human rights these days, but what about the human rights of the families of the disappeared? They have suffered immeasurable distress and anguish since losing their relatives, but that, seemingly, is overlooked. I want to see the suffering of those families ended, and I call on the terrorists who carried out these vile deeds to pass on the information on the location of the victims' remains.

Perhaps, the party opposite, past or present, could encourage those who are responsible, if they are known, to give the vital information that is needed to locate the remaining seven bodies that are still to be located. I hope that the Boston College tapes may reveal clues to end that sorry situation. Hopefully, the Members opposite will not block any moves to obtain that information. I support the motion.

Mr Nesbitt: We have been here before, as some Members have noted. I have no difficulty revisiting the issue. The difficulty is that we have to revisit the issue because seven families still await the right to bury their loved ones. Today, that is 40 years on — 40 long years.

To give that some context, I would like to turn to another incident from just 23 years ago, which made headlines recently in another part of the kingdom — the Hillsborough disaster, when 96 football fans died in a crush at the Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield. It took their families 23 years to get the truth. That seems like a long time to me, but it is nothing compared with the 40 years for the families of the disappeared.

At the weekend, a former Lord Chancellor made some interesting comments about Hillsborough. Charlie Falconer said:

"96 people died in a disaster to which the police very substantially contributed. For 23 years, the police told lies about what had happened and the families... felt utterly obliged to protect the reputations of those whom they loved who had died ... Those 23 years of pain and suffering should not lead to the situation where people say it's too late and the families don't get justice."

He went on to talk about family members:

"one ... whose son died in the disaster, said 'My other children were very young at the time my son died. They grew up during those 23 years and I never noticed them growing up. I do not know what happened.' Another person, who is a mother, said that she was 42 when her loved ones died. She is now 65, and she still feels like she's 42. Those 23 years have been lost. And the idea that they should not get justice after 23 years is an utter affront to our society."

I can do no better than to echo the words of the former Lord Chancellor when summing up the positions of the families who still seek the truth about their loved ones: it is an utter affront to our society.

I am sure that the families of the disappeared feel that their lives have whizzed past in the same way as the families who lost loved ones at Hillsborough do. How can the Members opposite therefore seek to persuade me that my future is best served by adopting Irish republican values?

In an important sense, Hillsborough bears no relation to the disappeared. What happened on 15 April 1989 was a mistake. The police made a mistake. On the day, it caused death on a scale well beyond that of any single incident in the sorry history of our Troubles. Ninety-six people died; treble our worst single incident. However, it was a mistake. They did not set out with that intent. They did not wake up in the morning having decided that, later in the day, innocent people should die. It was not a policy; it was a mistake, albeit of mammoth proportions. The evil was in how they reacted to what happened; the cover-up, the briefings to the media, the blackening of reputations and the justification of the unjustifiable. Does that ring a bell with the Members opposite? The blackening of names like Jean McConville's?

The last time that the Assembly debated this, Mr McLaughlin made interesting comments about how the disappeared came about. On 16 April, in this Chamber, he said:

"I support the right of the families to have redress after so many years of injustice piled on injustice. The policy was wrong then and it is wrong now. ... Anyone who studies the history of conflict in this country will know that it was a practice or policy that emerged... very early in the previous century... It was a practice or policy that was carried forward." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 74, p16, col 1]

A policy, Mr Speaker; not random acts by madmen or psychopaths, but policy. Some republicans sat down to discuss what to do about people whom they considered to be a problem. They came up with a policy — to abduct the individuals in question; maybe torture them; then kill them and bury their bodies and pretend that nothing happened — deny friends and family, through a policy.

5.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the same policy was used by fascist military dictatorships in Latin America? That is, in fact, where the term "disappeared" came from. People were taken away from their families and murdered, and their remains were buried and, in many cases, were never to be recovered.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for the intervention. I could not agree more that the provenance of the policy is South America. It shows absolutely no regard for our shared humanity, which I hear preached to us — "their unionist brothers" — by republicans on a daily basis, yet, with their own nationalist brothers and sisters, they were prepared to sit down to devise a policy of abduction, torture and murder and the denial of the Christian right to a burial. And yet those same people think that they know best for me; they think that they have my best interests at heart and the best interests of my family. When I think of people who can formulate a policy to abduct, torture and murder —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has almost gone.

Mr Nesbitt: — I feel physically sick. I support the motion.

Lord Morrow: It will not come as a surprise to anyone that I support the motion. We have discussed this issue on several occasions, and rightly so. I suspect that we will debate it again in the not-too-distant future. It is right that

we should do that, because this is a very emotive issue. It is an issue that has to be dealt with. It is an issue that is not going to go away, and it is an issue that, to date, Sinn Féin, in particular, and the IRA have failed to grapple with.

When we look at some of the victims and the circumstances that prevail around them, we can see that it is quite horrendous. Some of them have been mentioned in name this evening, not least Jean McConville, a mother of a very large family. She was abducted from those children, young and all as they were. She was murdered and taken into another country, where her family did not have access to her.

I want to deal for a moment or two with some of the things that Mitchel McLaughlin and the SDLP said. Quite frankly, some of the stuff that we have heard today is nothing short of hypocritical. Mitchel McLaughlin said that the IRA is quite prepared to deal with this subject. I want to ask him this, then: who is holding it back? It has had umpteen opportunities to put its best foot forward on this one, but, to date, it has failed to do so. So, why have we not heard from it?

As was referred to by my colleague William Humphrey in his contribution, a challenge was made that Lisa Dorrian has been forgotten about. If you take a look at what Mr Humphrey said, you will, I think, see that he said that there are 17 victims for whom we are still waiting for a resolution and whose bodies have still to be found.

One of those 17 is Lisa Dorrian. She has not fallen off our list; she is not one of the forgotten victims. Let me say this quite categorically: we in the DUP unreservedly — with no ifs, ands or buts — condemn outright what happened to Lisa Dorrian. I want to make it quite clear that, if the day should come when the perpetrators are brought before the courts of this land and are convicted and put behind prison bars, this party will not line up with any other party to demand their release, as happened in Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council just a week ago, when the SDLP and Sinn Féin came together to demand the release of someone by the name of McGeough who has been convicted by due process of the attempted murder of a colleague of mine and many of us here, Sammy Brush.

The SDLP needs to stand up tall on these things. It is great at condemnation; it can talk the talk, but it will not walk the walk. It is time for the SDLP to stand up and be counted. We know where Sinn Féin is. That party is in denial, in perpetuity. It is not going to come clean on this issue; not now, not next year and not 10 years down the road. What is the SDLP going to do? Is it going to continue to row in behind Sinn Féin, as it did in Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council just a week ago and say, "Yes; on this one, Sinn Féin is right"? Is it going to say that those who attempted to murder Sammy Brush should be released back on to our streets? Such hypocrites. Such hypocrisy is unbelievable.

In an intervention when Mr Nesbitt was speaking, Mr Bradley made the point that what was happening was nothing short of fascism. How right he is. I ask Mr Bradley directly: are you going to stand up on this issue or are you just going to hide behind rhetoric all the time, condemn it and say that it should not happen? When it comes to being counted on this important issue, you are not prepared to lead your party forward. This is a real challenge for the SDLP and its leadership. That party has to stop hiding

behind the backs of Sinn Féin. If Sinn Féin, in this great debate —

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. The SDLP is not going to take any lectures from Lord Morrow. Since its foundation, the SDLP has a proud record of standing against violence and murder, and many of its members were murdered and subjected to violence. We have never hung on to the coat-tails of any other party —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr D Bradley: — or any paramilitary group or pseudo-paramilitary group.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have short interventions. The Member has a minute added to his time.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I heard what Mr Bradley said, and I can understand why he gets annoyed. I can understand why, when we challenge SDLP Members directly on those issues, we get under their skin. You know, if you want us to get out from under your skin, you have to, as I said earlier, stand tall on those issues. Unfortunately, you are perceived to be in the pockets of Sinn Féin on issues like that.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker. How can unionists or anybody else who looks at that say that what happened to Sammy Brush was acceptable, as —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Lord Morrow: — the SDLP and Sinn Féin did at that recent council meeting?

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo faoi na daoine a sciobadh ar shiúl óna dteaghlaigh, a dúnmharaíodh agus ar fágadh a gcoirp gan tásc ná tuairisc — cuid acu, fiú, go dtí an lá inniu. I am happy to support the motion on the disappeared, who were taken away from their families, murdered and buried, and whose families, in many cases, have been waiting decades for the return of their remains.

I do not want to turn this into a political wrangle, as Lord Morrow has attempted to do. With the support of my party, I tabled two previous motions in the Assembly on this issue, and I was minded to do so again. So, I am grateful to Mr Humphrey and Ms Bradley for having tabled the motion.

What happened to the disappeared and their families is something that, if I were one of those family members, I would be extremely angry about. I would probably seek revenge, and I would seek prosecution.

I have worked with the families of the disappeared in my constituency over a number of years, and I have got to know them. I only have the greatest admiration for those families for the way in which they have approached the issue, and for their forbearance, understanding and willingness to wait. The families do not ask for revenge or prosecution, and they do not ask why or how. They do not even ask for the truth, which is something that they are richly entitled to. All they ask for is information to help to locate the remains of their loved ones. That, at least, is something they are entitled to, and it is something that I hope they will get.

Some of them have had that information, but others still await it. Information is all important in these circumstances, as other Members have said. It is time to lift the omertà; it is time to stop thinking, "whatever you say, say nothing". It is time for those who have said nothing and those who have not said enough to come forward with that vital information.

Sixteen people were disappeared during the Troubles — 17 if we count Lisa Dorrian. To date, the remains of nine victims have been recovered: Jean McConville; Peter Wilson; Eamon Molloy; John McClory; Brian McKinney; Gerry Evans; Danny McIlhone; Charlie Armstrong; and Eugene Simons. There are seven others whose remains have yet to be recovered: Joe Lynskey; Seamus Wright; Kevin McKee; Columba McVeigh; Robert Nairac; Seamus Ruddy; and Brendan Megraw.

There are strong indications that the remains of Brendan Megraw may be buried in Oristown bog in County Meath. More accurate information may help to locate his remains. Kevin McKee and Seamus Wright may be buried near Wilkinstown in County Meath; likewise, more information is needed to help to locate the remains. Seamus Ruddy's disappearance is different in so far as his remains are believed to be outside the city of Paris in France. Once again, it would help if the two Governments, along with the French Government, intensified an information campaign in France to help to jog the memories of local people who may have seen or heard something.

Every piece of information, no matter how small, is of value. People from this part of the country and from the Republic were involved in all the disappearances; they are the people who have vital information in most cases.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr D Bradley: They are the people who can bring the suffering of the families to an end. The key word, as I said, is information, and I appeal to all those who have information, or who can help to get information, to do so without delay.

Mr Elliott: This is an emotive issue, and it has come before the House on a number of occasions. I cannot think of a more traumatic situation for any family to be in than to have their loved one murdered and have no resting place to visit. I suggest that all of us here today, as far as reasonably possible and without diminishing any of the families involved, should try to put ourselves in the position of those families. Just think what it would be like not to be able to visit the place where your loved one should be resting, whether on their birthday or Christmas or at any time you feel you should be there. Not only is that the situation those families are in, but we must also think what those people have gone through for years; not just at the time of the disappearance, not just at the time that it was recognised and accepted that that family member had been murdered and disappeared and that their remains were buried somewhere that they do not know.

I hope that you are still trying to put yourselves in the position of those families. I know that it is not a position that I would like to be in. Nothing I could suggest is more degrading. I can think of nothing more brutal, more lacking in compassion and more unchristian than having to think of that or to be in those families' position.

5.45 pm

Today, I have listened to the blame game and to people trying to defend themselves, but two groups of people are key to the situation and to the debate. The first is the families, about whom I have talked. We must pay tribute to those families for the dignity with which they have endured a process that has lasted up to 40 years. I sometimes question how they have kept their cool and their dignity. I think that it would be very difficult for me and many in the House to do the same.

The second group of people who are key to the debate are those responsible for the murders and disappearances. In the previous debate on this subject, I said that I often wondered whether there was a better title for those people than "the disappeared". I do not think that anyone has come up with one. I think that to call them the disappeared is almost degrading in itself. However, whether or not they are in this Chamber, those who created those families' heartache and hardship should hang their heads in shame. They have opportunities to make some redress, to come forward and give information. Only those individuals and the group that was intent on carrying out those murders, taking away those people and burying their remains know why they will not produce evidence and information that would reduce the heartache and suffering and, perhaps, bring a degree of closure for the families.

I appeal to those who carried out the murders: whether it is you or your representatives sitting in this Chamber, you have got to this point in government, and it is time to act like you are people who have some compassion and respect for the wider community, and most of those are people who you would call your fellow citizens and countrymen. Whether they are Irish or —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost at an end.

Mr Elliott: — Ulstermen and women, now is the time, folks, to come forward, give that information and help those families.

Mr Attwood: To pick up on Mr Elliott's last comment; he said that now is the time to come forward to speak up and give information. In my view, as this phase of politics continues — the phase defined by devolution, stability and a united stand against terror — the next phase must be defined by truth and accountability about the past. I make that point because, if we have achieved stability, devolution and a united stand against terror, it came at a high price and after too long.

To borrow Mr Elliott's phrase; is now not the time and the place to ensure that truth and accountability around the past define the next phase of politics? I make that point because, frankly, I am anxious that the next phase of politics will be about anything but truth and accountability. It will actually be about mechanisms defined by others to avoid truth and accountability, under the guise of saying more about the past than has previously been the case.

Looking at the narrative at the moment and suggestions about to how to deal with the truth and the issues of the past, including truth and accountability, many contributions to date have been defined as mechanisms to avoid answering the hard questions, facing up to the truth and accepting full accountability for what happened during the years of terror. As a consequence, we are in a very vulnerable and risky place, where, if further efforts are not

taken forward at senior political level — Mr Lyttle and Mr Nesbitt touched on it — this emerging phase of politics will not be materially different from the past when it comes to truth and accountability.

For that reason, I want to put down some markers on behalf of the SDLP about how we should take forward the debate. First, it must be defined by a comprehensive truth and accountability process. The various mechanisms and interventions around truth and accountability, including proposals for dealing with the issue of the disappeared, travel part of the path, but do not travel it totally.

We now have to define a comprehensive truth and accountability process that measures up to the three standards of being comprehensive, truthful and accountable. In my view, that responsibility at this time falls to all those who have leadership consistent with those themes. In my view, the Irish Government have a particular urgent responsibility to embrace that approach, to shape that approach, to work with others in leadership on the island in defining that approach and to go to others on the island who fight and resist that approach, including the British Government, and say that this is how we want the future to be dealt with in terms of dealing with the past.

The second principle that I want to put down as a marker today is that amnesty is not part of a comprehensive truth and accountability process. We are in the rundown to others announcing that they believe that you need amnesty in order to bring about truth and accountability. I want to put down the marker today that, whether it is for state agents or for terror organisations, we will not stand for amnesty. It offends the European Convention on Human Rights; it offends the Good Friday Agreement, which only went as far as commutation of prison sentences, and it offends any standard in which those who now, by their own language, refer to their actions as being wrong and indefensible should somehow, on the far side of those words, end up getting amnesty.

I will be asking the Irish Government today to take a lead, with others who are so inclined and who do want to have a comprehensive truth and accountability process, to shape it, configure it and lead it and to work with victims and families in bringing that about. In doing so, let it be clearly understood from our Benches that we will have no truck with amnesty in any shape or form.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Allister: Simultaneously this afternoon, in the two jurisdictions on this island, examination is being extended to two of the most horrendous aspects of the IRA's cruel campaign. The Dublin Administration are, quite properly, being faced with the effects and the conduct of the IRA's genocide campaign in the Fermanagh border area against the Protestant community and, in this Assembly, we are debating the horrendous campaign of the IRA, in the main against its own community, in respect of the disappeared.

In this debate it is significant that, whereas there has been one token contribution from the party that knows the most about this matter, it has been but one token contribution, and that, of course, was a contribution full of weasel words. It focused on reading to the House the utterly disingenuous statement of the IRA in 1999, indeed, almost as a eulogy to what they had to say, with the protestation that it involved apology, that it was full and that it was

ample. Go tell that to the family of Charlie Armstrong, who, to this day, the IRA deny disappearing.

Go tell that to the family of Gerry Evans, whom to this day it denies disappearing. Go tell that to the family of Jean McConville.

Members will remember that, when they last debated the issue, Mr McLaughlin gave us the benefit of his contribution. He ran away from this testing challenge: would he withdraw the assertion that he made back in 2005 that the murder — the "killing", as he called it — of Jean McConville was not a criminal act? He failed then to withdraw that, and he fails now. That tells us all that we need to know about the true heart of Sinn Féin and what it really thinks of those whom its IRA butchered and murdered. It cannot even bring itself to acknowledge something as elementary as the fact that Jean McConville was murdered and it was a criminal act, rather than the corollary that inescapably is that it was the lawful act of the IRA. It is that seminal issue that it utterly fails to address that tells us all that there is to be told about the politics and the soul of Sinn Féin.

Others can speak to that far more eloquently than I can. The relatives of some of the victims can do it far better. Recently, we had Oliver McVeigh — brother of Mr McVeigh, one of the disappeared — challenging Adams and McGuinness to use their influence directly to get the information from the IRA people involved. He said:

"They've got to take the lead on this. They've got to start knocking on the doors of those who know precisely what happened."

Mr Adams has done the easy bit: he has issued a statement. He needs to do the hardest bit. Seamus McKendry, the son-in-law of Jean McConville, said of Adams's attempts to wriggle on the matter:

"The man lives in a fantasy world. As far as I'm concerned, he's the world's greatest fabricator. He's trying to con all the people, now he's conned himself."

And so the con goes on —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Allister: — that the IRA did not murder Jean McConville. In the words of Mr McLaughlin, it was not a criminal act. What hypocrisy. What cant.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Allister: What weasel words that speak so ill of those who utter them.

Ms P Bradley: Throughout the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, many individuals have been killed, and many families and communities have struggled with the aftermath. One area that has been particularly difficult is that of the disappeared — people who were abducted, murdered and secretly buried. Their families have struggled with the pain and trauma of bereavement, in addition to the agony of not knowing where their loved one is buried and why and how they were taken.

Northern Ireland has been emerging from a period of conflict for 14 years. In doing so, we as a society have had to face a number of actions that were conducted during the 30 years of violence. Actions that cannot be justified were committed during that time, and I believe that the issue

of the disappeared and the continuation of the agony that seven families live with cannot be justified in our society. It does not matter whether a person is religious or not: the grieving process is the same. Seven families to this day have an element of doubt about what happened to their loved one. They still walk down the street, scanning every face in the hope that their loved one will come back to them. Like many families emerging from our turbulent history, they have an empty place at the Christmas table, and yet, unlike with the majority of people who sadly were killed, they have no graveside to visit. The first stage of grief is the knowledge that the person is dead. For seven families, that has been denied to them. The burial ritual is vital to finding closure, but it has also been denied to the families, as has the knowledge of how their loved one died. For many years, the families of the disappeared have been tormented by a lack of knowledge, the cruelty of the misrepresentation of their loved one and the almost certain knowledge that their loved one's death was not peaceful but was likely to have been most violent.

6.00 pm

We cannot undo the hurt that all families of the disappeared have suffered over the years. Sadly, we cannot bring their loved ones home to them safe and well. The only thing that Northern Ireland society can do is help to bring this shameful — that is what it is — chapter of our history to a close. I urge society to give its full support to the independent commission. People should be secure in the knowledge that revenge or prosecution are nowhere near the agenda and that the information that they give will be used only to locate remains.

It is notable that many of those abducted and murdered were young. A mother of 10 is also included. These people had their life taken away from them by a terrorist gang. Even after all these years, those responsible still have a responsibility to finally step forward and ensure that this harrowing chapter of our history can be closed. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the abduction and murder of these individuals and the impact on their families, the only right and moral action is to come forward now with information about what happened to the individuals who are still missing to this day. Only by locating the remains of Joseph Lynskey, Seamus Wright, Kevin McKee, Columba McVeigh, Robert Nairac, Brendan Megraw and Seamus Ruddy can we hope to ensure that the families have some chance of finding peace and closure.

I will now talk about what other Members said. I want to thank Mr Humphrey for bringing this to my attention and proposing the motion on the Floor today. He started by saying that words were not enough and action was now needed. He talked of compassion, comfort and closure for the long-suffering families. He spoke of Columba McVeigh's mother, who went to her grave not knowing what happened to her son. As a mother, I cannot even begin to imagine the turmoil that that mother faced throughout her life and into her death. Mr Humphrey also gave the example of my party colleague Mr Brush and said that people in our community still have doubts about whether Sinn Féin has moved on. He also said that it is time to be open, honest and forthright and for people to do the decent and right thing.

Mr McLaughlin, who supported the motion, advised that we all have to deal with the issues of the past. He went on to

state that the Irish Republican Army had made a statement in which it made a commitment to do everything within its power. He also said that that will be of little consequence to the families.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: I certainly will.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I did acknowledge that there is no comfort for the families in the IRA statement. However, it is a simple statement of reality that the majority of the remains recovered were recovered because the process of asking for information worked and that information was passed on to the commission. Therefore, while there is definitely work for republicans to do, we all have to agree to go on asking for the information so that we can address the remaining cases. The remains that have been returned to their family were found on the basis of information being recovered and passed to the appropriate authorities. We should acknowledge that.

Ms P Bradley: I agree with Mr McLaughlin that we should acknowledge that, but I also agree that there is still work for republicans to do.

Mr Ross Hussey talked about the policy of the IRA during the years in which the incidents took place. He also said something really quite poignant: if these had been acts of the security forces, we would hear shouts from the rooftops that the issue needed to be addressed now. We are not hearing that. He asked why the burials were hidden, which is a question still to receive an answer. He also spoke of the hurt and pain of the families.

Mr Colum Eastwood said — I am finding my writing rather hard to read, so please excuse me — that each of us had a duty to move forward. He said that we needed to follow the lead of the families and call for any information to be passed on. He also said that we needed to deal with the difficult issues of our past. Chris Lyttle paid tribute to the relatives of the disappeared, who have campaigned to find their loved ones. He also paid tribute to the WAVE Trauma Centre, which has worked closely with those families and will continue to do so. He said there was an obligation on anyone with information to come forward and to do so before it was too late. He highlighted the fact that the legislation did not cover Lisa Dorian as one of the disappeared. He also said that the families deserved much better and that what they deserve should be delivered as soon as possible.

Mr George Robinson asked that the perpetrators do the honourable thing and give closure to the families. A vein that seemed to run through all the contributions was that the families need closure. He also spoke about the human rights of the families who were suffering.

Mr Mike Nesbitt said that we should revisit the issue. He spoke about the Hillsborough disaster and how it had taken 23 years for the truth to come out. He said that some of the families of the disappeared have been waiting for 40 years and still have not heard the truth.

Lord Morrow said that this is a very emotive issue that would not go away. He also highlighted the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of mother of 10 Jean McConville. He stated that the IRA was hypocritical. He, too, brought up the disappearance of Lisa Dorian and said that she was not to be forgotten. He condemned outright what happened to her and stated that our party would

not be demanding that the perpetrators of that crime be released.

Mr Dominic Bradley said that he did not want to turn this into a political wrangle and was grateful that the motion had been brought here today. He said he had the greatest of admiration for the families and for their forbearance and willingness to wait for the information to locate their loved ones. He also said it was time for those who have said nothing or not enough to come forward.

Mr Tom Elliott asked that we try to put ourselves in the position of the families and imagine how they must feel. Again, I cannot possibly begin to put myself in that position. Mr Attwood said that the issue must be defined by the truth and accountability process and that the Irish Government also had a responsibility to deal with the past. Mr Jim Allister spoke of the relatives and the disappeared and challenged the IRA. He said that we are yet to receive answers.

It is painful at times for anyone to emerge from a conflict situation, but I firmly believe that, for us to be successful and build a new future for our Northern Ireland, we have to ensure that no victim is left behind. In supporting the motion, I hope that information will be received to ensure that the families of the disappeared are not forgotten or left behind as we continue to build a peaceful and sustainable Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that it is 40 years since the first abduction of what would become known as "the disappeared" occurred; acknowledges that, to date, seven families have been denied the right to bury loved ones because of the actions of republican paramilitaries who abducted, murdered and hid the victims' remains; commends the dignified perseverance of the families and the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR); pledges its support to those families in their ongoing fight for justice; and calls on all those with information to co-operate fully with the ICLVR so that this harrowing chapter of our history can be closed.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who want to speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Choiste Gnó as cead a thabhairt dom an díospóireacht seo a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Sorry, it is now Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — things change quickly around here. I thank the Business Committee for affording me the opportunity to debate this issue, and I thank the Minister for taking the time to attend the debate.

The SDLP has stated that all children should have a statutory right to a preschool place in their immediate preschool year in their local area, as is the case with primary-age children. That is the broad context in which I approach the topic. In particular, the topic of the Adjournment debate is a case in Middletown in County Armagh, which, like many other villages across the North and across this island, is a small, close-knit community. As in many other communities, the local primary school and the local nursery are central to village life. Today's debate is about nursery school provision at St John's Primary School in Middletown. It was raised with me by parents locally, who were stunned to learn that their sons and daughters were unable to get a place at the local nursery at the beginning of September 2012. Although I raise the issue today in relation to Middletown in particular, it could be any other village or any other town across the North come September of next year. So, as well as being a particular problem, it is a general problem to a large extent.

St John's nursery and, indeed, the primary school are obviously very popular places of education for families in that area, so much so that the nursery school had 38 applications for 26 places in September. All 38 applicants were local; this was their nearest school. They all lived within three miles of the school, so it is not a case of grannyng or of pupils travelling to get to the school. It is purely and simply that the local nursery school is not in a position to meet the demand of local parents and of a growing population. St John's has no reception class. In fact, it is the only school in the locality that has no reception class, and there is no other nursery provision or reception provision within five miles of the school. Many local parents, when selecting their nursery of choice, selected only Middletown and gave no number two choice. It was their sure belief that there was no problem in getting their son or daughter into the nursery. Parents who put second and third options included in them Little Acorns in Derrynoose, which is five miles from Middletown, and a playgroup in Caledon as the next nearest options. They too were filled to capacity. Other options offered by the board

included some in Armagh city, 10 miles away, or Killylea, almost seven miles away.

I have visited the school and seen the hustle and bustle of busy school life. The school offers an excellent education for local children. As well as the normal curriculum, it has extra-curricular activities in football, hurling, basketball, cooking and music, to name but a few. It is famous for its school drama and musical productions.

This village is expanding. A new social housing development is almost complete, so where are the children of the new families to go? The problem may arise again in September, and then it may not for another couple of years. It could be Dungannon, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, Derry or Dunloy next year. The principal of the school and the board of governors have pleaded with the Department to allow a variance this year. He asked for permission to admit boys and girls from the village to the school. The Department refused, as it did not want to set a precedent. However, what precedent is it to give every child a good start in life in their local school? That is in accordance with departmental policy, and this is a precedent that should be not only set but followed in all cases.

We are well aware of the argument that there are enough nursery places in nursery education in Northern Ireland. The only problem is that they are not in the right places. It is a perennial problem. We have seen it crop up year after year, yet we do not seem to be able to solve it. It is frustrating for parents and frustrating for principals to be in a position where they cannot offer local children who live but a step or two from the school door a place in their local school. The board of governors, in this case, applied the admissions criteria correctly. The parents and the principal wrote directly to the Department on numerous occasions, but, apparently, nothing could be done.

I will share with the Members who are here and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, one story. At the time of applying to the school, one mother — a single mother who worked and lived close to the school — applied for a place. By the time September came, she had lost her job and sold her car, as she could not afford to keep it, and she was offered a place for her child in a nursery school 10 miles away in Armagh. I know that the Minister will have empathy with the school and with that case, and I know that he has communicated that to the principal and the board of governors. The school site is only 10 years old. It can accommodate 200 pupils and has 164 on site. Asking for a variance would not have put the school over its numbers. So, I ask the Minister to consider that case and to take real action, not for Middletown alone but for other areas that might be confronted with the same problem.

6.15 pm

As I said, the SDLP's policy is that each child should have a statutory right to a preschool place in their immediate preschool year. All I ask the Minister to do is to afford nursery schools the same variance of 10% as is afforded to primary schools. That could be a first step in the Minister's response to the issue and may go quite a long way towards resolving it. I raise the issue on behalf of the parents of Middletown. It is a growing, popular school in a rural village on the border with County Monaghan. The population in the village continues to grow, and all I ask is for the Department to allow local children to have a place in their local school.

I should mention that Mr Kennedy, our colleague from Newry and Armagh, has extended his apologies for not being present at the debate. Sin a bhfuil le rá agam, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leatsa, leis na Comhaltaí eile agus leis an Aire. I thank the other Members who have remained late for the debate, and I thank the Minister for his attendance.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-bhuíoch den Chomhalta as an díospóireacht a chur ar an tábla inniu. I thank Mr Bradley for securing the debate, and I also thank the Minister for his attendance. Middletown is in my constituency, and I am glad that the speaker in the House today is a member of our constituency and is well aware of the problems in it.

I want to outline some key elements of the debate, which I welcome. Over 10 years ago, Middletown and Tynan primary schools amalgamated to address the issue of falling school numbers and, more importantly, the issue of sustainable education provision in the area. Whilst that was a difficult decision for the people of Middletown and Tynan, they accepted it and moved on. I mention that because I agree that it is about the child and the provision of education and that the child comes foremost.

I received a copy of a letter sent to the Minister by the principal in February on the number of applications to the nursery unit in St John's Primary School in Middletown. I then received copies of further correspondence in April with information outlining some facts and figures about the area, including figures on the deprivation rating and lone parent households, which number 13.9% in the Middletown area, compared with the average across the North of 8.1%. School meals entitlement has doubled in two years, which suggests an unemployment impact. Access to services in the Middletown area ranks at 38 of 582, demonstrating remoteness. I know that the Minister is well aware of that, because he has received that information from the principal of St John's.

In his letter, the principal requested a variation in nursery enrolment numbers to accommodate the demand in the area for one year only. He assured the Minister that the school could facilitate the extra target-age pupils and stated that it would be a more cost-effective option. I know that he asked in the letter for a reception class, but clearly that practice no longer exists.

The school has a 26-unit nursery provision, but this year there were 37 applications, leaving an extra 11 children looking for places. The Minister is well aware of the number of times I called into his office to discuss this matter. I leave it at that.

I will refer to and comment on some of the e-mails that I received from anxious parents who had applied for a place for their child in the school. One parent wrote:

"The school is at the heart of our parish in the centre of our rural village. Six generations of my family have attended the school and my child has eight cousins attending the school."

Another parent, unable to gain a place for her child in her preferred choice, which was in Middletown itself, found that she was closer to a preschool in County Monaghan; and though there are arrangements to access such places, unfortunately there is no funding available.

Another parent said:

"I am very concerned that my child, if not accepted, will be at a disadvantage when attending the primary school as she will not have been able to develop her social and academic skills to the extent that other children will have. We are also a one-car family, which my husband takes to work each day, making it impossible for me to take the child to another preschool."

Those comments are indicative of the difficulties that parents face when their child cannot be placed in the school of their choice. They face isolation from other children in the wider family, and, worse still, the possibility of the child not receiving a preschool place at all.

The decision was ultimately taken not to award any extra places. I know that three or four of the children who applied have secured positions but, to my knowledge, seven or eight others have not. I have to say now, as I did then, that I was very disappointed at the outcome of that request, as I had been liaising with the principals and the parents throughout the process.

I recognise and understand that today is about Middletown, but it is difficult to deal with that issue in isolation. I will try, with your indulgence, to outline a number of requests that I have been lobbied on about nursery and preschool provision in the area. I know that the Minister, during Question Time, referred to the area, as opposed to individual schools.

I want to talk about some of the issues. I know that St Mary's Primary School in Granemore has received full-time nursery status during the past two years, after many years of applying and hard work on behalf of the school. However, St Mochua's of Derrynoose and Carnagh, which went down the same route as Tynan and Middletown, amalgamated a number of years ago. I have had experience of speaking to young parents in the area who were unable to access preschool places after that amalgamation. Certainly, I think that that is something that we should be looking at. The Minister is well aware that St Francis of Assisi Primary School in Keady has made an application for nursery provision. Unfortunately, it has not received it.

I ask the Minister for his support in relation to ward boundaries. I will give an example from my own town. It is a small town, and there are three wards. Some of the pupils in that area cannot secure Sure Start places or anything else. I would like the Minister to comment on that, and maybe suggest some way in which I could bring that forward in relation to boundaries. Clea Primary School is also in the area and it is also looking for preschool places. There is also talk of preschool provision for Irish-medium schools. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to give consideration to a review, or look at how, in the circumstances that have led to this debate on preschool and nursery places, that can be addressed. Will he consider flexibility to allow for fluctuating numbers in nurseries and preschools in rural areas such as mine? That would go some way to allaying parents' fears and to providing important learning for our young people at a vital stage in their life. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús,

ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Chomhalta Dominic Bradley as an tsaincheist seo a ardú inniu. Leagann sé béim ar cheist nach bhfuil uathúil do Bhunscoil Naomh Eoin, ach is ceist í ar dóchúil go dtiocfaidh sí aníos sa chomhthéacs réamhscoilaíochta nuair nach féidir freastal ar éileamh. .

I thank Mr Bradley for raising the matter today. It highlights an issue that, as has been said, is not unique to St John's Primary School, but which is likely to arise in a number of preschool settings where demand exceeds supply.

Members will be aware of the commitment in the Programme for Government to ensure that at least one year of preschool education is available to every family that wants it. As is the case with primary and post-primary admissions, the system used to determine preschool admissions is open enrolment, with parents indicating a preference for the setting that they wish their child to go to. However, that does not mean that every family will be able to receive an offer of a place at their first-choice preschool provider.

Educational evidence supports the view that the preschool experience that a child receives at a non-statutory setting will be of equal value, and there is no educational benefit derived from a full-time place. It is important, therefore, that parents express more than one preference. I note that Mr Bradley said that at least two parents had not expressed more than one preference. I hope to send out the message clearly here that parents should put more than one preference on their application form to assist in ensuring that their child receives a place.

The balancing of supply and demand in an area is a matter for the local preschool education advisory groups (PEAGs) established in each education and library board area. They take decisions on preschool provision on an area-based basis and not with reference to an individual setting in isolation.

Where demand exceeds supply in any given area, the PEAG will seek to address that by securing additional places, using funding made available to it by my Department under the preschool programme. For the 2012-13 school year, more than 97% of target-age children who engaged with the process received the offer of a preschool place. The issue of oversubscription at St John's occurred during the 2012-13 admissions process, and there has been no history of oversubscription at the nursery unit or the primary school. It is unfortunate that all applicants for admissions to a particular setting could not be accommodated.

In the case of St John's, the school sought Department of Education approval for a temporary variation to increase the nursery unit by an additional 11 places so that target-age applicants could be admitted to nursery. A temporary variation of 11 is unheard of, whether in preschool, post-primary school or primary school. The temporary variation measure is for a small number — one or two, at most.

As required under the 1998 Education Order, my Department has determined a full-time and part-time enrolment number of 26 in nursery schools. However, I advise Members that that is something that I am reviewing as part of the early years strategy. It is a figure that is not set in legislation, and it can be adapted to meet local needs. I will make Members further aware of the outcome of that when I make my statement on preschool settings to the House later in the autumn.

St John's requested that it admit children to reception class. I intend to deal with that in the early years strategy as well. Reception classes are not suitable places for preschool education; they do not teach the relevant curriculum to children at preschool settings, and I do not favour them.

Some young people failed to get into St John's. I understand that, in addition to nursery provision at the school, there are a number of voluntary and private providers offering funded preschool places within a five-mile radius of the school. I will give Members an example of some of the dilemmas that are faced when you make decisions on these issues.

In the recent past, I was presented with a development proposal for a nursery setting in a school in a rural community. The figures were very finely balanced within the three-mile radius and the five-mile radius. I considered the case very carefully. I decided that, on balance, I would approve a nursery unit in the school. I have been lobbied by local representatives, as they were right to do; I have received letters of support and representations from them all. I approved the nursery setting.

Lo and behold, within a week, I was lobbied by some of the same representatives because my decision to put the nursery unit in the school had, as they saw it, put in jeopardy the voluntary and community settings in the area. That is the fine balance we have to get. I am sure Members would agree that, if I was to approve a setting in any area, they would not want to put in jeopardy any of the preschool settings. They want the community and voluntary settings and nursery school settings to be viable going into the future.

6.30 pm

That was the dilemma we faced at St John's. A variation of 11 would require a development proposal to move forward. Under the current proposals, the school would be required set up two classes rather than simply envelop the additional 11 into the class of 26. So, there would have been a significant change to the school. As I said, I am going to take the example of what has happened at St John's into account when finalising the early years strategy, which I will bring to the House in a number of weeks.

I have no quick fix solutions to the issue at St John's. On balance, I believe that the right decisions were made with regard to how we deal with preschool provision in the Middletown and wider geographical area. However, I appreciate the disappointment of parents.

I note Mr Boylan's comment that, as he understands it, several of the children were not placed. I am willing to be corrected by the Member, either now or at a later date, but, as I understand it, all the children did eventually achieve a place in a preschool setting. I believe that at least one of those places may have been in Monaghan, but all the children did receive a place in a preschool setting. Clearly, that place was not at St John's, but it was at a setting in the area. The important thing for me is that they have been placed in a preschool setting, because that is beneficial —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will certainly.

Mr D Bradley: Yes, all the children may have achieved a place in a preschool setting, but not all of them took it up. My information is that two children did not take up places.

The reason for that was the distance from their home to the setting.

Mr O'Dowd: I accept the validity of that information. Local information is often more accurate than what I receive in the Department.

We have, over the past number of years, tightened up how we plan our preschool environment. The allocation of places and the information going out to parents is much improved. I repeat that parents should put more than one preference on their form when planning that. We have brought new providers on board for preschool settings. I will be mindful, as we plan, of the debate around provision at St John's and in that area. I am going to make changes to preschool arrangements under the early years strategy. I have no doubt that Members will continue to engage with me about preschool provision in the Middletown area.

Mr Boylan raised the issue of how boundary measurements for schools take place. I understand, but I am willing to be corrected, that we deal with a radius rather than a constituency boundary; for example, a three- or five-mile radius. I particularly focus on the wider radius when I am dealing with rural communities, because of transport issues and accessibility, etc. If the Member wishes further information as to how we plan our preschool settings, I am more than happy to share that with him.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's consideration of the situation at St John's as he looks at the issue of preschool provision in general. Will he clarify whether he will consider the 10% variance in his deliberations?

Mr O'Dowd: I noted the Member making that comment during the debate. I certainly will take that into account. Lessons have to be learned as to how we use temporary variations in primary and post-primary schools. I would like to interrogate the 10% variation further, but a significant number of nursery settings in this case have told us that they can take more children. They have the physical capacity to do it, they have the staff trained to do it, and I think that we should facilitate that. I am not suggesting that that will rise as far as 11%. When I say that I will consider the St John's issue, I mean in the context that the experiences of St John's will weigh on my mind when I make final decisions.

In my view, if St John's rises to 11%, and that were to continue into the future, they would need a development proposal. I understand that they do not expect such a significant number in the next number of years, but things can change and there are other providers in the area.

Unfortunately, I have no good news in the sense that I am not going to make a change to St John's provision at this stage, but lessons can be learned from it, and I will inform Members later in the autumn about plans for preschool provision under the early years strategy.

Adjourned at 6.36 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 October 2012

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Welfare Reform

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

At the beginning of the year, I gave a commitment to a full scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill and that I would not seek accelerated passage. Hence, the Assembly is now considering the Bill clause by clause at Committee Stage and giving this important legislation proper and detailed scrutiny.

The Welfare Reform Bill is not only the largest Bill to come before this Assembly — that challenges those who have suggested we do not take forward major legislation in this place — but also, arguably, the Bill with the furthest-reaching consequences. Very few parts of our society are not in some way impacted by this legislation.

Two weeks ago, during the lengthy sitting at the Second Reading stage, many contrasting views were expressed on the measures in the Bill. Clearly, we all have concerns about the content of some of the 134 clauses in the Bill. However, I take great encouragement from the level of interest from all sections of the House, as evidenced by the number of Members who spoke. There has been an engaging debate thus far on welfare reform, which, I believe, demonstrates the progress we have all made in this place beyond constitutional issues and towards dealing with the matters that affect our constituents day and daily — what we usually call the real bread-and-butter issues, the issues of normal politics.

At Second Reading, although some argued for delays and others, including myself, that we should move on to detailed scrutiny, one thing that was very clear was a commitment across all parties to try to make the Bill the very best it can be for the people of Northern Ireland. The Chairman of the Social Development Committee rightly stated that we should work together collectively to improve the legislation. I agree.

Given the level of interest across the House, it is right that I should come back to this place to report on the progress made in my discussions with Lord Freud, the Minister for Welfare Reform in Whitehall. The level of interest in welfare reform that I have referred to is not confined to this House. All across Northern Ireland, there has been an active debate, whether at voluntary and community sector events, in the media or in the church and faith sector. In turn, my officials and I have been meeting people and listening to the many different views expressed across the community. That has included an ongoing detailed dialogue and negotiations with the team of Ministers in

the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), involving face-to-face discussions in Belfast and London, telephone conversations and correspondence with Lord Freud and Iain Duncan Smith. I also met Maria Miller on disability issues when she was a member of the DWP ministerial team. Those ministerial engagements will continue and so will the intense level of official discussions including large swathes of my Department.

In my dealings with Lord Freud, I have found him to be someone who has a genuine interest in the specific challenges that we face here in Northern Ireland. With that in mind, I am pleased to report that he has accepted my invitation to advise us further on how best to address the impact of the housing benefit changes. He is the architect of the proposals, and it will be valuable to have him here to discuss the local impacts as we chart the way forward on this aspect of welfare reform. He is keen to come over. He is aware of some of the particular issues here that we need to address, and he is interested in how the Housing Executive, housing associations, the advice sector and the Department can work together to find a solution.

Clearly, the local debate on welfare reform has concentrated, to date, on many of the downsides of welfare reform and the need to seek flexibilities. I have established a universal credit programme board, comprising senior stakeholders in my Department and from the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. The board is overseeing a large multidisciplinary team that is working on the many facets involved in introducing this once-in-a-generation change to the welfare system.

I visited the IT design work for the universal credit system in Birchwood, outside Manchester. It is a huge undertaking, said to be the biggest IT design, build and test exercise in the world at present. The Northern Ireland universal credit programme has several staff embedded in that team. As I have stated previously, making the changes that we have requested is no quick fix. While universal credit will simplify the benefit system for claimants, with it being easier to understand and the online service making it easier to claim, the IT supporting that straightforward customer-facing experience is complex and state-of-the-art. For that reason, I have previously cautioned Members against thinking that the design changes that we need for Northern Ireland can be simply and easily embedded into the new computer system.

Some have said that, when it comes to universal credit, although the underlying policy of claimants being better off in work is laudable, there are not the jobs available

to enable the new approach to succeed. Yes, we face extremely difficult times, with 63,000 people without employment and in receipt of jobseeker's allowance, coupled with recent announcements such as those relating to the FG Wilson job losses. Many people in Northern Ireland who have been made redundant over the past few years would love nothing better than to secure a job and come off benefits. However, while not underplaying the significant challenge, I take heart from the fact that the latest Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) report on the Northern Ireland labour market and economy showed that, in the quarter ending in June 2012, we had the first increase in the number of employee jobs available. It was up by 1,940 since the start of the downturn in early 2008. Hence, even in these very tough times, there are job opportunities available, and, of course, universal credit is a generational change. By taking action now to implement these reforms, we will have the architecture in place when the economy recovers. In particular, we will have a system in place that will help us to break the scourge of workless households, for it is those households who are some of the most socially excluded in our community, who face persistent poverty and for whom we have failed to provide a practical route towards employment, opportunity and financial independence.

Mr Deputy Speaker, as you will know from my contribution to the debate at Second Reading stage, I am fully committed to the concept of universal credit and to the principle that people should always be better off in work. Helping people to beat the benefit trap is a key reform that we must pursue. It will help to lower the high level of economic inactivity across Northern Ireland that holds back many of our people. Linked to that, I welcome the proposals that universal credit will, where possible, mirror being in employment, with payments similar to a monthly salary. That will help benefit claimants smooth their transition into work. However, although I am fully committed to social security parity between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I recognise that we have unique circumstances in Northern Ireland that the Assembly must take into account, not least while we scrutinise the legislation designed to reform our welfare system. Hence, for many months, the issue of applying different payment arrangements to universal credit has been on my radar, and I brought that issue to the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform in the early spring to ensure that my proposals were fully understood by all parties.

Traditionally, between 80% and 90% of our housing benefit payments have been made directly to landlords for both social housing and the private rented sector. I have listened to those who have expressed concern that, as we introduce many other aspects of welfare reform, now is not the time to make a wholesale change to those arrangements. It is important because it ensures that individuals should remain safe in their tenancy and that social housing provision has a firm financial basis. Thus, I have adopted the stance that we should have payments to landlords for the housing element of universal credit as the default position while allowing customers the freedom to opt out of that arrangement if they wish.

Also within the area of payments are the single household payment and the monthly payment. For the majority of Northern Ireland claimants, as for those in Great Britain, the arrangements will work well. For example, many of those currently on tax credits receive household

payments that are paid every four weeks, and they are fully accustomed to those arrangements. However, I recognise that there are others, not least the most vulnerable, who, for a variety of reasons, could struggle with either a single household payment or the monthly payment. Hence, in my discussions with Lord Freud, I have sought a commitment that he will agree to make changes to the IT system that will accommodate those payment flexibilities.

From the outset, my party's strategy has been to use our voice at Westminster when it counted and to secure what we could at the national level. We represented our constituents at Westminster and gave a voice there to the poor and vulnerable. As the process moved to Northern Ireland, we entered into discussions and negotiations with the Westminster Government at both ministerial and official level to try to secure the operational flexibilities where we felt they could be achieved within the bounds of financial parity.

12.15 pm

I acknowledge clearly that there were parts of the Bill we did not like, but we had to face the reality of the consequences of not moving it forward through the normal scrutiny process in the limited time frame that we have, otherwise we would have inflicted even more hardship on those whom many in the House aspire to protect. Indeed, we acted in the only responsible way and continued our negotiations to press the Government for the operational flexibilities that we believe to be essential. I referred to the limited time frame, and the fact is that we are just within the time frame for getting the legislation through the Assembly in order to meet the deadline. There is no spare room; there is no more road; there is no more time left. The time frame is absolutely tight, and that is why we need to press on, without hindrance and delay, to get the Bill through the House in the time available.

Two weeks ago, I asked the House to vote for the Bill at its Second Reading, not because I agreed with all of its content but because it was the right and responsible action to take. I pledged to the House that I would continue my negotiations with the Government to secure changes, and I am pleased to report that, after a series of detailed negotiations — work that in essence started the day after I was given the responsibility for this portfolio — with Government Ministers, officials and the IT experts, Lord Freud gave me a number of commitments in writing after our meeting last Tuesday. The housing cost element of universal credit will therefore be paid automatically to the landlord rather than to the claimant, with an opt-out arrangement for those who choose to receive the full universal credit payment and, in turn, pay their landlord. In addition, the IT system functionality will be developed to enable the computer system, where necessary, to split the payment between the two parties in the household and, again where necessary, to make two smaller payments a month rather than the single full monthly payment. In the majority of cases, there will be a single monthly payment to each household in receipt of universal credit, but these payment flexibilities will allow for different payment arrangements where necessary, not least where vulnerable customers will find budgeting difficult. With that in mind, I have tasked my officials to develop and consult public representatives and voluntary sector representatives on a set of guidelines for determining the circumstances when the universal credit payment should

be split or made on a twice-monthly basis. This way, we can protect the vulnerable while maintaining the monthly household payment for those who do not need these bespoke measures.

Some in the House wanted to kill the Bill under various cloaks of convenience and to foolishly ignore the consequences, which included depriving many thousands of our people of the social fund that they rely on when at their most vulnerable. Those consequences would also have deprived critical government services of £200 million to meet the shortfall in the Budget and put over 1,000 existing jobs across Northern Ireland at real risk. If the House had chosen that pathway two weeks ago, we would now have to deal with those real consequences, and my negotiations with the Government would have been effectively over. I am glad that the House did not in the end take that pathway. Today, I am pleased to be here announcing that we will be able to administer payments according to our own local arrangements, which is a major step forward in customising welfare reform for the special needs of Northern Ireland.

Although the deal has been done at ministerial level, there is much work to be completed to make this agreement a reality. My officials are working closely with their DWP counterparts to ensure that the universal credit computer system design is enhanced to deliver these specific requirements. This work should be completed in six months' time, by March 2013, when the system changes will then need to be built and tested. In light of securing these commitments from Lord Freud and the associated need to allow time to develop, build and test the additional system functionality for these payment arrangements, I have decided to launch universal credit in Northern Ireland in April 2014. I have the agreement of Lord Freud that, as this will still be part of the continuous United Kingdom-wide roll-out that will commence from October 2013, there will be no breach of parity. This timing has the added advantage that any lessons learned in the early stages of the UK roll-out can be reflected in local implementation planning and delivery.

The securing of additional payment modalities to meet the needs of our unique circumstance in Northern Ireland is one element of a package of measures that I am developing to help claimants and households manage under the new arrangements. These measures include developing detailed proposals for how we can support claimants with appropriate budgeting advice and guidance, alongside the availability, when necessary, of short-term advances. In addition, I am taking steps to ensure that Northern Ireland claimants will also have access to special banking products that are currently being developed to meet the needs of universal credit claimants. Taken together, these measures will help many to budget effectively while taking advantage of the better credit ratings that can arise for those on a monthly income.

Discussions are continuing with regard to the impact of welfare reform on housing benefit, and I am pleased that Lord Freud has agreed to visit Northern Ireland in November to support us in those discussions as they progress.

In summary, the successful outcome of my negotiations and discussions with Lord Freud means that I am in a position to launch universal credit in April 2014 with the operational flexibilities that reflect the needs of the people of Northern Ireland and address concerns raised

by Executive colleagues, Members of the Assembly and representatives of the wider voluntary sector. I am sure that all Members of the House, from whatever side and party, will welcome this announcement and appreciate the successful completion of this stage of our negotiations. Today's announcement fully vindicates the approach that I have adopted and the position that I set out in the debate in the Chamber some days ago. This is a good outcome for Northern Ireland. It meets the particular needs of Northern Ireland to a significant degree. I believe that it will be welcomed by everyone, and I think that it is a successful outcome to what has been a lengthy period of complex and protracted work that has, nevertheless, proved well worth it in the end.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we move to questions on the statement, I advise the House that the Speaker has ruled that, in advance of the motion under Standing Order 34 being moved — the next item of business — there should be no mention of human rights issues related to the Welfare Reform Bill or the merits or otherwise of the use of Standing Order 34 to seek advice from the Human Rights Commission. If that is clear, I will call the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Alex Maskey.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a raiteas. First, I thank the Minister for his statement. From the outset, I want to say that I reject much of the political content of the Minister's statement. In fact, I would argue that it is interesting that we did not hear anything about the flexibilities being conceded by the British Government until after the recent very lengthy, protracted debate in the Assembly, which showed universal opposition to many aspects of the Bill.

Our party will be very much to the fore of welcoming any progress that the Minister is able to announce. I am particularly pleased to hear that the British Government have acknowledged that direct payment to landlords is a good thing. However, I note that the concession on flexibility concerns direct payments to landlords, and the cynics among us might think, "Well, that's the landlords taken care of, all right". As I said, I want to be very positive about this. The fact that serious discussions are now under way on split payments, multi-payments and the more regular payments of universal credit is important. Suffice it to say that, currently, the Bill has provisions for those measures to be enacted and facilitated in particular circumstances. There is nothing specifically new, although I look forward to the initiative being taken further.

I also welcome the fact that, for the first time, publicly, through the Minister, the British Government have again acknowledged that they can concede some flexibilities, even in the context of parity, and that the IT system can be modified to facilitate those flexibilities. All these things are important. Again, I continue to commend the Minister, where he is pursuing a number of the issues of concern that he outlined to the House in the previous debate. I commend all those who have continued to campaign on a wide range of issues that, people believe, will have a negative impact on the wider community. Will the Minister take the time to outline other issues that he wants to take forward with Lord Freud and his Westminster colleagues, not least the issues of conditionality for lone parents,

the sanction regime that is in place and other aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill that Members of his party have expressed serious concerns about? It is a bit of a start and it is to be welcomed, but we have a lot of work to do in the time ahead.

Mr McCausland: First, unlike the Member opposite, I do not condemn those who have been involved in lobbying; I commend them.

The Member opposite was not party to the discussions that have been taking place over a considerable period. Those discussions were between me, as Minister, my officials in the Department, Ministers at Westminster and officials at Westminster, and, as I said clearly in my statement, have been ongoing for quite a long time. They were detailed, complex and time-consuming, but, for some time, as I clearly said to Members, I was very optimistic that we would achieve the success that we were looking for. I believed that we had done the work and done it well and that we would get the outcome that we desired. I think that that has been fully vindicated today.

The Member raised two further points, one of which was on the issue of split payments to a household. He asked why it was not the default position was that there should be split payments. The fact is that the Department is not seeking to intervene and decide which partner should receive payment; rather, when it comes to universal credit, it will be for partners to look at it and come forward to present a case if there is a need to do so. I believe that this is the right approach, that we are doing the right thing and that this is the best outcome. If we can avoid split payments, so much the better. Already, there are many households in which people in receipt of benefits are in that situation. It is the best way forward, but we are concerned for those — time will tell the exact number, but it will be a smaller number — who are vulnerable, have particular needs and are in a particularly difficult relationship in the home. In those situations, the provision will be available. Over the next period, we will look at the guidance and at the arrangements that will be put in place. We hope that the number of cases will be smaller.

It would be good if there were an understanding among the partners that there would be a single payment. However, I believe that we have ensured all the protection that is needed while remaining within the confines of parity.

The other key issue is that it is crucial that the changes and flexibilities that we were looking for are introduced at the point when universal credit comes in. We could not move on universal credit without those, and the key thing was getting those two elements aligned. That has taken some time. There may well be a view across the water that they might look at these things at some time in the future, but we needed it right at the beginning, which is what we have achieved.

12.30 pm

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome it very much. I recognise the hard work that the Minister has put in to put our case forward on the flexibilities. I know that he was working hard on that long before the debate took place in the Chamber. Will he confirm again that the delay in the introduction and roll-out of universal credit will not cause any breach in parity?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Member's comments. She is absolutely right; we identified the flexibilities right at the start of the process.

I confirm absolutely that we have negotiated these arrangements and have produced a package in agreement with Lord Freud that ensures that there is no breach of parity.

Mr Copeland: I, too, thank the Minister for his efforts on the issue thus far. He is aware of the serious reservations that individual Members and some party groups in the House have about the effects of the proposed legislation. Does he now feel that the shopping basket is filled with as much as can be purchased, or is he actively exploring other areas so that our citizens can be protected from the worst effects of the proposed legislation?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that I made it clear in my statement that Lord Freud would visit in November and that we would have further detailed information about the impact of the housing benefit changes in Northern Ireland. That information, together with his visit, will help us to move on in that area, which is, of course, an area of considerable concern. The Member referred to that, as have many others, and we recognise it.

I am sure that other issues in the detail of the legislation and the regulations will be looked at where it is not so much a matter of bringing something back from Westminster but of this House doing the hard work and seeing what amendments, flexibilities and changes can be made. The biggest and most challenging work, however, was to get that firm commitment in writing from Lord Freud, which we now have.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Today, he is quite reminiscent of Neville Chamberlain. Although the flexibilities certainly please us, they will not, on their own, appease us.

The statement gives no indication of a recognition of the factors prevalent in Northern Ireland that will make the impact of welfare reform here even harsher. I appreciate that more work is being done on housing, but there is no mention of reduced employment opportunities, lack of childcare or, significantly, higher rates of disability and mental illness. How does the Minister intend to pursue those important issues?

Mr McCausland: I am taken aback by Mr Durkan's words of thanks. He expressed them on the stairs on the way down to the Chamber, and he has expressed them in the Chamber, so I am truly overwhelmed by his generosity of spirit. It is rather different from his press statement this morning, in which, I noticed, he was beating his chest once again. There was so much chest beating, I thought that he was about to audition for a Tarzan film.

To return to the issue that the Member raised, I should say that it is a major and very important element of the flexibility. It is the area on which there has been so much discussion and focus. Indeed, when the Executive subcommittee has asked parties to come forward with the flexibilities that they are looking for, those were the three things. We have had considerable success — in fact, I believe that we have had full success — in that regard.

There are other issues. We will work on some of those in the Executive subcommittee, which is due to meet again this afternoon. Work will be ongoing in the Committee for

Social Development as it scrutinises the legislation. There is more work still to do, particularly on the area of housing that I referred to in answer to a previous question.

I cannot magic up a different employment situation. That is not an area that falls within my responsibility. There are things that we can do and things that we cannot do, and that is the key. Over the next while, we need to keep the focus on the areas in which we can make a difference rather than waste time looking at areas in which it is impossible to make a difference. We should accept that there are constraints. However, there are things that we can do. Over the next number of weeks, the focus for the Committee for Social Development, for me and for officials will be very much on the areas in which we can make a difference — albeit limited to some extent — by tailoring the legislation for Northern Ireland. That has to be the priority.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, thank the Minister for the statement. I welcome the announcements on the payment mechanisms and the timing of roll-out. He referred to the specific challenges that we face in Northern Ireland and how the housing benefit changes will further impact on those. Although it is important that we raise these matters with Lord Freud, given the problems that we have with segregated social housing, would the Minister be able to make a better case for flexibility if we were seen to promote mixed housing proactively?

Mr McCausland: As the Member rightly identifies, the issue of segregated housing is a significant one in Northern Ireland. It is not restricted to those who are in receipt of housing benefit, whether in the private rented sector or the social sector. It is also a reality among homeowners. Most people who own their own home live in areas that are as segregated as social housing areas are. We do ourselves a disservice if we go down the road of focusing simply on social housing. It is a wider societal issue. The challenge is to find out why it happens in the private rented sector, why it happens among homeowners and why it happens in the social sector. The detailed research has almost been completed, and we will have that for our meeting with Lord Freud.

There is work to be done, and there are real challenges. Look at the issue that I have brought up on a number of occasions; namely, the social housing development programme. When I was presented with the social housing development programme at the start of the year, I challenged the Housing Executive on whether, in producing the programme, it had taken into account the impact of welfare reform. The answer was no, which is truly alarming. The social housing development programme was sent back to the Housing Executive for further consideration because it had not taken account of welfare reform. A very large section of the people on the waiting list are singles, yet there was not the provision for singles in the building programme that the situation merited. There is a lot of work to be done on housing. That is one of the major challenges, and that is why I am so pleased that we will have that engagement with Lord Freud when he is here in November.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that changes have been made to direct payments. However, there are a lot more issues in the Bill that will have a major impact. Direct payments are crucial, but equally crucial is the whole question of

underoccupancy, which could lead to up to 40,000 people being made homeless. Has the Minister discussed with Lord Freud the question of underoccupancy, the impact that the legacy of conflict has had and the difficulties that it poses, and the role of Atos in providing medical assessments here, given the serious difficulties and problems elsewhere?

Mr McCausland: First of all, I assure the Member that I appreciate his words of thanks. They have been duly noted.

I have been lobbying the Westminster Government for flexibility in introducing the housing size and underoccupancy measure as we seek to understand the impact on our social housing stock in Northern Ireland. So, the answer to the Member's question is, yes, we have been lobbying on that issue and putting the case very strongly. That will be a key topic for consideration at the housing benefit reform event that I plan to hold. In the meantime, I have asked for the social housing development programme to be adjusted to cater for smaller households. That is an obvious response to make sure that, if a particular situation is emerging, we have the right housing stock to meet the demands from that.

As regards the assessments for PIP in the future, it is a bit presumptuous to think that Atos —

Mr F McCann: It is happening at present.

Mr McCausland: We are dealing with this particular piece of legislation and that is another issue, but it is one that I am sure the Member will return to.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the statement from the Minister as far as it goes. How confident is he that the IT system can be refined and specialised to meet the needs of Northern Ireland? More importantly, in the meantime, will he give an assurance to those unfortunate but genuine claimants who have to appear before appeal or review boards that they will be treated with due regard and sensitivity by panel members? There has been a disturbing trend in recent times of claimants, especially those who suffer from mental health problems, not being treated with due regard. That causes major concern and problems.

Mr McCausland: One of the major pieces of work over the next while will be to develop the guidance, processes and so on for assessments. Experience will certainly feed into that discussion. The ongoing work by my officials will look at that, and I am sure that the Committee will want to look at it as well. The concern that the Member expressed has been noted and will be taken on board.

I apologise because, having answered the second question, I have forgotten what the first one was.

Mr Byrne: It was about the IT system.

Mr McCausland: Thank you. I am assured that the IT flexibilities we require can be delivered in the necessary time frame and that they will work effectively. The reason for bringing in universal credit within the time frame that I set out is to have assurance that the IT system will be able to accommodate our needs. It is a major challenge, and it has taken a lot of negotiation to get us to the point where DWP is willing to do this. We have got to that point, and I am satisfied that it will work in the way that DWP intends. We will monitor it carefully, as we move forward, to ensure that everything is in order.

One of the good things about this is that universal credit is being introduced on a rolling system in stages. By coming in at the end of the process, we will benefit from the lessons that have been learned from what went before. Any flaws in the system and procedural things that need to be amended will have shown up. We will benefit from that experience, so people in Northern Ireland will actually have a double advantage.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I too thank the Minister for his statement, but I will leave the fulsome praise to Mr Durkan.

In your statement, Minister, you talked about the effectiveness of your MPs at Westminster. That is a matter of opinion, as there will still be a £400 million deficit in the welfare budget — but that is beside the point at the moment.

You used an interesting phrase in your statement when you talked about “customising welfare reform” to suit the needs here. That has been precisely the whole argument around welfare reform: we are asking for flexibilities to ensure that the particular circumstances and needs here in the North are catered for. In relation to the social fund, you mentioned setting something up to cater for our local needs. How soon do you envisage that being put in place?

12.45 pm

Mr McCausland: The Member made a number of points there. I suppose that that is the nearest to happy that you are going to get out of Mr Brady.

Mr Brady: Happier.

Mr McCausland: Happier. That is good.

As regards MPs in Westminster, it is always more effective to be there than not be there. If you are not there at all, you cannot even have your say. It is always best to use the opportunity to influence to whatever degree you can.

As regards customising to meet the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland and the social fund, that work is ongoing. We know what the deadline is, and we know the challenge. We need to have that in place so that people in Northern Ireland do not lose out. We need to have a social fund, and the challenge is there to ensure that we get one that is best suited to the needs of Northern Ireland. That work will be ongoing, and I am sure that it will come up regularly between now and the end of the financial year, through both the work of the Executive subcommittee and that of the Social Development Committee.

Mr Campbell: I am sure that the Minister will have noted the question from the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development, who said that it was as a consequence of the long debate the other week that some of these flexibilities have come about. I am sure that the Minister will probably comment that, if we had talked on until 4.00 am, we might have got even more flexibility. That is how ludicrous that was.

On a more serious and substantial point, can the Minister outline what the consequences would have been for claimants and other high-risk and vulnerable sections of our society had we not proceeded at Second Stage when we did?

Mr McCausland: The Member has made an important point. I reiterate what I said at that debate, with an additional point: it was imperative that we moved forward, because the implications were, as I have said, no social fund to help the most vulnerable; the loss of £200 million from the budgets of other key Departments, whether Health, Education or whatever; and, thirdly, the endangering of well over 1,000 or 1,500 jobs in Northern Ireland. Those dangers were avoided by ensuring that we moved forward. That said, there is a timetable between now and the end of the process that we need to meet. It is a very tight timetable, and it is imperative that there is no further delay, because we could get ourselves into difficulties if there were further delays. We need to move forward with urgency, acknowledge the success that we have achieved and show that that approach really works. I think that we can see resolutions to a number of the other issues over the next while.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that the SDLP MPs challenged every aspect of the Welfare Reform Bill in Westminster. Following on from his last comment, in his discussions with Lord Freud, did he get a guarantee that the 1,500 jobs in the Social Security Agency and the Child Support Agency were now safe?

Mr McCausland: I would not want to intervene in what was clearly a domestic squabble on the other side of the House about attendance or non-attendance at the sovereign Parliament at Westminster. As regards the jobs, the position is simply that there has no announcement yet about where the future welfare payment jobs will go. We know that we are well placed in Northern Ireland because of the high performance level in the units in the Province. It is crucial that we highlight that, and, in fact, that point was made to Lord Freud when I met him last Tuesday. We are performing extremely well, and I give credit to the staff in the Social Security Agency and those in charge of the agency. They have done a good job in ensuring that we are well placed. On the other side of the picture, if we had not moved, we would have endangered the jobs. We must now continue to press home to Westminster the high level of performance here and the fact that it would make good sense for a whole lot of logistical reasons to retain the jobs in the Province. I am very hopeful in that regard.

Ms Brown: I welcome the statement by the Minister. This is good news, and I congratulate the Minister on delivering for the people of Northern Ireland on these important issues. Does the news that universal credit will not now be introduced until April 2014 have any bearing on the critical timeline for the Welfare Reform Bill and the associated regulations being passed through the House?

Mr McCausland: No, we still need to have the legislation through in the timescale that we indicated. There is no flexibility in that regard. The urgency is there for the reasons that I have set out in regard to the social fund and because other changes will come down the road in the early part of next year rather than in the following year. Because of that, there is no opportunity for further delay. We still have to stick to the timeline.

Assembly Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is the motion under Standing Order 34. As this is the first time that the Assembly has considered such a motion, I will explain the procedure. Standing Order 34(5) restricts the debate to two speakers. Only the mover of the motion and the Member who opposes it may make brief statements. The Speaker has ruled that the time limit for the statements will be five minutes each. The Minister for Social Development has indicated that he will speak to oppose the motion. Standing Order 34 also states that, after both statements have been made, the Question must be put without further debate. Given the restrictions, Members should not try to make any interventions or any points of order until the item has been concluded. The motion does not require cross-community support. Let us proceed.

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Welfare Reform Bill is compatible with human rights.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I propose the motion today not to grandstand or to take the easy way out by opposing the Bill, as some would have you believe, but with genuine concern that the Bill will destroy families, lead people into destitution and lead to thousands of people being made homeless.

A number of people have tried to mislead people on the Sinn Féin position on welfare reform or cuts. I will make it clear again: we are opposed to the passage of the Bill, and we were opposed to the passage of the Bill in June 2007 when we brought amendments to the Chamber. We in Sinn Féin have said that we will consider all options in the passage of the Bill through Committee. In fact, we have promised many groups and individuals whom we have had meetings with that we will have full scrutiny of the Bill during Committee Stage, and that is what we intend to do.

That is why we bring the motion to the Chamber today. We believe that passing the Bill will impact on the human rights of our constituents. We have argued, as have many in this Chamber, that different circumstances exist in the North. Let us now put that to the test. When the Equality Commission was in front of our Committee, we asked a number of questions that left concerns, especially concerns that the legislation will have a more detrimental impact on the North. Sinn Féin also met the commission, and the commission voiced serious concerns that the Department for Social Development had failed to consider the cumulative impact of welfare reform. The commission was also critical of the failure to provide consultation on the whole policy framework as it specifically applies to the Six Counties.

Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which is concerned with discrimination, says that, to comply with article 14, the Government must consider the potential adverse impact on any group that may amount to any form of discrimination. Section 75 sets a higher standard because it obligates legislators to avoid adopting policy that adversely impacts on named groups such as women, children and those in particular religious groups.

Where there is an adverse impact, there is a need to take mitigating measures to remove that negative impact. The argument that every claimant is dealt with on an equal basis does not absolve the Department for Social Development of the responsibility to scrutinise the impact of policy on disadvantaged groups.

We also met the Human Rights Commission to ask if it is happy that the passage of the Bill is compatible with people's human rights. It was quite obvious that the answer was no. It was interesting to note that the Human Rights Commission expressed concern that, despite its expectation of a clear statutory duty to scrutinise the legislation and an official offer to provide expertise, both the Minister and his Department had failed to engage with the commission. That is a deplorable situation.

We believe that the Bill should be set aside. The Commission was concerned that a full memorandum of human rights and equality implications, which they considered appropriate for this Bill, had not been tested and may not have been prepared by the Department for Social Development. Instead, the Minister may simply state that the Bill is compliant. It also stated that, if the Executive did not trigger Standing Orders 34 and 35, the matter of human rights compliance would fall to the Secretary of State to determine as he sees fit. It also said that the NI Act had a constitutional status that Westminster could not ignore. The Act allowed for much greater flexibility in relation to the operation of parity, in administration, funding and recognition of different circumstances in the North of Ireland.

The Commission was very concerned that the Bill was constructed in such a way that it was difficult, if not impossible, to determine human rights and equality compliance because so much relied on secondary legislation and guidelines. It urged us to call for the legislation to be considered together with secondary regulations and guidelines because meaningful scrutiny was impossible otherwise.

We believe that the Assembly should invite the Human Rights Commission in to see whether the Bill is compatible with people's human rights in the North. Not to go down that road would leave us open to criticism that we have not done all in our power to make the changes to the Bill that we believe are required to protect people.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion.

I am somewhat surprised by the motion. As part of the process for bringing a Bill to the Executive, my Department has already conducted a full analysis of the proposals contained in it for their compatibility with their obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights. The articles of the convention that we consider to be relevant are article 3, prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment; article 4, prohibition of forced labour; article 6, right to a fair trial; article 7, no punishment without law; article 8, the right to respect for private and family life; article 10, freedom of expression; article 14, prohibition of discrimination; and article 1, protocol 1, protection of property. The Department's view and mine is that the Bill is compatible with the convention rights, as defined in section 1 of the Human Rights Act 1998. That view has been confirmed by the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

The principal reform measures being introduced through the Welfare Reform Bill are universal credit, which will replace the main income-related working-age benefits, and the personal independence payment, which will replace disability living allowance. The Bill also contains measures to reform the existing benefits regime in advance of the introduction of universal credit. Matters relating to social security entitlement are within the ambit of article 1, protocol 1 of the convention for the purposes of article 14. The Department considers that groups of people who are treated differently by the conditions of entitlement often will not be in analogous situations. In any event, the Department considers that the basic conditions of entitlement are designed to achieve a legitimate aim and are proportionate. It is plainly in the public interest to limit financial support from the state to those who need it most by imposing earnings and capital limits and to have regard to the different issues that generally apply to younger and older people. It is also entirely reasonable to require claimants to accept a claimant commitment to show that they are prepared to engage with the system and understand what is required of them.

Equally, the Department considers that it is compatible with article 14 to restrict income-related state support, such as universal credit, to persons who are in Northern Ireland. It is reasonable for the state to pay income-related benefit only to those who are habitually resident in Northern Ireland and have a legal right to reside.

Although it is acknowledged that a social security benefit is capable of being considered a possession under article 1, protocol 1, it is the fact of entitlement that is protected, not a particular amount of benefit. PIP will assess more accurately, objectively and transparently those who would benefit most from additional support, and replacing DLA with a new benefit focuses support on the disabled people who face the greatest barriers to leading a full, active and independent life, and decisions will be based on an individual's circumstances and the impact of an individual's health condition or impairment, rather than labelling them by their disability.

1.00 pm

The changes are, in any event, justifiable. A redesign of the benefits and tax credits systems, which aims to create greater incentives to work and to earn money and allows income to be subject to a more generous taper, which will mean that a claimant will keep more of their benefit, despite working and earning money, is, clearly, a legitimate aim. Any significant interference with an existing claimant's amount of benefit will be proportionate. The amount of universal credit has been designed to provide a different structure of support for people with no or low incomes, both in and out of work.

As you are aware, the Bill corresponds to the Westminster Welfare Reform Act 2012. You may be interested to learn that lawyers for the Department for Work and Pensions have also considered convention rights and advised that the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 are, indeed, compatible. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud, has made a statement under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act 1998 that, in his view, the provisions of the Westminster Bill are compatible with convention rights. In view of the actions already taken in relation to human rights, which

I have just outlined, I oppose the motion raised under Standing Order 34, and I urge other Members to similarly oppose it.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr F McCann and Ms Ruane

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Ms Brown.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kinahan, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann

Question accordingly negatived.

1.15 pm

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I understand that, in an earlier debate, the Minister mentioned that I used the word "condemn" about people and organisations who campaign to change the Welfare Reform Bill. I want to put on record that, if I did use the word "condemn", I, obviously meant to use the word "commend".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members may take their ease for a few minutes.

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Consideration Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the four clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the long title.

Clauses 1 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Consideration Stage of the Superannuation Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: One amendment has been tabled. Members will have received a copy of the Marshalled List, which provides details of the amendment, and the grouping list. The amendment requires any changes to the compensation scheme that would reduce the amount of a benefit to be subject to the negative resolution procedure. I remind Members who intend to speak that they should address their comments only to the amendment. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill.

If that is clear, we shall proceed. No amendments have been tabled to clause 1.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Consultation in relation to civil service compensation scheme modifications)

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move the following amendment: In page 2, line 32, leave out “Before” and insert

“The scheme shall be subject to negative resolution and before”.

In moving the Committee’s amendment, I would, first, like to take a little latitude as Chairperson to refer briefly to the Committee’s scrutiny of the Bill at Committee Stage.

The Committee held a number of evidence sessions with departmental officials, both before the Bill was introduced to the Assembly and during Committee Stage. It also engaged in written correspondence on detailed issues arising from the evidence. Members also heard from a panel of Civil Service trade union representatives and other stakeholders, including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission.

In its report, the Committee agreed key conclusions and policy recommendations in addition to the proposed amendment, all of which will help to address issues raised during the taking of evidence. I welcome the positive response that the Committee recently received from the Minister on each of these. First, the Committee welcomes the Department’s clarification that engagement between NICS management and the trade unions offers the opportunity for compromise and agreement on potential nuances in the timing and substance of compensation scheme changes in the North, while maintaining overall parity. The Committee believes that the reconstituted pensions forum has the potential to provide an appropriate mechanism for meaningful engagement and calls on management and trade union sides to engage constructively through the forum with the aim of reaching agreement on any scheme changes to be made through subordinate legislation after the Bill is enacted.

Arising from its examination of the requirements for proper consultation and of the current process for following parity in policy with Britain, the Committee recommends that, in future, the Department undertake local consultation with the trade unions at the formative stage of policy development in tandem with rather than subsequent to the timetable followed by the respective Whitehall Department. Members believe that that would help to maximise the opportunity for DFP and the Executive to influence Whitehall policy in that area and to ensure that any considerations that are specific to the North are taken into account before reform proposals are finalised. The Minister believes that the recommendation can be achieved through the pensions forum, and I expect that the Committee will wish to monitor future initiatives in that regard.

I will now turn to the specifics of the amendment. During the Committee's deliberations, it became clear that, although removing the trade union veto, the Bill as drafted would fail to address an anomaly whereby the Department can make changes to the Civil Service compensation scheme through subordinate legislation — in this instance, to decrease redundancy payments to civil servants — without the Assembly being able to debate and agree the proposals when it was deemed necessary. Given that lack of accountability to the Assembly, the Committee agreed to table an amendment at Consideration Stage to provide for a measure of Assembly control. The Committee welcomes the recent notification that the amendment will be accepted by the Minister.

In its deliberations on the amendment, the Committee examined the respective merits of the affirmative and negative resolution procedures. It was noted that a case could be made for affirmative resolution on the basis of the number of people affected by changes to the scheme and the relevance to public spending. Also, the affirmative approach would address the theoretical risk that scheme changes could be brought into operation by the Department before the Committee had had an opportunity to table a motion for a prayer of annulment against such changes. Although cognisant of those points, the Committee considered that the negative resolution procedure would better align with the provision in the 1972 order for changes to the compensation schemes of other public servants. In view of its decision to opt for negative rather than affirmative resolution in its amendment, the Committee called on the Department to provide an assurance that, in the event of the amendment being agreed by the Assembly, it would observe the practice of the 21-day rule, whereby any future superannuation scheme changes will not commence until at least 21 days after being laid in the Assembly. That assurance was received from the Minister on 10 October.

Lastly, I inform Members that the Committee also considered the merits of amending the Bill to strengthen the reporting duty in clause 2 to include information on the consideration given to all issues raised during the consultation, the detail of any changes made to the provisions of the scheme as a result of the consultation and, finally, the time frame for the consultation. However, given assurances from the Department that those requirements are already inherently a requirement under clause 2, the Committee decided not to propose such an amendment. Instead, the Committee will scrutinise carefully the reports that DFP lays before the Assembly

to ensure that they include the detail necessary to inform the Assembly's view on the robustness of the consultation undertaken by the Department. That, too, has been acknowledged by the Minister. I ask the House to support the amendment.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the House. I will speak in favour of the Bill as presented with the one amendment, which is basically the negative resolution in relation to bringing it back before the House, should that be required. I understand that we have already dealt with a number of the areas where we have removed the veto for the unions within the Bill to come into line with the 2010 order from Westminster and have agreed to additional consultation with the unions prior to any changes being made. On that basis, I am in favour of the amendment and the Bill as presented.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím sa chás seo chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú. I support the amendment. The original intention of the Minister in clause 2, page 2, line 32 was simply to lay a report before the Assembly, thus quite simply presenting the Assembly with a fait accompli and, you could say, denying it power of scrutiny of whatever proposals the Minister would bring forward in respect of Civil Service redundancy arrangements. Such an arrangement would have been weak in terms of the devolved institutions and would have rendered them powerless in this respect. The amendment not only strengthens the Assembly's role but reassures the trade unions, in so far as the opportunity is there for Assembly Members, the Committee or political parties to hold the Department to account. Without the amendment, we would simply have taken the veto away from the trade unions and handed it directly to the Department. There would have been an element of pure farce in such a situation, with the Department saying that the trade unions should not have a veto but the Department should have a veto itself, without the necessity for any proposals to pass through the Assembly, subject to either positive or negative resolution.

The amendment gives, in the first place, the power of scrutiny to the Assembly if it chooses to use it, should it be necessary and should it be thought that any change being brought forward was unreasonable or unfair. That is a good and healthy situation in so far as it helps to ensure that the Department, in the knowledge that any change will be subject to negative resolution, will be minded to ensure that meaningful consultation is conducted and agreement to the largest extent possible reached with the trade unions.

Although the Bill does not require negotiation, only consultation with the trade unions, the amendment will make it much more likely that meaningful consultation/negotiation — the difference can be slim at times — will take place. It will strengthen the trade unions' hand without the veto, which was never used here. There was a long discussion at Committee Stage about the difference between consultation and negotiation. No doubt, negotiation provides the best protection for the rights and interests of workers. Some Committee members were minded to amend the Bill to require negotiation rather than consultation but, under the weight of legal advice and the dearth of case law around negotiation, it was decided to abandon that route.

Whereas the Bill will not legally require negotiation, the practical effect of the amendment will be that negotiation with a view to agreement will take place to help to ensure, from the Department's point of view, that any changes will not be challenged by the Assembly. I am not saying that that would not have happened without the amendment, but it is more likely to happen in light of the requirement for any order to be subject to negative resolution.

The amendment is a good compromise for the trade union side, affording, as it does, extra protections to its position in lieu of the removal of the veto. The Department initially rejected the amendment but later changed its mind and accepted it. I very much welcome that change. A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, ar son mo pháirtí féin, molaim an leasú seo don Tionól. On behalf of my party — the SDLP — I commend the amendment to the House.

1.30 pm

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the amendment to the Superannuation Bill. As Members will know and have already said, the Bill proposes to remove the requirement for trade union consent before any adverse changes to the existing compensation scheme can be made. As the Chair of the Finance and Personnel Committee indicated, in the time since the Bill passed its Second Stage, the Committee has scrutinised the proposals and concluded that the amendment detailed should be proposed to allow for negative resolution on potential detrimental changes. Hopefully, the amendment will address any concerns raised by trade unions around fairness and scrutiny. In addition to ensuring that Northern Ireland remains on a fair and equal footing with GB, the amendment adds a further dimension of control on governmental accountability. Trade unions still have a vital role to play in the representation of public sector workers. The Bill seeks to redress the balance and ensure that due process and credence is given to the trade union voice. Constructive engagement with trade unions should be pursued and encouraged, and the Bill gives unions their rightful place in requiring the Department to report on its consultations with trade unions and their outcome, with a view to reaching agreement that is suitable to all sides.

Although the Alliance Party supports the proposed changes, which serve to maintain parity and ensure that our public sector adequately reflects its GB equivalent, we appreciate the need to exercise caution when making any decision so substantial. For those reasons, we support the amendment today.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel):

I thank the Committee for its work on the Bill and for the conclusions and recommendations in the report. I note that the Committee considered that there was a strong case for greater Assembly scrutiny of changes, and it proposed the amendment that we have discussed today.

I am not going to go into some of the other outlying issues that Members have raised about negotiations and consultations and the difference between them. It was always our intention to have the 21-day rule apply; there is not an issue there. However, the Committee wished to see some measure of Assembly control. It proposed the amendment, which would mean that any scheme that had the effect of reducing the amount of compensation should be presented to the Assembly and be voted on by

negative resolution. I can confirm that we have accepted that amendment. We have consulted the Office of the Legislative Counsel and have agreed revised wording for the amendment. Therefore, I am happy for the amendment to be accepted by the Assembly today, and I trust that it will be.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for keeping their contributions short. I will try to do the same. I thank the Members and the Minister for their contributions to the debate. I will go over some of them briefly.

Paul Girvan, on behalf of the DUP, agreed to the amendment and the Bill as presented. The Deputy Chair referred to the original proposal to simply lay a report before the Assembly. He said that he believed that that would have undermined the Assembly's role and that the changes that have come forward will be positive not only for these institutions but for the trade unions. They will strengthen the trade unions' hand, and the amendment is a compromise. Judith Cochrane echoed that and said that it is important that there is a maintenance of control and government accountability. A number of Committee members were concerned that we should strike the correct balance as regards accountability and the role of the Assembly.

I should also acknowledge that Committee members were mindful of the fact that stakeholder opinion was sharply divided on some of the provisions in the Bill. The removal of the requirement for the Department to obtain the consent of the trade unions for reductions in benefits was always going to be a contentious issue. That was a factor in the Committee's deliberations on the need for the amendment. The Committee's decision to support the removal of the trade union veto was influenced by a number of considerations, including the fact that no trade union veto exists in respect of the superannuation arrangements for the other categories of public servants; the clarification and assurances received on the consultation arrangements to be followed; and the safeguard provided in the proposed amendment to establish a measure of Assembly control over future scheme changes. Of course, as one Member said, the veto has never been used.

It should be acknowledged that the reporting requirements in clause 2 provide an extra element of assurance. However, without the level of Assembly control that the Committee proposes in the form of the negative resolution procedure, there is no safeguard if concerns are raised — for example, by employee representatives — about the fairness of the consultation or about issues not being addressed during the consultation process. The amendment will, therefore, give this democratically elected institution its rightful place in having a level of control in that respect. Some might question the value of having that safeguard, given the policy of parity with Whitehall. However, two important points arose from the Committee's scrutiny. First, as I mentioned, DFP explained that engagement between Civil Service management and trade unions offered the opportunity for compromise and agreement on potential nuances to the timing and substance of compensation scheme changes in the North while maintaining overall parity. Secondly, the legal advice to the Committee highlighted the Gunning principles, which set out the case law requirements on fair and proper

consultation. In light of that, it will be vital that proper consultation takes place, and the amendment will help to ensure that that is the case moving forward.

Finally, I should point out that, in agreeing the proposed amendment, the Committee was mindful that the extent of Assembly control provided for would align with the narrow scope of the Bill and would apply only to proposed reductions in the amount of a compensation benefit. Personally, I believe that the rationale behind the amendment could equally apply to the case for establishing a similar level of Assembly control over all changes to Civil Service superannuation arrangements, including any proposed reductions or increases in pension benefits in the years ahead. However, that is perhaps a debate for another occasion.

I welcome Members' contributions to the debate, and I again thank the Minister and the Department for their positive responses to the Committee's report recommendations. I, therefore, ask the House to support the Committee's amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to clauses 3 and 4. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group those clauses for the Question on stand part.

Clauses 3 and 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Superannuation Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That the draft Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

This statutory rule is being made under the Energy Act 2011, which prescribes that these regulations must be laid in draft for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly. The draft regulations that I bring forward today relate to the introduction of the Northern Ireland renewable heat incentive (RHI) and were subject to a statutory consultation that closed in October 2011. Following the consultation, further work was carried out to finalise both the policy position and these regulations.

The legislation will provide the necessary powers for my Department to introduce the RHI scheme, which will support generators of renewable heat through long-term incentive payments designed to cover the additional costs involved in renewable technologies, as well as providing a favourable rate of return for investors. Ensuring a more secure, competitive and diverse heating market is a key priority for my Department. Our current reliance on fossil fuels is unsustainable; therefore, heat from indigenous and renewable sources must be promoted. The RHI will provide businesses, community groups, schools, churches and other organisations with ongoing financial support when switching to renewable heating. In addition, the development of the sector will provide opportunities for local firms involved in the area.

The RHI will be open to non-domestic customers in the first instance, with a view to extending it to the domestic market in due course. In the meantime, householders can avail themselves of grant support from my Department through the renewable heat premium payments scheme that I launched in May. My Department has already received over 300 applications and has offered over £450,000 in support. That represents a total investment in the sector of £1.7 million.

Financial incentives have already been successful in the local renewable electricity market. Since the introduction of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) in 2005, the level of electricity generated from renewable resources has increased from 3% to 14%. It is now vital that a similar commitment is made for the renewable heat market. It is expected that the RHI will support the installation of over 20,000 technologies by 2020, as well as securing our target to have a level of 10% renewable heat. The launch of the RHI, in conjunction with the grant support already in place for domestic customers, represents funding of £25 million up to 2015. This demonstrates my commitment to the sector and my desire to see levels of renewable heating increase.

I ask Members to support the regulations that will outline the arrangements for the Northern Ireland RHI. These in turn will allow for the launch of the scheme and for installers of renewable heat to be supported by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). On that basis, I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat,

a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her introductory remarks.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment welcomes the introduction of the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations 2012. The Committee recognises that, although Northern Ireland has no binding targets under the EU renewable energy directive, we are expected to contribute to the Westminster share of that target. As part of that share, the strategic energy framework commits the Department to achieving 40% of its electricity and 10% of heat being generated from renewable source by 2020. Those targets are very challenging.

The Department has informed the Committee that the current level of renewable heat generated is 1.7%. To assist us in increasing this level to 10% by 2020, the Westminster Government have made £25 million of funding available to the Executive up to 2015 to support the introduction of a renewable heat incentive. The Department has assured the Committee that this is additional funding that will have no impact on energy bills for consumers.

The seemingly unrestrained rise in fuel prices over recent years has been of great concern to the Committee. Increasing burdens are being placed on struggling businesses and hard-hit families. Our high reliance on oil as a means of heating homes and businesses has meant that many are placed at a disadvantage when compared with regions where gas is the dominant heating fuel. All the long-term indications are that the cost of oil and gas will only increase further in coming years.

1.45 pm

The introduction of the renewable heat incentive will provide a structured means to provide long-term guaranteed financial assistance for renewable heat installations. The incentive focuses on customers who currently depend on heating oil, and it is designed to provide a cost-effective option for those consumers to switch to. It also provides an option for any consumer to avail themselves of a source of heating that can lead to lower CO₂ emissions, increased fuel security and an increase in local employment opportunities in the green energy sector.

Some concerns have been expressed that the tariffs for the renewable heat incentive are lower than those in Britain because the tariff is generated against a counterfactual position of heating oil. The Department has assured the Committee that all consumers will be eligible to apply but it will be more economically viable for those currently using oil than those on gas, gas being considerably cheaper, cleaner and greener than oil. Unlike in Britain, the vast majority of consumers here use oil to heat their home.

The £25 million provided for the renewable heat incentive is a limited and time-bound funding stream. It therefore seems appropriate that the Department targets that funding at the most costly, most polluting fuel sources. If the funding can be used to move the maximum number of people from oil to renewable energy without providing an overincentivisation, it will have succeeded in maximising the contribution to the 10% target for renewable heat.

This statutory rule represents the first phase in a two-phase approach to incentivising renewable heat

generation. The Department has informed the Committee that phase 2 should be introduced in summer 2013.

Phase 1 concentrates on non-domestic installations. That approach will allow the Department to gauge reaction to the RHI and will introduce a long-term incentive for non-domestic renewable energy. The Committee is aware that, in the intervening period, the Department has introduced the renewable heat premium payment scheme for domestic installations. The Committee considers the Department's approach to be fair and equitable, in that it provides for an immediate incentive for those who wish to install eligible technologies that, in the long term, equates to the incentive to be provided under phase 2.

The Committee scrutiny of the development of the renewable heat incentive has been considerable and reflects the importance and long-term nature of the proposals. Before supporting the RHI, the Committee sought and received assurances on incentive and tariff levels, banding levels, incentives for domestic consumers, payments to participants and support levels for the renewable heat premium payment scheme. The Committee also wanted to be satisfied that EU state aid approval had been secured before agreeing the proposals.

The Committee wrote to Action Renewables to obtain the renewable sector's views on the proposals. Action Renewables informed the Committee that it supported the proposals; however, it brought a number of concerns to the Committee's attention. Action Renewables stated that there should be support for the use of air source heat pumps, particularly as a Northern Ireland company produces them on an international scale. The renewable heat premium payment scheme provides a one-off payment of £1,700 to domestic consumers. The Department also assured the Committee that it intends to introduce support for air source heat pump technology in phase 2.

Action Renewables suggested that additional banding be introduced to support heat from biogas. The rate for biomethane applies only to small-scale plants that generate 200 kilowatts or less and excludes support for heat from anaerobic digesters, which generally generate more than 500 kilowatts. The Committee is aware that anaerobic digesters are incentivised for electricity generation through the ROC system and would not therefore be eligible for an incentive for heat, as that would constitute double incentivisation. However, the Department may wish to consult on this in phase 2 to determine whether there may be opportunities to incentivise heat generation from biogas at levels greater than 200 kilowatts.

Action Renewables also raised concerns that the proposed rates and bands for biomass could create a distortion in the market and lead to applicants installing boilers with a smaller than required capacity, leaving them to have to supplement their heat from oil generation. That is another matter on which the Department may wish to consult in phase 2.

The Department has informed the Committee that the renewable heat incentive will have scheduled reviews built in to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and provides value for money. Those will include consideration of the appropriateness of technologies and the effectiveness and success of the scheme. Clearly, the Committee will pay particular attention to the reviews, and it will scrutinise the

implementation of the scheme and the proposals for phase 2 as closely as it scrutinised the proposals for phase 1. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, therefore, supports the renewable heat incentive and recommends that the regulations be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Newton: I rise as a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee to welcome what I regard as a good news story announced by the Minister today. It is a good news story in many respects, as the Chairman of the Committee outlined in a very detailed manner.

I have just a few remarks. This is another step forward in the green economy, which is to be welcomed. It is an area where, I believe, we are often maligned, and I do not believe that that maligning is justified. The renewable technologies are a cost-effective option that, as the Minister has outlined, will see many beneficiaries being brought to the table. They offer a degree of competition in our economy, which, again, is a good thing. It is to be welcomed that, in the first stage, 300 applications from householders have been made for householders' grants. That is an encouraging move.

This project is leading us down a road, and I believe that, when we reach the final stage, the economy of Northern Ireland will have benefited significantly from the steps that the Minister has taken. The Committee as a whole welcomes it, as has been said. It is a welcome stage down the road. The Minister has recognised the need for competition in our energy sources, and this is a very positive step.

Mrs Overend: I apologise for not being here for the Minister's speech earlier. Unfortunately, the TVs were not up to date out there, and I thought that it had not started yet. My apologies.

Having had the opportunity to scrutinise the regulations in Committee, I am happy to support the Minister in bringing them forward. The statutory rule will establish a renewable heat incentive scheme that will give subsidy payments to generators of renewable heat and producers of biomethane.

Given that there are differences between renewable heat markets in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it was important that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment undertook its own research and economic appraisal of the situation here. That research, followed by a public consultation, has undoubtedly been invaluable in informing decision-makers on the best way forward for a renewable heat incentive scheme for Northern Ireland. The benefits of renewable heat as an alternative to expensive and finite fossil fuels, which often have a negative effect on the environment, should be well known to the House. Examples include wood pellet boilers, solar thermal water-heating units and heat pumps. Further to that, biomethane is a naturally occurring gas and is defined as a green source of energy, which means that it also has many advantages over fossil fuels. It is right that we have a scheme in place that supports and incentivises those alternatives.

The statutory rule has its basis on equivalent regulations in Great Britain that have been passed at Westminster and Holyrood. It is important that we do not find ourselves lagging behind, given that the scheme is already off the ground to some extent in other regions of the UK. It is also

important that we do all in our power to meet the target of delivering 10% renewable heat by 2020 as included in the strategic energy framework and endorsed by the Executive. This scheme can be a significant contributor to that aim.

I want to briefly mention the employment opportunities that could stem from the heating industry. The Department of Energy and Climate Change estimated that there were 150,000 jobs in the heating industry in Great Britain, which equates to around 3,750 jobs in that sector in Northern Ireland. The Renewable Energy Installer Academy lists 92 individuals or firms in Northern Ireland that are qualified to install renewable heat. With the right action, that can grow.

We are aware of the disappointing labour force statistics of last week, showing that our unemployment rate remains above the UK average. The statistics show that, more than anything, we must maximise the potential of every opportunity to create jobs. I, therefore, call on the Minister to use the regulations as a means of helping to tackle our high unemployment rate.

Mr Lyttle: I support the regulations. The Alliance Party has a long-standing commitment to encouraging the development of renewable energy sources. Our 2011 Assembly manifesto called for the introduction of a renewable energy Bill. A renewable heat incentive scheme will assist us in working towards reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and focus our work on harnessing the potential of renewable sources for our environment and economy.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the regulations. They have been long awaited by the renewables industry in Northern Ireland. Although the delays between the consultation and the arrival of this proposal were necessary to ensure that we did not breach EU state aid rules, the timeline caused some uncertainty in the industry.

I received representations from people asking me whether the regulations would be introduced, and I assured them at all times that the Minister's intention, as best I knew it, was to bring forward the regulations. Today's announcement is a welcome step that will provide assurance for the industry and give people who want to install renewable heat systems the confidence to do so.

There are many advantages to renewable heat. In many cases, the fuel sources will be cheaper than oil or gas, although there can be higher upfront costs. That is a problem for the industry, and I hope that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will work with the industry to see how we can get round the financing of renewable heat systems.

In the past, I have expressed my concern about the Department's overall priorities. At times, I am concerned that it seems as though the Department is trying to ride two horses in promoting gas and renewables. I have said that the statutory duty to promote the gas industry means that there is a hierarchy whereby gas is favoured over renewables. That needs to be addressed in the forthcoming energy Bill.

I take the opportunity to make the point that, although I welcome our 10% target for renewable heat, it should be seen as a minimum and not a maximum. The funding for the renewable heat incentive has come from Westminster, and should the scheme be successful — I believe that

it will be — I hope that the £25 million will be seen as a minimum investment and the Department will consider supplementing it.

I said that the Department seemed to be riding two horses, and it has certainly been speculated that it proposes to spend £50 million to extend the gas network. That would send another signal that the Department's commitment was to gas and not renewables. I hope that I am wrong about that. I hope that there is a genuine commitment to renewable heat and that, as well as this incentive, Governments will go further, and Departments will increasingly look towards renewables to source heat rather than using polluting fossil fuels.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. Having said that, I note that a motion on the green new deal is also down for debate in the House, and it is disappointing to see how few Members have made themselves available to debate a very real scheme with real job opportunities. However, I am pleased that those who spoke in the debate were positive and welcomed the renewable heat incentive.

I will take up some of the points made by the Chair of the Committee, but I want to say to Mr Agnew that part of the reason for the delay in introducing the regulations was the fact that the SL1 was with the Committee for a considerable time.

The air source heat pumps are incentivised under the premium payment scheme for domestic installations, and non-domestic installations will be supported under phase 2. Those are not supported in Great Britain at present, and, therefore, we have moved beyond what is happening on the mainland in that regard.

The Chairperson of the Committee also mentioned biogas. The incentive levels for biogas are very appropriate, and we took a lot of time to look at those in the context of the existing market conditions.

Indeed, some would argue that the AD support for biogas is too generous where electricity is concerned, but I think that it is at the right level. Of course, as he suggested, we will look at large biogas users in the second phase of the consultation.

I do not want to leave the House with the impression that Action Renewables does not support the RHI. Action Renewables is very supportive of the RHI coming before the House and being agreed today.

2.00 pm

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have not spoken in the debate, but I fully support the proposals and look forward to the stage 2 roll-out to domestic consumers.

I will take the Minister back to her comments about the delay with the SL1. Does she agree with me that it would have been remiss of any Committee to approve the SL1 without having full information on the levels of the incentive?

Mrs Foster: The delay was caused by the fact that you were waiting for state aid clearance. I would have thought that one would have been able to pass the SL1 without state aid clearance. Then, when that state aid clearance came, the SL1 could have gone through. In any event, we are here and we have the RHI regulations before us.

The only other issue that I want to answer Mr Agnew about concerns promoting gas contrary to renewables. There is no difficulty in supporting gas and supporting renewables. In many cases, businesses in the west of the Province — he may not be that interested in businesses in the west of the Province, but I want to tell the House that I am very interested in them — will not be able to produce enough renewable heat for their needs, particularly in the agrifood sector, where a great deal of an energy source is needed so that people can do their jobs.

So, I am pleased that Members are broadly supportive of the incentive mechanism. We are pleased that we have been able to bring it forward today. In times of higher energy prices, which the Chair referenced, my Department is committed to exploring opportunities to provide greater choice for consumers, promoting more sustainable technologies and supporting those who wish to change from conventional fossil fuel heating. The development of the sector is important in the realisation of a more diverse, secure and competitive heating market in Northern Ireland.

The regulations will support the introduction of the RHI and are set in a very clear framework for the scheme, including how payments will be calculated and made, as well as its conditions and eligibility standards. The scheme will be administered by the GB energy regulator, Ofgem, which has wide experience of managing similar large renewable energy schemes.

So, the RHI is a groundbreaking scheme for Northern Ireland. It will support the realisation of increasing levels of renewables heating to 10% by 2020 and — I hope that Mr Agnew is right — beyond. The development of this market will have real benefits for Northern Ireland's energy security by reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and by providing the potential for new jobs and industries. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Unemployment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with grave concern that the unemployment rate has risen by 19,000 in the three years between the quarters ended July 2009 and July 2012 and that 23.5% of 18- to 24-year-olds, some 24,000 young people, are unemployed with little prospect of work; acknowledges that the role of Invest NI is to grow the local economy; expresses dismay that Invest NI appears to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the trend of jobs moving overseas; further notes that the Executive have not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland Green New Deal Group or developed the proposals of the jobs plan published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and Invest NI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thanks very much indeed, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

The latest unemployment figures show that the situation has continued to deteriorate beyond the dates given in our motion. The number of people who are officially unemployed in Northern Ireland has now risen to 70,000; another 200 people joined the dole queue last month. Between June and August, 8.1% of the population here were unemployed. The number of people claiming unemployment benefit or unemployment-type benefit has increased by 4.8% to 63,400 over the past year. That is compared with a 1.4% fall in the overall UK figure. The number of people aged between 18 and 24 who are unemployed is up three percentage points from the level this time last year. That does not reflect the number of people who have had to disappear from our shores in seek of work elsewhere, principally in places such as Canada, Scotland and Australia.

I am chair of the all-party working group on construction, and the construction sector continues to bear the brunt of the impact of an economic slowdown and a lack of capital investment. The total volume of construction output has decreased by 8.2% over the past quarter, which is 2.3% lower than it was at the same time in 2011.

That is the background, or at least some of it, to our motion and is evidence of the need for a robust job creation and business support strategy. To be frank, ad hoc announcements about employing trained teachers as classroom assistants are not sufficient to deal with the growing unemployment crisis.

The people whom we represent in the Assembly need jobs, and they need them now. They cannot wait for long-term diplomacy to grind slowly through a decision-making process in China. OFMDFM has already had to rejig one visit to China to suit the political timetable of the Chinese Communist Party. That raises the question of how many more bumps we will have on that road.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The attempt to attract inward investment from countries with established and emerging markets is welcome, but it needs to go hand in glove with greater support for our local companies, be that support in marketing or in the ways recently highlighted in the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on research, innovation and development. There needs to be much more done.

As well as the need for a properly funded green new deal, which I will come to later, the Minister will be aware of the CBI Northern Ireland proposals to get the economy moving while we wait for the final decision on what corporation tax powers would cost. Many businesses look to that as being part of the context for our economic salvation.

A key issue that the CBI identifies is the need for greatly improved access to appropriate volumes and types of finance for local businesses to support our economic recovery. It recognises the need for a more proactive approach by Invest NI to client companies and potential client companies, with an effective communications strategy and benchmarking of support available compared with other EU countries to improve support for our small and medium-sized enterprises. It is also urging a reduction in red tape and a reform of the public sector, public procurement and the planning system, all of which are issues that came up last week at the meeting of the all-party working group. I appreciate that the Minister had other commitments that day, and we are all aware of them. We may disagree on some of the detail, but the point is that there is much more that the Executive could and should do to boost our economy.

The deputy First Minister's party announced its own jobs plan earlier this month. Launched by the former Member of Parliament for West Belfast, the ex-Baron of Northstead, a title that the deputy First Minister may one day inherit, its focus is opposition to the Government in Dublin. The actual jobs plan ends at the border. Interestingly, the document has this to say about jobs north of the border:

"Over the last number of years, Sinn Féin made job creation a key priority in government in the Six Counties."

Apparently, we are doing fine. The document goes on to claim:

"This good work is being continued with the new Programme for Government, which all parties (except the SDLP) support in the Six Counties."

Essentially, we did not support that Programme for Government because, just as the other Sinn Féin does not support the Irish Government's policy when it comes to job creation, we believe that it is fundamentally flawed.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Sorry, I do not get extra time for this, Phil, much as I would love to.

Published a year later than the start for the time frame that it is supposed to be a programme for, we do not need a crystal ball to know that many of the targets that it set will not be met, any more than the targets in the previous Programme for Government were met. The Northern Irish people need a jobs plan, too.

One strategy that has real potential for job creation and has been ignored, if not neglected, by the Sinn Féin/DUP Programme for Government is the green new deal. That holds promise of significant job creation; sustainable economic recovery; reduced dependency on imported fossil fuels; fewer people in fuel poverty; cuts in our carbon emissions; and the foundations of a new, competitive, low-carbon economy of the future. There is one other element to that. Attempting to address some of the worst excesses of fuel poverty helps to keep people out of hospital, so there is a cost element to it. That green new deal envisaged the refurbishment of tens of thousands of existing homes with full insulation and renewable energy, including the 137,000 homes that failed to meet the decent homes standard, thus making a significant inroad into fuel poverty. It involved the transformation of the energy performance of public and commercial buildings through energy-efficient measures and making every building virtually a power station in its own right. Those are savings to the public purse. It also envisaged decarbonisation and the regionalisation and localisation of the supplies of electricity and heat through large-scale renewables, microgeneration and the more efficient use of fossil fuels.

I return to my original point. We are losing the skills of the young people who are heading abroad. Those are the skills of the tradespeople of the future, and we are losing them to other countries. The green new deal envisaged employing a carbon army of higher- and lower-skilled workers to implement this vast, systematic reconstruction programme, with the potential to create around 24,000 jobs. It had the potential to transform our transport system and make it fit for purpose in the coming era of high oil and carbon prices by providing a real public transport choice for everyone. It also had the potential for the creation of green-collar jobs and access to the £3 billion world market for low-carbon environmental goods and services. Recently, we received from the Department enabling legislation for the green investment bank to be operational in the North. That holds great potential, and I hope that there is some dovetailing of efforts between this Department and other Departments that are empowered with this to say that, although the green investment bank is not yet fully operational, we should look at the potentials and opportunities and at what we can do to create more jobs and keep our young people at home. As we know, the green new deal was starved of the initial funding required to attract the necessary investment to enable those proposals to succeed. Far from providing the strong leadership required, the Executive prevaricated and delayed in bringing forward that green new deal.

There are opportunities now. Let us look at those opportunities and deliver on them. Let us look to the future. We have all of those issues that probably have not been dealt with well in the past. Let us look at how we can make a better future for this place. We do not quite yet have the fiscal levers necessary to set out our own economic policies, but we do have the key powers to introduce such creative, innovative new programmes as the green new deal in industrial and energy policy, education and training

and environmental and social policy. These powers are all in the hands of the devolved Administration. We need the political will to make these things happen, and, in proposing the motion, the SDLP is allowing that focus to be brought to bear, allowing the Assembly to look at these issues and allowing us to creatively and constructively look at the potential to deliver hope for our young people in particular. A Cheann Comhairle, molaim an rún.

Mrs Overend: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "economy;" and insert

"expresses dismay that Invest NI appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson; notes with concern that there was no dedicated Invest NI business start-up scheme in place for over a year; further notes that the Executive have not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland green new deal or developed the proposals of the jobs plan published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and Invest NI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals and to give a commitment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning in making bids for the significant Barnett consequential arising from the Youth Contract initiative, as announced by the coalition Government at Westminster, to tackle youth unemployment specifically."

I commend the SDLP for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House. The worryingly high and ongoing rise in unemployment is causing increasing anxiety across Northern Ireland, so it is more important than ever that the Northern Ireland Assembly is seen to be addressing the issue in a timely and efficient manner. Too often in the Assembly, we have debated fairly trivial issues when it is the economy that should be our number one priority. Therefore, I welcome the opportunity that the debate provides to discuss one of the major issues affecting the people of Northern Ireland: increasing unemployment.

The labour force statistics that were published on 12 September were shocking to individuals and families and to businesses, and they should have been shocking to us all in the House as well. Our unemployment rate was up from 7.1% to 8.2%, and we are now above the UK average. Youth unemployment, which refers to our 18- to 24-year-olds, was up to 23.5%. Again, that was well above the UK average. The proposer of the motion also referred to those statistics, and they show no improvement, with unemployment claimant counts also rising further. To put that into some sort of context, the dole queues in Northern Ireland have 2,900 more people this year than last year. That is in contrast to the rest of the United Kingdom, where the number has decreased by 1.4%. Those are the facts, and they cannot be argued with. That is why no one can disagree with the beginning of the motion, which sets out the scale of the challenge.

2.15 pm

I will move on to the Ulster Unionist Party amendment and set out the reasoning behind it. It can be broken into three parts, and I will deal with each individually. First, it

expresses dismay that Invest Northern Ireland appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson. My colleague Roy Beggs will go into that later in his speech. I sympathise with the SDLP broad-brush approach that Invest NI displays that attitude towards all jobs going overseas, but I do not fully agree with it. Invest NI has been moving away from a focus on external as opposed to local business. As regards offers, assistance and investment, more resource is going into locally owned business now than ever before from Invest Northern Ireland. The figures that compare 2011-12 to previous years bear that out. However, that said, the way Invest Northern Ireland responded to the FG Wilson situation was wrong, and the House needs to deal with that issue in more detail. We have that opportunity now, as that is what our amendment is about. After the revelation that 760 jobs were being lost at FG Wilson, the chief executive of Invest NI stated that, if he had been in charge of the company, he would have made the same decision. He also said that he was not surprised by the move. That is not the way to build confidence in our economy. It is no way to support the workers of FG Wilson, and it is totally improper from someone in his position. The House should express dismay over those comments and the resigned acceptance of the job losses that was apparent in his remarks. We should seek to highlight the advantages of doing business in Northern Ireland, not agree with decisions to move business overseas.

Secondly, the Ulster Unionist amendment differs in that it also notes with concern that there was no dedicated Invest Northern Ireland business start-up scheme in place for over a year. That is, of course, due to the legal challenge that was taken by Enterprise Northern Ireland. I am delighted by and have welcomed the news last week that the situation has now been resolved following the announcement of the Regional Start initiative, which the Minister will no doubt give us more information on later. However, given that we are in the midst of a recession with unemployment increasing on an ongoing basis and at a time when FSB research shows that nine out of 10 unemployed people who find a job do so through starting up their own business or going to work in one, it is not good enough for Invest NI not to provide a bespoke business start-up programme. I know that the Minister will point to the fact that the Go For It scheme was a wider initiative, and that is correct. However, the most important aspect of that scheme — the business start-up programme — was absent for over a year. In announcing the Regional Start initiative, the chief executive of Invest NI said that it was now time to put all this behind us and focus on delivery. We should have been focusing on delivery over the past year, yet we did not even have a dedicated programme in place to help people who wanted to start their own business. Instead, budding entrepreneurs were being signposted all over the place in an effort to get the help and support that they needed. Everyone in the House should agree that it was far from an ideal situation.

Thirdly, our amendment calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to make bids for the significant Barnett consequential arising from the Youth Contract. That £1 billion contract was an announcement made by the coalition Government in Westminster to create new opportunities for young people, including apprenticeships and work experience placements. A Barnett consequential

on both the allocation and savings of the initiative is resulting in a net addition of £26.5 million over the three-year period from 2012 to 2013. That money will, of course, go centrally to the Finance Minister, and we call for a commitment from the Enterprise Minister to work with Minister Farry to prepare bids for that money so that it is used to specifically tackle rising youth unemployment.

I move on to consider the jobs plan, as published by the Business Alliance, which includes the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors. Given that this is the first joint policy document produced by eight of our leading business organisations, it is vital that it is studied and developed. Some examples of potential job opportunities by 2020 in this document include creating 10,000 jobs in the ICT sector; growing our food and drink industry by 40%; and creating over 11,700 jobs in the creative industries and 21,000 jobs in tradable services. Will the Minister outline how that document is being taken forward, given the unique nature of its endorsement by so many in the business community? The economic strategy is a living document that must evolve and adapt to our changing economy. The jobs plan can therefore act as an important reference as we seek to make improvements and address current failings that are leading to increases in unemployment across the board.

The jobs plan also mentions another important area that the motion deals with: the green new deal. That would involve substantial investment in retrofitting a number of houses, and the jobs plan states that that could have led to between 2,300 and 3,500 jobs by 2014-15. I ask the Minister this: why was that not taken forward, and what is the future of the green new deal? Despite it being a manifesto commitment of all the parties in the House at the last Assembly election, the green new deal does not appear once in the current Programme for Government.

I ask all sides of the House to give consideration to our amendment during the debate. It is practical and pragmatic and seeks to add to the motion tabled by the SDLP. The amendment should not be dismissed simply because of party political posturing but should be considered as a positive contribution to the debate.

Mr Newton: I oppose the motion and the amendment. I find it difficult to understand what has motivated some of the comments that we have heard in the Chamber today.

I think that everyone in the Chamber recognises the difficulties that there are for those who are unemployed, and I believe that all are sympathetic to their situation. An unemployment figure of 8.2% is unacceptable. The fact is that we live in a global economy, so it should not surprise us that, when other areas are doing badly, there is a knock-on effect on Northern Ireland. However, we could, in fact, be doing worse. I looked up some of the figures, including the figures for Birmingham. It is a part of the UK economy that is not distinctly different from Northern Ireland in that it was dependent on heavy industry. The unemployment figure in the Ladywood area is 12.1%. In the Hodge Hill area of Birmingham, it is 10.3%. Again, in Middlesbrough, an area of England that has a similar economic history, the figure is approaching 10%. Of course, the Republic of Ireland has an unemployment figure of 14.7%, which is its highest unemployment figure in 17 years. That is not to do down the situation.

I take exception — that is probably too strong a term — I am surprised by the comment on Invest NI made by Mr McGlone, who holds the position of Chair of the Committee:

"Invest NI appears to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the trend of jobs moving overseas".

It is not my job to defend Invest NI; Invest NI is big enough to do that itself. However, as Chair, Mr McGlone ought to recognise that Invest NI lives in a difficult economic situation, a global situation. Those words say an awful lot more about Mr McGlone than they say about the author or speaker of those words, Alastair Hamilton. They do not recognise that we are in a global environment and that capital will invest where it gets its best return. The very same comments were made by Mrs Overend.

Remarks were made about the green new deal. On this particular day, when the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has announced an initiative on the renewable heat incentive, to criticise the green new deal at this stage is very poor timing, and you know that timing is everything in politics. Those Members, particularly those who are members of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, knew that, when the green new deal proposals were put forward, the economic case for those proposals did not stack up.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. My understanding is that the green new deal had support from economic groups such as the CBI, the Institute of Directors and business organisations, as well as trade unions and environmental groups. From what he has told us through the media, the Minister talked of one economist in his Department who believed that the proposals were risky. Surely, at a time when we are asking businesses to take risks, sometimes it is worth the Government taking risks.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Interventions should be short, and they should not end up as statements. I have warned Members on a number of occasions in the House that they should not abuse interventions, especially when the Member who has the Floor is good enough to take an intervention. I warn the whole House. The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, the Member well knows the situation that arose and the risks that were being taken. The economic case did not stack up.

With regard to where the Northern Ireland economy is, we live in a global economic situation, and world conditions are challenging. The economic recovery that was predicted — not by economists in Northern Ireland or in GB but by economists who operate in a global environment — has not come to pass as expected, and the UK entered again into a recessionary position earlier this year. The Republic of Ireland is benefiting from an export-led recovery, but that is the only area of that economy expecting real growth. Northern Ireland will continue to feel the impact of the challenging economic conditions in its key sales markets, especially those markets and companies that rely on exporting to the Republic of Ireland. It is a difficult time for Northern Ireland companies, but, rather than challenging the companies at this stage and the incentives that have been agreed by every party

around the Executive table, we should get behind the incentives, the initiatives and the strategies and drive those strategies forward.

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease as we move to Question Time at 2.30 pm. The next Member to speak on the motion after Question Time will be Phil Flanagan.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 8 have been withdrawn

FG Wilson: Job Losses

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what guidance and advice has been provided to the employees of FG Wilson. (AQO 2702/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

My officials have worked with FG Wilson since the earlier announcement was made in June this year to determine how the Department could assist these highly skilled employees who face redundancy. My redundancy advice service has already started delivering a tailored package of support to staff across all three FG Wilson sites. In addition, officials are working with the company's appointed outplacement provider, Lee Hecht Harrison, which is represented locally by Gilpin Executive Search and Development, to organise a job and training and recruitment fair at each of the three sites. Both of those will commence this week. On Friday evening, there were 14 companies listed to participate in the job fairs, with a further 28 posts identified in the food processing sector, mainly with Moy Park. I am delighted at that response, which has been facilitated in part by the advanced manufacturing working group.

Should individuals need training to facilitate their move into those new roles, my Department will arrange and fund that training. In addition, the organised training and recruitment fairs, which also take place this week, will provide an opportunity for affected workers to find out more about relevant opportunities and pathways into a different career. Northern Regional College, South Eastern Regional College and Belfast Metropolitan College have been invited to participate in the fairs along with the relevant sector skills councils. A number of private recruitment agencies will also be present.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his response. I welcome the good news element to the response that he has brought to the House. There was a very high level of skill among agency workers employed at the various sites. Can the Minister assure the House that there will be equality across the workforce for such opportunities?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Hilditch for that supplementary. He says that this is good news. It is some good news in that we are beginning to make progress in reassigning workers to other forms of work, but, of course, we must appreciate that we still have a long way to go in that respect. I am happy to give him the assurance regarding equality in how we treat all those who are affected by the FG Wilson redundancies. We have a clear self-interest in doing this, beyond our overriding requirements, in that the workers are skilled. They have a lot to offer to the future of the economy, and it is important that we fully capture the opportunity to redeploy those workers in a productive way, rather than to have them fall into unemployment. For all

those reasons, I give the Member the commitment he is looking for.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can I get an assurance from the Minister that he will keep foremost in his thoughts the difference between urban and rural? A lot of the rural workers who are being paid off from FG Wilson are from my area, and they will face difficulties in getting re-employment because of their rural isolation. Can the Minister assure me that that will be taken into account?

Dr Farry: We are certainly very conscious that there will be a number of types of workers facing different issues, and, obviously, transport is one of those. Equally, it is important that people are realistic in that there is often a requirement on people to travel to work. Although it is important that we try to find alternative work as close to home as is possible, there may be circumstances in which people will have to relocate.

There are potential job opportunities opening up in the food and drink sector, for example. Moy Park, in particular, has been very much at the forefront in identifying those. Those opportunities will be in a location that is different from Larne. It is important that people seize those opportunities.

When I am mentioning the likes of Moy Park, it is worth stressing that food and drink manufacturing is an industry that has a lot of opportunities for highly skilled operatives in management and leadership. It is not all about dirty jobs. It is an industry about which there is often the wrong perception. It is good to see that progress is being made in that sector, but I stress again the importance of people being available to travel to different opportunities.

Mr Beggs: Has the Minister been able to advise or guide employees on any new skills or training programmes related to new manufacturing that may be associated with bringing back from Caterpillar other work, which may have been carried out in other regions, and to fill the capacity that exists locally?

Dr Farry: There are a number of things that are worth saying about the issue of retraining. First of all, we are trying to conduct a skills audit of the staff who are being affected in FG Wilson. That will become clearer over time, as those who are affected by redundancies are made known. There is a commitment from me and my Department to facilitate any retraining that is involved with that.

Beyond the immediate issue of FG Wilson, we have an advanced manufacturing and engineering working group, and we are looking at the wider needs of the sector. That will capture different types of growth in respect of manufacturing, whether it is in Caterpillar or in any other companies that intend to expand or invest in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is important that we address the skills needs right across the sector and address any skill shortages or mismatches.

Mr Dickson: Can you tell us whether the skills of workers to be made redundant from FG Wilson will be matched directly to other employers, and, where there are skills gaps, will those people be trained or retrained?

Dr Farry: That is true. There are two different aspects to the processes that we have. Hopefully, the job fairs will bring that into clear focus over the coming days. We

will want to look at the existing skills of workers and see whether there are opportunities in other companies that will allow them to move across very readily without much more investment in skills. By contrast, there are those who might need a little bit more work to update their skills or who are skilled but do not have accreditation in the form of qualifications. Through the colleges, we can move swiftly to address that shortcoming and to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to move on to new productive employment.

Mr A Maginness: I accept that the Minister is doing some good work in helping those who have been declared redundant. Will the Minister consider setting up a permanent team in DEL to assist and advise workers in the future who may become redundant, rather than simply putting something in place in the aftermath of such events?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Maginness for his question. In many respects, we have that already through the redundancy advice service. That is a standing element in the employment service. However, when we are faced with major redundancies, which are very regrettable situations, we will put dedicated teams on site to work hands-on with those who are affected. There may come a time when we have to look at the resourcing of the redundancy advice service, because it is under pressure at the moment. With the wider policies being pursued by the Executive, we will, hopefully, turn a corner in respect of jobs very soon, and that pressure will be alleviated. However, it is something that I am keeping under review in the short term.

Education Maintenance Allowance

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, following the conclusion of the public consultation on 2 November 2012, when he intends to announce the future provision for education maintenance allowance. (AQO 2703/11-15)

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is trying to secure a larger budget for education maintenance allowance. (AQO 2706/11-15)

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 5 together.

With regard to the announcement on the future provision for education maintenance allowance, I can advise that, following completion of the public consultation on 2 November, my Department and the Department of Education will carefully consider all responses received, prior to making a joint recommendation on the future structure of the education maintenance allowance scheme. Final decisions on the way forward will rest with the Executive.

If changes to the scheme are to be implemented from the 2013-14 academic year, an announcement will need to be made as soon as practically possible in order to ensure that current and prospective students are provided with sufficient notice of how any proposed changes to the scheme may affect them. We also need to ensure that there is sufficient time for the Student Loans Company, which administers the scheme on behalf of both Departments, to make the required changes to the ICT infrastructure, application forms and guidance documentation.

With regard to the budget for the education maintenance allowance, my Department has always made available

sufficient resources to meet the costs of the scheme, even when that has meant providing additional resources to meet a forecast increase in demand. The budget to meet the forecast demand for the current financial year is £26.7 million. That is a significant increase from the baseline budget of £23.7 million two years ago. Indeed, annual expenditure on EMA has increased by 36% — some £7.5 million per annum — over the past five years. At present, there is no forecast pressure on the budget for the current financial year.

I should add that, as part of the Pathways to Success strategy for young people not in education, employment or training — the so-called NEETs — one of the new initiatives that I have introduced is a training allowance for young people participating in projects funded by the European social fund. That allowance has been designed to ensure that there are effective incentives in place for young people to progress from the provision that re-engages them with learning and develops skills linked to education and training to programmes that provide skills and qualifications to support progression and success in work.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. How soon does he expect to come forward with proposals? Does he plan to include all educational providers, not just schools and colleges?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary. The consultation closes on 2 November. As the Member will appreciate, it is a joint consultation by my Department and the Department of Education. I hope that, after our officials have had the chance to analyse the responses, my colleague John O'Dowd and I will be in a position to make a recommendation to the Executive before the Christmas recess.

The current review is of the core EMA scheme, which covers those currently in secondary or further education, subject, of course, to their being eligible. There is a separate EMA-type scheme for young people currently on the Training for Success programme, which is not covered by this review. As I have just outlined, we recently set in place a new training allowance for young people who are on European social fund schemes in the community and voluntary sector. That was in response to representations made by young people themselves. It was also the subject of consideration by the Committee for Employment and Learning and a debate in the Assembly. Hopefully, the House will welcome the fact that we have been able to follow through on a motion on the Floor of the Assembly in such a short time.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In light of the EMA review, has the Minister considered any additional means by which the allowance could be targeted more at those in the greatest objective need?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. First, it is worth stressing — I certainly speak for myself and John O'Dowd in this regard — that we are not seeking to abolish EMA in Northern Ireland, unlike what is happening in other jurisdictions, most notably England. We are seeking to better target existing resources around the main scheme. We still have the EMA for Training for Success. As I outlined, I have decided to introduce a new training allowance for young people who, in the past, did not benefit from EMA because they were outside the formal

statutory sector but have been engaged in very worthwhile training in the community and voluntary sector. That allowance is now in place, with thresholds of £10 and £25 respectively, subject to the number of hours attended. Hopefully, that will make a big difference and spread to support more young people as they go through education and training.

Mr Ross: I am sure that the Minister will agree with me that all the research available to him indicates that huge sums of money are being paid out in EMA that are considered deadweight. Will he assure the House that any reforms will better target EMA at those who actually need the funding to stay in education and thus result in a saving to the public purse?

Dr Farry: I am happy to give Mr Ross that assurance. We want to ensure that the resources available to my Department from the block grant are used properly and targeted at where they make a difference. Frankly, had we not gone down the route of having the current consultation on EMA and, I hope, reforms to it in due course, the danger was that, through the inefficient use of public resources, we would have left ourselves exposed to negative comment from the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office.

We will seek to capture savings, but it is important that I caution that we will not be able to capture fully the proportionate level of deadweight. For example, if 60% of recipients say that it makes a difference and the remainder says that it does not, we are not going to see the equivalent percentage in savings, because resources obviously need to be targeted most effectively, and those for whom EMA is making a difference have the strongest claim on the budget. Without doubt, there are still savings to be made from better targeting in due course, and I am committed to finding them.

2.45 pm

Mr Agnew: I am concerned that the Minister is looking for savings in this area. As he pointed out, expenditure in this area has increased, which shows an increase in need. Does the Minister not agree that, at a time when few jobs are available, there is even more reason to ensure that we keep our young people in education?

Dr Farry: The purpose of the reform is not to abolish EMA; it is to retain it and to ensure that we spend our resources on those to whom EMA actually makes a difference in staying on at school or in further education. However, where the evidence shows that EMA is not making that difference, there is no case for our spending that money, and those resources should be used elsewhere.

It is important that we are realistic about this. We have a finite budget in Northern Ireland. I know that Members have all sorts of hare-brained schemes about how we will expand that pot, but let us be realistic about where we stand. Over the past number of months, we have created a very good deal for young people in Northern Ireland. I appreciate that there are real tensions in making sure that we maximise skills, get people through education and training and tackle unemployment. However, over the past year, we have managed to freeze tuition fees, widen access to higher education, invest in NEETs budgets that did not previously exist and fund a new youth employment scheme. Those are all moneys that did not exist previously,

so we have done a lot for young people over the past 12 months. In doing that, it is important to spend the money wisely and where it will make the biggest difference.

NEETs: Support Programmes

3. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the engagement he had with the First Minister and deputy First Minister prior to the recent announcement of a pilot intervention to support young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), which will be rolled out to 500 families as part of the six signature projects. (AQO 2704/11-15)

11. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the pilot intervention to support young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). (AQO 2712/11-15)

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 11 together.

My Department, on behalf of the Executive, developed Pathways to Success, the NEETs strategy for Northern Ireland. It was the product of significant engagement between Departments, including the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it was launched in June 2012.

My Department is now implementing several initiatives under that strategy. One is the community family support programme, which was discussed in detail with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and other Executive colleagues when the Executive considered the strategy. The community family support programme pilot was initially intended to target 20 disadvantaged families. However, detailed planning has enabled us to focus on the needs of 44 families in targeted areas. The initial project will be delivered by the local employment intermediary service, in partnership with other mainstream provision. The pilot will concentrate on the needs of disadvantaged families to support parents, help prevent younger family members from falling into the NEET category and help other young family members who are already in that situation to re-engage with education, training or employment. Following a trawl of examples of good practice interventions across Departments, OFMDFM recognised the considerable benefits that would accrue from a significant extension of the original programme. The additional £2 million will mean that the service can be extended over the next two years to some 500 families.

I am also piloting a community-based access programme through the learner access and engagement programme. That programme will enable non-statutory organisations to provide learner support to young people aged 16 to 18 through a contractual arrangement with a further education college.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his full answer. Will he confirm that he is satisfied that the number of people who are classified as NEET is accurate? I have recently seen research from Europe that indicates that that number could be out by as much as 50%. Can he confirm whether young people, perhaps with mental health issues, who are in the support group of those who receive ESA and are allowed by law to carry out permitted work are included in those figures?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. The identification of the baseline for the number of NEETs is a key element behind the strategy. It was also raised by the previous Committee for Employment and Learning in its own recommendations, so it is something that we are very conscious of.

NEETs, by the very definition, are those who are not in education, employment or training, so it is possible to break it down and work out what we are talking about. We are talking about a figure in the high forty thousands in Northern Ireland. Those falling into youth unemployment would be a subset of that. However, they would be defined by those who receive jobseeker's allowance, but there are people beyond that, particularly in the 16- to 18-year-old category, who are not in receipt of any form of support. We are conscious of the need to establish reliable baselines, but we are confident that the figures are in the general territory.

On the subject of youth unemployment, there is often a misapprehension about the precise figures in Northern Ireland. We have a figure of 23.5%, which is over 20,000 young people. However, that does not equate to one in four or one in five young people being unemployed. That figure refers to those actively seeking work, and that is the percentage of those actively seeking work. It does not take into account those in full-time education. Therefore, although the problem of youth unemployment is very severe and we should not be complacent about it in any shape or form — indeed, there is a lot that we are doing to try to combat it — the realistic figure that we are talking about in Northern Ireland is one in seven young people actively seeking work who cannot find it at present.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Will he outline how families are targeted around the issue of NEETs? I have a concern that we will again fall into the trap of tracking only areas of high deprivation. There is an underlying issue of many areas where there is underachievement not necessarily falling into the deprivation figures.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to finish his point.

Mr Craig: I would like to see families in those areas targeted as well.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Craig for his supplementary question. I understand the drift of the issue that he outlines. The specific programme that we are talking about is, of course, a pilot, and we have to choose areas in which we start pilots. However, we are looking to deliver the pilot mainly through the LEMIS scheme, which is a very community-based intervention for dealing with people who are unemployed.

There are other ways in which we hope to capture young people who fall into the NEET category. What we are discussing now is only one element of a range of new initiatives, whether from my Department or other Departments — the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety being others that are critical. It is also worth highlighting that the Careers Service will have an important role to play. We are talking about trying to have one-to-one mentoring of young people who fall into the NEET category. It is also important that we work in close co-operation with the Department of Education to identify at a very early stage young people at risk and make sure that we can track them

through the education system. Obviously, social services will have an important role to play there.

Mr F McCann: As the Minister is aware, I have continually raised in Committee how NEETs are dealt with. One concern that I have had is for the 36,000-plus young people who left school without any GCSEs. Has anything been specifically tailored to meet the needs of young people who are freshly out of school without any qualifications?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Given his constituency interest, I can tell him that we are starting the roll-out of the scheme in West Belfast, so no doubt he will take some comfort from that. We are conscious that a lot of young people leave school without sufficient qualifications or with no qualifications. In the labour market, the opportunities for people in that situation are set to decline quite dramatically over the next 10 years. By 2020, fewer than 10% of job opportunities will consider people with that level of education; so there is a real challenge to turn that situation around.

There is a range of existing programmes to help young people who do not have those skills. We have the Training for Success programme, which offers a guaranteed training place to any 16- to 18-year-old. It is outside the confines of formal apprenticeships. We want people to consider how they can progress through the system. We also offer essential skills training, which offers people a level 2 qualification in literacy and numeracy. That is of particular relevance to those who leave school without a GCSE in English or maths.

Mr P Ramsey: I will ask the Minister about his Department's financial commitment to the pilot projects. Apart from the youth employment scheme and NEETs, how much money is his Department putting on the table?

Dr Farry: The important point to bear in mind is that those moneys are my Department's budgets. We bid successfully for them from the Executive and secured the resources.

On a related subject, I am bewildered by the fact that we are discussing an amendment in the House today that calls on me to make a bid to the Executive for the Barnett consequentials arising from the Youth Contract. We have done that: a strategy was agreed by the Executive in March 2012. We received the Barnett consequentials in the form of a monitoring round bid in June 2012. That covered the youth employment scheme and the funding of interventions around NEETs. All of that is in place. Although Barnett consequentials do not come across on a hypothecated basis and are open for discussion by the Executive, it is worth reminding the House that we have secured resources in excess of the scale of the Barnett consequentials. In Northern Ireland, we are doing more in youth unemployment and NEETs pro rata than anywhere else in the UK. That is an indication of the scale of commitment that we have across the spectrum to investing in our young people.

Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he expects an action plan to be brought forward by the advanced manufacturing and engineering services working group. (AQO 2705/11-15)

Dr Farry: The first meeting of the advanced manufacturing and engineering services working group took place on 19 September. My officials have already commenced drafting an action plan that will be the basis of discussion at the next working group meeting on 14 November. The action plan will set out the short-, medium- and long-term actions to address the current and future skill needs of the engineering sector. It will be developed and refined over the course of a number of meetings of the working group, and I envisage that it will be published in the early spring of 2013.

The action plan will be a tripartite plan agreed and supported by government, employers and education and training providers. To ensure the full and adequate implementation of the action plan, there will need to be a commitment from all parties involved to address the skills issues in the sector. I have recently identified a number of sectors on which my Department will focus its provision to bring about the economic strategy's aims of rebuilding and rebalancing the local economy. I have identified advanced manufacturing as one of the sectors that will be the focus of my Department's work as it will help to rebalance the local economy. I am committed to ensuring the full implementation of the action plan in support of the sector.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response. He made reference to some of the labour and skill shortages that he is aware of in the sector. Is he aware of any others? When was he first made aware of those specific problems?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and for his interest in the subject. We are aware of potential skill shortages and mismatches in a range of sectors across Northern Ireland. The Member should be aware that, this year, we have already had an action plan for the information and communication technology (ICT) sector and the food and drink manufacturing sector, both of which were launched in June. As for engineering specifically, I have been made aware over the past number of months by a number of companies and elected representatives of potential skills issues in that sector. I asked the Northern Ireland skills adviser, Bill McGinnis, to conduct a survey and engage with a range of employers to gauge the level of issues in that sector. He reported to me in the spring, and we had a stocktake meeting in June, at which time we decided to establish the working group.

Further to that, I am conscious that particular issues have been identified in the west Tyrone/mid-Ulster area. A number of companies from that part of the world are represented on the group.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Broadband Delivery UK

1. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline how her Department intends to prioritise areas of need when allocating funding through the Broadband Delivery UK scheme. (AQO 2716/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): In 2005, Northern Ireland was the first

region in the United Kingdom and Europe to be able to offer access to a basic broadband service to anyone, should they require it, for a reasonable cost. We have continued to invest in our infrastructure, and, since 2008, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has spent approximately £45 million on telecoms projects in Northern Ireland. Of that, £21 million has been targeted at rural areas, through schemes like the Northern Ireland broadband fund and our support to provide satellite broadband services for very remote users. Those have been very successful, and Ofcom, the independent communications regulator, now estimates that 94% of households in Northern Ireland are able to access superfast broadband services. However, we must continue to make plans to invest in telecoms to bridge the remaining gap and to ensure that everyone can access higher speed broadband services. The funding from Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) will help us achieve that objective.

We will consider matters such as the quality of solution designs, value and pricing. However, we have to be mindful that we do that in the most efficient and economically advantageous manner, which will achieve the best value for money and is sustainable in the long term. I intend to ensure that that happens. I expect that telecoms suppliers will contribute significantly to the project, and it is likely that a range of technologies will be used to ensure that the services are delivered.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Can the Minister provide us with an update on how her Department is working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to ensure that any funding that is awarded goes into areas of the highest need?

Mrs Foster: Over the past number of years, we have worked closely with DARD. DARD's total contribution to telecoms to date has been £2.5 million, made up of £1.5 million under the European Union programmes and £1 million from other sources, for the next generation broadband project. The fact that DARD has become involved with DETI in rolling out rural broadband sends out a very positive message of Departments working together to bring solutions to rural dwellers. DETI has contributed £17.3 million to the next generation broadband project and, as the Member will know, we have received consultation responses on the BDUK money, the £4.4 million. Those responses are being gone through at present, and it will come as no surprise that many of them are from rural dwellers.

Mr Moutray: Can the Minister indicate when it is likely that the funding from BDUK will be rolled out across Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, BDUK has indicated that £4.4 million has been allocated to Northern Ireland. I indicated before that we were disappointed with that amount of money and felt that we should have received more from the central pot. However, we will certainly use that money, along with our own finances, to really make a difference to those who cannot access superfast broadband at present.

As I said in my original answer, 94% of our residents have access to superfast broadband, but I know very well that the 6% who cannot access superfast broadband are very frustrated by the fact that they cannot. We hope that we

can take into account the views of all those who responded to our consultation.

The exact timing of when the money will be allocated to DETI is not yet known, and the timings depend on the project plans of the bidders who will make bids during the mini procurement competition that we have to carry out. We hope that expenditure will take place next year and into 2014.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister has said that she is aware that it is pretty upsetting for the 6% who do not get it. It goes much further than that. People are absolutely distressed. It affects their work and their children's homework and all of that. Does she not think it is time that we made 100% broadband — not superfast broadband, just broadband — a universal provision?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to finish his question.

Mrs Foster: People have access to broadband. They may not have it through fibre to the cabinet technology, but they can certainly access it through satellite or wireless technology. I acknowledge that, unfortunately, they have to pay extra for that, but we as a Government have put some subvention into those technologies, and we are looking at new technologies all the time to assist people who cannot access it. I hope that the Member will contribute to the ongoing consultation on BDUK; I do not think that he has done so to date.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. Why are there so many areas of broadband deficit considering the multitude of initiatives that the Minister has outlined?

Mrs Foster: It is because of the rural aspect. A lot of rural dwellers cannot access the sort of service that they need. At the moment, we have 3,000 broadband access points across Northern Ireland, approximately 2,500 green boxes, 191 exchanges, 400 mobile masts, a Virgin Media node and, of course, the Kelvin nodes. So, there is plenty of infrastructure around, but, when our constituents come to us about broadband, we need to tell them that they may have to look at technologies other than the traditional ones. A lot of people get it into their head that, unless broadband is delivered through fibre to the cabinet and by BT, they do not want to know about it. Frankly, they will have to look at other ways of accessing broadband because, in some cases, those ways will be the only way that they will be able to access it.

Tourism: Visitor Numbers

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the steps she is taking to continue to improve on this year's tourist numbers over the rest of this decade. (AQO 2717/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Challenging tourism targets have been set in the Programme for Government. In the longer term, the target for tourism is to increase visitor numbers to 4.5 million and to double the current contribution tourism makes to the Northern Ireland economy to £1 billion by 2020. There are many positive indicators of the success of ni2012 to date in boosting visitor numbers. Titanic Belfast has attracted more than 555,000 visitors since it opened, the Giant's Causeway visitor centre has welcomed over 270,000 visitors from 130 countries since July, and a record-breaking 130,000 spectators attended

the Irish Open at Royal Portrush. In addition, average room occupancy in hotels in August 2012 was 81%, an increase of eight percentage points on August 2011. 2013 will provide a further platform to promote Northern Ireland, with Belfast hosting the World Police and Fire Games and Londonderry as United Kingdom City of Culture. We will continue to invest in key events and capital infrastructure, including new conference and exhibition facilities, to drive tourism spend.

Mr Lyttle: I give the Minister and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board credit for the ni2012: Our Time, Our Place marketing campaign, particularly for the flexibility that has been shown around modified use of the branding and strapline. However, how damaging are the scenes of street violence that we saw in Northern Ireland this summer to our tourism product? What key actions need to be taken to secure tourism growth here on a long-term basis?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his positive comments on the branding. The whole idea behind the ni2012 branding was that it would be taken up by not just the Tourist Board but the industry in general. I am pleased to say that they stepped forward and owned the brand. Indeed, when I spoke with some retailers in Dungannon recently, they indicated that they felt that the campaign had helped in Dungannon town centre as well. That is very positive, because, as well as the tourist nature of ni2012, we very much saw it as a way of building civic pride in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is disappointing when images of street violence are relayed across the world, and, this being Northern Ireland, they tend to be relayed across the world. If there were violence in Birmingham or Manchester over a weekend, it would, perhaps, not get beyond the front page of the local papers, but because it happens in Northern Ireland, it tends to go across the world. It is damaging to the tourism product, but we will keep moving on. As I said, we have the World Police and Fire Games next year, which we are very much looking forward to, and everybody is looking forward to Londonderry being the first UK City of Culture.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the current rate of air passenger duty discourages tourists from coming here and airlines from setting up new routes? Does she also agree that its total abolition would be a massive boost for tourism here? What is she doing in that regard?

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that we had a very successful campaign to have the power to set the rate of air passenger duty in respect of international flights devolved, and that legislation is going through the House. We did well to achieve that, because it gives me — along with the International Airport, the City Airport and Londonderry airport for that matter — the opportunity to look for new flights to come in. I accept that air passenger duty for domestic flights remains a huge issue, and I very much support the call for the Westminster Government to look at air passenger duty in respect of the whole of the UK. We hope that they will take on board that call from the industry and, more widely, from politicians.

Mr Newton: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. Does the Minister recognise the tourism potential that would be created by Belfast City Council's proposal to extend the Waterfront Hall to provide an exhibition space?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question, and I take this opportunity to commend the work of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB). Not only did it present us with this new convention centre proposal, but, having worked with its staff on requests for conferences to come to Belfast and to Northern Ireland in general, I know that they do a professional job and I look forward to working with them in the future. As we know, the city council proposes to extend the current facilities at the Waterfront Hall, and that will add to our capacity to have larger conferences in Belfast. The economic appraisal that was commissioned by the city council is being reviewed by my economists, and the tourism development scheme application is being assessed as well. The grant request is in the region of £10.5 million of European Union funds and £2 million from the tourism development scheme, against a project cost of £21 million. We will work with the city council, BVCB and all stakeholders to make this a reality because it will add to what Belfast has to offer as a convention centre.

Mrs Overend: Looking to 2013, can the Minister indicate the demand anticipated for overnight accommodation during the World Police and Fire Games and how that relates to available spare capacity? Will the Minister outline how she is working to ensure that Northern Ireland performs as well as the event's other host countries have?

Mrs Foster: Rather than having spare capacity for the World Police and Fire Games, the difficulty will probably be that we do not have enough capacity. We are working with the games' organisers to make sure that we have alternative ways to accommodate all those who come to Belfast and Northern Ireland, so that they can have a quality experience while here.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has also been withdrawn.

Natural Gas: West Tyrone

4. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the proposed extension of the natural gas network to west Tyrone. (AQO 2719/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department recently completed a detailed economic appraisal on gas network extension to additional towns in the west and north-west, including Strabane and Omagh, and to towns in east Down. We are discussing financing issues with DFP and liaising with the Utility Regulator regarding a competition for gas licences. Subject to the outcome of this competition and the completion of the detailed network design and planning approvals process, pipeline construction works could begin in 2015.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response, and I look forward to the gas network coming into the west. Will the Minister indicate the benefit that that will be to businesses in west Tyrone?

Mrs Foster: I think that businesses in west Tyrone will be very pleased to have the network extended to them as a source and another choice of energy. In particular, I know that some firms around Strabane and Artigarvan in his constituency will welcome this pipeline becoming available to them. The towns under consideration in the west include Dungannon, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Coalisland, Omagh, Enniskillen, including Derrylin, and Strabane. The new gas

pipeline from Londonderry to Strabane will also, as I said, serve customers in the Artigarvan area.

3.15 pm

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I notice that the Minister forgot Brookeborough this time. What figure has been discussed that the Executive might have to put in to fund that potential capital investment?

Mrs Foster: As I said, the economic appraisal is with the Department of Finance and Personnel, so it is too soon to talk about figures at present, but it is safe to say that I think it will be an investment that will benefit the west of the Province in a way that no other investment has for quite some time.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers so far and welcome her statement. Can she say anything about the recent announcement about the DOE planning permission for a possible gas storage facility at Larne? Does the Minister agree that addressing fuel poverty is a benefit that may accrue from getting the gas extension to Strabane, Omagh and other towns?

Mrs Foster: The gas extension will help with fuel poverty. It will also, as I said, bring much needed investment to that area of the country. As well as that, it will bring jobs in the immediate construction of the pipeline, so we are pushing ahead with that project.

I put out a statement saying that I welcomed the underground storage facility at Larne lough. It is part of the strategic energy plan that I published. We need storage, and, as I understand it, that is the only storage facility for which there is a live application now. We look forward to working with the company to make it a reality.

Renewable Energy

5. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the extent of the involvement of Northern Ireland-based companies in offshore renewable energy projects. (AQO 2720/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Some 250 Northern Ireland companies are already actively selling into the offshore renewable markets. It is estimated that Northern Ireland-based companies secured sales of £52 million in offshore contracts in 2011-2012. Those include companies such as Harland and Wolff, B9 Energy, McLaughlin and Harvey, Barton Industrial Services, Doran Consulting, RPS and Farrans. The recent announcement of offshore wind and tidal development rights in Northern Ireland waters to three consortia has been made, which included the local company B9 Energy Offshore Developments. That really does present further opportunities for Northern Ireland firms.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for her answer. What impact has the announcement that was made within the past fortnight had on the job situation and the supply chain for Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: It is a very positive story. Indeed, just last week, I was at an offshore wind and ocean energy international conference in Dublin, where we had the opportunity to present the case for Northern Ireland alongside a Canadian Minister and, of course, Pat Rabbitte from the Republic of Ireland. All those offshore announcements are about multimillion-pound private

sector investments. No government funds are going into any of them. It is around £1.8 billion for the 600 megawatts offshore wind project alone. Invest NI has been working closely with companies that may be in the supply chain for all the offshore installations. It has engaged with 800 businesses and responded to 1,400 inquiries in just the past year alone, so there are huge opportunities around offshore renewables.

Mrs McKevitt: Does the Minister intend to ensure that the benefits of those projects will be for the North, particularly the jobs, and does she agree that early consultation with stakeholders in the communities where the projects are proposed is essential in order for the locals to have their say?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that question. As she is probably aware, meetings have already been held with the developers to discuss the statutory requirements for the consenting and licensing regime. Part of that will be about how they communicate and interact with the communities in their particular areas. I am very aware of the fact that it is critical for local communities and other marine users, such as the fishing sector, to be a part of that engagement right from the beginning so that there are no misunderstandings. Indeed, people in those sectors may see opportunities to become involved in that work — to diversify, as it were. We will continue to work with developers and the stakeholders so that timely and meaningful engagement takes place with both of them.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that there is a significant opportunity for those who have recently lost their job in FG Wilson to adapt their skills to the growing engineering sectors such as renewable energy? What advice has she provided to former FG Wilson employees in that regard?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: some of the skills that have been employed in FG Wilson for many years could be transferable in the same way that people in Harland and Wolff have been able to transfer their skills into building offshore renewable substations. The transformation in the work that is going on in the shipyard now is quite incredible. DONG Energy, which has set up its hub in the harbour, will be looking for workers, and there are many other companies in the supply chain that will be able to make use of the skills that are available to them. Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with the Department for Employment and Learning so that we can make sure that those skills are matched up with particular companies.

Mr Swann: Will the Minister give us an assessment of how the new offshore renewal projects will affect our renewable energy targets?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. The announcement has been made in relation to the leasing. However, given that we have to go through strategic environmental assessments and planning permissions and so on, the installation will probably not be in place until towards the end of this decade. That said, 600 megawatts of offshore wind and 200 megawatts of tidal energy will significantly enhance what we have been doing thus far. At the moment, our onshore wind provides 400 megawatts of renewable generation, which equates to 14%, if you take into account everything involved in the electricity target. That is estimated to rise to 700 megawatts or 800 megawatts by 2020, which equates to that magic 20%

target. Onshore wind will provide us with that, but I say to the Member that, as well as the onshore and offshore wind and tidal energy sources, we need to invest heavily in our grid infrastructure if we are to tie everything together.

Employment: Demographic Changes

6. Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the number of jobs needed per annum to keep the employment rate at its current level, taking into account demographic changes. (AQO 2721/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The working-age population is projected to increase by around 3,000 to 4,000 people for each of the next four years. However, we should be careful to avoid drawing fixed relationships between any one variable and the employment rate. For example, productivity will also affect the number of jobs required. The critical issue is whether growth is strong enough to generate enough jobs. For Northern Ireland, economic commentators suggest that growth of around 2% is required to prevent unemployment rising. Clearly, in common with other advanced economies, the marginal growth rates seen in recent years are well below that level. Although we cannot predict whether jobs will be lost in the future, we have committed in the Programme for Government to increase employment by promoting 25,000 jobs. Later this week, the Executive will meet to examine what additional measures we can take to support the local economy in these difficult times.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her response thus far. What is the net number of jobs created since the beginning of this Assembly mandate?

Mrs Foster: I cannot answer that because I do not have the figures in front of me. I will be happy to write to the Member on that issue. I can tell him that, in the past 18 months, 8,000 jobs have been promoted, and Invest Northern Ireland currently has a healthy pipeline of work-in-progress projects. I will write to the Member with those figures.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that our aim really should be full employment, as far as it goes, and that for every individual who has no job there is a sense of uselessness and of being undervalued? That has to be our top priority.

Mrs Foster: I am not sure that there is a question there. Certainly, we would seek to put as many people into work as we can, and that is why we have set our targets in the way that we have.

Mr Dunne: What other initiatives have the wider Northern Ireland Executive put in place to support job creation in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: That is a fair question. This afternoon, I will respond to a motion relating to unemployment and other things that have been thought up to put into the wording of one of the longest motions that I have seen for a considerable time. It is important to recognise that this is the job not just of the Enterprise Minister but of Ministers right across the Executive. That is the way in which the economic strategy, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy have been put in place.

As the Member may be aware, the Executive have committed £330 million of investment to the A5 dual carriageway. It is a matter of regret that workers are being prevented from starting that project. Indeed, I have concerns that the firms involved may be in difficulty because of that. In a housing market weakened by recession, the Executive will deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes. We have backed the One Plan for Londonderry's UK City of Culture year. We have committed to providing a new training college for the police, prison and fire services, and we will invest heavily in our sports stadiums. At the Executive meeting on Thursday, we will look at our economic strategy and the Programme for Government to see whether anything occurring now can be accelerated.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the predicted level of youth unemployment, if current trends continue?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, youth unemployment is a matter for the Minister for Employment and Learning. He said at Question Time this afternoon that, at present, the real-time figure for youth unemployment is one in seven. We continue to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to try to deal with youth unemployment, which is a serious issue for Northern Ireland. We need to find ways in which we can bring young people, particularly those not in education, employment or training, back into the workplace.

Mr Allister: The Minister talks about jobs promoted. Will she update the House on the progress being made towards the far more definitive issue of jobs created? When will the statistics show the actual number of jobs created and sustained rather than the aspirational figure of the number promoted?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, because I answered his question for written answer on this subject just last week, I hope that those figures will be available next year.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Tourism: Strabane

8. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what efforts has she made to increase the tourism product in the Strabane District Council area (AQO 2723/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board offers financial assistance for capital-based tourism projects through the tourism development scheme, which is open to all areas of Northern Ireland. In response to the 2011-13 call, three applications were received from the Strabane District Council area: one has been shortlisted to proceed to the second stage of assessment; one was placed on the reserve list; and the third was unsuccessful. NITB has been working with key stakeholders in the Tyrone and Sperrins tourism area to progress a destination management plan. An aligned action plan will identify the key capital projects to be developed.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. Given that Strabane is one of the gateways to Donegal, has she had any discussions with her counterpart in the South, with a view to developing a tourism product on a cross-border basis?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I recognise that Strabane is one of the gateways to Donegal. Indeed, when I visited a tourism project in Strabane recently, I was nearly run down by a car going to Donegal. She knows precisely the tourism project that I refer to. I know that Members are disappointed that I am still standing. I had discussions with the Republic of Ireland's Tourism Minister, Leo Varadkar, just last week. We have not spoken about a tourism product on a cross-border basis. We talked about the number of tourists that we needed to attract from our biggest market, which is, of course, Great Britain.

Mr McGlone: We have touched on the benefits for both sides of the border and, indeed, the entire island. In light of the Dublin Government's recent announcement and their strategy for "The Gathering" and given that 50% of tourists who come to the island come north, does the Minister see added benefit in associating and collaborating with that project?

Mrs Foster: Anything that brings more visitors to Northern Ireland is to be welcomed, and I have said that on the record many times. Frankly, I do not know how many more times I am going to have to say it for Members on the opposite Benches to get the message: "The Gathering" is a Republic of Ireland initiative. It is not just about tourism; it is about investment in the Republic of Ireland. Of course, we compete with the Republic of Ireland for international investment. Anybody who wants to take advantage of "The Gathering" in Northern Ireland is free to do so, and, indeed, I know of many people who will.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Unemployment

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes with grave concern that the unemployment rate has risen by 19,000 in the three years between the quarters ended July 2009 and July 2012 and that 23.5% of 18- to 24-year-olds, some 24,000 young people, are unemployed with little prospect of work; acknowledges that the role of Invest NI is to grow the local economy; expresses dismay that Invest NI appears to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the trend of jobs moving overseas; further notes that the Executive have not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland Green New Deal Group or developed the proposals of the jobs plan published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and Invest NI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals. — [Mr McGlone.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "economy;" and insert

"expresses dismay that Invest NI appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson; notes with concern that there was no dedicated Invest NI business start-up scheme in place for over a year; further notes that the Executive have not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland green new deal or developed the proposals of the jobs plan published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and Invest NI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals and to give a commitment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning in making bids for the significant Barnett consequential arising from the Youth Contract initiative, as announced by the coalition Government at Westminster, to tackle youth unemployment specifically." — [Mrs Overend.]

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. Tá an difhostaíocht ar cheann de na fadhbanna is mó atá os comhair an Tí seo faoi láthair. I am glad to take part in this important debate. Tackling unemployment is one of the biggest challenges facing this House, and it is good to see that we are debating the issue once again. However, it is important that we do not fall into the trap of turning the economy into a party political issue and simply criticise Ministers and other parties just for the sake of it. That, unfortunately, occurred following the announcement of significant job losses at FG Wilson, and it appears to have crept into this debate.

We are all united as an Assembly in that we want to see our economy grow and more jobs being created not only in the short term but in the long term. However, there are differences in the approaches that the different parties outlined in how they see the economy growing and jobs being created. That is important, and it is what we should be debating.

I welcome the motion and the amendment. Neither is perfect, but I listened carefully to the contributions so far, and I will continue to listen to those that are made over the next hour or so before I decide which way I will vote. The SDLP, in its motion, selected two specific proposals that it wants to focus on, but, importantly, neither of them are SDLP proposals. When Mr McGlone was moving the motion, he paid significant attention to Sinn Féin's Jobs Plan, which was launched in the South last week. I ask Patsy where the SDLP's plan is, because it has very clearly stated that it is unhappy with what the Executive are doing. So, where is its alternative approach?

Two strategies are mentioned in the motion. The first is the green new deal. As has been stated, all the Executive parties supported the green new deal, and it was in every party's manifesto. For that reason, it is very difficult to accept that it was not supported. It is very clear why it was not taken forward: it was deemed to be too risky both by economists in a Department and by the Social Development Minister. In a recent Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment public consultation on the Energy Bill, it was outlined that the green new deal was not taken forward because too many people were in fuel poverty and we could not really expect them to understand the benefits of insulating their homes. That is a very disappointing approach, especially if it is compared with the boiler replacement scheme, where people have to pay out £1,000 to replace their boilers. I know which scheme would be an easier sell to make.

The motion focuses on two specific elements. I suppose that the most important aspect of the motion is the call for a robust job creation strategy and business strategy. That is useful. Focusing solely on that will be much more productive than going into the ins and outs of why certain things have not been done in the past. We need to look at where we are and at how we can move things forward as best possible.

I read recently that the Minister is taking forward an enterprise strategy to complement the economic strategy. I look forward to seeing more on that. I encourage the Minister to keep that strategy as broad as possible so that it includes a number of the aspects that I will touch on in the remaining time that I have to speak.

The green new deal obviously has massive benefits for job creation and tackling fuel poverty. Co-operatives can play a role both by creating jobs and providing employees who may be facing redundancy with the opportunity to take over a business. I think that that is a very good way of trying to retain jobs. There are a number of issues with public procurement, and they have been highlighted both by Mr McGlone and in some of the documents that have been referred to. So, there needs to be an approach on public procurement.

We need to look at how entrepreneurs are dealt with. Mrs Overend spoke about the start-up business programme and about how such a programme has been absent for

over a year. Thankfully, that has been resolved. I know that not everybody agrees with the decision, but we are moving forward, and we all need to row in behind that. An unwillingness to take a calculated risk is also a problem in government. When we get all these economic appraisals done and things looked at, we need to ensure that we are making a decision based on its merits, not on potential risk or because civil servants are considering the potential of their having to appear before the Public Accounts Committee.

The progress that we have seen today on the renewable heat incentive scheme is welcome. There are tremendous opportunities in the renewables and green sector, and I look forward to hearing more from the Minister on how she intends to improve the current situation.

Mr Lyttle: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I respond to this debate, which is on one of the most important issues affecting people across Northern Ireland and, indeed, internationally. Rising unemployment throughout Northern Ireland, particularly youth unemployment, is one of the most important issues facing the Assembly. There has been a missed opportunity on the implementation of the green new deal. However, the SDLP motion and the proposed UUP amendment are not only ill judged but mislead the Northern Ireland public about the serious action that the Assembly is taking in response to many of the issues.

The SDLP motion and the UUP amendment calling for action on youth unemployment are both flawed and out of date. Then again, they have been proposed by the SDLP and the UUP, so I am not sure what else we expected. The policy for a new Northern Ireland youth employment scheme has been proposed by my Alliance Party colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning and approved by the Executive, with funding having been secured in June of this year. The funding for both the youth employment scheme and the NEET strategy is on a higher scale than the Barnett consequential that the Executive accrued. Therefore, not only is the UUP amendment out of date but the resourcing request has been met and exceeded already. The criticism of Invest NI for displaying what was described as an attitude of "resigned acceptance" to the trend of jobs moving overseas is also ill-judged.

We cannot ignore the fact that, for Northern Ireland to move forward, we must recognise that, although we might be unable to compete with certain areas on labour costs, we can adapt and grow a more knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland. A good example of that can be found in the Northern Ireland Advanced Composites and Engineering Centre, which is based in my constituency of East Belfast and funded by an array of partnerships. It was financed by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Invest NI, the strategic investment fund and Bombardier Aerospace. Invest NI's support was part-funded by the European regional development fund. Queen's University and the University of Ulster are also involved, as they co-own and operate the facility. The centre works closely with the universities, and alongside many businesses based in Northern Ireland and across the UK, to develop and commercialise new innovation technologies and to create jobs in Northern Ireland.

I welcome many of the ideas in the jobs plan that the Business Alliance has published. The Alliance Party has

long called for many of the targets set in it, which include job creation in key growth areas such as the tourism and agri-food sectors and the facilitating of investment in our ports and airports to improve international connectivity. We heard much about developing that ground in the announcements on air passenger duty. The targets also include building an infrastructure that can deliver more sustainable, competitive and secure energy supplies and securing the availability of high-speed broadband, which has also been mentioned today.

Although the Executive have not fully implemented the plan, they have acted on and taken forward definite proposals. The Minister for Employment and Learning has also overseen a significant increase in places in STEM subjects in our universities, which the document strongly endorsed. By doing that, the Minister is showing his commitment to delivering and improving skills in Northern Ireland. The jobs plan also called for improvement in careers advice and guidance to help align the choices that our young people make with the economic opportunities available to them. In my role as a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I proposed that an inquiry be conducted into careers provision in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Minister has promised to work in collaboration with the Chairperson and the Committee once the findings have been produced and has brought forward a report that he had scheduled for 2014.

The Alliance Party agrees that the green new deal has been an opportunity missed by the Assembly. Along with many other parties, we mentioned it in our 2011 manifesto, and we are disappointed that it has not been developed in the way that was suggested by the proposals. Therefore, there is a need for the Executive to review those proposals and the potential that they have for creating employment, developing critical skills and improving energy efficiency in Northern Ireland. My colleague Judith Cochrane MLA has proposed that the Social Development Committee examines the economic appraisals that form the basis of the decision taken on that issue.

In conclusion, the Alliance Party welcomes the debate on the serious issue of unemployment. We advocate that the green new deal be reconsidered and that the sound proposals in the jobs plan be taken forward as much as possible.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Lyttle: However, the motion misleads and misinforms the public on an issue that demands clear and positive leadership from the Assembly. That is what we want to see going forward.

Mr Moutray: Increasing unemployment has an adverse impact not only on the economy but on the whole fabric of our society. It must be tackled, and it is right that we should debate it. However, at the outset, I have to say that I am disappointed by the overall tone of the SDLP motion and UUP amendment. Instead of tackling the real issues affecting businesses, such as rising energy costs, the motion seeks to be more about political point-scoring. We only have to think back to a recent meeting of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment when Mr Tony O'Neill of Moy Park raised the issue of energy prices. Unfortunately, the Chairperson, Mr McGlone, in a response to the Competition Commission, was even opposed to the extension of the gas network.

The SDLP and UUP are members of the Executive, and the Programme for Government, which has the economy at its very core, has clear targets for economic growth and was agreed —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No, not at the moment. The Programme for Government was agreed by all parties in the Executive. However, to look at the motion and amendment, both of which are critical of the Executive, you would think that the SDLP and the UUP were in opposition.

We are all concerned about the growth in unemployment and, in particular, the job losses recently announced at FG Wilson, which are referred to in the amendment. I will return to that later. Rising unemployment is not unique to Northern Ireland; far from it. Virtually all nations in the developed world are experiencing job losses as part and parcel of the prolonged downturn in the global economy. The manufacturing industry is under severe pressure, and we need to be creative in our thinking on how we develop Northern Ireland's economy. However, it is not all gloom. The number of employee jobs has increased over the quarter from May to July 2012 for the first time since 2008, and job numbers have risen in the manufacturing and service sectors.

Despite job losses and other economic pressures, the Minister, her officials and Invest NI are proactive. Faced with unprecedented levels of competition, they are redoubling their efforts to build the economy and to attract high-quality, high-value-added jobs. We must also continue to encourage local business to focus on exports, and that is the aim of Invest NI's successful trade missions. Last year's export total was £45 million, and we ought to try to go beyond that this year. Some of our companies are proving to be very successful in overseas markets, and we must take every opportunity presented in places such as China, Hong Kong, India and the Middle East.

Northern Ireland has much to offer, and the Minister told business leaders during her recent visit to California that we host a vibrant and high-growth technology sector. As we seek to attract inward investment, one of our key weapons is our well-educated, young and dynamic workforce. We have young people who want to work. The amendment calls for the Minister to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning. That is happening, and I support that.

I will turn briefly to the amendment's reference to last month's job losses at FG Wilson. All of us were deeply shocked by the scale of the redundancies, but it is unfair to accuse Invest NI of an "attitude of resigned acceptance". We are dealing with business decisions taken by businesses for strategic reasons. We have little control over such decisions.

Finally, I commend the Executive for actively pursuing the corporation tax issue. I know that it is not a magic bullet in itself and that it is complex, but it will provide us with an additional and very significant lever in our efforts to revive the economy. I hope that there will be good news on that front soon. I oppose the motion and the amendment.

3.45 pm

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on what is probably

the biggest problem that we could be faced with at the present time; addressing the challenge of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, against the backdrop of a global economic crisis. As stated in the motion, more than 20,000 young people are unemployed and with little hope of finding work. This has led to mass emigration not seen since the 1980s and not seen in my lifetime or in that of my peers.

This is a really difficult time to be a young person in Ireland. As we have just heard, one in seven young people is unemployed. Young people are being forced to leave their homes and families because of a persistent lack of opportunities and jobs. As a result, we are losing many of our most talented and educated young people, the very people who have the most potential to help us build a better future.

Unemployment is the highest it has been since 1997. Just last week, we heard that the unemployment figures have fallen in Britain but risen here in the North. That proves, once again, that the economic agenda being driven by Westminster is not suitable for us and does not take into account our interests.

The British Government appear to be out of touch with what is happening here on the ground, and the lack of fiscal autonomy in the North means that we do not have the necessary tools — or all the necessary information — through which to grow the economy and develop a detailed economic strategy. Economic and financial decisions in the North are taken in the absence of any proper statement of revenue generated here. Instead, we are told to rely on estimates and on a departmental expenditure limit, the level of which is based on a population-based calculation which has its roots in the delivery of public services in England.

Rising unemployment, and very real economic challenges, indicate that this is a time for a different approach. We need investment on an all-Ireland basis to promote job creation and to further cross-border co-operation, if we are to harness the potential of this tiny island. The need for, and potential of, all-Ireland economic growth is now widely accepted by economists and the private sector. Even within the Assembly, we have been developing all-Ireland solutions in health, and we need to take a similar approach to the economy. At present, the resources of Invest NI and IDA are spread too thinly. To encourage foreign direct investment in local business start-ups, those organisations should operate with a greater degree of collaboration. Furthermore, Invest NI should encourage investment right across the North. Rural areas, like my own in south Armagh, have seen little to no investment over the years, which has had detrimental effects on our community. It has seen thousands of people emigrate from a relatively small population. Our proximity to the border means that we are subject to economic instability due to the existence of two distinct economies within such a small country.

There are just over six million people on our island. Existing economic strategies, North and South, are targeted at high-value jobs in innovation, research and development, yet we continue to have skill shortages in the very sectors that are promoted. That is partly due to the disconnected and unco-ordinated third-level sectors North and South.

A further point is that government policy identifies exports as the key to delivering growth and, although that is an important step, it must be realised that, for many, the first step into a new market is actually just across the border. Greater fiscal autonomy and access to more tools to aid economic recovery would leave us in a stronger position to address current economic challenges. The British Government have accepted that there are flaws in their current approach to the funding of devolved administrations. That is in our Program for Government for everyone to see. We need to encourage the British Government to give us more tools for economic growth. Most importantly, we need the ability to generate revenue that will not be removed from the block grant and which we can use to grow the economy and stimulate job creation.

The situation at present is extremely restrictive for effecting change and it prevents us from having an effective economic policy which benefits the people we serve. It is a complex issue, and I know that it will not be solved overnight, but it is essential that we start to see results on the ground in job creation to ensure that we do not continue to lose our young talented people to places like Australia and Canada.

The Executive have made significant commitments to building the economy and tackling unemployment, and there have been key successes in that. Just imagine what we could do for the 64,000 unemployed people in the North if we had the necessary economic tools.

Mr Frew: This is a very solemn debate and one that we have to take very seriously. Everything to do with the economy, job losses and unemployment must be taken very seriously by every MLA, the House and the Executive. I have been here for the whole of the debate, unlike the UUP's new economic policy unit.

Mrs Overend: I really do not think that I should have to give excuses to the Member as to why I had to step out of the debate. My 11-year-old daughter missed her school bus and, I am sorry, but that takes precedence over anything in the House.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for that intervention.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: I am glad that the Member was able to say something from head and heart. Most of her colleagues usually read things out of a pre-scripted speech.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: That is good to see, Mr Speaker. I did not realise that Mrs Overend was the only member of the economic policy unit in the party, but I am glad to see that they are all here now and all lined up to hear my participation in the debate.

This is a very serious issue. We have a motion and an amendment from the two smaller parties that smack of political point-scoring, as Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party have already stated. I will deal with the UUP's amendment first. Here we have something that is completely outdated already. The Minister for Employment and Learning mentioned the Executive's commitment to youth employment schemes and tackling youth unemployment specifically during Question Time today. We have invested

above and beyond the Barnett consequential — more money, more commitment and more investment. That is what we have delivered, and that is what we have put in. What does the amendment smack of? It smacks of an outdated policy from a newly set up economic development unit within the party. That is not a very good start for the UUP with regard to economic strategies.

With regard to what the SDLP said — I know that the Chairman of the ETI Committee is a sincere politician who wants to do what is best for his constituents — should we really be looking to the Republic for job creation, when we consider the Republic's unemployment levels and what it is going through at the present time? I think not. He also talked about the jobs plan, which is a couple of years out of date and which was considered at the time of our Programme for Government and investment strategy. That brings me to my point, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time. I apologise for not indicating that earlier.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We have a plan already in place. We have the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the economic strategy. That is very important. Those are in place for a reason.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: They are in place to lift this country out of recession. This is not the time to panic; this is not the time for plan B, plan C and plan D. This is the time to look at what we have and the progression that we have made. I ask the parties — the smaller parties: the SDLP and the UUP — to consider engaging in the Executive and to test the Executive and ask them what they have delivered and how they have progressed with the plans that we have in place. There is absolutely no point in producing another strategy or another report that could sit on another shelf when we have plans in place. We must hold our nerve. The businesses out there — those in Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle — are telling me to make sure that the Executive and the Assembly hold their nerve. The last thing that they want us to do is panic. Businesses are not panicking. It is very true that, when you look at some of our figures, you can see that they are depressing, disappointing and concerning, but someone who is on the unemployment list or who has to go home and face a family without a job does not really care about statistics or figures. Life is hard enough for them without having to read about whether things are getting better or worse. For them, it is bad. The last thing that we need to do is panic.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that the more he says, "Don't panic", the more he sounds like Mr Mainwaring? [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: Is this the economic policy and strategy that the Ulster Unionist Party is adopting? Very, very good.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: Mr Speaker, there is good news. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Frew: There is good news to come out of this country. After London, Belfast is the most attractive UK city for foreign direct investment, particularly in technology and financial services. In the past three years, Northern Ireland has won 7% of the FDI attracted to the UK, with a population of 2·8 million. Those are good news stories.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Frew: Those are good news stories, and I ask the smaller parties to engage in the Executive and to put their full weight behind the plans that are already in place to bring this country out of recession —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Frew: Thank you.

Mr Beggs: I support the amendment standing in the names of my colleagues. The original motion rightly highlights the growing concern at the increasing unemployment levels and states that the number has risen by 19,000 over the past three years. More particularly, it states that 23·5% of our young people aged 18 to 24 are unemployed. Worryingly, that rate has shown a very significant increase of 5·2% over the period. So action is clearly needed in that area.

Yes, a contract for youth has commenced elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Not at this moment. Let me get into my speech, please. In our amendment, it is clear that we want a more effective system to be developed here. We want close working between DETI and DEL to maximise the opportunities for our young people. I think that there is nothing wrong in asking for that.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: OK. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Lyttle: The Member is calling for a targeted youth employment intervention. What is the Member's assessment of the targeted youth employment intervention that has been put forward?

Mr Beggs: It is obvious that whatever has happened to date is not sufficient, because the figures show that it is not sufficient. I am not satisfied that one quarter of our young people are unemployed, and neither should you be.

The motion is sweeping in its criticism of Invest NI.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: We have to have regard for the positive work that Invest NI does on occasions. However, I think it is appropriate that we criticise some of the comments that were made regarding jobs at FG Wilson. The BBC reported that, when the chief executive of Invest NI was asked if he would have made the same decision and moved some of the manufacturing jobs to China, he said:

"If I was in that job, in all possibility, yes."

I do not think it is appropriate for the chief executive of Invest NI to be saying that. I hope that, with hindsight, he will have accepted that that was a mistake.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have already given way; I wish to proceed with my speech. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Beggs: It is important that we learn lessons from that and continue to show determination to create and sustain jobs locally. I hope that lessons will be learned.

I have asked Assembly questions on the issue. Members are saying that this is a lot of hot air. Can I go into some detail and highlight issues from my constituency? Do you know how many potential investor visits to Carrickfergus there have been over the past three years? None. There were none to the borough of Larne last year. That is despite the fact that there were 350 such visits throughout Northern Ireland during the period. I hope that there is increased recognition of the need to create such opportunities in the east Antrim area going forward.

I have been suggesting other ideas, but I have not heard Members across the Chamber suggest positive ideas. I have identified that only 4·7 acres of Invest NI's land bank is in my constituency, and those are in Larne. It is time that that was increased to create potential opportunities for other investors. When I pressed that issue, it was disappointing that the Minister referred to the fact that there was other land available. Yes. If you look at the nibusinessinfo website, you will see that there are a further 17 acres in the business park at Larne harbour. However, that is a very central area, and with that comes a much increased price for purchase and rental, which, in itself, could rule out some potential investors to the Larne area. I would like to see other infrastructure developed in the Larne area, as has occurred in many other areas, because the number of job losses scheduled to happen is a cause for concern. We hope that they will not happen, but they are likely to happen. I wish to create as many opportunities for future investment as possible.

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

The legal wrangling over the initial contract for the business start-up scheme was disappointing, but we have to welcome the fact that that has come to a close and that it is operating once again. I hope that Invest NI, DETI and the procurement operation in DFP have learned lessons and that we will not face another situation when such schemes, which are particularly needed in times of economic difficulty to allow young people to start up businesses and to allow those who may be laid off to take up new opportunities, will be delayed.

I hope that lessons have been learned and that the good work that has been delivered by our local enterprise agencies in the past will be allowed to flourish again once more.

Last Friday, I was at the Willowbank site in the Larne Enterprise Development Company, and we heard from Charlie Cole from Broughgammon farm. He is a young man who had difficulty getting employment, so he took the initiative to set up a seaweed farming operation, and he has started raising kid goats, all with very little funding. He has shown a get-up-and-go attitude, and I have no doubt that the more we support such small business start-ups and developments, the better the opportunities will be for individuals —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Beggs: — to come up with ideas for export and to enable new jobs to be created in Northern Ireland for everyone's benefit.

4.00 pm

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very critical debate. I listened to Members who spoke previously, and, whilst I believe that there is consensus in this Assembly that we must do much more for the economy, I would like to have heard, and I think it would have been useful if we had heard, much more from Members about the demand for increased fiscal powers. It remains the case that we have 375,000 people who are unemployed across Ireland, and those numbers are growing. We need, therefore, significant investment and stimulus to create jobs, and we need that investment on an all-Ireland basis. That means the creation of an all-Ireland job creation strategy and greater co-operation, North and South, to release and realise the potential for the whole island.

Greater fiscal autonomy is required in the North. That would allow the North to generate revenue and to develop policies of benefit to the people of the North without the current restrictions.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will she not accept that the Republic of Ireland Government and its national Exchequer's greater fiscal policy had to be ceded to Europe and to Germany? Indeed, she has not mentioned the £7 billion from Her Majesty's Exchequer. How on earth does that simply add up?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he will allow me to continue, I will get into some of the detail around where the North needs to be on fiscal autonomy. The increase in cross-border trade, banking and insurance regulation, to name but three, and the potential of an all-Ireland energy market, have demonstrated the interlinked and interdependent nature of the economies North and South. Sinn Féin is therefore asking for the North to be given the opportunity to engage in proper economic development. The provision of a full and detailed revenue statement will allow the development of an approach to economic development on the basis of detailed knowledge regarding the amount of money that is required to deliver public services and the amount of finance that is generated in the North. That does not happen at present.

We continue to have skills shortages in the very sectors that are being promoted, and, as colleagues who spoke previously mentioned, for an island the size of Ireland, there must also be a cohesive approach to attracting foreign direct investment. At present, the limited resources —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: No, I will not, sorry. The limited resources of INI and IDA are spread too thinly in the global marketplace and compete for investment in similar sectors. We need greater co-ordination, which some Members referred to, of third-level provision to ensure value for money and the creation of national centres of research, development and innovation.

Today, we heard some of the commitments under the Programme for Government, and I do not need to rehearse them here. However, it would be remiss of

us not to pay particular attention to the construction sector. The decrease in the construction output that was detailed in reports issued last week is not confined just to infrastructure. There was a 10·3 quarter-on-quarter volume decrease in housing output, which is down by more than 20% over the past five years. Key to that is that if we had access to greater fiscal autonomy and to more tools to aid economic recovery, we would be in a stronger position to address current economic challenges.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: No. Most importantly, we need the ability to generate revenue that will not be removed from the block grant, so that we can grow the economy and stimulate job creation. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is difficult to know where to start this afternoon. Some Members are, obviously, addressing a different motion to the one that is before the House. Other Members would like to address a different motion because the motion that they have actually amended is so out of date, it is just incredible. However, I will attempt to answer some of the points that have been made. I think that we all have at least one thing in common: we are hugely concerned with the performance of the local labour market and the impact that it is having on individuals, households and, indeed, businesses right across Northern Ireland.

Although some Members would like to, there is no shying away from the fact that global economic conditions remain challenging. Growth in the euro zone and, indeed, the United Kingdom has been weaker than expected. That is why we have had global estimates downgraded over the past while. As a small open economy, the sluggish recovery in our key trading partners continues to impact on many local businesses and act as a major drag on growth in our local economy. That, in turn, has limited the rate of local job creation.

Although Northern Ireland has lost some 40,000 jobs during the downturn, and recent unemployment figures are hugely disappointing, it should be recognised that there are some positive signs. Output in the manufacturing and construction sectors is showing some improvement. Indeed, the quarterly employment survey for June 2012 shows the first increase in four years, as was mentioned by my colleague Mr Moutray.

I want to pick up on the construction issue because it was mentioned by the previous Member who spoke and, indeed, Mr McGlone in his opening address. Construction has had the biggest downturn and most job losses. That is why it, now, relies on Government intervention for over 50% of its jobs. That is not a particularly healthy place for the construction sector to be. Members need to reflect on that. We in Government have recognised the impact that the downturn has had on the construction sector. That is why we have been looking at accelerating capital projects and why, now, over 50% of construction jobs are reliant on public-sector funds. As I said, it is not a particularly good place to be. However, that is where we are and that is what we are trying to do to help.

We have made the economy the top priority for the Programme for Government. The Northern Ireland economic strategy was published alongside it in March and was unanimously endorsed by the Assembly. I come

to the House and listen to people saying that we need an economic strategy and a job-creation strategy. It already exists in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. If people have ideas that they want to add to the economic strategy, we will, of course, look at them. The subcommittee of Ministers that looks at the economy meets regularly. Right from the beginning, it said that the economic strategy is a living document and it is happy to look at it. When I get motions that come to the House asking me to implement the job strategy from the Business Alliance, which was launched in February 2011, I really do have to ask where those people have been. The jobs plan from the Business Alliance was actually one of the foundations for the economic strategy. It informed the economic strategy. It talked about looking more at export markets and all the things that we have in our economic strategy. We have a very close relationship with the Business Alliance in moving forward, particularly on issues such as corporation tax.

The amendment and, indeed, the motion talk about implementing the jobs plan from the Business Alliance. The Business Alliance was in closest co-operation with the Executive in forming the economic strategy. Therefore, I do not know quite where that piece comes from in the amendment and the motion. We clearly put export-led economic growth at the centre of our ambitions. We have quite stretching targets for exports and exports into new and emerging markets. Therefore, we wanted to use that export-led growth to rebalance the local economy.

Obviously, we also need to rebuild the local labour market. That is the other piece of the economic strategy, and it is hugely challenging. I work continually with colleagues in the Executive to look at new ways in which we can intervene in the labour market. We have made considerable progress, and I pay tribute to my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning for his work in bringing forward the youth contract. Mr Lyttle is absolutely right: the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his colleagues, saw a need to use the Barnett consequentials, which totalled £26 million over three years. It is not just the Barnett consequentials — in fact, he has been allocated some £42 million to support his work and that of the wider Executive in tackling some of the worst impacts of youth unemployment.

The amendment references working together. We are already working together; we do so very closely in the ministerial economic subgroup and in the Executive. We are looking not just for Barnett consequentials, but more besides. So I am not sure where that part of the amendment comes from. One must ask whether the Ulster Unionist Party knew that that had been achieved.

By making it easier for businesses to talk to Invest Northern Ireland through our business support schemes and the Boosting Business programme, we are trying very hard to expand the number of local jobs. We are using the jobs fund to deliver those on the ground and, over the past 18 months, more than 1,600 people have entered work as a result. We expect that figure to rise to 2,400 by the end of the financial year.

We have heard much about the third element of the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which looks back at why we did not have a regional start-up initiative. I would have loved to have had a regional start-up initiative, and I am pleased to say that, after the legal wrangling that we

experienced, a programme will be put in place to deliver support and guidance to those who may dream of running their own business. That includes those who may have found themselves out of work as a result of redundancies such as those at FG Wilson. Specifically, we will try to encourage individuals in neighbourhood renewal areas and young people not in employment, education or training to think about starting a business. They will be further incentivised with grants of £1,000 and £1,500 respectively.

I wish to recognise the unique contribution of social enterprises in providing pathways to employment, which are often but not exclusively for disadvantaged people and in disadvantaged communities. Members will be interested to know that we are involved in work on social entrepreneurship at the moment. I look forward to saying more about that in the near future.

The local economic development measure, part-funded by the European regional development fund, is available to councils, some of which have been quite proactive in putting together pieces of work to help local markets. I warmly welcome that work.

I welcome the recognition in the motion of the central role that Invest NI plays in growing the economy. Of course, I refute the allegation that we — I use the word “we” because I work very much as part of a team with Alastair Hamilton — display a “resigned acceptance” to the trend of jobs moving overseas. What utter nonsense. I assume — indeed, it was confirmed by Mr Beggs — that those comments were driven by Caterpillar's recent decision to move some of its production from Larne to China. The global trend for relatively low-cost general engineering moving from advanced, modern Western economies to countries that offer a much lower cost base, such as China, is something that no one involved in economic development can have failed to see over recent years. It is obvious to all of us that we cannot just ignore global trends and hope that they will go away, although some in the House clearly would like to. We need to be open, honest and transparent, as I believe that Invest NI was in its response. I note that Mrs Overend was asked the same question on the same programme and she refused to answer it. Which is better: to try to be honest and answer the question or to just ignore the question and not answer it at all?

4.15 pm

The reality of FG Wilson and that situation is that it is a major multinational corporation that undertook a global strategic review that led to the decision that impacted on Northern Ireland. Of course, it is an extremely painful decision, particularly for those individuals who are directly affected. However, we need to be realistic and recognise that, as a small regional economy, we will neither be immune from the impact of global market dynamics nor able to prevent them.

As I said recently in the House during the debate on FG Wilson, we have more often been a beneficiary of companies realigning their global footprint than we have lost out. Seeing and capitalising on changing global trends is a core element to rebuilding and rebalancing our economy, and those elements have been behind our very recent successful track record in winning new inward investment. Over the past four years, inward investors have committed to around 170 projects promoting 9,600

new jobs and protecting 1,300 jobs. Those are not just jobs; the vast majority are quality jobs, with the average salary from the new inward investments up around 40%.

So, we need to embrace new processes and technology, build our workforce's skills and broaden our horizons by embracing global opportunities. I believe that we have been doing that through the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. It is what Invest NI is delivering on daily. Where once our economy was heavily reliant on two or three key sectors, we now have a more diversified base, going from advanced manufacturing to ICT, financial services, life sciences and moving into emerging sectors such as e-health and renewables.

Two very recent but very different openings give a clear signal about what I am talking about. On the same day that CME Group, which is one of our new inward investors, opened its new office in Belfast, two new sound stages at Titanic Studios in Belfast were opened. I think that that just shows the broad range of what we are attracting into Belfast.

I am hugely disappointed that two parties in the House seek to personally attack a member of Invest Northern Ireland's staff. The fact that one of those staff members is the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland makes it even more disappointing. It is shameful. I find it quite shocking. If the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland did not have an appreciation of global trends, I would be more concerned about that than about his avoiding questions just so that Members could say, "He avoided that question well." He was open and honest, and that is an approach that the former Chair of the ETI Committee acknowledged and welcomed in the past. It would be very disappointing if the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland found that he cannot be as open and honest as he has been in the past because some in the House seek to attack him for petty political reasons. It is hugely disappointing that that is the case here today.

So, we have the economic strategy, which the entire Executive endorsed. We pride ourselves on high levels of academic achievement among our brightest children, but we need to continue to invest in the education and development of all our young people to ensure that they emerge not just well qualified but well qualified to work. That shows that we need to work right across the Executive so that we can do that.

Where the proposals on the green new deal are concerned, the Executive may not have funded their specific proposals, but the Northern Ireland economic strategy contains a number of commitments that will clearly have an impact that is consistent with the green new deal's objectives. That is true whether it is DSD with its boiler replacement scheme or my Department's dealing with renewable heat incentives or being associated with the recent announcement on offshore renewables.

Although some people try to misrepresent it in the House, I will continue with my commitment to believe that working in the whole area of renewables provides us with investment and the economy with jobs. More than that, it helps us to deal with all our energy policy issues, including security of supply and dealing with matters that are connected to fossil fuels. The motion is timely, because we are speaking about issues that are very important for the population of Northern Ireland. However, the debate has been very

disappointing, because issues that happened in the past were talked about and a very valued member of my team when we go out across the world —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs Foster: — looking for new investment was criticised. I ask the House to oppose the amendment and the motion.

Mr B McCrea: I support the amendment standing in my name and that of my colleague. I have just listened to the Minister. She seems to be rather tetchy; she is disappointed at this and that. The tone of her voice was almost one of dealing with some children that she can hardly be bothered to reprimand but is going through the motions nevertheless. I find that approach deeply disappointing and unhelpful, but there you go. We are both deeply disappointed and trying to make things better. She finished on the comments that were attributed to the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland. My colleagues were only wishing to point out that they disagreed with the statement.

Mrs Foster: That is not correct.

Mr B McCrea: I am more than happy to give way. Instead of the Minister speaking from a sedentary position, it would be better if she stood up and spoke for herself.

Mrs Foster: I will. That is not what the amendment says. The amendment refers to "an attitude of resigned acceptance". If the Member does not know what his own amendment states, that is even more depressing. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: There you have it: quick-fire wit returned by the Minister. Oh boy, am I cut. That was tremendous. Listen: what we were actually doing was talking about what was said in the debate. I do not know whether you were listening to the debate. This party is not resigned to the fact that those jobs are definitely gone. Whenever we were talking to Mary Walshok —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind the Member that, in all cases, remarks have to be made through the Chair.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: Absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker. Through you, I make the point that the party was merely saying that we should fight for every single job. Not every single job will be high-tech or in an area in which we have an unassailable competitive advantage. Many jobs out there are, by their very nature, fairly normal and ordinary, but they put bread on the table, they keep people employed and they give us something to look forward to. We should fight for every single one. That is merely the point that we wanted to make.

We put the words of our amendment in the way in which we did because we did not wish to attack Invest Northern Ireland on a global basis. There were certain issues that we had a problem with, and it is entirely appropriate for us to bring them up. An issue in our amendment, which we ask Members to consider, is that there should be better collaboration between DETI and DEL. If the people who hector us from the sides think that things are going really well, they might ask themselves what the unemployment rate was when the DUP first formed a Government. It was 3.7%. What is it now? From listening to people on

my left, you would think that everything is great; that the whole of our economy is fantastic. "Don't panic", says Mr Pike. There are people unemployed, people looking for work and people looking to us to provide solutions. What are we getting? We are being told that we do not need to worry because it is all in the Programme for Government and economic strategy. We are told, "Say nothing. Move along. Nothing will happen. It will be OK." It may have escaped the Minister's notice, but, in the rest of the United Kingdom, they are creating jobs. There are more jobs. However, for 29 or 30 months, we have had either the highest or second-highest claimant count in the United Kingdom. That is not something to be proud of; rather, it is something on which we want to work together —

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. He has mentioned "solutions", but —

Mrs Foster: Has he?

Mr Flanagan: No, he mentioned the word "solutions", but he did not actually mention any solutions. He is the third Member from the Ulster Unionist Party to speak. To date, the only solution that we have had is for Invest NI to buy more land in Larne. Does the UUP have anything better to offer than that?

Mr B McCrea: I was moving on to that bit in my speech — it is a bit off attacking someone about something before they get to say it.

I will say a couple of things. First, during Question Time today, the Minister for Employment and Learning mentioned that only 10% of jobs in the next 10 years will require no skills. We need to upskill. Secondly, the Isle of Man is now reckoned to be the fourth most likely nation to get involved in a space programme. Anyone who has been to Farnborough will have looked at all those issues, and I know that Members from the party beside me were there. Where is our ambition in advanced manufacturing and skills?

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: You have had your say. I only have time to get through what I have to say.

The Minister wanted solutions. I went to Citibank and was told that it could double its workforce if people would only listen to what it has to say. There is no listening there, Minister. There has been a complete and utter failure of strategy.

People talk about an all-Ireland vision — I hear all of this — but there already is an all-Ireland economy; people already trade throughout Europe. That is not the issue. The issue is about what is going to happen in Northern Ireland. That is what we are fighting for.

When it comes to the issues, people stand up and try to denigrate us by talking about little, small parties or little this, that and the other. I look at this place and ask whether it is really working. I have to say, particularly to those who have this brief, that it is not working. You are at least one year and probably two years behind the recovery in the rest of the United Kingdom, and you do not have a single idea about what you are going to do to reverse the rise in unemployment. That is a tragedy for many of our people in many of our constituencies who will not be won over by bland platitudes and your saying, "Trust us, it will be OK".

This is an issue that requires the House to work together. That is what our amendment calls for —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, I do not have the time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr B McCrea: That is what the amendment calls for, and that is why I urge everybody to vote for a sensible amendment —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr B McCrea: — that asks for better collaboration for the betterment of everybody.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your time is up. Before I call Mr Alban Maginness, I remind Members that we have provided a microphone system, and that it is not necessary to shout. Again, remarks have to be made through the Chair. I call Mr Alban Maginness to conclude and wind up the debate.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that I do not wind up anybody across the aisle.

I have to disagree with some in the House who believe that the motion and the Ulster Unionist amendment, which we accept, are inappropriate. This is a timely motion and debate. The reason I say that is because the figures that have been pointed out repeatedly in the House show that the economic situation here is getting worse while it is getting better in Britain.

For some time, perhaps the past two years or more, I think we deluded ourselves that, while things were worse in Britain and other parts of these islands, we were all right and would see it out. That is not happening. The unemployment rate here is now higher than in Britain and the rate in Britain is going down. That is the central, material part of the motion, and it is right for the House to address it. The Minister and her colleagues might not like it, but we have to face up to realities.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, Minister; I will certainly.

Mrs Foster: The Minister is quite happy to come to the House and discuss unemployment statistics any day of the week. What the Minister objects to is your use of a sentence that the chief executive of Invest NI said on the radio to attack an institution that is doing all it can to bring jobs and investment to Northern Ireland. That is my fundamental issue. The amendment is simply out of date.

Mr A Maginness: If that is really what the Minister's criticism is of the motion and the amendment, it is a very small part of this matter.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I will not, because you have explained your position very clearly and in a very partisan fashion. All the Member for East Belfast did was to come here in support of his Minister: that is all that he was concerned about. His attitude is that he will support the DEL Minister until death. *[Laughter.]*

4.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: That was your sole purpose in coming to the Chamber.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I do not see why I should allow that to be repeated here: does anyone else?

It is not just the fact that unemployment figures are bad and getting worse; it is the fact that the youth unemployment figures are appalling.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: You have made your point a number of times; let me speak for a change.

Mr Lyttle: I have a question.

Mr A Maginness: The youth unemployment figure has increased by 5% —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be seated. I have two points: a Member should not persist in asking for an intervention when it is clear that the person speaking will not give it; and I repeat that shouting from a sedentary position is not acceptable.

Mr A Maginness: Nor will it improve the youth unemployment figures, which have increased by 5%.

We now have 23·5% youth unemployment. How are we going to tackle that? What are our young people going to do? Do we just let them despair? Do we allow them to emigrate? As many Members know, young people are going to Australia, Canada or elsewhere to get employment. Those are well-qualified people. Some are unqualified and unskilled.

We have to ask questions in this House. Where else do we ask them? Ministers are accountable to the Assembly; we are not accountable to Ministers. We are not accountable to the Executive, and Executive Ministers have to learn that. It is all very well for the Minister to get upset about this debate, but she has to listen to constructive criticisms. These are not negative criticisms; these are constructive criticisms.

The green new deal is a very positive thing indeed, but it has been dismissed by the Executive. One has rightly to ask why the Executive are effectively rejecting the green new deal. The concept comes from President Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States during the Depression. The reason that people have adopted that title is because the New Deal got the United States out of recession; that is why we use the term "new deal". The green new deal can do the same for us in Northern Ireland. I believe that Britain is more advanced in developing the green economy to try to stimulate the economy generally. Recently, £125 million was given to the green deal cash-back offer. That is a sensible approach. The same thing is happening in Scotland where they are building more homes because newbuilds stimulate the economy and get people back to work. It would give those in the construction sector who have been unemployed for lengthy periods the opportunity to work. What are the Executive doing? Are we speeding up the programme of newbuilds or are we not? I believe that the latter is true. We have to do that because the multiplier effect is so helpful in stimulating our economy.

What about European funding? I do not believe that we have exercised more of our skills and efforts to access

European funding. Why not? What is our connectivity with the European Union as a devolved regional Executive? I do not believe that it is good. I believe that more work can be done on that, as I said about the green new deal. What about the jobs programme that the business people in Northern Ireland have produced? Do we dismiss the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors and all the other business groups that have come together?

I do not believe that it is sufficient for us to ignore that, and I believe that we should, in fact, re-examine —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; I am running out of time.

It is important that we go back and re-examine that. There is no harm in revisiting things. Why should we not revisit things? Why should we not give our young people greater hope? Why can we not give those who have been unemployed and who believe themselves to be unemployable greater hope and opportunity? I do not accept that it is right for Ministers — whoever they are — to come to the Chamber and simply dismiss criticism. It is up the Minister to accept criticism and to say, "Yes; perhaps we should do things differently, and maybe we can do things better". That opportunity is there for us, and I believe that we should pursue it vigorously.

It is important to take into account what people have said in the House today. I have heard, in terms of defending the situation, that the global downturn is so heavy, constrictive and deadening that we will not be able to get out of this situation. If that is true, why do we not close up shop? Why does the Executive not simply go away? We have got to give people hope. The attitude that has been expressed by the Minister certainly does not inspire me in giving hope to those who are unfortunately unemployed. All that we are asking the Minister to do is to re-examine things to try to get a new approach to the situation here.

Incidentally, Mr Frew, it was not Captain Mainwaring who said "Don't panic; don't panic". It was Corporal Jones.
[Laughter.]

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. Just when we talk about people saying things —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up, sorry.

Mr McGlone: Sorry; right.

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the absence of any actual solutions from the SDLP or UUP, I have a copy of the youth employment scheme that Mr Maginness may want to have a read at before he finishes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, and it would be helpful if Members asked for points of order.

Mr McGlone: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In his intervention, Mr Moutray factually misrepresented my position in regard to gas to the west. I have never said any such thing, or maybe I did not say it on those numerous occasions when he is not at the Committee, but —

Mr Deputy Speaker: If that is the case, Mr McGlone now has it on the record.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mrs Overend

NOES

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dunne and Mr Frew

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Overend and Mr Rogers

NOES

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dunne and Mr Frew

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with grave concern that the unemployment rate has risen by 19,000 in the three years between the quarters ended July 2009 and July 2012 and that 23.5% of 18- to 24-year-olds, some 24,000 young people, are unemployed with little prospect of work; acknowledges that the role of Invest NI is to grow the local economy; expresses dismay that Invest NI appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson; notes with concern that there was no dedicated Invest NI business start-up scheme in place for over a year; further notes that the Executive have not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland green new deal or developed the proposals of the jobs plan published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and Invest NI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals and to give a commitment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning in making bids for the significant Barnett consequential arising from the Youth Contract initiative, as announced by the coalition Government at Westminster, to tackle youth unemployment specifically.

Adjourned at 5.00 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 October 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

Youth Justice Review

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With permission, I wish to make a statement on the implementation of the youth justice review.

I will begin by briefly reminding the House of the process that has brought us to this important stage. In furtherance of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, I appointed an independent team of experts to review our youth justice system and to report its findings to me. I want to pay tribute again to the way that the review team approached its task, which culminated in a report that was balanced, thoughtful and, judging by the public consultation response, well received.

I also want to thank all the individuals and organisations that have contributed to the review through dialogue or by submission. I am pleased to note that our open, transparent and inclusive approach to the process has encouraged a very positive level of engagement. I also acknowledge the important role that the Justice Committee played in helping to shape the review with perceptive advice and guidance from the outset of the process. I was also pleased with the hearing that I received from the Committee when I outlined for it at the end of June how I was minded to proceed. I gave a commitment then to publish in the autumn an implementation plan setting out how the review recommendations would be taken forward. That is the purpose of my announcement today.

The report provides a blueprint for the effective transformation of our youth justice system. That is my considered view, and it is the overwhelming view of those who responded to the public consultation. It is, therefore, my intention to see it substantially implemented over the next 18 months in line with the commitment that I have already made in the Programme for Government. I am, today, publishing an implementation plan to give effect to that commitment and to demonstrate publicly that I intend to see this agenda through. The implementation plan sets out actions and timescales against each of the review's recommendations and indicates whether the recommendation is a matter that is under my direct control or whether I need to work with others where cross-cutting issues are involved. That latter group involves wider social policy issues that are often complex and likely to require sustained and co-ordinated action over a prolonged period.

My Department is pressing ahead with matters that lie within my ambit. For example, I have already announced

that the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) will be the sole justice location for the detention of juveniles by 1 November 2012. I am pleased to report that, today, there are no juveniles held at Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre (YOC) and that that will continue other than in the most exceptional circumstances. That contrasts with the situation that I inherited on devolution, when there were 16 under-18s held there. I want to be clear that, in using the term "exceptional circumstances", it will be rare indeed for anyone under 18 to be housed in the YOC and, if that is ever to be needed, the JJC regime would apply to their care and support.

We continue to tackle the delay in the system highlighted by the review team and others, and we are taking forward a wide range of initiatives, with improved timeliness in youth cases a particular priority. I have also announced my intention to introduce statutory time limits within the mandate of this Assembly, beginning with the youth courts.

The Criminal Justice Board has approved plans to pilot a new approach aimed at providing better support and information to young people in the criminal justice system, as well as reducing the time taken for cases to be dealt with. This youth engagement pilot was launched on 1 October. It will promote early engagement between children who have offended and youth specialists from the police and the Youth Justice Agency to facilitate better communication and decision-making and encourage a greater uptake of diversionary disposals.

The police, the Public Prosecution Service and the Youth Justice Agency are also taking forward the recommendations directed specifically towards them. The PSNI has developed a model of training that provides officers with the necessary skills base to develop positive interaction with children. That training is being piloted in conjunction with the PSNI's human rights training adviser and policing with the community branch, with the intention of full roll-out over the coming months. The Youth Justice Agency has embraced the recommendations aimed at enhancing the success of youth conferencing. They include maximising the opportunities for direct victim attendance; examining issues of proportionality; reducing the time taken for conferences; and establishing parameters for cases in which youth conferencing may not be the best option. Similarly, following consultation with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Victim Support and others, the Public Prosecution Service has revisited all its correspondence with children and their parents or guardians to simplify its content to make it more easily understood. All that activity is reflected in the implementation plan, along

with the plans for delivering on the rest of the review's recommendations.

The review team made a number of significant recommendations on joining up our overall approach to children at ministerial and strategic levels, particularly in relation to early intervention. That is why I am progressing this aspect of the review agenda through the Delivering Social Change framework, which now incorporates the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. It provides the necessary overarching approach across all the key social policy areas that affect the lives of children.

Poor outcomes for children do not always manifest themselves in offending. However, there is strong evidence that early poor experiences in the home, at school or through unmet need and social exclusion can lead them in that direction. There is a heavy responsibility on all of us to do all we can to prevent that. I, therefore, welcome the recent announcement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister of a substantial investment of £26 million over two years in early intervention. It fits with the direction that I and others have been advocating of taking a more joined-up cross-government approach to some really challenging social policy issues. My Department and the justice system generally will play their part in the development of schemes and programmes in areas where we can make a meaningful contribution.

No statement on the review of youth justice would be complete without mention being made of the one really contentious recommendation in the review: raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12. Personally, I agree with the overwhelming majority of those who responded to the public consultation that a child of 10 is just too young to be dealt with by the weight of a criminal justice system. Medical research on brain development around understanding consequences and social policy research on the negative impact of criminalising young children tells us that we should seek non-criminal justice interventions for the very small number of children in that age group who offend. I recognise, though, that an important minority in the House is not yet persuaded by that argument. I am, however, committed to pressing the case for an increase and intend to continue the dialogue to establish what scope there is for progress, perhaps with safeguards to allow for the extremely rare case of a very serious offence by a child under the age of 12 to be addressed. This arrangement has operated without difficulty in the Republic of Ireland for the past six years.

An implementation team, reporting to a cross-agency programme board, will co-ordinate the overall delivery of the planned work. The team will report regularly on progress to me and to the Criminal Justice Board. I have also undertaken to keep the Justice Committee informed on the same basis.

The matter of independent oversight has been raised with me. In this connection, I am pleased to advise that the acting chief inspector has agreed that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) will undertake and publish an assessment of progress at key stages to provide the necessary independent and objective assurance that we are sticking to the task.

Of course, transforming the youth justice system is not the only task we are engaged in. Since becoming Minister of Justice, I have gone through a systematic process

of reviewing key elements that constitute the criminal justice system to ensure that they are fit for purpose. Members will have seen the resulting reports. We are now moving forward on delivery. Work is progressing apace on implementing the access to justice review and the review of the prison system. We are developing an overarching strategic framework for reducing offending; we have published a community safety strategy underpinned by funding; and we are consolidating the police and community safety partnership network to facilitate engagement and accountability at local level. We are tackling head-on important issues around child prostitution and exploitation, domestic and sexual violence, hate crime and the interests of victims. Work is progressing on the criminal justice Bill, the faster, fairer justice Bill and the mental capacity Bill.

These issues relate to the work on youth justice. They are only some of the highlights in an unprecedented modernisation programme aimed at making our community safer and more secure than ever. This constitutes a far-reaching reform programme that demonstrates the difference that devolution is making. Central to that programme is the input that political representatives, NGOs and the wider community provide to the work of my Department. I am delighted to say that today marks another milestone in that journey and demonstrates our commitment to having an effective and efficient youth justice system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): As a Committee, we will continue to engage on these important issues. In respect of a number of points that the Minister highlighted, I welcome first the fact that he recognises that increasing the minimum age from 10 to 12 is not going to happen. That will allow us to move on and focus on important issues, now that we have dealt with that. It will be for the judiciary to decide whether someone in that age bracket has committed an offence, and we should not frustrate it in its efforts to protect society. Secondly, the Minister announced today that nobody currently under the age of 18 is in Hydebank. That is something that, operationally, the Prison Service can do, and the Minister should explain why he wants to put that in legislation, when, clearly, it is not necessary to do so. It is important that we do not use legislation to make political statements when, clearly, there is no need to do so.

Finally, the whole House will wholeheartedly welcome the Minister's remarks on early intervention. It recognises the need — before people even engage in antisocial behaviour or ever have contact with the criminal justice system — for us to do more to identify areas at risk and families at risk, in conjunction with health, education and the justice system, and engage in serious programmes of early intervention. Will the Minister outline the resources in his Department that he intends to allocate to early intervention to support schemes that will come forward?

Mr Ford: I thank the Chair for his comments. I am not sure that the statement recognised that the minimum age of criminal responsibility was not going to be raised. I indicated a willingness to engage on possible ways in which the matter might be addressed and highlighted the issue where the most serious offences are exempt from that change in the Republic of Ireland, a lesson that was in line with what was being suggested to me by some unionist Members.

I welcome the extremely good work of the Prison Service and the Youth Justice Agency to, effectively, case conference the under-18s away from the juvenile wing, as it was, in Hydebank Wood. However, when the Chair says that legislation should not be used to make a political statement, I think that, a lot of the time when we make legislation, it is as much as anything about a political statement — a statement of intent of the correct direction of travel that underpins the good work that is being done. I believe that there is a case for legislation on the issue.

The Member correctly highlights the fact that a lot of early intervention responsibility lies with the Departments of Health and Education. That is largely around what you might term “early years intervention”. My Department is more concerned with what might be described as “early stage intervention”, diverting those at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system at an early stage of what would otherwise be a potentially criminal career. There are limits to what the Justice Department should be doing with respect to early years. It is not appropriate that we should be involved at that stage. However, where the issues of early intervention are around the early stage intervention, the Department will certainly commit resources. For example, we have just agreed to contribute to the project in west Belfast and the Shankill. It is very much not Justice-led, but I see a role for Justice as a minor partner alongside the significant work being done by Health and Education. So the issue for me is ensuring that we get that partnership approach and joined-up working between Departments.

10.45 am

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement. I am sure the Minister will welcome the fact that Derry was announced this morning as the fourth most likely city that people will want to visit in the whole world in 2013.

Turning to the youth justice review, I welcome the fact that there will be independent oversight and the inspectorate will carry that out. Can the Minister outline how frequent that will be and confirm that it will not replace the need for ongoing and continuing monitoring and scrutiny?

Mr Ford: I thank the vice-Chair for his comments. I suppose the only response I should make, if he is playing the constituency card, is that, as long as people come from around the world to visit Derry via Belfast International Airport situated in South Antrim, that is all right by me.

On the more serious issue of oversight, there is a specific role for CJINI, which has agreed to provide formal reports in March of next year and March 2014. There will also be regular quarterly updates outside the formal recording mechanism by CJINI. Obviously, the Committee and others may well be interested in the work that is being done that relates to the wider work of the justice system and to the role of other Departments. I have no doubt that, through the Delivering Social Change network as well as through the more specific departmental structures, where CJINI will play the lead, there will be a degree of checking up on what the Department is doing.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for the statement. He noted early poor experiences at home and at school and unmet needs and social exclusion for young people. He indicated

that there was a wider responsibility on all of us. I agree with that, but what are the Minister and his ministerial colleagues doing collectively to resolve that matter or to improve it?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Elliott for that question. As I made clear, I believe that the specific issues around the early age interventions are, in very few cases, likely to be for my Department primarily, given that the criminal justice system should not be involved with very young ones. The important issue, as I see it, is that we should see joined-up working through the Delivering Social Change work being done by the Executive. We have a structural problem in that our Departments are set up almost as Whitehall images operating in silos. In my time as Minister, certainly, I believe that we have seen an increasing willingness at ministerial and official level to work across those silos to ensure that we get joined-up government, which means that our work is done more effectively and more efficiently. That is a particular necessity at times of financial stringency.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's statement this morning. I congratulate the Minister on his good work on the review of youth justice. Indeed, I do not think I could have done it any better myself. *[Laughter.]* The Minister deserves great support and praise for the work he has done.

Time limits and statutory time limits are very important. Justice delayed is justice denied, particularly in the youth justice system. When does the Minister believe that statutory time limits will be introduced in this important area?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for his comments. If he had had the same team as I had, he would probably have been able to do as good a job as I did. That praise from a lawyer, knowing the ability of barristers to have 20/20 vision in hindsight, is to be welcomed by me.

I have indicated that we intend to have statutory time limits for youth cases during the lifetime of this Assembly mandate. It is only part of the work that is being done to speed things up, including the work being done around youth engagement, which has already started this month, as I highlighted. We are seeking to build on the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, where there is already legislative provision around statutory time limits. It is perhaps not the best legislation around, but it is already in existence. No doubt Mr Maginness is as well acquainted with the precise provisions of the 2003 order as other Members of the House and will, therefore, be able to follow it in Committee.

Mr Dickson: I congratulate the Minister on his statement and on the excellent work that the Department has done on these matters. *[Interruption.]* I am trying to do it in an understated way. *[Laughter.]* I refer the Minister to the issue of the juvenile justice centre. Can he assure the House that arrangements will be in place to care for and manage those who might previously have been sent to Hydebank?

Mr Ford: My colleagues normally get accused of being effusive in their congratulations, although, on this occasion, Stewart has been unable to compete with Alban.

The necessary support for Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre is a key issue in ensuring that Woodlands is able to manage the small number of very difficult young people whom it has to deal with. This morning, I understand that

there are 25 young people in custody in Woodlands. I think back a generation ago to my early days in social work, when there would have been in the region of 400 young people in custody in Northern Ireland. That shows the extremely good work being done by social services, the Youth Justice Agency and others in working with those young people in the community and keeping them out of custody. However, I am certainly committed to ensuring that we get the necessary resources to ensure that the work can be done at Woodlands. That involves a lot of intensive staff work, excellent training, significant measures of support and ensuring that Woodlands is not overfull and is, therefore, able to deal with particularly difficult young people. We have seen excellent work done by the team in Woodlands, which, I am convinced, will be able to continue.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned integrated services in west Belfast and greater Shankill, and that is a project that, I believe, should be rolled out across the city. I agree with the Minister's assertion that early intervention is the key not just in youth justice but across government. The Minister mentioned the youth engagement pilot. How exactly will that work?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Humphrey for his positive remarks about the operation of a variety of cross-departmental working on early interventions. The youth engagement clinics, which have been operational since 1 October, are designed to ensure that young people who would be likely to accept a diversionary option are given the opportunity to agree that at an early stage, which would therefore remove them from the formal system at an early point. At the moment, the pilot is examining the best ways in which that works. Obviously, you will appreciate that, just three weeks in, there have not been many young people for whom that has been relevant. However, it is a way of bringing together those who would otherwise be involved in a prosecution — representatives of the Youth Justice Agency, along with the child and their representatives — to see what the best options are; to see whether a diversionary option is available and suitable; to ensure that, if that is the case, young people are given the incentive to recognise that at an early stage, so that the diversion can happen at a time when the young person is still aware of what they have been doing; and to ensure that we do not clog up the justice system by potentially waiting for a court hearing, which could well result in a diversionary option some months down the line. It is all about making it a speedier system, avoiding the blockages in the formal system and ensuring that the best treatment for the young offender happens at the earliest possible stage.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas inniu. I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he expand on the concept of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people and tell us who is involved and how often it will meet? Are all other Departments committed to the plan?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Lynch for his positive comments. In fact, the ministerial subcommittee has now been subsumed into the Delivering Social Change framework, which is an OFMDFM-led initiative. That initiative attempts to ensure that all relevant Departments work together on the aspects that are, as it says, about delivering social change and involving the needs of children and young people, particularly in this context. I cannot give Mr Lynch

the precise detail of who is involved, because it is not my initiative. However, I can say that the Department of Justice is involved and is committed to being a full partner in it.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like my colleague, I compliment the Minister on his announcement. With regard to the overall independent oversight and effective monitoring of the implementation plan's delivery, can the Minister clarify that the cross-departmental aspects of the plan will also be overseen and taken into account?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McGlone. I am glad that he is slightly more modest than his colleague anyway.

Oversight is an issue at different levels. Clearly, CJINI has an oversight role in anything that relates to the criminal justice system or to the Department of Justice's responsibilities. Wider oversight on cross-cutting issues would be for whatever arrangements are set up. The Executive will have a wider role to ensure delivery through the Delivering Social Change programme. Whether that means that the OFMDFM Committee will take the lead at Assembly level, I am not sure. Certainly, in areas where my Department has responsibility, I can commit to saying that it will answer to the Committee on anything that it wishes to ask. We will make public the formal reports that CJINI publishes on the work that we are doing.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement. In the context of my experience as a former member of the DPP and the DPCSP in west Belfast, my question relates to preventing young people from coming to the attention of the youth justice system. When doing that work, I was involved in consulting young people on their experiences of the police. They reported that they felt that the police had very negative preconceived ideas about them. Could the Minister be convinced that elements of the recommendations would help to change that mindset, which may exist among some PSNI members?

Mr Ford: I am not sure that the youth justice review goes into that level of detail on the relationship with the Police Service. Clearly, there are issues to ensure that the Police Service operates to the highest professional standards in every part of Northern Ireland. It is undoubtedly the case that dealing with teenagers where there are suspicions of antisocial behaviour can be one of the biggest problems. I certainly hope that the review's lessons, as they are applied by all the agencies, would be applied at every level of those agencies, including those who have the most difficult job of dealing with problems as they arise on the streets.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the reduced number of young people who are being detained at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, as well as the success of the early intervention programmes that the Minister referred to in his statement. Can the Minister advise whether the documented success of schemes such as that run by Action for Children will encourage him to put more funds into that intervention stage, meaning that work will be done with young people and their families where there is a risk of offending?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Beggs for the general tenor of his question. At this stage, in difficult financial circumstances,

I cannot give specific financial commitments. I can say that, over the past few weeks, I have seen three different youth engagement projects working. They were led by three different organisations in three slightly different ways. All of them demonstrate value for money and help to turn round the lives of young people who might otherwise get into trouble. I am keen to see that we learn lessons from them and apply those lessons as widely as possible.

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

11.00 am

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the Minister's statement and the publication of an implementation plan for youth justice reform. I also put on record my recognition for the PSNI Victoria youth independent advisory group in east Belfast, which does a lot of excellent work with young people on this issue. How does the criminal age of responsibility in Northern Ireland compare with that in other European countries, and what further work is needed on that issue?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for his complimentary remarks about a lot of the good work that is being done around youth engagement. The issue of the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Europe is slightly wider than the brief I have with me, but, at 10 years old, the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland is very much at the lower end by European standards. I believe that in Scotland it is 12, with consideration being given to increasing it. It is 10 in England and Wales. It was increased six years ago, except for the most serious offences, in the Republic. The important thing is to ensure that we get a minimum age of responsibility that is consistent with what we understand about the developmental psychology of young children in a way that is meaningful. We can ensure that we discuss that sort of evidence and try to take a rational decision rather than one swayed by prejudice or, indeed, by the very rare event that occurs in other jurisdictions and with which there has been nothing comparable, as far as my officials can trace, in Northern Ireland ever.

Ms McGahan: What is the Minister's strategy for dealing with hate crime? Coming from a rural area — Dungannon — I am getting feedback that hate crime is not being tackled properly on the ground.

Mr Ford: I am not quite sure where hate crime fits into the youth justice review. I will happily meet the Member if she wishes to discuss the initiatives being taken on hate crime in different parts of Northern Ireland. Clearly, it is very worrying. It was particularly worrying to see a national television programme last night that featured a victim of hate crime — a disabled person who, I believe, lived in the Lisburn area, certainly within Northern Ireland. As I referred to in discussions at Question Time last week, I am determined to do what we can to ensure that hate crime is addressed by all the relevant agencies in every part of Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: The Minister may not be surprised if I do not follow the back-slapping trend of the morning. I suppose I could say I have come to question the Minister, not to praise him. *[Laughter.]* The Minister is a great advocate of the processes and architecture of the House. Being such, why is he so intent on trying to subvert the reality that there is not the requisite support for his foolish notion of increasing the minimum age for criminal responsibility?

Why waste time and effort on a proposal that is patently stillborn?

Mr Ford: I am not sure, Deputy Speaker, whether it is in order to accuse a Minister of seeking to subvert the processes of the House. I think the evidence would show my engagement with the House and the Committee is anything but.

Mr Agnew: The Minister, rightly, draws a distinction between early intervention by his Department and early years provision, primarily taken forward by the Department of Health and the Department of Education. He cites an example of good practice, where his Department has supported the work of the Departments of Education and Health in this regard. However, does he not believe that it would be better for this to be a requirement of government, so that we can make good practice common practice?

Mr Ford: I suppose I have slightly longer experience in the ways of the House than Mr Agnew and am not sure whether we can enforce certain provisions on other people. Indeed, in the Justice Act 2011, introduced in 2010, shortly after devolution, it proved not possible to put a requirement around other agencies to co-operate with the work of policing and community safety partnerships — a view that, I think, is now being reconsidered in certain quarters. We will do the work that we can do best in the Department of Justice in co-operation with all other Departments where it improves the outcomes for our people. Whether or not compulsion is required, we will do our best to ensure that co-operation.

North/South Ministerial Council: Education

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Le do chead ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh, in oiriúint do alt 52 den Act TÉ 1998, faoi fhormaid cruinnithe oideachais den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas. Mr Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education format. The meeting was held in Armagh on 17 October 2012. I represented the Executive as Minister of Education, along with the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland MLA. The Irish Government were represented by Ciarán Cannon TD. This statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland and is made on behalf of us both. I will summarise the main points from the meeting, ranging across all the agreed areas of education co-operation.

The Council received a detailed presentation on the work being done by the educational underachievement working group (EUWG) in literacy and numeracy. It noted that the EUWG met on 4 September 2012 to review and advance its work programme, including a review of progress on the production of a joint report by the two inspectorates on best practice in literacy and numeracy in post-primary settings and the potential for a similar publication on good practice in supporting those with special educational needs.

As regards youth exchanges, my Department continues to liaise and co-operate with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the Causeway youth programme. The programme is an important initiative in the non-formal education sector that allows for youth exchanges and special projects between groups from across Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

The Council noted the most recent work that has been undertaken to progress the recommendations contained in the joint inspectorates' evaluation report on the dissolving boundaries programme. Discussions are taking place between my Department and the Department of Education and Skills to progress part 2 of the study on North/South co-operation in the education sector. A progress report will be presented at the next meeting of the NSMC in sectoral format.

We noted the content of the joint report from the two teaching councils on outstanding issues and obstacles to teacher mobility. We also noted that both Departments of Education had, through the North/South teacher qualifications working group, initiated immediate discussions with both teaching councils on implementing the suggestions for improving teacher mobility included in the report. We noted the ongoing discussions between Marino Institute of Education in Dublin and the University of Ulster regarding the UU's proposal to deliver a preparatory course to enable students to undertake assessments administered by Marino college leading to the scrúdú cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge, which is the Irish language qualification. We noted that the UU hopes to offer the preparatory course in the current academic year and is currently attempting to establish the level of interest among students on its diploma in Irish. The renewed interest shown by St Mary's University College, Belfast in delivering the Irish language requirement was also noted.

On Irish-medium education, we noted the decision to extend the jointly funded collaborative programme for the 2012-13 academic year and the content of the proposed programme, which included educational conferences in both jurisdictions, a blended learning project on language and literacy development and an Irish-medium community of practice in the border areas.

The Council welcomed the ongoing exchanges between the inspectorates from the Departments, and the sharing of the Departments, in June 2012, of the joint inspection report on the Middletown Centre for Autism was also noted.

Progress continues in the development of the joint cross-border planning survey that is to be undertaken shortly by my Department and the Department of Education and Skills. The purpose of the survey is to inform our position on attitudes to cross-border pupil movement and the potential impact on school planning and the schools estates, North and South. Officials from the two Departments have taken forward the practical details. The questionnaire to be used in schools in the North was piloted by my officials during August, with positive results. The findings were shared with colleagues in DES, as they will undertake a similar pilot exercise in the near future. The survey will take the form of an online questionnaire that will be available to parents of pupils attending schools that lie within six miles for primary schools and 12 miles for post-primary schools of the border. Parents of pupils in primary 1 and in year 8 of post-primary education will be asked for their views on cross-border education, as they represent the most recent cohort to have possibly considered it. Parents of pupils in primary 7 will also be included, as they may be about to consider it. The questionnaire will issue in the North in the final week of October and in the South in November. The results of the survey and the proposals on the way forward will be available for the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting of 2013.

I understand that applied A levels and BTECs are not considered by Irish universities or institutes of technology. They accept GCSEs, A levels and the Cambridge Pre-U, but there may be subject-specific requirements for individual course entry and minimum grades for which those types of qualifications are accepted. I will continue to discuss the matter with Minister Quinn. High-quality, relevant vocational qualifications with clear pathways for progression can be the right choice for pupils who then seek to go to university in the South, and it would be very positive to see greater flexibility in recognising those achievements. That would also support the mobility of students across the island of Ireland.

I understand that the Central Applications Office will allocate points only in respect of A-level qualifications taken in the same academic year. That puts students in the North who choose to take an A-level subject a year early at a disadvantage, as up to 150 CAO points — the maximum available for an A level — will not be counted. There is no reference to it in the CAO handbook, which simply refers to leaving certificate examinations having to be taken in one sitting to attract CAO points. I feel that the system is unfair, and I have asked the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, as the qualifications regulator here, to raise the issue with the CAO. I have also asked my officials to highlight the matter to careers

advisers in the Department for Employment and Learning, as it could clearly affect the university choices of students.

In relation to the work on special educational needs and the work to develop the Middletown Centre for Autism, the Council discussed the progress made in developing the necessary budget processes that will enable the expansion to take place as soon as possible. I renew my commitment to the expansion of services at the centre. The quality of the service provision is an excellent example of the benefits that can be promoted through North/South co-operation. I congratulate the centre on its ongoing work, which resulted in a recent joint inspection report describing the service provision at the centre as outstanding.

Mar fhocal scoir, d'aontaigh Airí gur chóir cruinniú de choiste oideachais na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas a reachtáil arís ar 27 February 2013. In closing, Ministers agreed that the North/South Ministerial Council in education format should meet again on 27 February 2013.

Mr Kinahan (The Deputy Chairperson of the

Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement to the House this morning. I note his reference to the second part of a study on North/South co-operation in the education sector, and I look forward to further information on the progress report.

The Minister also referred to a number of problems in the Republic of Ireland, where universities or the CAO have decided that they will not recognise certain Northern Ireland qualifications. Like him, I am disappointed to learn that, in some circumstances, that includes GCE A levels. On behalf of the Committee, I wish to indicate its growing concern in respect of that issue. I welcome the Minister's intervention on behalf of hard-working Northern Ireland students who have achieved good results in their exams and have chosen to study elsewhere.

There is much in the statement to question. As Deputy Chair, I ask the Minister whether he will use his best offices, including, as appropriate, future North/South Ministerial Councils to help maintain the general transferability of Northern Ireland GCSEs and A levels to other jurisdictions, particularly in the UK, or is his concern purely confined to the transfer of students between this jurisdiction and the Republic?

From a party point of view, I would like to ask why we are concentrating on post-primary literacy and numeracy. Why are we putting so many resources into the cross-border initiative? When you look at the distances, it will involve a mass of people. It will, therefore, be a costly exercise, when there is so much in Northern Ireland that needs to be resolved and made better first.

11.15 am

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for the question. I will update the Assembly on the cross-border studies report following the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting, when we will get a report.

As regards exams and Southern universities, the attitude adopted by the body in charge of universities in the South towards our examinations is disappointing. I am happy with the work of Minister Quinn on this matter; he is doing everything in his power to resolve it, but the body we are dealing with is independent and will take its own counsel

and make its own decisions on these matters. As for the transferability of our exams system, the reason I have concentrated on North/South aspects in this statement is that I am reporting back on a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. I have made it clear to the House before that I want to ensure that our current exam system and whatever examinations system we end up with after the review will be transferable across these islands. That includes England, Scotland and Wales, as I am perfectly aware that many, many students choose to travel there to further their studies, and I have no intention of hindering that process in any way.

I think I have covered all the points that the Member raised — sorry, he asked about the best use of resources. We are dealing with the border corridor and border communities, and we could end up in a position where the best use of resources would be to share more than we do currently, rather than operating an education system back to back. As regards his question about numeracy and literacy only focusing on post-primary schools, I assure the Member that our attention spans all areas of education. The current work involves post-primary schools, but we are focusing on all areas of education.

Mr Hazzard: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Can the Minister outline the importance of overcoming mobility barriers to the professional recognition and registration of teachers across the island?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for the question. I do not think that we have answered the question of teacher qualifications and the ability to move across the island yet. I welcome the fact that both the GTC and the TCI have recently, at the request of the North/South Ministerial Council, provided us with a progress report. Within that, they ask a number of questions of Ministers and future work programmes that may stand in their way.

I will write to the GTC here and reaffirm that, in any future changes to teacher training, I will bear in mind the need for teachers to be able to operate across all these islands and to be able to operate across the border. I will reassure it that I do not intend to place any further barriers in its way. The Teacher Council of Ireland has raised a question about whether it would be appropriate for Minister Quinn to intervene to give special status to teachers from the North. I have asked Minister Quinn to explore that matter further, and he will take his own counsel and come back with a decision. Progress has been slow to date, but I think the most recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format has given added focus to this matter. I expect early results to flow from that.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the Minister's statement. The cross-border survey shows that there are not just financial benefits; there are benefits for isolated Catholic and Protestant communities. The results of the survey will go to the North/South Ministerial Council. Will they be known in time to be incorporated into the post-primary area planning process?

Mr O'Dowd: The results will come to the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in or around February. Departments will be aware of them before that time. If there is relevant information required to flow into my area planning decisions, I will take cognisance of that and be minded of it when I come to any decisions. The final

decisions on how we interpret, deal with and implement the findings of the survey will be a matter for further discussion with Minister Quinn at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. However, as I have said to the House previously, area planning is not like the Big Bang theory; it will not happen all at once. It will be evolutionary in that sense and will evolve over time. The North/South survey will be of benefit to area planning as it progresses over the coming months and years.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning, particularly the part on special educational needs. We welcome the progress that has been made at the Middletown Centre for Autism. Despite the cynicism of some parties in the initial stages, it is going well, and the Minister intends to extend it. Has there been any discussion apart from the discussion on autism? We know that there are other special needs requirements for children. I am thinking about speech and language. What about classroom assistants? Have the Ministers discussed those other aspects of special educational need?

Mr O'Dowd: Special education needs is an area of co-operation under the North/South Ministerial Council, so there have been broader discussions in my time and that of my predecessor on that matter. I will write to the Member about the items of work that have been conducted. I do not have all the details in front of me at this time. I again welcome the progress made at Middletown. The most recent joint inspectorate report found the work at the centre to be outstanding, which is very welcome. It was treated with suspicion at one time, but I think that suspicion has now been broken down due to both the Committee visit and the reports coming back. It is now a valued part of our special educational needs framework. It has provided training and assistance to thousands, and its work will continue.

One of the issues causing difficulty, although it is not insurmountable, is that the South's Budget process differs slightly from ours. Its Budget process is from December to December, whereas we operate from April to April. We are trying to see how we can synchronise that for the further development of the Middletown centre.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he elaborate on whether the youth exchange programme includes our NEET children, and are there any examples of good practice in how that works?

Mr O'Dowd: It includes all categories of young people. I see youth exchange and youth provision as an integral part of education, so it covers all aspects of youth provision as part of our educational work. I do not have specific examples in front of me, but I will pass those on to the Member. Experiences of youth unemployment and disengagement and a lack of youth opportunities are familiar on both sides of the border. What is also familiar is the good youth work that is going on. The opportunities that youth brings to our communities and our society can and will be shared, and the enthusiasm that youth brings to projects is an element that should and will be shared as part of the exchange programmes. I will give the Member greater detail in writing.

Mr B McCrea: I note the Minister's comment in his statement about applied A levels and the difficulties with the CAO. Will he outline when he first became aware of

the obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education and what engagement he has had in the past months and years to deal with that issue?

Mr O'Dowd: This matter was really highlighted when we changed the provision around the A* in A levels. A number of universities in the South did not fully recognise that, as we would have liked. So, it has been in place for possibly three to four years. There has been ongoing work by my predecessor and me with our respective ministerial colleagues in the South. As I said to your colleague and previously in the House, I believe that Minister Quinn is doing everything that he can to assist us in this matter, but the CAO, which is an independent body in the South, is making the call on this. I have again asked CCEA to engage in face-to-face meetings with the CAO to offer it reassurances, to explain the rigour of our examination and marking processes and to reassure any universities that require it that our A levels and applied A levels are robust examinations that can be read across into the South's examinations. So, we have had a problem with A* grades for several years. The issue with applied A levels has now been highlighted to me as well, and we are working to resolve that.

Mr Allister: The Minister told us something about the discussion on cross-border pupil movements. At any stage, did that discussion move to or will it move to payment for the education provided on a cross-border basis? We know that, at present, 400 pupils from the Republic are educated for free in Northern Ireland and maybe less than half that number in the opposite direction. We also know that the Finance Minister, who is now here, is on record as saying in the House that it must be done on the basis that it is not a gift, especially when budgets are under pressure. So, has any progress been made in getting to the point where the Republic provides funding for the free education that we provide for its children? If the Minister did not raise that, did his minder on that occasion, Minister McCausland, think to raise it?

Mr O'Dowd: It was raised at the first discussions that we had on the cross-border survey, dating back the best part of a year. Minister Quinn and I discussed the financial implications of the outworkings of the cross-border survey, and both of us recognised that there might be financial implications for both jurisdictions. So, it is on record. It is part of the work programme, and it will have to be resolved to the satisfaction of both jurisdictions before we move forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that "minder" is not an appropriate term to use in the House.

Mrs Hale: I apologise to the Minister for not being here for all of his statement. Further to the question that Mr McCrea raised on access to the higher institutions in the South, does the Minister have any idea of the number of young pupils who feel that they have been disadvantaged by having the applied A level and BTEC in the North?

Mr O'Dowd: I apologise to the Member; I do not have those specific details in front of me, but I can get them forwarded on to me. Several Members from across the Floor have raised that matter to me. They say that it is disenfranchising a number of their constituents. If it applies to one or two cases and the matter can be resolved, let us resolve it. However, I believe that the numbers are more significant than that at this stage. It could be a growing

problem if you look at it in the context of student fees, travel costs etc, as well as in the context of the wide range of courses and degrees that you can actually achieve through further and higher education colleges just across the border. So, there is growing interest in those matters, but I do not have the exact numbers available at hand. I will forward them to the Member.

Executive Committee Business

Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

At the very outset, I apologise to Members for the impenetrable nature of the speech that I am about to make. I assure Members that, for future orders of this nature, I wish those who advise me to have lessons in plain English so that we can all understand what the nature of the business is.

Basically, the nature of the order is to make sure that there is wider scope for safeguards for subcontractors in the construction industry when it comes to ensuring payments and fair treatment. I hope that that bit at least is explicable and that people understand it. There may be some difficulty with the rest of it; nevertheless, I will plough through it, and we can have questions at the end.

The statutory rule is made under powers set out in the Construction Contracts (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which the Assembly recently updated through the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. I am also laying another related statutory rule, the Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

Given the impact of the current economic recession on the construction industry, it is critical that the benefits of government funding are provided not only to the main contractors who win government business but to their supply chains. I have often stressed the importance of fair payment in government construction contracts and my desire to ensure fair dealing for subcontractors. Government has worked hard to improve the promptness of payments to its suppliers and contractors. It is still disappointing that not all main contractors are holding up their side of the bargain and that some subcontractors are suffering as a consequence of that unacceptable practice.

The amendments to the 1997 order will afford greater protection to smaller businesses participating in supply chains.

11.30 am

The 1997 order sets out measures to improve payment practice and provide access to adjudication as a quick means for the interim resolution of disputes in the construction industry. Following the amendments to the 1997 order under the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, it is necessary to update the Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 to reflect those changes. The main purpose of this exclusion order is to exercise the power vested in the Department by the 2011 amendment Act to disapply particular provisions of the Act from first-tier private finance initiative subcontracts; that is, the contract between the special purpose company and the main contractor appointed to carry out the construction works.

The refinement of this exclusion order will help improve payment practice and facilitate greater access to

adjudication in a wider range of construction work. That will allow for the speedy resolution of disputes, meaning that subcontractors will not face long and expensive litigation. Contractual arrangements for other private finance initiative supply chain members will now be included. Previously, all contractual relationships associated with the private finance initiative were excluded.

The 1997 order provides that construction contracts must comply with various requirements. Prior to its amendment, the 1997 order permitted the Department to define and exclude any particular type of construction contracts from all the requirements of the order. The new power provided in the 2011 Act allows that any or all of the amendments of the 1997 order may be disapplied.

The effect of this order will be to allow payments to first-tier private finance initiative subcontractors to be conditional on obligations being performed in other contracts. With regard to wider payment issues, the 1997 order will also prevent the use of pay-when-paid clauses in construction contracts; that is, a clause whereby a main contractor will not pay a subcontractor unless the main contractor has been paid. The consultations with the construction industry in Great Britain, however, suggested that some firms continued to avoid the effect of this by making payment dependent on the issue of a certificate such as a valuation of the work by the clients' representatives under the main contract. The 2011 Act closes that loophole.

Because the new measures introduced by the 2011 Act may adversely affect private finance initiative projects to an unwarranted degree, this excluding rule is required. The rule excludes only the operation of new measures in the 2011 Act as regards first-tier private finance initiative subcontracts. All the other requirements of the 1997 order, such as the right of parties to a construction contract to refer a dispute to adjudication or to suspend performance if payments are not made, will apply to these contracts.

Article 1 sets out the title of the statutory rule and gives its operational date as 14 November 2012. I look forward to hearing the comments of Members and commend the statutory rule to the Assembly.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for keeping his opening remarks short and simple.

This primary legislation provides that construction contracts must comply with various requirements. The Committee noted that this rule excludes first-tier private finance initiative subcontracts from specific requirements of the Construction Contracts Order 1997. A first-tier PFI subcontract is a contract between a non-public body party to a PFI agreement and a third party, essentially the main construction contractor, in which the former subcontracts construction obligations in the PFI agreement to the latter.

The Department advised the Committee that, upon commencement of the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Act 2011, the first-tier PFI subcontracts would otherwise be caught by all the new construction contract requirements provided for by the 2011 Act. It is for that reason that the excluding rule is being made. The order will allow payments in first-tier PFI subcontracts to be conditional on obligations being performed in other contracts. The Committee noted that it is largely a

technical rule that closely replicates recent amendments to corresponding legislation in Wales, Scotland and England.

The Committee considered the proposal to make the order at its meeting on 19 September and had no objection to the policy proposals at that time. The formal SR before the Assembly today was considered at the Committee's meeting on 10 October together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for bringing this to the House. I looked around the Chamber and saw Members glaze over at the technical detail. What really amazes me is how something that should be relatively straightforward can sound so convoluted and difficult to bring in. It is a common sense approach to what has been a problem. It closes a loophole that has been there for quite some time, as PFI contracts were outside the order.

The lead person and the contractor can now continue, because they are taking the risk and have the potential to bear the losses associated with some of these contracts. The subcontractors that come in below them are protected by the Act that went through Westminster in October 2011. It was subsequently put in place by the Scottish Administration in November 2011, so we are somewhat behind. However, we welcome the fact that this is coming forward.

It is a helpful approach that will ensure that private subcontractors and SMEs are not hung out to dry and that arbitration can be entered into to resolve payment issues that can ultimately arise. Given the number of schools and public contracts that are now delivered by PFI schemes, it is important that we give that protection.

I could not quite fathom the mention of the exclusion of private residential. The wording meant that it became a residential occupancy. I felt that the mention of residential occupancy could be misconstrued to include even houses that are provided through housing associations, which are publicly funded. I am glad to say that that loophole is not there, but unfortunately the wording is convoluted and could give people the impression that any residential occupancy can be excluded. However, I am glad that that is covered.

Mr Wilson: I thank Members for their contributions. The fact that there has been so little response means either that no one understood a word that I said or that Members have decided that they will leave this in the hands of the Department and do not want to say a great deal more about it.

It is an important rule. As the Chairman and Mr Girvan pointed out, it ensures that there is greater protection for subcontractors who are engaged in delivering PFI schemes. I recommend the rule to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

This statutory rule is made under powers set out in the Construction Contracts (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which the Assembly updated recently through the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The order is associated with a statutory rule, the Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012, which we have just debated.

The purpose of the scheme is to provide default contractual terms that will apply where a contract does not include the necessary terms to meet the statutory requirements. This order updates the Northern Ireland scheme of 1999 to correspond with changes introduced to the corresponding 1998 scheme in England and Wales.

The proposals set out in the amended regulations were subject to the scrutiny of the Finance and Personnel Committee. Following a full public consultation earlier this year, it was evident that there was a strong desire in the industry to maintain parity with the amended legislation in GB. I have therefore tried to reflect that desire and align our legislation as closely as possible to that of Great Britain.

The main amendments to the scheme are as follows: the adjudicator will inform the parties to the contract of the date a dispute is referred; the adjudicator can allocate liability for the payment of the adjudicator's fees and expenses between parties; there is clarification of the period within which the adjudicator must reach a decision; powers are given to adjudicators to correct minor errors in their decisions within five days; provisions that allowed adjudicators to make peremptory decisions are repealed; terms will be implied in contracts where express terms are either absent or deficient to make appropriate payment provisions; it will be the responsibility of the payer to issue a payment notice where parties to a contract fail to make an express provision; and there is provision to challenge or revise the sum in a payment notice by the issue of a notice of intention to pay less than the sum. The changes will provide further safeguards for contractors and subcontractors to help to ensure that small businesses receive fair treatment.

The Central Procurement Directorate and the centres of procurement expertise, in consultation with the construction industry, have already put measures in place to help alleviate the difficulties experienced by subcontractors in supply chains. In future, where contractors fail to comply with the requirements of government contracts relating to the treatment of the supply chain, they will be prevented from tendering for future government contracts.

I stress again my commitment to improving payment practices in public contracts. It is important that firms avail themselves of the remedies provided by the amended 1997 order to ensure that it has the desired effect and

changes attitudes in the supply chain. Article 1 sets out the title of the statutory rule and gives its operational date as 14 November 2012. If the measures are approved today, they will ensure a level playing field for our local companies. Along with my ministerial colleagues, I want to ensure that procurement continues to play its part in supporting the local economy in these challenging financial times.

I look forward to hearing the comments of Members and commend the statutory rule to the Assembly.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Committee noted that this rule amends the Scheme for Construction Contracts Regulations 1999. Related primary legislation, such as the Construction Contracts Order 1997, makes provision for the contents of construction contracts, and the scheme applies where parties have failed to provide for those contents, in effect by supplying the missing contractual terms.

Most amendments are consequential, reflecting the changes made to the 1997 order by the 2011 Act, which the previous Committee scrutinised in detail during Committee Stage. At the Final Stage of the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill, the then Chairperson of the Committee referred to advice given by officials to the Committee that it would be necessary to amend the scheme before the Bill, once passed, could come into effect and that any proposed amendments to the scheme would be subject to further consultation. This rule is a consequence of that consultation. The Committee considered the proposal to make the order at its meeting on 19 September and had no objection to the policy proposals at that time. I support the motion.

11.45 am

Mr Wilson: I thank the Chairman for his response. I ask the Assembly to support the statutory rule, which, as the Chairman and I have indicated, will ensure that, where contracts are not satisfactorily drawn up and are deficient, there is a fallback position that will ensure that subcontractors have protection and a certainty that there is a scheme in place that will give them the ability to have disputes resolved. Given the importance of the construction industry and of these contracts in the supply chain to the Northern Ireland economy, it is important that we keep that supply chain healthy. That means that payments must be made regularly.

I want to emphasise the warning that was in the speech. I have raised this matter with the construction industry, and I expect support from the industry on it, because the industry itself has raised the issue of the treatment of subcontractors, especially during this recession: where main contractors do not comply, do not make payments on time and do not treat companies in the supply chain properly, we will exclude them for a period from applying for public sector contracts. As I have said time and time again, the important thing is that we now have a mechanism for adjudication of which people can avail themselves where there is a dispute. Of course, firms must have the courage to say that a main contractor is not paying them. In the past, there has sometimes been a reluctance to do that because of a fear that it

might jeopardise an opportunity for future work. Project managers, the firms themselves and those who oversee contractors must make sure that, where there is not fair treatment of small firms in the supply chain, we are notified.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for giving way. This is a fairly arcane piece of regulation, but the general drift is to assist subcontractors. The Minister said that measures could be taken against main contractors to suspend them for a period. Does the Minister have any idea of how long those suspensions would be for? Does the legislation in any way affect insurance by main contractors in workplaces, or is that outside its parameters?

Mr Wilson: That is outside its parameters. Any suspension or any decision made in relation to non-compliance by main contractors could involve them being suspended from applying for public sector work for up to one year, so it is a real sanction. I hope that it does not have to be used, but the Assembly has endorsed it. The industry has indicated that it believes that there is a problem there. I hope that it does not happen, but the real test will come if we have to exclude a contractor from applying for public sector contracts. The reaction of the industry will be very telling at that time, because this requires everyone to work together to have a healthy supply chain. That is the whole point of the regulations.

Mr Girvan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a moment. The whole point of the regulations today is, first of all, to include more of the industry than currently is included in the protections under the 1997 order. Secondly, it is to put in place a scheme whereby there can be effective adjudication and terms if the terms are not explicit in the contract. Thirdly, when firms do not abide by those, sanctions will be applied to them.

Mr Girvan: Does the Minister agree that, in bringing forward the scheme as protection, we will encourage small companies to tender for contracts? Until now, a number of contractors have decided not to tender for or get involved in major contracts. The protection might encourage them to come back into the market, therefore bringing some business back into our economy.

Mr Wilson: Hopefully, it will give greater certainty to small and medium-sized enterprises, which tend to be the subcontractors within main contracts. It will give them greater certainty and protection. That is healthy, of course, because it means that there will be more competition for work. It also means that firms can remain a bit healthier during the recession. The importance of having an effective supply chain must not be underestimated because, if we do not have a range of contractors, subcontractors and sub-subcontractors available to do jobs, we lose a lot of flexibility in the system. As the Member said, anything written by lawyers tends to get turgid, arcane and everything else. *[Interruption.]* There are howls of protest from members of the legal profession dotted around the Chamber. They tend to be very dry — *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: The regulations or the lawyers?

Mr Wilson: Both. The language can be impenetrable etc. Nevertheless, the regulations are important. I trust that the

practical import of the two statutory rules will be felt across the industry, after the House accepts them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill as amended in Committee in the House of Commons dealing with the UK Green Investment Bank and payments to directors of quoted companies should be considered by the United Kingdom Parliament.

We are here to consider two distinct issues arising from the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, which is currently making its way through Parliament. The main purpose of that UK Bill is to encourage long-term growth and simplify regulation. The consent of the Assembly has been sought for provisions relating to matters devolved to Northern Ireland. The provisions under consideration relate to the UK Green Investment Bank and to payments to directors of quoted companies.

I turn, first, to the UK Green Investment Bank, which is a public company established by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills under the Companies Act 2006. Its purpose is to facilitate and develop investment in the green economy. The provisions relating to the bank in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill have two main purposes, the first of which is to ensure that it engages only in activities that contribute to achieving green purposes. The second is to require the Secretary of State to provide an undertaking to facilitate the bank's operational independence. The legislation will also provide powers for the Secretary of State to fund the company. Although banking is a reserved matter, the green purposes for which the bank has been set up bring it into the area of transferred policy. A legislative consent motion is required to give the bank the statutory authority to operate in Northern Ireland. Without the LCM, there is a risk that Northern Ireland would not see the benefits of the initiative and local companies would be excluded from the additional source of finance.

The second aspect of the motion concerns payment to directors of quoted companies. This issue forms part of the UK Government's broader review of corporate governance. The UK is widely considered a global leader in this area. However, in recent years, there have been increasing concerns that the link between executives' pay and company performance has diminished. Those concerns were among the views expressed in response to a UK-wide consultation on the issue carried out by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. There has also been recent opposition from shareholders in a number of companies to the executive pay that does not reflect company performance. I am sure that Members are aware of that.

Through the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, the UK Government intend to address the issue by giving shareholders more power to engage with their companies and greater influence on executive remuneration through enhanced voting rights. Shareholders will be given a binding vote on directors' pay policy, and that will take place at least every three years. It will encourage companies to adopt a longer-term approach to pay policy and will put in place effective and binding limits on directors' pay. Shareholders will also have an advisory

vote on how the improved policy has been implemented. If the company fails to secure 75% of votes from that advisory vote, the entire pay policy must be put back to shareholders for reapproval by way of a binding vote. The policy aim is to encourage better engagement between companies and shareholders at an early stage in the process of developing remuneration policy. There will also be greater control of exit payments, and companies will not be in a position to pay more than shareholders have agreed.

Through the reforms, the UK Government are not proposing to dictate how much directors are paid. The reforms are about giving businesses and shareholders the tools that they need to engage effectively. The proposals on directors' pay will apply to UK quoted companies, which, in essence, are those listed on a major stock exchange. There are around 1,000 such companies in the UK, with only two in Northern Ireland at present. With so few local companies affected, the impact of the proposals on Northern Ireland businesses will, therefore, be very limited. However, if the opportunity to avail ourselves of the provisions in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill is missed, the existing legal uniformity of the UK company regime could be affected and a legislative gap could be created that could expose local businesses to the inefficiencies that differing legal codes would create.

So, maintaining legislative parity helps to ensure consistency and reduce uncertainty, and I believe that it is important for local businesses that the Assembly pass this legislative consent motion. Northern Ireland businesses will benefit from access to a significant additional source of funding and from a continued single company law regime, and shareholders of local quoted companies will have a greater say in the running of their firm.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as ucht an rún a thabhairt os ár gcomhair inniu. I thank the Minister for bringing the legislative consent motion before us today.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment welcomes the legislative consent motion on the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill. On 6 September, the Minister wrote to inform the Committee of the Department's intention to seek an LCM to enable the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, first, to ensure that the Green Investment Bank engages only in activities that contribute to achieving green purposes and remains operationally independent, as well as to ensure that the provisions extend to the North; and, secondly, to give shareholders in quoted companies greater control over the remuneration of directors. The Department informed the Committee that that approach would preclude the development of a legislative gap and the administrative and regulatory difficulties that could ensue. The Committee received oral evidence from departmental officials on 27 September.

In recent years, executive pay in Britain's largest companies has quadrupled with no correlation to an increase in performance or shareholder returns. The Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill is intended to enhance shareholder voting rights. Currently, no company is bound by a shareholder vote on directors' pay, which is purely advisory. The Bill will provide for binding voting

rights for shareholders on annual pay, performance and exit payments to directors. The legislation applies only to quoted companies that are listed on the stock exchange, and there are only two quoted companies in Northern Ireland. The Department has assured the Committee that industry as a whole is supportive of the provisions for voting rights.

The purpose of including provisions for the Green Investment Bank in the Bill is to ensure that it adheres to its green purpose and maintains its operational independence and that the Westminster Government can continue to provide funding. The Department reported that the bank is being established as part of the UK Government's initiative to pursue the green economic agenda.

The Committee was informed that the novel and long-term nature of green investment infrastructure can often deter private sector investors. The Green Investment Bank is intended to provide financing for green investment that can produce commercial returns in due course.

12.00 noon

The Committee questioned officials in detail on the types of business that might be eligible. Any business from any sector will be eligible to apply for funding from the initial £3 billion pot, providing it fulfils one of the purposes for which the bank is established. There are five purposes for which funding can be provided: greenhouse gas emission reduction; advancement in efficiency in the use of natural resources; protection or enhancement of the natural environment; protection or enhancement of biodiversity; and promotion of environmental sustainability.

The Committee particularly welcomes assurances from officials that businesses from the agrifood sector will be eligible to apply, especially given the establishment of the Agri-Food Strategy Board and the current difficulties faced by agrifood-based businesses in securing finance along the criteria outlined.

The Committee looks forward to any state aid issues being resolved so that the bank can be operational on schedule by the end of this year. The Committee will, in due course, take evidence from the Green Investment Bank to ensure that matters of specific concern to businesses are fully considered and taken into account by the bank.

Having considered the evidence, the Committee agreed to support DETI in seeking the Assembly's agreement to the Westminster Parliament considering provisions of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill dealing with the devolved matters of the Green Investment Bank and payments to directors of quoted companies.

Mr Newton: I support the legislative consent motion, and I thank the Minister for bringing it to the House. There is no doubt that, over this past number of years, executive pay that does not match performance has been a bone of contention for those who have invested in companies, whether they are individuals or organisations investing, perhaps, through a pension fund. Where shareholders are investing, there have been grievances when the annual general meetings of companies treat shareholders with a large degree of disrespect and, indeed, in many cases award large sums to chief executives who underperform.

I know that this is restricted to companies on the stock exchange, and, as both the Chairman and the Minister

said, there are only two such companies in Northern Ireland. However, this is something that has a UK-wide perspective, and Northern Ireland has to play its part.

It is of concern when such large payments are made to chief executives who have been underperforming. It is good that, through this legislative consent motion, shareholders will be awarded a greater role and, in many ways, greater security for the performance of their company as a whole. So I welcome the legislation.

Mrs Overend: I will make just a few brief remarks about this legislative consent motion, as the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee and the Executive have already received the relevant briefings, and I understand that they are both happy to proceed.

There are two major issues in the Bill. The first is the Green Investment Bank. The purpose of the bank is to facilitate and develop investment in the green economy. It was established by the Companies Act 2006, and the outworkings of this Bill for the bank are threefold. First, the Bill will ensure that the bank engages only in activities that contribute to achieving one or more of the statutory green purposes. There are five green purposes: reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; advancement of efficiency in the use of natural resources; protection or enhancement of the natural environment; protection or enhancement of biodiversity; and promotion of environmental sustainability. I believe that all of us in the Assembly can agree that those five purposes are positive and it is right that the Green Investment Bank should be solely focused on them. Secondly, the Bill ensures that the bank maintains its operational independence. In order to do that, there is a requirement on the Secretary of State to provide an undertaking to the UK Green Investment Bank plc. Thirdly, the Bill ensures that the UK Government can continue to provide funding to the bank, and that is, of course, a requirement for it to have a meaningful impact in the longer term.

The Committee has been made aware that the bank will receive initial funding of £3 billion from the UK Government and will be given borrowing powers. Any business will then be eligible to apply for funding within the five purposes. It is, therefore, important that we sufficiently advertise that option for businesses so that they are fully aware of this source of finance for green investment, which can then produce commercial returns in due course. I seek an assurance from the Minister that the work of promoting the Green Investment Bank among the business community is ongoing.

As time progresses, it will be interesting to find out how Northern Ireland benefits from this. I would also point out that it is important for the Minister to monitor the workings of the Green Investment Bank, given that banking is a reserved matter. We know well that it is difficult to gauge the level of lending from banks to Northern Ireland businesses on the whole, and we must have a better knowledge as this project progresses.

I also support the provisions in the Bill that give binding voting rights for shareholders on annual pay and performance and exit payments to directors. It is not a massive change for Northern Ireland, as the legislation applies only to the two companies that are listed on the stock exchange here. However, it will lead to a more accountable and fairer legal framework regarding company directors'

remuneration. We support the continuance of regulative uniformity across the UK and support the motion.

Mr Dickson: I support the legislative consent motion. I note from Hansard that no objections were raised in Committee on 27 September.

Many countries now have to face up to the consequences of unsustainable development, which has resulted in the exploitation of resources, increased pollution and climate change. If current trends continue, damage to our environment will undoubtedly accelerate. By pursuing the green economic agenda, we can help our economy and our environment.

In Part 1, we support the provisions relating to the Green Investment Bank, particularly those aimed at ensuring engagement in activities solely dedicated to achieving one or more of the statutory green purposes. Those purposes are wide-ranging and have an initial budget of £3 billion. The bank certainly has the potential to advance our green economy. The market can bring about much innovation and change, but there is merit in intervention and assistance to drive that innovation and change forward. However, my party has raised concerns with the UK Government over their definition of green investment and whether this could be used to invest in high-carbon infrastructure and technologies, rather than fulfilling the purpose that the Government have set out, namely to support a low-carbon investment where the returns are too long-term or too risky for the market. For example, we could have a case where projects receive funding for reducing greenhouse gas emissions or improving efficiency in the use of natural resources but could still be relatively high-carbon. We wanted more consideration to be given in that regard, but, failing that, we hope that those judging the applications will make the right decisions on the basis of the Government's stated aims.

We note that there are no quotas for the allocation of funding to different regions of the UK. We are told that decisions will be based solely on the quality of the applications received from businesses. Therefore, it is important that they receive all the appropriate advice and support from the Department in advance of the scheme and during the application process. I know that some of the operational details of the bank are still being worked out, but it is our hope that the Department will provide all the information and support that it can to local businesses when those plans become clearer.

Finally on this point, we have expressed concern that the bank will be unable to borrow from capital markets from day one, whereas leverage in private investment could provide it with the extra impetus and mandate that it needs to help build a clean, green economy. I will be interested to hear the Minister's assessment of this point and whether her Department has made any representations to the UK Government on the bank's borrowing arrangements.

I move on to directors' pay, which is an issue that many feel very strongly about. Executive pay seems to keep going up and up while the public and shareholders see little correlation to an increase in performance and returns respectively. That is simply not right. Although executive pay is primarily an issue for the boards and shareholders of companies, we, as legislators, must use our powers to set the corporate governance framework and put in place

fairer arrangements. We support the efforts to empower shareholders, and we support those provisions.

Ideally, we want to formulate and implement legislation for ourselves, but enacting the provisions will ensure that the law is updated here in Northern Ireland at the same time as it is in the rest of the United Kingdom, thus avoiding the development of a legislative gap and the administrative and regulatory difficulties that could follow.

Mr Agnew: I support the legislative consent motion; it is very much to be welcomed. In recent weeks, we have seen the growth of the green economy and the benefits it can bring to Northern Ireland. The launch of the offshore wind projects and tidal projects off the north coast in the past week or so have demonstrated the great benefits that renewable energy can bring to our economy. Yesterday, the Minister outlined that £52 million of sales have already been realised by 250 Northern Ireland companies in relation to offshore renewal energy projects. Indeed, we could see private investment of around £1.8 billion in one offshore wind project. Those are the Minister's figures. That shows that green policies can go hand in hand with a prosperous economy. It also shows how regulation and targets in relation to a reduction in carbon emissions can drive innovation and the investment in the economy that we need.

I welcome the UK Government's establishment of the Green Investment Bank, and I am happy to support the legislative consent motion to ensure that Northern Ireland can receive the benefits of that. It is also worth mentioning the five areas in which the Green Investment Bank will invest, as was highlighted. I agree with Mr Dickson that we need to ensure that they are truly green projects. However, it shows that economics can be about more than profit. It is not about being opposed to profit, but it goes beyond that and shows how investment in particular areas can benefit social and environmental objectives, not just economic objectives.

I welcome the legislative consent motion and the work that the UK Government have done on this, if not on other issues. As a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, I have also asked that the Committee looks into how we can maximise potential job creation benefits in Northern Ireland from the growth in the green economy. I hope that the work of the Committee will supplement that of the Minister, her Department and Invest NI in ensuring that Northern Ireland benefits from green growth.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Members who have supported the motion today and contributed to the debate. I must also thank my colleagues in the Executive and the ETI Committee for considering the matter in a manner that has allowed the motion to be debated today.

I want to respond to a few issues that have been raised. It is my understanding that the European Commission approved the UK Government's proposals to establish the bank on 17 October, so the state aid clearance is now in place. That is good news, because it means that we can proceed.

Obviously, making companies aware of what is happening in Northern Ireland very much fits in with our access to finance strategy and what Invest Northern Ireland is rolling out for its companies. We will work with the Department in Westminster to ensure that Northern Ireland is included

in any promotional material or events. We will add the Green Investment Bank to our business table, which is maintained on our business website and, of course, draw it to the attention of companies. I think it was Mr Dickson who referred to the fact that there are no quotas allocated to each of the regions of the UK. That is absolutely right, so we need to be proactive with our companies to ensure that they put forward the best proposals possible to ensure that they benefit from the Green Investment Bank. It is an innovative way of dealing with the deficit in the access to finance piece.

Mrs Overend said that there was £3 billion to start with. That is absolutely right. All of it is government funding, at present. I think, in answer to Mr Dickson's point, that the rationale behind that — obviously it is a matter for the Westminster Government — was to allow the bank to build up a credible track record in making those commercial green investments, to mobilise the private sector and to bring forward capital later on in the piece. Therefore, it really is a government initiative, an incentive to point individual private sector companies in the right direction.

It gives me great pleasure to tell the House that a chief executive officer has been appointed. He is Shaun Kingsbury, who is originally from Northern Ireland and is a graduate of the University of Ulster. I am very pleased that that is the case and that a man from Northern Ireland who should know everything there is to know about our economy here will be in charge.

The investment bank and the other company law reforms will assist our businesses and provide encouragement, I hope, to operate in an environmentally friendly way. That is what we want to see happening so that they can deal with all the issues that are before them. We know that multinational companies are looking at their supply chain and assessing how environmentally friendly they are, so this will assist companies in that.

I thank Members for their contributions. By passing this motion, we will secure the benefits that I have outlined. As well as that, we will demonstrate how much the Assembly is committed to helping local businesses here. I commend the motion to the Assembly and thank Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill as amended in Committee in the House of Commons dealing with the UK Green Investment Bank and payments to directors of quoted companies should be considered by the United Kingdom Parliament.

12.15 pm

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McElduff: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-border Undergraduate Education' (May 2011) based on research by the European Employment Services Cross-border Partnership at the request of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry Joint Business Council; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to remove the barriers which limit student flows within the island of Ireland.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I propose this motion, which is all about removing the barriers that prevent students from the North gaining admission to universities, colleges and institutes of technology in the rest of the island and, of course, vice versa, with the problem of students from the South not being able to gain admission to universities in the North or to gain relevant information appropriately.

In proposing this motion, I am conscious that a lot of young people have experienced an obstacle course of hurdles put in their way when they have tried to gain admission. I think of a young person from Cookstown who achieved 525 points this summer in her A levels, took one of her A levels early and was forced to take a gap year because her plans to gain admission to a university in Dublin were thrown aside. I think of a parent from Omagh who told me that getting advice from his son's school about options in universities down South was like pulling hen's teeth. I received a very extensive e-mail just before 11.00 am today from a lady in County Tyrone who detailed the hurdles that her daughter faced when she tried to gain admission to DCU. She persisted when she was not included in the first round of offers, and she persisted when there was UCAS and CAO confusion. She got in at the last minute on the second round of offers, but many others would not have persisted and would have given up at an earlier stage.

For the evidence base for the debate, I rely significantly on the report written by Mr Andy Pollak, director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, at the request of the IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council last year. The report details the current and historic patterns of low levels of North/South student mobility, identifies the main obstacles and makes specific recommendations. It also states that there is a general acceptance that North/South student mobility is essential for economic prosperity, reconciliation and advancing the peace process on a small island of six million people. The obstacles that limit that type of student mobility include lack of information about universities and

institutes of technology in the other state or part of the island, entry requirements and confusion between UCAS and CAO. The difference is explained well in Andy Pollak's report.

We were also served well in preparing for the debate by the Research and Information Service and a very useful paper on CAO's admissions criteria that was written by Eoin Murphy. Lack of information on universities down South is, however, particularly pertinent for students in the North. It is a major issue, more so than the other way round. Historically, few universities in the South have taken a stand at the annual UCAS convention in the King's Hall, Belfast. There are some exceptions; for example, the National University of Ireland, Maynooth; in recent years, Dundalk Institute of Technology; Letterkenny Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; and, more recently, Dublin City University have shown some appetite. However, that is symptomatic of a failure of higher education institutions in the South to be proactive in seeking students from the North. In one sense, from the point of view of over-demand in the South, do they need to attract Northern students? However, few universities' school liaison officers pay regular or dedicated visits to schools in the northern part of the island. In the North, some careers teachers do not give adequate advice on options. Often, students are told to go on the internet. There is a lack of information specifically about institutes of technology. Page 15 of Andy Pollak's study details that. In fact, in the North, there seem to be misconceptions and a lack of understanding about the range of courses that might be available at Dundalk IT, Sligo IT and Letterkenny IT in such a way that people do not understand that they can undertake and finish degrees, masters degrees and PhDs at those institutions. You could live in Newry, travel for 20 minutes, stay at home for the duration of your degree and still achieve a degree.

There is an unfamiliarity with the CAO application process in the North and little or no guidance from teachers from the careers service, whereas students are prepared intensively for the UCAS process. Again, people are left to their own devices. My colleague, Phil Flanagan, talked about his experience as a student and about being compelled to pay a bank draft in euros to make his application to the CAO. There is no CAO helpline. A-level results often come out later than leaving certificate results. That disadvantages students in the first round of offers. There has been a change in the recognition of A levels — a change in equivalences between A levels and leaving certificate grades. For high-demand courses, the likes of Trinity College and UCD expect students from the North to achieve four A*s. Very few students undertake four A levels. More undertake three A levels. It is now the case that a leaving certificate qualification is regarded as two thirds of an A level, whereas previously it was regarded as half an A level. That is dealt with in Eoin Murphy's paper very well.

There are other obstacles, of course. One might be the cost of living in Dublin, for example, which is often cited. We will not sort out that one here today. There are different fee structures. Although that might be presented as a disadvantage, therein lies an opportunity. On the issue of equivalence between A levels and leaving certificates, I understand that an equivalence working group between the Irish Universities Association and the CCEA has been set up to look at the fairness of that. I just wonder whether

Minister Farry will be able to address that in his remarks and give us a progress report.

The case is compelling, and the time is now. If you look at the current fees context, you will see that high fees in Britain will negatively impact on the high proportion of the North's students who have traditionally gone to universities to study, not least those in Scotland, England and Wales. So, higher fees there will act as a disincentive to east-west student mobility. I commend the Executive for freezing fees here in the North. I note that, in the South, there are relatively low registration fees, which are sometimes called student contributions. We can couple that with the increase that there has been in the number of births in the South in recent years, meaning that the demand for places there in 2009 was 42,500. However, that is expected to rise to 68,000 in 2027. So, the solution lies in this region and in having places available in the North. That presents an opportunity for greater cross-border, all-island co-operation on undergraduate education.

Students need ease of movement within the island. They will not be able to go elsewhere unless they come from, you might say, richer families. Again, in inviting the Minister to respond later in the debate, I would be appreciative if he could take time to explain the revised funding arrangements that he announced in June 2012. I hope to be convinced that that was done in the spirit of enabling this. OK? I commend the Minister for paragraph 5.7 in the strategy for higher education, which shows that he has been paying close attention to the debate on this matter.

It is in the best educational, social and economic interests of young people on the island of Ireland that there is such cross-fertilisation and free mobility. Politically, there should not be any objection to that. We recently established the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association to support the North/South Ministerial Council's work and to challenge what goes on there. However, this is about mutual benefit for all the people of the island of Ireland, and I ask people to direct their attention specifically to the nine recommendations in Andy Pollak's report. Interestingly, one of those invites closer working relationships between the University of Ulster and Letterkenny IT.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the meeting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals

1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of the Environment what representations he has made to Her Majesty's Government and the EU about the potential implications of the EU proposals [COM (2012) 380/381/382] for additional testing, enforcement and licensing of vehicles. (AQO 2730/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for her question. As I have said before, one of the duties of the Environment Minister is to be sent home every Friday with a list of the updated casualties and deaths on our roads. There have been tragedies in the South over the past number of days, with six road deaths, including the tragic death of two young children in Tuam. On behalf of the House, I convey sympathy to the families bereaved and the people who are suffering as a consequence.

I am a big supporter of the European Union. I am not in any denial of that. Why would I not be, given its contribution to this part of the world and peace in Europe, notably, in the past number of days, with the Nobel peace prize? I would like to see us build and deepen our relationship with Europe. However, the proposals cross a line that, when it comes to our jurisdiction and roadworthiness, is best not crossed. That is why I have written to the European MPs and the Parliamentary Under-secretary in London in relation to the matter. I may attend the transport council sectoral meeting in December that will discuss the matter. I have endorsed the London negotiating position in opposition to the proposals, and I have spoken to my colleague Minister Varadkar in the South to ensure that, when it comes to these transport proposals, the relevant Ministers North and South are on the same page.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the matter is typical of the EU attempting to enforce a nonsense policy on its member states? Does the Minister further agree that decisions of that nature should be with our own Government?

Mr Attwood: I do not agree with the Member that this is typical of decisions of the European Union. We are within days and, hopefully, within touching distance of the European Union, through the Special EU Programmes Body, releasing €22 million, which is £17 million, to build infrastructure to join up trade and tourism on this island in respect of the funding bid before the SEUPB for the Narrow Water bridge. If my memory serves me right, Europe, through the SEUPB, has contributed €800 million in funding to this small part of Europe for the SEUPB projects. I do not agree that the matter is typical of Europe. Europe, typically, has been an enormous supporter of this part of the world, politically and financially and particularly for communities that are in disadvantage. Do I agree that

this is not a wise course to follow? Yes. Do I believe that it is a good principle that Europe should say in general that there are standards that we should live up to in respect of European membership? Yes. Although we have good standards when it comes to roadworthiness, other members of the EU have — to borrow a phrase — some road to travel yet.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Question Time is an opportunity to ask one question to the Minister, not multiple questions.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Member for tabling the question. Will the Minister consider introducing an early warning system so that the Executive, the Departments and the Committees here get an opportunity for proper input in time to respond to proposals and consultations that come from Europe?

Mr Attwood: I agree with the principle that the more we integrate what is happening in Europe in the life of the Assembly and the Executive, the better we will be. That is why I keep making the case that we need to do a lot more to integrate what we do to access European funding opportunities going forward. From 2008 to 2014, the drawdown in Dublin from FP7 — the €50 billion fund for innovation and research — will be in and around, if not in excess of, €600 million. The drawdown to date in this part of Ireland has been £30-odd million. So, yes, the more we integrate the better we will be, and the more that comes through the European system that is brought to the attention of Ministers, the Executive and the Committee, the better we are. That is why the Executive were right to upgrade their presence in our European office to understand better what is going on and to have information that we can share. This is an example of something that, if it is known early and brought to the attention of the Assembly, the Committee and the Minister, would be a good way to proceed.

Mr P Ramsey: Like the Minister, I extend my sympathy on the road fatalities in the South, particularly the sisters Kate and Grace Gilmore, whose father works in my constituency.

Will the Minister give us an update on road safety performance in Northern Ireland, particularly with reference to trends in road accidents that include death and serious injury?

Mr Attwood: As the Member acknowledged, it only takes one weekend — a couple of days — and a number of accidents for the figures to look even worse. That was the experience with the six deaths in 48 hours in the Republic. Therefore, anything that I say has to be set in that context: we are only one catastrophe away from our improving figures beginning to deteriorate.

There have been 31 deaths on the roads in the North this year, compared with 42 deaths to this time last year. That is a positive trend, which is confirmed when you look not just at the figures over the past number of years for the North year on year but at those that compare the North with the other parts of these islands. We are even beginning to bear down on the lesser number of deaths and serious injuries that we have experienced over recent years. There are many reasons for that, including the road traffic campaign that has been run through the Department of the Environment over a number of years. Independent

research has assessed that there is a 90% awareness of DOE road traffic ads, which is nearly twice the rate of general awareness of campaign advertising.

Mr Allister: I want to bring the subject back to this hare-brained proposal from Brussels. The Minister said that Brussels had won a peace prize, but it certainly will never win a common sense prize with regulations such as these. The regulations seek to introduce the intolerable burden —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Allister: — of MOTing farm machinery. Has the Minister any idea of the cost to the farming community and the cost to the Department of administering such nonsense?

Mr Attwood: I agree with the later point. As I indicated in my previous answer, the costs, never mind the policy implications, are disproportionate and extravagant to the value of any proposal that might come forward. What would be the cost? We have not interrogated the costs to the final pound, but it will mean more roadside testing and the need to invest more money in resources and technical machinery to conduct the assessments. It could also mean that, in the event of replacement, some vehicles will need to have the parts as at the time of manufacture. As people will know, the proposals extend not just to tractors that travel more than 25 miles per hour but to small trailers. So, in my view, the cost in all those terms for the owner and the state is extravagant and excessive. A multitude of common-sense proposals have come out of Europe: this is not one of them.

Tourism: Popular Areas

2. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has considered options other than the introduction of national parks for assisting tourists and visitors who come to popular areas. (AQO 2731/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. In my view, we have only one option at the moment. We learned last week that unemployment had increased by 200 over the course of four weeks and that we face, on the far side of welfare reform migration, figures in and around 85,000. No one is contradicting those figures; indeed, some tell me it will be more than that. Bearing that in mind, we only have one option, and that is to turn over every stone to find opportunities to grow jobs in Northern Ireland, otherwise the scale of worklessness that we face and the risk that that worklessness will be embedded and structural will not easily change.

The challenge to me as Minister, to MLAs, to farming organisations and to everybody is to find opportunities to grow jobs. It may be that we can do so around our built and natural heritage. That is the essence of our tourism strategy going forward. We hope to grow tourism to a £1 billion-a-year industry, and it seems to me that I have to challenge myself and everybody else to look at ways of growing tourism around our natural heritage, our rural communities and the scale and wonder of our rural landscape. That is the question that has to be asked, and we all have to answer it.

One mechanism that I have put forward is national parks. Given that national parks is a global brand name, a model could be created in Northern Ireland circumstances and without any additional restrictions that could create

opportunities to grow product, tourism and jobs in our rural areas. That is the question and that is the answer that people have to give.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister appears to have read the writing on the wall about the infeasibility of imposing a national park on the people living in and around the Mournes. When will he make a final decision about his intentions for the north Antrim coast and Fermanagh?

Mr Attwood: I have made it clear throughout this process that it is anti-democratic, it is anti-national, and it would not work. I go back to the question about Europe: there could end up being a situation where an authority imposed its will against the wishes of the community. The evidence from south Down and the Mournes at the moment — it is not conclusive evidence but evidence nonetheless — is that the voices of opposition are greater than the voices of support. There are many voices in support, but they have not been as loud as the voices of opposition. That is why I said a number of weeks ago and repeated last week, although people did not seem to hear it, that, as things stand, there would not be a national park in the Mournes in my view.

The question remains for other parts of the North of whether we can develop a national park model with no additional planning, agricultural or other restrictions that will capture the scale of the opportunity for jobs around the natural heritage. We could use national parks as a global brand to market those areas. People have to ask what the impact would be if one part of Northern Ireland were deemed to be a national park, the consequence being that people came, visited, stayed and spent money and generated job opportunities in a way that did not compromise the interests of those who already live there, not least farmers. People should ask themselves, “Is there an opportunity around this concept, modelled around our circumstances, that we should grasp rather than resist?”.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Patsy Molloy.

Mr Molloy: We will go for Francie. I thank the Minister for his reply so far, but my answer is “No, there is not”. With the new 11-council model coming into place in 2015, will the Minister ensure that they have a role in developing the tourist facilities in their area and give them the funding to do so instead of creating a new quango that will curtail local accountability and democracy?

Mr Attwood: Can someone explain to me how local democracy and accountability is curtailed when, as part of RPA, our councillors will make the vast majority of planning decisions and decide local plans and community planning initiatives? How does that curtail accountability and local democracy? It is far from it. It means that planning decisions will pass from the hands, if you like, of the bureaucrats into the hands of the democrats. That should give people fundamental reassurance that if, on the far side of this debate, there is an endorsement of legislation and designation of national parks, it will not be a threat to rural communities including farmers. Actually, it is a source of reassurance that planning on that scale will be in the hands of local people. When the Scottish nationalists took power in Scotland at a time when there were no national parks in Scotland, why did their leadership come out and say that they wanted to see national parks in Scotland? It was because they realised that there was a marketing

opportunity, a brand opportunity and a tourism opportunity to sustain rural life, including rural farming life, in a way that they felt was sympathetic to the area. Is that beyond our competence? You will hear no argument from me that, in going forward, we need to be even more precious about Northern Ireland's rural assets. Why? Because those have been well managed by farmers and others over many generations and because of the opportunities that exist. Yes, we have to market our rural areas better, but are national parks part of the answer or part of the problem?

2.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: My apologies to Francie Molloy. I call John Dallat.

Mr Dallat: You have got that right, Mr Deputy Speaker. The recent environmental scheme in Portrush and Portstewart has not quite turned those places into a national park, but it has certainly made them much more desirable destinations for tourists. Will the Minister tell us if he intends to roll out that successful scheme in other areas?

Mr Attwood: Portrush and Portstewart could be part of a potential national park. *[Interruption.]* I hear Mr Allister very firmly endorsing that proposal. I would love to see Black Mountain and Divis being part of a Belfast national park. The opportunities here are limitless, if people would just reach out — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: I missed that one — if people would just reach out and grasp them.

Portrush and Portstewart were about doing something mitigating delay and dereliction in coastal communities. An announcement about doing the same in Derry is imminent. I would like to see the Executive roll out that scheme of interventions in local communities to deal with blight, decay and dereliction. I would like to see the Executive embrace that in a much more extensive way across many towns and cities. Two weeks ago, in Ballygalley, I held a good beach summit. What was the issue that we were discussing? Not just the management of beaches and water quality, but coastal community development and how the good beach summit and the DOE could help to shape and lead our coastal communities. National parks could be part of shaping coastal communities going forward, if we choose to look at it in that way. I do not diminish or deny the issues, concerns and worst fears that exist out there. However, if we are able to give fundamental reassurances that this is about enabling rural communities and not about additional restrictions in any shape or form, is it not a light-touch concept, to borrow a phrase that was used to me recently, that may yet give opportunities going forward?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Urban Blight

3. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking in conjunction with local authorities to counteract urban blight, unfinished developments and listed buildings falling into dereliction. (AQO 2732/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Mr McDevitt's thunder was stolen by Mr Dallat. Yes, I would like to see the scheme in Portrush and Portstewart deployed more fully, but there are other

interventions that we have to embrace. In my view, Belfast and Coleraine councils, with their powers, are demonstrating good authority in taking action where there are properties that create a health and nuisance difficulty or are seriously detrimental. By taking enforcement action against landowners with property in such states, councils can show good authority. I look to other councils to use their powers under the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 to demonstrate that good authority, just as I hope that the Department demonstrates good authority in serving urgent works notices on a scale not seen at any time since they became an opportunity for government over the last 40 years. Indeed, just last week in Ballycastle, 48 hours before an urgent works notice was to be served, the owner under threat of having the notice served got down to the business of mitigating the threat to the property concerned.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister will well know that there are significant parts of south Belfast that suffer from blight and dereliction and where there are unfinished buildings desperately in need of attention. Is the Minister satisfied that the law is robust in that regard and that the powers exist at central and local government level? Is he convinced that every central government authority and every local government authority is doing everything it should to tackle blight, dereliction and unfinished buildings?

Mr Attwood: I have to acknowledge that, in my view, as I indicated, Belfast City Council is the trailblazer in using the powers that it has to deal with issues of safety, nuisance, dereliction, decay and so forth. Indeed, I have asked its senior officials to come back in to see me in order to see how they are rolling out their particular interventions to deal with those issues. However, as I indicated, it is not my view that all councils are measuring up. There may be reasons for that — resources, understanding of the law or a lack of confidence in the deployment of the legal weapons that they have. Whatever the reasons, if they have mechanisms — Belfast has demonstrated that they exist — to go after owners who are on the wrong side of maintenance of their property in a fit and proper way, they should use them. It is not an issue of having more law; it is more an issue of enforcing the law.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response on what is a very interesting subject. Has the Minister considered de-zoning development lands in areas where there are high numbers of unfinished housing developments?

Mr Attwood: I am pleased to hear that suggestion because it has not come up on my radar before. I will take that into consideration. In these circumstances, as the Member indicated, what do we do when there are development opportunities that, for example, are about to run out of time? In the next number of days we will consult on introducing reduced fees for planning applications to be extended beyond the original lifetime of the approval, namely five years. At the moment there are a lot of planning approvals that will go nowhere because of the recession, lack of money, NAMA, bankruptcy and so on. Are there opportunities to aid development going forward by reducing the fees for the renewal of planning approvals in a way that will keep those approvals live, especially if they are of great value, and in a way that will plan for the time after recession?

Mr McNarry: Given the Minister's decision yesterday to grant planning permission to Castlebawn in Newtownards,

is he today confident that, following his answers to other questions on the subject, the decision that he has made will not contribute to blight and dereliction in Newtownards town centre?

Mr Attwood: I have made it very clear that, in going forward, I want to see a new planning policy — PPS 5, which is currently being prepared — that will definitively favour in-town retail opportunities rather than out-of-town or edge-of-town opportunities. That is clearly my ambition. Decisions that will be forthcoming in respect of article 31 applications that continue to be determined will demonstrate — as I tried to demonstrate through, for example, the refusal in Banbridge two weeks ago — that I will be consistent with planning policy, the law, evidence and practice. I will try to demonstrate that out-of-town retail can only be justified where there is strong, clear evidence to do so. I thought long, hard and cautiously about that application in Newtownards, but what attracted me to it was that it is not out of town. It is partially in town and partially sits on the edge of town. It will bring back into the life of Newtownards the historic bawn walls of Newtownards. It will create a gateway, in my —

Mr McNarry: How can you bring a wall back to life?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Part of the life and experience of any town or city is its heritage. We are blessed, in the North of Ireland, with a rich built heritage that adds character to the life that we lead. So, heritage is very much a part of the character of our lives and the life of Newtownards. The proposal will create a gateway from the Castlebawn site through a regenerated Court Street, which is part of the heritage of Newtownards, into High Street and the town's trading area. That can be a win-win.

Planning Service: e-PIC

4. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the operation of the e-PIC system since it became operational. (AQO 2733/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question.

The e-PIC system went live in December 2010. There were teething problems with it, but the principle and the practice behind it is a good one. It allows access to plans, maps, drawings, consultation responses and third-party consultee replies. So far, 25,000 planning applications have been uploaded on to the system, as well as 250,000 documents, 100,000 consultation responses and 250,000 neighbourhood notification letters and so forth. I want to see the scheme developed, because I want to see online planning applications and online planning consultation responses. That will be the next phase of e-PIC, if we are to make the planning system more fit for purpose.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer. Unfortunately, it took quite some time to get the system launched, but, that aside, I think that the community in Northern Ireland welcomes it. The Minister took my initial question in raising the issue, but does he have any targets for introducing online planning applications? Hopefully, those will not be held up by any delays.

Mr Attwood: The introduction of e-PIC took too long, but that was the legacy that was left to me when I came into the post. As I indicated, we hope to have applications and

consultation responses online in 2013. That will make more efficient a system that has already seen a 50% reduction, we anticipate, in the current year in telephone calls to planning officials. That should make those officials and the planning system more efficient.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the fact that the e-PIC system is up and running, and I welcome the assistance that it gives. Does the Minister accept, however, that there continues to be inconsistency in the level of correspondence that is posted on e-PIC and that some people do not know whether what is on it is the most up-to-date information?

Mr Attwood: I accept that there have been and continue to be teething problems, but, as this rolls out into its second and third year of full operation, despite those teething difficulties and given the management information that is being uploaded to the portal, you will see more and more best performance.

If you compare planning performance and the number of approvals that are going out the door with where we were even 18 months ago, you will see that there has been some material change. There is a long road to travel, and issues still need to be addressed. However, if you look at the overall performance and the number of individual wind turbine applications that are getting out the door compared with three months ago and if you see that the performance for major, intermediate and small applications is better than it was a year ago, you will know the direction of travel is better. That said, it has to improve even further.

2.30 pm

Finance and Personnel

General Register Office: Revenue

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Bronwyn McGahan.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. To ask the Minister how much revenue is generated through the General Register Office annually.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry. I call Bronwyn McGahan. Your question number is?

Ms McGahan: Question 1, sorry.

1. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much revenue is generated through the General Register Office annually. (AQO 2744/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): We have got the question number and the question, Mr Deputy Speaker, so there should be no excuse for not giving you an answer.

The income generated by the General Register Office will vary annually. It really depends on the public demands for the services. In 2011-12, the income generated was £2,568,018 — sorry, £5,680. No, it was £500,600 — *[Laughter.]* It was £2.5618 million or thousand pounds — million pounds. Sorry: it was £2.56818 million. I knew that I would get that answer out eventually. That includes income from birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, searches for certificates and the procedures for marriages and name changes. The fees are reviewed annually.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Does the revenue remain in the North?

Mr Wilson: The revenue that is generated covers only the cost. Indeed, the fees are reviewed annually because we are obliged not to make a profit, nor can we subsidise the cost of running the service. The fees are set annually in relation to the costs of the delivery of the service. That means that all the money remains in Northern Ireland to pay for the service that is generated.

Mr D McIlveen: Minister, you will be aware that a number of people require copy certificates for benefits and so on. Are there any plans to have subsidised rates for people on a low income?

Mr Wilson: We do not subsidise the cost of certificates when they are being issued. However, we have a different arrangement from what exists in other parts of the United Kingdom. For example, if someone needs two certificates and applies for two, they are charged only for one. Where someone can produce evidence that they require the certificate — for example, for education, social security benefit claim or election purposes — there is a reduced fee. It is not a subsidised fee, but we accept that there is no escape from the fact that certificates will be needed for those purposes. People usually require them for a service that they will obtain; therefore, there will be a reduced fee.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister clarify that the revenue does not rise with inflation and is just related directly to the cost?

Mr Wilson: Normally, it will be linked to inflation because costs will go up with inflation. I think that the import of the Member's question is this: if costs go up and no regard is given to how those costs are generated, do the public have to pay for it? The answer to that is no. The number of people who are employed in the various offices, for example, will be worked out on the basis of the number of clients those offices have. The costs are kept under control in that way. I would be very concerned if it were a case of simply letting costs spiral out of control and letting the public pay, but that is not the case. The costs and the demand for the services will be monitored, and the staffing complement will be based on that. Therefore, the cost will be based on the demand for the service. We try to keep the costs under control.

Pensions: Public Sector

2. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the reform of the NI public sector pension scheme. (AQO 2745/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Executive took a decision on 8 March 2012 that they would commit to reforming Northern Ireland public sector pension schemes to keep in line with equivalent schemes in GB. Despite that decision, I have been attempting to persuade my Executive colleagues to agree to a legislative consent motion that would enable the Public Service Pensions Bill, which was introduced in Westminster on 13 September, to give effect to those reforms in Northern Ireland. Only if we do it in that way can we avoid, first, falling behind the introduction of the pension reforms in the rest of the UK and, more importantly, the very serious financial consequences of missing the April 2015 deadline.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Are the projected costs associated with the delay in the introduction of pension reform?

Mr Wilson: It was quite difficult, but, after some probing, we were able to get figures for the likely savings or how much the reduction in liability would be for pension schemes after the introduction of the changes in GB. If we carry those figures over to Northern Ireland, in one year the reduction in liability would be £60 million for the Civil Service, £62 million for teachers, £18 million for the police, £23 million for the Fire and Rescue Service and £100 million for the health service, giving a total reduced liability of £260 million. The Member will, therefore, understand where I am coming from when I say that, if we fall behind in implementing reform as a result of not tagging on to the legislation at Westminster, despite an Executive commitment to do so, we will have to find and Treasury will expect us to make up the increased liability for pension schemes in Northern Ireland. That would be £260 million in 2015-16, when there will be greater pressure on public finance in Northern Ireland.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Has the Minister been advised of the possibility of legal challenges arising from the changes to the pension scheme?

Mr Wilson: No, there has been no indication of legal challenges. Indeed, the legislation is going through Westminster without any legal challenge. The big challenge for Sinn Féin is whether it is prepared to face up to the financial challenge if we do not deliver this on time. Members on the other side of the House, despite all the evidence staring them in the face, tried to hold up welfare reform, with all the financial consequences of that, and Sinn Féin is doing exactly the same with pensions, despite having agreed that we will follow the GB pension arrangements going through Westminster at present.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Has the Minister made any assessment of the impact that pension reform will have on the lowest paid workers in the public sector?

Mr Wilson: The nature of the pension reforms is twofold. First, there is the Bill — the primary legislation — the main provisions of which will be the move from final year salary schemes to career averages. Secondly, the pension age will be linked to the age at which one qualifies for state pension.

As far as the regulations for individual pension schemes are concerned — this is where the Assembly can have an input — there is some room in the funding envelope to vary things. There could, for example, be some variation in the evaluation of pension schemes, the contributions made et cetera. That is where there is probably scope for looking at what we can do. However, there will be very little room for variation if we are hit with a £260 million bill in the first year because we were tardy in our response and did not deal with it in the most obvious way, which is by linking with the main primary legislation going through Westminster.

Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme

3. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the impact of the empty retail rate concession since its introduction. (AQO 2746/11-15)

Mr Wilson: To date, there have been 32 successful applications under the new scheme, with total relief of £76,636 awarded. I actually got the figure right this time, Mr Deputy Speaker, and did not stumble over it. That one-year rate concession was, of course, introduced in April 2012. I am sure that the Member will be well aware that, in our constituency, three businesses have already benefited from this. All of them were at the end of towns where there were substantial numbers of vacant properties. From that point of view, it is to be welcomed. I have visited a lot of the premises and spoken to the business owners, and, on many occasions, they said that one of the deciding factors — I will not pretend that it is the only factor — was the fact that they got a 50% rates reduction for this first year. In some cases, that probably saves them up to £70 or £80 a week.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, can you outline how the uptake of new retail tenants in the period from April to September compares with previous years when empty retail concessions were not in place?

Mr Wilson: I do not have the exact figures for that, and we probably would not be able to make the distinction between premises that became occupied purely because of the rates concession and those that came on stream for other reasons. I can say that, despite the recession, no matter what band you look at, the occupation of premises has remained fairly steady. I suspect that many of the rates concessions have enabled us to keep that level of occupancy.

Mr I McCrea: Can the Minister detail why he has no plans to extend the scheme to newly vacated properties? More importantly, what plans has he to help other businesses that need financial help?

Mr Wilson: We had a long debate on this in the Chamber when we were taking the legislation through. As I made clear at the time, the one thing that I want to avoid is the displacement of current activity with someone simply moving from a shop to a shop next door to avoid having to pay 50% of their rates. Indeed, this came through in many of the consultations that we had with traders. It was felt that, where premises were in long-term vacancy — for more than a year — it would help to avoid the kind of displacement that might have occurred had a shop been eligible after only being vacant for a year. For example, a multiple trader could simply have vacated their shop and moved somewhere else and moved someone else into their premises to avoid the rates. Having that one-year period would stop people abusing the system in that way.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister provide us with a geographical spread of the uptake of the scheme, please? He may not have it with him today.

Mr Wilson: I do not have it with me today, but I can say that, from the very north of Northern Ireland to the very south of Northern Ireland and from the east of Northern Ireland to the west of Northern Ireland, people have taken up the scheme and are successfully running business as a result.

DFP: Press Releases

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the reasons for a ban on departmental press releases being circulated to Press Association Ireland. (AQO 2747/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As everyone in this House knows, I seek to keep good relationships with my friends, my enemies, those who abuse me and those who praise me. However, on occasions, when I believe that there has been wilful wrongdoing, it is right for any Minister to impose whatever sanction they believe is necessary. About a year ago, the Press Association ran a story that was totally without foundation and which it had made no attempt to check. Even after it had been given the facts, it stuck by its story. I do not believe that it would have been reasonable in such a situation for me to ignore what had been done, and, therefore, I made it clear that it would not get any co-operation from me or from my Department. That situation existed until I met Deric Henderson from the Press Association. He made a plea to have the situation changed. He made an apology privately. He was not prepared to do it publicly, but I accepted that and the situation was resolved a number of weeks ago. Let me make it very clear that, as a Minister, I expect that people will not treat me with kid gloves, but I do not expect and will not allow people to wilfully walk over me, especially when it involves ignoring the facts.

2.45 pm

Mr Elliott: I am almost tempted to ask the Minister how many people are in each of the categories that he outlined: his friends, his enemies and whoever else. Did the Minister report the matter to the Press Complaints Commission? If so, what was its response?

Mr Wilson: I did report the matter to the Press Complaints Commission, which upheld my objection to the story and asked for a retraction. That was slow in coming, which contributed to the way in which the matter was handled.

I thought that the Member was going to upbraid me for my attitude to the press. I am glad that he did not, because I might have made another enemy. Given the fact that the House is littered with people who have been subject to purges in the Ulster Unionist Party after the issuing of press statements, I am glad he did not go down that line. I would have had great fun if he had.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I listened with interest to the Minister's responses. I congratulate him on resolving the issue in the meeting with the PA. Did he meet the PA before he imposed the ban?

Mr Wilson: I not only met someone from the PA but spoke to them a number of times on the telephone. I ran into Deric Henderson while he was signing books in Coleraine and had a long conversation with him in that bookshop. Every effort was made to give the Press Association an opportunity to remedy the situation. It was unwilling or unable to do so, hence the sanction that was imposed. As I said, it is not my style to hold grudges in that way, but, equally, it is not my style to be used as some kind of doormat.

Lord Morrow: I have listened with interest to what the Minister said. Can we take it that it is business as usual, all is forgiven and we are back to normality? It seems that the Minister has been very tolerant, bearing in mind that he was given an apology privately but not publicly.

Mr Wilson: It is, of course, always better to have good relations with the press, although, at times, that is not possible. When it is possible and when issues can be resolved, of course I am happy to do so. I am glad that the

issue has been resolved. I trust that it will be a salutary lesson, and I hope that all Ministers adopt my position. The press has an important job to do, but it should do that job properly. The influence and the power of the press does not mean that we should allow it to do a shoddy job without any consequences.

Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the contribution to non-identifiable expenditure is calculated and allocated across relevant budgets. (AQO 2748/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I assume that the Member is interested in how the non-identifiable expenditure is treated in the estimation of Northern Ireland's net fiscal balance position. Of course, it would not be treated across individual Departments in any way. Non-identifiable expenditure is incurred on behalf of the United Kingdom as a whole and cannot be identified as benefiting any particular region of the UK. It mostly comprises spending on defence, debt interest and international services. My Department estimates Northern Ireland's share of that expenditure. It is generally worked out either on the basis of our percentage of the UK population or our percentage of the UK gross value added. That method is then included in the net fiscal balance report for Northern Ireland, which is available on the Department's website.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm that those matters also relate to the bank bailouts and Olympic funding?

Mr Wilson: No. As a result of our negotiations with the Treasury we got a Barnett consequential as a result of the Olympic funding. There was a dispute from us, Scotland and Wales about the exact amount that should have been attributable to our budgets, but there was expenditure during the Olympics on, for example, roads and housing that would have had Barnett consequentials. I cannot remember the exact amount of money that we got from that, but we fought and got a Barnett consequential. It would not have included Olympic funding.

As far as the bank bailout is concerned, where there is any interest on the loans or the overall borrowing that would have been attributable to it, that interest would have been spread out across the four Administrations — the three Administrations plus England — in the United Kingdom.

Mr Rogers: Minister, will you detail the costs?

Mr Wilson: We only have the figure for 2008-09 because the data is not up to date yet, but the cost to Northern Ireland of that non-identifiable expenditure and our proportion of the total UK expenditure was £2.8 billion in 2008-09. I do not have the figures for 2009-2010 or 2010-11 yet, but they should be available shortly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Moving on, I call Leslie Cree. Sorry, I did not realise that we had only had one supplementary question. I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: Does that figure include the very extensive subsidy that we share, as part of the United Kingdom, in our EU contributions or is it on top of that?

Mr Wilson: I cannot give the Member an answer to that, although I suspect, since the figure deals with

international obligations, that it would be regarded as an international obligation and that, therefore, a percentage would be attributable to Northern Ireland. Like me, the Member holds the view that that considerable contribution, which is well above what other nations in Europe of an equal financial and economic standing contribute to the European budget, should be severely reduced, and we support the UK Government in all their efforts to reduce the net contribution to the EU budget, which seems to be out of control. I note that, at a time when we have austerity measures in the United Kingdom, the EU seems to think that it can have an increase in its budget of over 5%.

Government: Procurement

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he intends to take following the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on collaborative procurement and aggregated demand. (AQO 2749/11-15)

Mr Wilson: First, I welcome the publication of the report. As Members will appreciate, all Northern Ireland Audit Office reports are laid before the Assembly and may be subject to review by the Public Accounts Committee. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for me to comment at this moment in time. However, I assure the Assembly that we intend to build on the work to date on collaboration to ensure that we maximise further opportunities and savings, even though — we may pick this up later in the discussion on this question — that is not without consequences for some of our other objectives of trying to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises to avail themselves of public procurement contracts.

Mr Cree: That leads me on very nicely to my supplementary question. Minister, there is obviously a tension between aggregating requirements to enable the best price possible and trying to attract small and medium-sized enterprises to compete. Have you any plans to handle that difficult problem?

Mr Wilson: The Member is right. We are looking to see where similar things are purchased by a number of different COPEs across Northern Ireland, but, when you bundle contracts together and make them of a higher value, you inevitably encourage bigger firms from outside Northern Ireland to tender for those contracts. There will be those tensions. What we sometimes do is encourage small firms to join in co-operative ventures with the bigger contractors who are applying for the large contracts etc, in order to try to give them a foot in the door. However, there is a conflict there, and Members must be aware of it. If we want to have bigger tenders, some of the smaller businesses will either feel that they cannot apply or find that they are in competition with much more efficient, larger businesses.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I will not ask the Minister a statistical question. Has he any plans to develop a stronger procurement process on an all-Ireland basis?

Mr Wilson: We have made big improvements in the procurement process. However, I must say that I am still unhappy with many of the responses I get about procurement in Northern Ireland. Sometimes, there is inconsistency across COPEs in the ways in which tenders

are handled, the bureaucracy etc. We have been working with various interests and industry groups to improve that.

I do not know whether the Member is really getting at improving the chances of success for local businesses. I suspect that that is what he is at. I have always added this caveat to any comment on this: we have EU regulations, which, of course, do not allow us to favour small businesses. However, if you look at the record in Northern Ireland, you find that we are currently sitting with 77% of contracts awarded by COPEs in Northern Ireland going to small and medium-sized enterprises. That compares with 24% in Great Britain. So we have got the balance more in favour of local businesses; however, we have to be careful that we do not breach regulations. In relation to the point that Mr Cree made, we must also be aware that, when we break contracts down into small lots so that firms can afford them, we may not get the best value for money.

Mr Dallat: I fully take the point made by the Minister that small and medium-sized businesses should be capable of tendering. However, the Minister must be aware that, in recent times, the education and library boards, the PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service and Northern Ireland Water have all been guilty of not going through the proper procurement procedures and allowing our own companies, here in Northern Ireland, to submit tenders. What is the Minister doing about that?

Mr Wilson: I assume that the Member is talking about the way in which some contracts are extended once they have been awarded. There are, sometimes, very good reasons why a contract could or should be extended, and, indeed, that does not always result in not getting value for money. In fact, on many occasions, by extending a contract, we get value for money. However, in all of those cases, there ought to be a business case presented, and guidance has been given to that effect. Justification has to be made for why an existing contract should be extended rather than going out to a new tender.

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the report 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-border Undergraduate Education' (May 2011) based on research by the European Employment Services Cross-border Partnership at the request of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry Joint Business Council; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to remove the barriers which limit student flows within the island of Ireland. — [Mr McElduff.]

Mr Buchanan: I question the motivation of the proposer. Why has a motion with such a narrow focus been brought before the House? It is clear that the proposer's main thrust and aim within the motion is solely focused on a North/South basis and completely ignores the east-west dimension. I therefore question how serious he really is about student flows throughout the region and to and from Northern Ireland.

During his speech, the proposer raised the difficulties faced by students and the problems that are highlighted in Andy Pollak's report. Those problems are a lack of information about universities, lack of information about institutes of technology, the high cost of living in Dublin, unfamiliarity with the Central Applications Office (CAO) process and so forth.

I would have thought that that was a matter for the Southern Government, rather than the Assembly. Perhaps it would have been better if the Member had passed the motion on to his counterparts in the South, who could have debated it in the Dáil rather than here. I feel that this is really an issue for the Southern Government. It goes without saying that, here in Northern Ireland, we —

3.00 pm

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: You will have your chance, I am sure, later on in the meeting.

It goes without saying that, here in Northern Ireland, we place a high value on education in general, and on our higher education system in particular, with a high proportion of our young people receiving an educational qualification that is recognised as being the highest in Europe. Research has shown that the situation of university students in Northern Ireland is unique among the regions of the United Kingdom in that it has the highest participation rate for students from lower socio-economic groups. For example, in 2008-09, almost 41.7% of Northern Ireland's full-time degree entrants were from lower socio-economic groups, compared with 32.4% and 28.2% in other regions. Although 31% of Northern Ireland-domiciled students study in other regions of the UK, only 2% of students from the UK regions are in our Northern Ireland universities. Equally, a similar trend can be found between the student flow North and South. Figures indicate that students from Northern Ireland studying

in the Republic represent only 1% of its undergraduate population, while, on the other hand, students from the Republic studying in Northern Ireland universities equate to 4-4%.

So, we can conclude that we have a problem; a problem of a limited cross-fertilisation of education opportunities taking place on an east-west dimension as well as on a North/South basis. Unfortunately, the motion fails to reflect that, with the proposer being so narrow-minded that he chose to deal only with obstacles to undergraduate education on a North/South basis. That is one of the reasons why I cannot and will not support the motion. So often from the party opposite that brought the motion, we hear the words, "all-inclusive". Where is the all-inclusiveness in the motion? It seems to have disappeared from the proposer's vocabulary today. There is no doubt that —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: No.

There is no doubt that Northern Ireland's universities will face a number of challenges in the next 10 years with demographic changes and the number of 18-year-olds predicted to fall by 15%, all of which will have an impact on undergraduate numbers. Therefore, it opens up the opportunity for a free flow of students from the different regions and jurisdictions. However, we must ensure that, whatever regions and jurisdictions these students come from, they are responsible for the student fees, the maintenance allowance, the higher education bursaries, etc, so that an added financial burden is not placed on the Department for Employment and Learning and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Buchanan: Mr Deputy Speaker, my understanding is that students from the South have cost the Northern Ireland purse £11.6 million this year, and we must look very seriously at that. We will not be supporting the motion.

Mr B McCrea: We are a little more ambivalent about the motion than the Member who spoke previously, in that we understand that there is an issue that should be dealt with. I listened to Mr McElduff's opening statement, and he made a number of points in his very fine speech. However, I could not help thinking that he was speaking to the wrong audience, and that the audience that he ought to be speaking to is the Dáil Éireann, and that most of the issues that he raised — *[Interruption.]* Is that not correct? Have I got the pronunciation wrong? I am sorry; I am doing my level best here.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Dáil Éireann.

Mr B McCrea: Sorry. The Minister for Employment and Learning has brought his considerable intellect to bear on the subject and whispered — *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, I sympathise with you for the trouble that you are having today with the unruly crowd here. We are doing our very best to engage positively on a matter that affects some people very particularly.

This seems to be an issue that is to do with the Irish system orientating to sort out Irish problems, and the knock-on effect for people from this part of the world is consequential rather than intended. At the risk of seeming

a little too pointed, I will point out to the Members who brought the motion to the Floor that the Committee for Employment and Learning, at their request, is dealing with this issue. We are writing to UCAS and the CAO, and we have done all the things that we were asked to do. Therefore, I have a little bit of concern that we are duplicating or making redundant the Committee's work. I am not sure that that is good practice.

The report that people are referring to is good, but it was published in May 2011. So, you have to wonder why it has taken until now for us to deal with the matter.

Earlier today, I asked the Minister of Education when he became aware of the situation, and in response he said that it had been in place for possibly three to four years. So, the real issue is that, although there are undoubtedly difficulties with it, I am not sure what the discussion in the Chamber today is going to do about resolving them. The Minister has said that he is dealing with it, and the Committee is also saying that he is dealing with it. There are undoubtedly some problems, particularly in medicine, in that if you were to have an unregulated system, as I understand it, there would be great difficulty providing enough places for the people in the South of Ireland who want to go to universities there. That is really what they were concerned about.

All in all, do I have some sympathy with the fact that some people do A levels in one year but are not counted in the CAO for the next year? Yes, I do. I think that that information should be made available. Is the prospect of going to an Irish university not fully explained to members of all schools in Northern Ireland? I think that that is also the case, but that is probably the responsibility of the universities — TCD, UCD, DCU and so forth. Those are areas in which the universities ought to do more outreach.

We recently had a lunch at Queen's University Belfast at which members of the Committee and other Committees were present celebrating their success. It is worth saying that they engage more fully with the universities than we perhaps realise.

I will close with one point that I think that we should be dealing with, because it is a here and now. The point was raised at that lunch. Students come from the Republic of Ireland, and although their fees are paid by the Government in the Republic of Ireland, their living costs, student loan or any subsistence are not paid. That was introduced in a draconian way, without warning or interest. Perhaps those are issues that the Members on the opposite Benches should be picking up, rather than some of the other matters. It is a very important issue, and, no doubt, the Minister or whoever will respond to that point.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor. Although it focuses on undergraduate provision, there are also issues with school and postgraduate provision. When it comes to undergraduate level, I am only too aware of the obstacles. I suppose I can declare an interest, as two of our daughters were educated at UCD. The Member who moved the motion outlined the obstacles, so it will be suffice for me to mention one or two issues. Until relatively recently, students in Newry knew little about Dundalk Institute of Technology, which is just 14 miles away from Newry, as there was a tradition for students to head for Belfast. However, DIT is now

addressing that issue and is visiting the schools in Armagh and Down.

I will move now to equivalence, particularly where our veterinary students are concerned. Where else on this island, other than Dublin, can you do veterinary studies? It leaves veterinary students between a rock and a hard place — four A*s or fees of over £9,000 per annum. A Member across the Chamber talked about the obstacles to east-west links. I think one of the obstacles to east-west links is the fees. It does not end with undergraduates. It is also there with postgraduates. I had an e-mail from a mother recently whose daughter is living in the South and has a degree from the North. She has applied to UCD, NUI Maynooth and NUI Galway to do a postgraduate course in education, but the Teaching Council of Ireland does not recognise her degree from the North. I can give the details to the Minister later, and I hope that he can do something about that.

Education is at the heart of our economic recovery. It will not happen if we do not get education right. There are some success stories of cross-border co-operation. The InterTradeIreland FUSION programme develops and facilitates three-way cross-border innovation projects between companies, third-level institutes and graduates. However, the Minister for Employment and Learning's statement of 24 April on the higher education strategy was a half-hearted approach to North/South co-operation. North/South was mentioned in the same breath as co-operation with Europe and the rest of the world.

For me, the way ahead must be a multidimensional approach, involving DEL, the Department of Education, its Dublin counterparts, the universities, institutes of technology, further education colleges and our schools working together, with the Executive taking the lead. DEL and the Department of Education must collaborate fully with the Irish Department of Education and Skills to ensure that obstacles to cross-border education provision are minimised and are no longer allowed to be an impediment to the economic regeneration of this island. They must examine the implications for higher education on the island with the advent of higher fees in England, the falling birth rate here and the higher birth rate in the South.

The universities, institutes of technology and further education colleges must continue to improve the information flow across this island. The Irish Universities Association and CCEA report on equivalence needs to be considered in order to ensure that the most equitable system of equivalence possible is incorporated into a reformed CAO. Students who study vocational A levels and BTECs need their qualifications recognised across this island. Schools need to inform themselves and students better about the different higher education options on the island. Most importantly, the lead must come from the Executive, leading to co-operation, which is at the heart of strand two of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I ask today: is there the political will? Are we going to have real and meaningful progress on an all-Ireland higher education strategy? For me, if there is a will, there is a way.

Mr Lyttle: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion and the calls for the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work together to ensure further and higher education exchange and collaboration across the island of Ireland. This is a very practical issue that affects young people in Northern

Ireland, and for the DUP and the UUP to tell those people to take their concerns to the Dáil is quite astonishing, to be honest.

In 2002, I was fortunate to participate in the Washington Ireland Program for Service and Leadership, which, to this day, brings students from all manner of backgrounds across the island of Ireland together for invaluable work experience in Washington DC and builds a network of young people dedicated to working together to improve communities across Ireland. Indeed, there are a number of DUP members and staff among its alumni who seem to share my passion for all-island exchange and education of this nature. I would like to recognise the contribution made by everyone involved with organisations such as the Washington Ireland Program to advancing this aim.

In 2011, the Alliance Assembly manifesto pledged to work to develop mutual recognition of education qualifications between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and endorsed closer co-operation between institutions at all levels on the island of Ireland. My party continues to believe that working in collaboration to enhance student mobility between both jurisdictions is extremely important, and there is much work to be done to achieve that aim.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Not many Members gave way to me, but go ahead.

Mr B McCrea: I missed that scurrilous comment. I am just wondering whether you are disappointed with your Minister's progress in resolving this issue, which was a manifesto commitment, given that you attacked us and said that we should not be talking here. I do not think that this is the right way to go about a debate where people are trying to resolve real issues for real people.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: I understand that the negotiations are ongoing. I welcome them and the work that has been done. I also welcome the fact that the issue has been raised at the Assembly today. It is disappointing that, unfortunately, Mr McCrea and the DUP have suggested that this is not the place in which to raise this type of issue. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on it.

Some of the reasons offered for the low take-up included difficulties with the application processes and confusion about entry-level criteria. They are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed. The application procedures must be clarified to increase the uptake of student places. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on that.

I welcome the work that the Minister for Employment and Learning and his Department have done to deliver the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland. This document, as Mr McEluff mentioned earlier, confirms that higher education providers will be encouraged to facilitate student flows between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and minimise obstacles to cross-border undergraduate mobility.

All three of Northern Ireland's universities are members of Universities Ireland, and the Open University provides courses and qualifications throughout the island. I welcome the Department for Employment and Learning's commitment to fund Universities Ireland to promote co-

operation and understanding in higher education on an all-Ireland basis. I welcome the revised student finance arrangements for local students who will commence higher education in the Republic of Ireland in September 2013. Those arrangements are broadly equivalent to those for Northern Ireland students who study anywhere in the United Kingdom, and I welcome the progress made in that regard. I do, however, support the call for urgent action to achieve the mutual recognition of A levels and leaving certificates on the island of Ireland. As I have said to Mr McCrea, I understand that negotiations are ongoing to resolve that matter. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about that today.

Mr Hilditch: I speak as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning — indeed, a relatively new member — who is attempting to get his head round the many challenges that currently face the Department. Although the motion calls for the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to remove the barriers that limit student flows on the island of Ireland, I, for one, acknowledge the historical background, where we are today and the implications of any change to the current situation. However, like Mr Buchanan, I question the usefulness of today's debate.

As I said, I am new to the Committee, and, admittedly, this is the first time that I have looked at the report in any detail. If I am being totally honest, I believe that most of its findings could be described as almost stating the obvious, with information — or, perhaps, the lack of it — on economic and grade equivalences being to the fore. The recommendations clearly flow from these findings, and that is where I have concerns about financial implications and pressures in this budgetary period, together with any further burden to the taxpayer. Some recommendations relate to much that can be done in the sector itself and, indeed, in other jurisdictions. However, there is also a call for government resources to be made available for commissioned work, and this report would form the basis of any collaborative working.

It is worth noting that some of those in the Republic of Ireland who participated in the formulation of the report expressed concern that they could not justify the expense at this time of severe financial cutbacks. Here in Northern Ireland, in our devolved Administration, those pressures are no different. Indeed, my attention was drawn to the section in the research pack that gave some detail on what is expected in monetary terms from the Department for Employment and Learning during the current mandate alone. The figures are quite stark and certainly exercised the minds of members of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Further to that, I understand that the cost of cross-border education to our devolved Administration is around £11.6 million. Clearly, any increase would affect departmental budgets.

I believe in educational choice. However, I am concerned about the impact that this motion or, indeed, any private Member's motion would have on our priorities. The Minister has been strong on issues that relate to growing the economy in Northern Ireland. He has clearly set out the Department's stall in recent statements on higher education. We know where improvements can be made in the system here. I advocate strongly that any additional resources made available should be diverted to priorities

here in Northern Ireland that will shape and create an innovative economy. Having attended my first couple of meetings of the Employment and Learning Committee, I have already been hearing of the basic need for capital spend on facilities and enhanced careers guidance down the line. Those are examples of local bread-and-butter issues that we must prioritise for our limited resources. I am concerned that a motion such as this would divert resources from real needs, and I will not be supporting the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleagues for bringing forward this hugely important motion. We had a number of significant discussions in this Assembly over the past few weeks regarding appropriate educational arrangements and investment strategies. There can be little doubt that this motion on cross-border student mobility is central to the current discourse on nurturing educational growth and economic prosperity throughout the island of Ireland.

It is undoubtedly the case that a sustainable, accessible and equitable process of building a knowledge-based society, in which knowledge acts as the catalyst for social expansion, is fundamental to our ability to grow future economies. As the mainstay of critical thinking and cutting-edge research, our centres of higher education play a leading role in that process, as they not only encourage and facilitate higher and further learning but offer academic freedom to our young people to push boundaries and exceed expectations. For that reason, among others, society's ability to harness the pioneering potential of higher education has often been the determining factor in scientific discovery, medical breakthrough and engineering feats.

Student communities in universities throughout the world have been at the centre of great social change. From Kent State in Ohio to the Sorbonne in Paris and our own civil rights struggle here in Ireland, universities have provided winds of change when old systems were ripe for reform.

Today's world of instant information and the global movement of people, ideas and cultures across borders presents us with endless opportunities for our society. Higher education has always been at the heart of international solidarity between peoples and cultures. In today's shrinking world of transnational trends and norms, access to equitable higher education stands as a door to a vastly improved future for many millions of young people.

Such opportunity has been characterised by huge change in higher education throughout the world. Demographic growth estimates point to a population of eight billion people within the next few years, with 130 million students by 2020, 10% of whom will access cross-border higher education. At the dawn of the 21st century, Australia already had 100,000 students enrolled in 1,500 cross-border higher education programmes. International figures have followed suit in subsequent years.

The demand for cross-border higher education, especially in professional courses, is rapidly increasing throughout much of the world. A number of reasons explain that, including changing demographics, increased post-primary graduates, movement to lifelong learning and the widespread growth of the knowledge economy. We are also seeing a huge change in the delivery of cross-border education as innovations in information and

communication technologies provide alternative and virtual ways of delivery, which are fitting into new types of cross-border programme arrangements such as branch campuses and franchise and twinning measures.

The face of higher education is changing rapidly as it grapples with the challenges of sustainable development and the mounting demands of lifelong learning. New providers, such as on-line universities, branch campuses in other jurisdictions and corporate universities, are creating a paradigm shift in higher education. In our age of accelerating globalisation, dynamic processes of increasing interdependence, growing competition and the communications revolution are severely calling into question the traditional forms of higher education.

The mobility of students, professors, knowledge and values has been part of higher education for centuries, but in the past two decades we have seen a huge growth in the mobility of programmes and modes of delivery. That presents many new opportunities for, notably: increased access to higher education; strategic alliances between regions; the production and exchange of new knowledge; the movement of graduates and professionals; human resource and institutional capacity building; the improvement of academic quality; and increased mutual understanding.

There is strong evidence that cross-border dynamics play a leading role in helping countries to develop accessible, available and affordable higher education. However, there are often difficulties around who awards the degree, who recognises the degree and whether it is quality assured. To overcome those problems, it is vital that Governments have clear legislative and regulatory frameworks for higher education. In cross-border education, recognition is critical to ensuring the legitimacy of the institution and the qualifications provided. As my colleagues have outlined today, those are some of the problems that face Irish post-primary pupils as they plan the next stage in the learning process. Indeed, today's debate will signpost why the movement of higher education students North and South has been considerably lower than you would expect for a small island with similar —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Hazzard: — educational cultures and systems. I support the motion, and I urge others to do the same.

Mr Anderson: I rise as a member of the Employment and Learning Committee to speak against the motion. It is a very great pity that the Members opposite seem to take every opportunity to make political capital out of important issues. I therefore query the underlying motive behind the motion today. It seems to be little more than "North/Southerly" for the sake of it.

Going by the number of Assembly questions that have been tabled by the Members opposite in recent times, they appear to be obsessed with the issue of student flow between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. At the same time, unless I have missed something, they are curiously silent on the flow of students between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. That is an area in which there are disparities and problems due to the different fee structures in the United Kingdom. That is a much greater priority.

I fully accept that there is a long-standing tradition of students from Northern Ireland attending excellent courses at such well-respected universities as Trinity College and University College Dublin. That tradition should continue for those students who wish to avail themselves of those opportunities. There is also a tradition of students from the Irish Republic coming up to our excellent centres of learning such as Queen's and the University of Ulster. That continued, to some extent, during even the dark days of the Troubles, when, just like all of our society, our universities greatly suffered as a result of terrorism. Let us never forget that many potential students had to leave home for an education because of the impact of that terrorism. Many of our best students left these shores to study, never to return.

There is merit in the various universities in the two jurisdictions co-operating to maximise their resources and provide complementary courses. However, there are a number of obstacles to co-operation, some of which have been highlighted by 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-border Undergraduate Education'. Those obstacles cannot be easily overcome. Most of the recommendations in that report fall to the universities to consider and implement. They are not for government.

Northern Ireland has close and long-standing links with universities and colleges in England, Scotland and Wales. Surely it is more important that there is open and affordable access for all the citizens of the United Kingdom to some of the best educational establishments to be found anywhere in the world. The free flow of students in the United Kingdom regions has entered uncharted waters. I fear that it has been damaged by the sharp increases in student fees in England and the cap that was introduced in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The new arrangements have led to several discrepancies that could be open to challenge. For example, it is grossly unfair that those from Northern Ireland who go to a university in Scotland will pay more than those from the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, that has led to some Northern Ireland students obtaining an Irish passport to get reduced fees. That might please the Members opposite, but it is a disgraceful state of affairs that needs to be addressed.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I absolutely agree with the point that he has just made. I have heard many contributions from the Floor here; people talk about aspirations, education and the movement of people and students across the border. However, I have not heard, other than from these Benches, anyone talk about cost. No one has mentioned opportunity cost. What do we stop funding to enable that to happen? No one has mentioned that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Anderson: I thank my colleague for his question. I agree with him. He is quite right in saying that. They are being a bit short-sighted. They have certainly not looked too far into the actual cost. I talk about the cost in my speech.

It is grossly unfair that English students who come to Queen's will pay the full £9,000 in fees while students from the Republic of Ireland will pay the same £3,500 as Northern Ireland students.

Why should students who come to Northern Ireland from a foreign jurisdiction be treated more favourably, because

they are EU nationals, than those who come from within the United Kingdom?

From next September, the arrangements for students from Northern Ireland studying in the Irish Republic will change with the ending of the grant. I will be interested to hear the Minister's views on how he thinks that might impact on the flow of students from here to the Republic. It is also worth noting that, as I understand it, students who come from the Irish Republic to Northern Ireland this year will cost Northern Ireland — I think my colleague said it — somewhere in the region of £11.6 million.

The issues that I have raised are far more important and pressing than those in the motion, which, as I said at the start, stems from Sinn Féin's obsession with all-island, North/South pipedreams that do no favours to anyone, especially students. I oppose the motion.

3.30 pm

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the motion. It is sad that our party's amendment was not picked up, as it would have allowed us to expand the motion to include Scotland, England and Wales.

Following my speech on education last week, I fear that certain people will expect me to be paranoid all the time. However, I wish that we could have fewer motions that divide the House down the sectarian sides. I look forward to this sort of motion including everyone and not just dealing with the Ireland/Northern Ireland side.

Today, we should be concentrating — and we are, to a certain extent — on the obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education and looking to removing those barriers. It is on that point that I welcome the motion. I think that we should emphasise and concentrate on the students, their undergraduate education and the skills they need, and help them to get the jobs, not only in Northern Ireland or Ireland, but everywhere possible.

I have raised this issue before. Often, we seem to navel-gaze or concentrate too much on Northern Ireland and Ireland. I look forward to the day when we can look outside Northern Ireland and at Northern Ireland being the world leader that it was — it still is in many areas — and when we can prepare students for the world and make sure they achieve the skills that make them go out in the world and become the entrepreneurs and managers who will, eventually, come back here and employ the next generation of students. So, the cycle should go on. We should concentrate on bringing forward the entrepreneurship and skills that we want to see in the future.

I thank those who wrote the briefing document. It was intriguing to see that, in 2009-10, 880 students went from here to Ireland. All in all, it was 1,290, which is not a huge figure, and 675 Northern Ireland students moved in the other direction. So, we are really only talking about 1,600 students a year. To put that into perspective, 17,000 students applied for places at Queen's University and the University of Ulster. There were only 8,000 places and, although we do not where they went afterwards, 9,000 students did not, necessarily, get their places. Some 16,000 students also go to the UK, especially to Scotland and the north-west. We need to look at the problem, and, as we are only talking about 1,600 students North and South, maybe we are right to focus on getting rid of the

barriers and on making sure that there are more chances across the border and here for those in Ireland.

I think that, at some stage, I am meant to declare an interest, in that I have a daughter at university in Newcastle and another who is going to university in Bristol. I do that now.

The barriers concern me. I was expecting that, by now, we would have gone into the detail of the differences in exams and qualifications, the problems in applying and what courses are available and where. Yet, no one seems to have touched on those details other than the Members who made the early speeches.

I want to touch on three matters. We talk about fees, grants and loans, and yet behind the word "loans" is the problem of debt. There is a mass of people who find the whole idea of student loans and getting into debt quite frightening. That is one of the barriers, and we really should look at how we teach people about the risks that do and do not exist with debt and help them not to see it as a barrier. That will allow them to move on and help them to manage it. We also have many who do not want to travel. In fact, one family in Antrim told me that they did not want their children to go as far away as Ballymena. As an Antrim man, I can understand that.

Mr Allister: Careful.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you. That is the sort of thing we are working against. There lies a very real barrier; there are people who do not want to travel. As part of our education system, we should be helping people to learn the skills in life that make them feel more confident, which will let their families allow them to go further away so that they can come back and help Northern Ireland and Ireland in the future.

Finally, on those points, there is learning about life. Going to university is not just about taking exams and passing; it is about learning to do things with other people and, dare I say it, have fun.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Kinahan: We must remember that people have to have fun at university, as well as understand and learn. I ask both Ministers to look at all the barriers, itemise them and find a way through them.

Mr McDevitt: I declare an interest as the husband of an academic at Queen's University, Belfast.

I note the report in front of the House that is behind the motion. It contains some stark figures; for example, at the time of publishing, only 1% of students in the Southern higher education system was from Northern Ireland, and 4.4% of our student quota was from the Republic. For such a small island, we simply cannot afford such disappointing mobility rates. The report outlines several issues that act as barriers to mobility, and I want to concentrate on two in particular: transferring qualifications and accessible information.

The fact that on this island we have no method of qualification harmonisation is a cause of legitimate concern. I fear that this has been more of a political issue than a practical one, and I fear that, given the tone of today's debate, there are some in this House who continue to see it purely as a political issue rather than a practical one. It may be worth noting at this point that there is not

one single university in this jurisdiction that does not want a more diverse student body. In fact, when you get senior academics in this jurisdiction into a room, they are careful to point out clearly that one of their great concerns about their universities is that there is not a great deal of diversity in their student body. Universities do not stick their heads in the sand, and politicians who have authority over universities should be careful not to do the same.

A practical solution is available. If the European Union can agree a method of credit transfer across several borders, why can we not simply do the same? The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is based on the Bologna process, which aims to establish a system of credit as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility, and is used throughout the European Union. It uses common systems of grade equivalence agreed by member states through the European qualifications forum. If a student receives a 60% grade in France, that equates to a level on the ECTS scale that can be used to calculate the grade in line with local grading from any other EU country. The difference between A levels and Leaving Cert on this island are not so much more complex than those in any other European system, yet a coherent and transparent method of credit transfer cannot be found here. Both the UK and the Republic are members of the European higher education area, where the ECTS process is agreed. In essence, therefore, we can arrange for European students to have their grades equalised to attend third-level education anywhere on this island, yet a Belfast student seeking to attend University College Dublin (UCD), for example, has to go around in circles to gain entry based on their qualifications.

I have looked through the documentation from the high-level policy forum within the UK Higher Education Europe Unit. DEL seems to have minimal input compared with, for example, our Scottish counterparts, who have direct input into the European system. Why cannot DEL, in conjunction with OFMDFM, seek to use our resources through the Brussels office to have a more direct input into the equivalence process, or even learn alongside the Department in Dublin how a local system might be framed? Both CCEA and DEL have a voice within the UK European Co-ordination Group for Vocational Education and Training, yet I find myself questioning what is being done about student mobility there to promote student flow through the mechanism of an all-island credit transfer.

The SDLP has sought to have the Minister and the Executive put their money where their mouth is when it comes to solutions. We asked if DEL would exempt local students studying STEM courses in the South from paying student fees from 2013, and the Minister refused. We are continually told that such courses are economically critical and that we must ensure that local students stay here to help build a future for this region. Yet, efforts to do those things have been rebuffed.

I ask a simple question: why can we not tap into a European framework that is available to everyone else? Why do we continue to allow ourselves —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McDevitt: — to be frustrated by what is either petty politics or bureaucratic unwillingness?

Mr Allister: It seems to be in vogue in the debate to declare interests that might connect one to universities in the Irish Republic. The only interest that I can think to declare is that I recently played a part, happily, in persuading a very intelligent audience in the Historical Society in Trinity to reject the motion that this House would reunite Ireland.

Mr McDevitt: That is Trinity for you, Jim.

Mr Allister: Yes; it was well worth doing.

The motion is, in a sense, quite fatuous in that it comes before a House that should not be the primary target of what is sought to be remedied in respect of such inequity as there is. If there is an inequity, the resolution of it lies elsewhere, with the Dublin Government and not with DEL or this Executive. Of course, as has been pointed out, the motion is but an exercise in Sinn Féin seeking to take yet another opportunity to try to trundle out and promote anything that comes anywhere close to promoting all-Ireland agendas. If the motion were a genuine effort to address university student mobility issues, it would not exclusively focus on the problem that may exist between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in that direction. It would focus equally — perhaps even more so — on the problems that we can maybe do more about; those that arise from the lack of mobility into our Northern Ireland universities for students from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he explain why he did not take the opportunity to table an amendment that would reflect that sentiment?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: My sentiments will be perfectly expressed by voting against the motion.

My point is that there is no difficulty in Northern Ireland universities attracting students from the Irish Republic. That may be no surprise, because we pay almost £12 million a year for them, and the success rate is quite staggering. We discover that the most recent figures given by the Minister, for 2009-2010, show that the University of Ulster had 2,810 students from the Irish Republic and a mere 625 from GB. So, yes, there is a problem with student mobility, but, as far as our universities are concerned, the problem is in attracting enough students from GB. They have no problem in attracting a surplus of students from the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, the figures for some of the campuses are quite staggering. Magee has 585 from the Republic and 50 from Great Britain. In Jordanstown, 1,420 are from the Republic and 210 from GB. So, yes, there does seem to be a mobility problem, but we need to address it where it lies and not in respect of the flow the other way. It is important to make the point that the local Exchequer funds the bill for all students here, which is something that Sinn Féin, being the spendthrift party that it is — the party that believes in the philosophy of spending other people's money — is quite happy to simply ignore.

Another issue that it is quite happy to ignore in a debate about equity and fairness in education is the Catholic certificate in education, which inhibits so many young Protestant graduates and teachers when it comes to teaching across the ambit of schools in Northern Ireland. So, I think that one can see right through the motion. It is

partisan, and it is designed to be partisan. It seeks only to focus on a single issue, and it has no regard to the actual needs of third-level education in Northern Ireland or its reality. It is just another opportunity to push what those Members see as an agenda of that particular type. I will oppose the motion.

3.45 pm

Dr Farry: I actually welcome the motion and thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I note the free pass on accountability that some Members offered by saying that this is not a relevant issue for either my Department or the House. I believe that it is a relevant issue, and a number of matters fall under my responsibility, as, indeed, some fall under that of my colleague the Minister of Education. This has become a polarised, divisive debate only because some Members have chosen to make it so. I regard this as one issue of many in higher education that are to be addressed. Indeed, we are currently addressing many of those. However, even in isolation, this matter is worthy of consideration.

I remain committed to ensuring that students from here continue to have a free choice of academic institution, whether it is locally, in Great Britain, in the Republic of Ireland or, indeed, elsewhere in the world. I also recognise the important role that all students play in contributing to the vibrant and multinational atmosphere of campuses throughout Northern Ireland. Any factors that limit the student choice of any institution should be explored, and any opportunities to increase student mobility should be considered. As part of that, I am fully committed to ensuring that any barriers to cross-border collaboration and mobility are addressed. This is not about favouring student flows in one particular direction over another. Indeed, we must respect choice. However, irrespective of where students choose to study, I ask that they consider making their future here in Northern Ireland.

Student mobility to Great Britain is already well established. At present, 30% of Northern Ireland-domiciled students choose to study in Great Britain. By contrast, only 2% choose to study in the Republic of Ireland. Although, of course, we have full devolution over higher education, our local higher education sector is nevertheless embedded in the wider UK higher education system, whether we are talking about the UCAS admissions system or the research councils. Exploring greater co-operation on a North/South basis poses no threat to that situation, so I am disappointed that we have had a polarised debate and have entered into a zero-sum-type discussion, which I do not believe is appropriate.

I recognise the convenience, efficiency and cost benefits that exist in accessing services in either jurisdiction, including access to higher education. I therefore welcome the report into undergraduate mobility that was commissioned by the joint business council of those two well-known subversive bodies, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry. That report examines the obstacles to North/South undergraduate mobility and makes a number of recommendations to increase student mobility in both directions. I believe that it represents an opportunity to explore any factors that restrict students in their choice of institution. Although some factors, such as the higher cost of living in the South, are likely to go beyond the immediate

control of either Department, I will seek to address some of the issues that are of particular relevance to my Department.

Recommendation 1 of the report states that the quality and flow of information about university courses and entry requirements for school leavers in both jurisdictions should be improved. For all students, the selection of an institution and the course to study is critical. It can affect career choice and potential employability. In my Department's recently published higher education strategy, we recognise the importance of the provision of high-quality information for students. Our careers advisers help clients explore the many options that are open to them in higher education and assist them in developing the skills and confidence to choose the career pathway that suits them best.

The Careers Service, in partnership with UCAS, also organises an annual higher education convention in Belfast. This year, exhibitors included representatives from providers throughout the island of Ireland in addition to those from England, Scotland and Wales. In September this year, my Department, in partnership with universities, implemented the key information sets, which provide comparable standardised information about undergraduate courses in higher education institutions, assisting those students to make informed choices.

Also, by 2014, as part of the higher education strategy, we will make relevant higher education information accessible via a single web-based platform. For prospective students from other countries, including the Republic of Ireland, the platform will act as a gateway to higher education in Northern Ireland, with everything that they need to know in one place. Of course, the final decision on institutions to which students should reply rests solely with the individuals concerned.

I now turn to recommendation 4 of the report, which focused on the current student support and registration fee arrangements for students from Northern Ireland who attend universities in the Republic of Ireland. It suggested that action should be taken to end the anomaly identified in the Stuart review, which is that the maximum maintenance grant for Northern Ireland-domiciled undergraduates who study in the Republic of Ireland is lower than the maximum that applies for study elsewhere in the UK.

Members will also recall that we sought views on student support for Northern Ireland-domiciled students in the consultation that my Department held last year on fees and funding arrangements. Therefore, in June of this year, I announced that we would introduce revised arrangements for Northern Ireland students beginning higher education in the Republic of Ireland in the 2013-14 academic year. These changes reflect the recommendations in the Stuart review, the IBEC/CBI report and responses to the public consultation.

The revised arrangements include a loan to cover the full cost of the student contribution charge, a means-tested non-repayable grant for living costs of up to £3,475 and the maximum loan for living costs of up to £4,840. It was inconsistent to continue to provide a grant for Northern Ireland students to cover the student contribution charge in the Republic while students who remain at home or go to Great Britain are expected to cover the cost of their tuition fees, with the majority applying for loans to do so.

In addition to the loan arrangement, our students will have access to an improved maintenance support package that will be the equivalent of that which applies to Northern Ireland-domiciled students at home or elsewhere in the UK. Indeed, the maximum non-repayable maintenance grant will increase by over 70% from £2,000 to £3,475.

Furthermore, a greater number of students will also become eligible for a personal maintenance grant as the upper household income threshold, to which there is an entitlement, will increase from £23,605 to £41,064.

The changes that will be introduced for students entering the system from next September recognise the long-standing special arrangements for students from here who opt to study in the Republic of Ireland. They also provide a more level playing field for all our students, whether they are studying in the UK or the Republic of Ireland.

Undergraduates from the Republic of Ireland, like all European Union students who come to study in Northern Ireland, are entitled to apply for the same non-means-tested loan of up to £3,465 that is available to Northern Ireland-domiciled students to cover the cost of their tuition fees. This arrangement complies with European Union legislation and, indeed, is required under that legislation. The responsibility for providing finance to Republic of Ireland-domiciled students to assist with their living costs rests with the Irish Government.

As these reforms faithfully fulfil a recommendation of the IBEC/CBI report, I was somewhat bewildered, indeed wounded, when some of those who tabled the motion attacked me and accused me of undermining the Good Friday Agreement when I was doing no more than implementing that which they are calling on me to do today.

Some unionist Members commented on — indeed, condemned — students from Northern Ireland exploiting a loophole in the Scottish arrangements by using Irish passports. It may be of interest to note that I have received correspondence from a large number of MLAs from both the main unionist parties seeking advice and assistance in that regard. So what they say publicly does not necessarily tally with what they do privately.

Mr Anderson: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Farry: Go ahead.

Mr Anderson: I take on board what the Minister is saying, but the fact is that there is an anomaly. Why should there be that discrepancy, with students having to go down the line of obtaining an Irish passport to get a free grant?

Dr Farry: The reason for the anomaly is the different fee regimes in different parts of the UK. That is an outworking of devolution and primarily an issue for the Scottish Government to address. They have made some announcements on the subject in the past number of weeks, and time will tell whether those stand up to scrutiny.

Comments were made about the cost to Northern Ireland of students coming from the Republic of Ireland, as they do in the current system. The figure of £11.5 million was cited. Of course, that figure includes costs related to further education. Today, we are talking about undergraduates, and those costs are in the region of £5 million. They are subject to discussion with my Republic of Ireland counterpart. I will raise the issue again on the margins of the forthcoming North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

Mr Kinahan commented on how terrible it was that students have to take on debt as they go through university. I remind him that his party questioned the decision that the Executive and I took to freeze tuition fees in Northern Ireland. Had we not gone down that route, students here would be faced with even more debt, so I did not quite grasp the logic of his point.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much for giving way. The point that I was trying to make is that many people are afraid of taking on debt and that we need to help them. I was not opposing the loan system.

Dr Farry: Everyone in Northern Ireland, particularly our young people and students, can rest assured that the Executive have done everything in their power to ensure that local students can go through university accruing the minimum of debt. They can also rest assured that we are working hard to ensure that we widen access and that people from more difficult and deprived backgrounds have an equal opportunity, subject, of course, to their academic ability to undertake courses. It is all about fairness, and we are working very hard to achieve that.

I will turn briefly to some of the other recommendations. The sixth recommendation is that the IUA and CCEA working group, which is examining the equivalences between A level and leaving certificate examination grades for Northern Ireland school leavers applying to Southern universities, make its report available to Irish university presidents. It also recommends that the working group prepare options for change to the Central Applications Office (CAO) system to ensure that the most equitable system of equivalences possible is incorporated into a reformed CAO system.

I am aware of the issues surrounding A Level and leaving certificate equivalences and of the decision by some universities in the Republic to require four A levels at the highest grade — now A* — for courses for which there is high demand, such as medicine and law. Both my colleague the Minister of Education, John O'Dowd, and I have raised that issue with the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn. It is the basis of ongoing discussions between CCEA and the Irish Universities Association. The Department of Education awaits a report from the IUA and CCEA on admissions criteria for students from Northern Ireland wishing to study in the Republic, and vice versa.

The report's ninth recommendation is that a study be commissioned by the Irish Department of Education and Skills and my Department. This should examine the implications for higher education on the island of the fall in the number of 18-year-olds in the North and the higher birth rate in the South, which has fed into higher demand for education places. It also recommends that we re-examine the recommendations of the Williams report of 1985.

That report suggested that demand for higher education places was set to fall in Northern Ireland, while demographic pressures would lead to a rise in demand in the Republic. The report suggested that it would be cheaper for the Irish Government to pay for its students to fill the spare capacity in Northern institutions than fund additional places in the South.

In the higher education strategy, the Department recognises the projected changing demographic of the student population in Northern Ireland and the need for the sector to respond to the changing market. Of course,

that may all change as we see the impact of differential fees across the UK. If, as expected, that results in greater numbers of local students wanting to remain in Northern Ireland to study rather than go to Great Britain, it may offset the demographic changes. So, I will monitor that situation and review it in the light of the changing situation.

I fear that we are running out of time. Hopefully, I have shown that we are taking the recommendations of the report very seriously. We are talking about important matters, and in no way, shape or form do they threaten the situation in Northern Ireland. People should see co-operation as a bonus that maximises choice for our local students.

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Phil Flanagan to conclude and wind up the debate.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will try not to wind people up too much, because there has already been too much political posturing in the debate. A number of themes were running through the debate. It is great to see that the Chairperson of the Education Committee has come in to join us so that he can laugh and snigger for the next 10 minutes as I try to make some —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will happily give way, Mervyn.

Mr Storey: It is rich for the Member, having listened to the speeches from his colleagues, to talk about political posturing. The motion was brought to the House for that very reason, so he is not in any place to give lectures to any other Members.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. It might not have been that useful, but I genuinely thank him for it.

The motion has been brought to the House due to the publication of a report that was jointly commissioned by the Confederation for British Industry and IBEC. It is very ironic that, two days in a row, DUP Members are going to vote against a paper produced by the Confederation for British Industry while Sinn Féin is going to support it. However, that is where we are.

Members have claimed that this is not the right forum for the debate. Where is the right forum? For most of the debate, we have had two Members of the DUP sitting on the Benches opposite. In fairness to David Hilditch, it is clear that he has read the report, and he highlighted a number of the recommendations in it, but it is quite clear that the other two contributors from the DUP have not read the report. Had they bothered to read the report, they would have seen that at least four of the nine recommendations fall under the responsibility of Stephen Farry or John O'Dowd. So, it is a very relevant debate to this Chamber, and it is a very important issue for our young people who may wish to go to university and cannot go to Britain due to the excessive student fees over there.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. We were talking about the specific issues that Mr McElduff raised in his contribution and whether they would be best debated in this Chamber or in the Chamber South of the border.

Mr Flanagan: Perhaps the Member will read Hansard and see that the issues that Mr McElduff raised came from either the recommendations of the report and its substantive content or were brought to him by his constituents in West Tyrone.

It is very clear that the people in the DUP are not here to listen to the debate; they have not read the report. However, the DUP has signed up to co-operation across the border on this island where it is of mutual benefit. Members have spoken about people burying their heads in the sand. That reference was to universities, but it is very clear that there are some in this House who have buried their head in the sand on this issue. One of the DUP Members said that one of the reasons why the party did not support the motion was that it focused solely on North/South issues and did not focus on east-west issues. It does not focus on east-west issues, because a report has not been published on the east-west issue with nine very straightforward recommendations for us to take on board. If someone were to draft a sensible report and outline recommendations to remedy the problems faced by students here or on the island of Ireland who cannot get into universities in Britain or vice versa, we would happily take that on board and debate it. For people to state that Leinster House is the place to debate this motion is very strange, given that nearly half the recommendations in the report come under the responsibility of Ministers in the Executive.

Three themes ran through the debate. The first was about whether this was the proper forum, and that is the reason for the DUP's opposing the motion. The second theme was about costs, and I am happy to take an intervention from any Member who can outline to me what the cost would be for a careers teacher to provide a student who wishes to go to a university, a college or a institute of further education in the South with the proper information about admissions criteria, the courses that are on offer and what the different criteria are down there. I am happy to take an intervention if somebody can outline to me how that would cost any extra money. Thirdly, many Members raised the issue of mobility with Britain, but, once again, they have completely set aside the argument that tuition fees in Britain are nearly three times the price that they are here. Some Members used the opportunity to say that it is discriminatory that people with a European passport can get easy access to a Scottish university. The Minister highlighted how some unionist MLAs were happy to exploit that loophole in the system when it was open to them.

There are nine recommendations in the report. The most straightforward one and the one on which I have most experience is about the quality and lack of information for students either in the North or the South who want to go to an institute of further or higher education on the other side of the border. When I was in school and wanted information about going to the University of Ulster or Queen's, I was given a prospectus, and the school knew all about the different colleges and schools at those universities. However, when the potential to go to study commerce at the National University of Ireland in Galway was presented, I was told that I may go on to its website to check that. That is the situation in most places, despite the fact that a great breadth of courses is available across the island of Ireland that are very suitable to what the Enterprise Minister, the Minister for Employment and Learning and the other Executive Ministers are trying to

do in upskilling and in growing the economy. It seems that we have no interest in attracting people from the South or in trying to get students in the North to do a good degree there.

Some Members completely failed to realise a point, and Mr Allister walked straight into highlighting the figure that 1,500 people from the South go to university in Derry while only 50 people from Britain go there. Does Mr Allister realise that there is a big stretch of water between Ireland and Britain and that it is much easier for a young person from Donegal to go to university in Derry than it is for someone from Britain to travel the whole way over here to go to Derry? Such stupid points really let everybody down in here.

There are serious problems with how young people can apply for university courses either in the North or the South. If someone who lives in the North wants to apply for a university in Belfast, Coleraine or Derry and in, say, Nottingham or London, there is one simple application process. You have your six choices through UCAS. However, if somebody wants to apply for a single course in Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Dundalk or any other part of the island, they have to go through CAO, which is a completely separate applications process. That means having to make a payment in euros, and that often means having to get a euro bank draft, which means having to go to a bank in the South. All those simple barriers can be overcome. There is no additional cost if that process can be simplified. The big issue, which can be resolved if there is a bit of goodwill from those in the industry and those providing careers advice, is to give young people who are interested in courses and universities in the South the opportunity and all the relevant information.

David Hilditch raised the issue of the historical situation here, and I am not sure what point he was trying to make. He mentioned history, as did other Members. Most of the universities on this island predate partition. There is a long history of people from this part of the island going to the South. Many proud Ulster men — proud British men — went to Dublin to go to university. Edward Carson, whose statue outside we have just spent £45,000 cleaning, went to Trinity and played hurling, and a fine hurler he was. There is a very proud history of doing that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Flanagan: — so why are unionist politicians now so opposed to it?

UUP Members said that they are much more ambivalent about the motion and that they have some sympathy for those affected. I have still not seen how they will vote, so I will watch that with interest. Jim Allister used a lot of big and important-sounding words, and fair play to him for that. He laboured heavily on the differential between the number of students from Britain and those from the North who attend Magee and Jordanstown. That is just senseless.

Stephen Farry stood up as Minister for Employment and Learning and pointed out how he and John O'Dowd were responsible for an awful lot of issues, and really outlined to unionists that this is a matter for Ministers here. Unionists' only argument is that this is not a matter for the Assembly and not something that we should be debating. They will vote against it, even though they have completely bought into the notion that, where co-operation creates mutual

benefit for everybody on the island, they will support it. You can clearly see that they have reverted to type and buried their heads in the sand. They are playing politics.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 52; Noes 28.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Flanagan and Mr McElduff

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Anderson and Mr Buchanan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-border Undergraduate Education' (May 2011) based on research by the European Employment Services Cross-border Partnership at the request of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry Joint Business Council; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to remove the barriers which limit student flows within the island of Ireland.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. —

[Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Hillsborough: Traffic Issues

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members will have approximately eight minutes.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to raise this very long-standing and serious issue. I thank the Members who have remained in the Chamber to speak on the subject. I also welcome some of the residents from Hillsborough, Culcavy and Halftown who have joined us today in the Public Gallery.

Many Members will be aware, either through the local press or issues debated in the Chamber over the past five years, that Hillsborough village and the surrounding townlands have become what is best described as a rat run. The debate on how best to protect the village and residential life while ensuring that traffic disruption is minimal has been rumbling on since 2007 with no solution and no resolution for villagers and residents alike. Life in these areas can be adequately summed up by one resident, who stated:

“My life has become a living hell. I am scared to walk into the village to go about my normal business, and I am woken every morning by the rattling of oversized lorries bouncing off the roads as my house shakes violently.”

Unfortunately, that reflects the experiences of most families who live in Hillsborough village.

Many residents have raised the issue, persistently lobbied elected officials and even protested. However, it is important to stress that the issue has never satisfactorily been addressed. A number of problems set out the context of and highlight the need for this debate. There are also a number of easy solutions that would cost very little and that would ensure protection and safety throughout the Hillsborough area. First, motorists who travel at peak times are using the new Hillsborough bypass to access the village to avoid queuing at the Hillsborough and Sprucefield roundabouts. The introduction of the new bypass in 2009, although welcomed by most commuters and motorists, has dramatically added to the traffic burden that the village faces. Having met representatives from the Roads Service in February 2012, I was shocked to discover that the new bypass has led to hundreds more vehicles coming through the village, especially at peak travelling times. That means that there has been an actual vehicle increase of 124%. In essence, an initiative that was designed to take traffic away from the village of Hillsborough has become a catalyst for attracting additional vehicular activity.

Secondly, the ever-increasing amount of large heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) has given many reasons for concern. Approximately 500 lorries a day use the village,

the Culcavy Road and the Halftown Road to shorten their journeys to avoid queuing on the main A1 dual carriageway. That is a staggering number. Villagers and residents have become anxious for their safety and that of their families, and they fear taking their cars along some of the smaller network roads.

Hillsborough village and the surrounding rural road network were never designed for 12- and 16-wheeled articulated HGVs. The streets and roads that those lorries use to quicken their journey times are barely wide enough for two cars to pass, never mind large HGVs. In fact, they were designed for the Georgian mode of transport. Those HGVs are also causing major issues for road traffic and pedestrian safety. The Minister witnessed that at first hand when I invited him in June this year to visit the village to view the problems for himself.

The damage that the additional traffic and the large HGV lorries are causing to the areas of conservation and the natural built heritage is another major concern for the village. In 1974, Hillsborough village was developed as one of the four pilot schemes for European architectural heritage status, and much work and public funding were allocated to refurbish and protect large plots of Georgian buildings and architecture. In 1976, the then Department of the Environment, under article 37 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, designated Hillsborough village and the surrounding forest as a conservation area. Having witnessed architectural damage and seen reports into building foundations, I know that it will come as no surprise that the external architect consultants believe that the additional traffic, coupled with the large HGV lorries, have been largely to blame for causing damage to the built heritage, which I will say again is listed to be protected.

In selling the village as a visitor attraction to tourists, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has also stressed that the built Georgian heritage in the village is recognised as a promotional attribute. In Lagan Valley, we are lucky to have 200 listed buildings, and 100 of those are in Hillsborough. The village contributes much to the local economy, with its pubs, restaurants, coffee shops, bakeries and butchers etc. So, if it were safe to cross the road, how much more could it contribute?

I wrote recently to His Royal Highness Prince Charles to ask for advice on how best to manage the traffic issue, using the village of Poundbury in Dorset as an example of best practice. Indeed, when Hillsborough Castle is being used for royal visits, the HGVs do not come through the village. They go about their daily business on the fit-for-purpose roads that surround the Hillsborough area — the A1, the M1, the A29 and the A49. Their life goes on, and the villagers welcome the brief respite. It is indeed damning that a solution has not yet been found to ensure that areas of conservation and built heritage are not damaged further due to the additional traffic and pollution that are now entering the village.

4.30 pm

Finally, there are issues based around public health and the quality of life for people living in the village and the surrounding areas. People should not be in fear of walking through their village, taking their children to school or shopping locally. They should not be in fear of being knocked down by heavy goods vehicles mounting the pavement, which they do daily, or of crossing the road, due

to the volume of the traffic. There are no pelican crossings, 20 miles per hour zones, speed limits or ramps in Hillsborough, and, indeed, no traffic-calming measure has been trialled or introduced, but we are constantly having to complete traffic survey forms. Why is that? People are being woken daily due to the noise caused by lorries, with the very foundations of their house shaking constantly, day and night.

To date, I have raised the issues regarding roads and traffic movements with the Minister, Mr Kennedy, through various meetings, correspondence and questions. The issues facing the conservation areas, the built heritage and quality of life have also been raised with the Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood.

What are the solutions? There are similar cases around the UK. For instance, Alderley Edge, Yate and a number of villages in the Cotswolds have successfully banned heavy goods vehicles from using their village as a bypass to other routes. Weight restrictions and additional signage for heavy goods vehicles, which are not on village deliveries, are forced to stick to major roads on the outskirts of the village. Councillor Nigel Schofield of Alderley Edge council said that, while a weight restriction might be difficult to enforce, they needed to "villagise" Alderley again, turn it back to what it was and return some safety and sanity into the area. The current situation in Hillsborough is unsafe, and I am sure that most people would go so far as to say that it is insane.

There are major roads surrounding Hillsborough that are specifically designed for extra vehicular traffic and the large heavy goods vehicles. Those roads do not damage the conservation area or the built heritage, and they prevent traffic and heavy goods vehicles from causing jams in the village, due to their size and capacity. Above all, they protect and allow the villagers to go about their daily life in a peaceful and safe manner. All I ask is that measures are put in place to ensure that those HGVs, which should be using the main roads, do so and do not cut through rural villages and use minor roads just to reduce their travelling time by five minutes.

It would be hugely beneficial if a weight restriction was twinned with a 20 miles per hour speed limit in order to protect villagers crossing the roads in their village. We need to ensure that any planned changes with regard to road markings and the introduction of signals to the Hillsborough roundabout do not inhibit village life further and prevent residents from exiting their property during peak flow, as was the result with the new flyover. Any solutions must be trialled before permanent implementation, thus reducing the risk of exacerbating the traffic problems even further. I also ask the Minister to highlight what budget has been allocated to build the Knockmore and Sprucefield feeder roads to the Maze site, guaranteeing that additional traffic and lorries do not have to use the village and the Culcavy and Halftown roads to get access.

It is my hope, and the hope of my constituents, that a long-term solution can be found to this very important issue; that village and residential life can return to normal; that residents will feel safe to return to work, live and shop in the village; that people will be able to sleep at night, free from the nuisance of lorries; and that the conservation area and built heritage can be given the added protection that it desperately needs. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy

Speaker, for allowing me to raise the issues in the Chamber, and I thank the Minister.

Mr Lunn: I can only agree with a great deal of what Mrs Hale said, and I congratulate her on bringing the issue to the House today. Some of us of a certain age can remember the days when Hillsborough did not even have a bypass. I hate to think what it would be like now, if the biggest bypass in Northern Ireland had not been built.

Even though there have been fairly recent improvements, it is a fact that they have had the effect of driving traffic through the village, exactly as Brenda said. Mrs Hale kept going back to the same point that it is to do with HGVs coming through the village as an alternative to using the main road. When you think about it, you will realise that the only real through road through Hillsborough is from the carriageway towards Ballynahinch. Everything else is being used as an alternative to the road that people should be using, so I am in complete agreement with what was said.

Furthermore, Hillsborough is a conservation area. It is one of the most beautiful villages in Northern Ireland, if not the most beautiful, although Broughshane might disagree. Hillsborough is a lovely place, and it should be a safe place. I do not think that Brenda mentioned that it has a very steep hill down the main street. I can remember the days when people were in fear of their lives crossing that road because of the steepness of the hill, the inadequacy of people's brakes and, perhaps, a wee bit of frost. I hope those days are gone.

To me, the solutions, to which Brenda referred, are pretty simple. The introduction of a weight limit, except for collection and delivery, is an obvious one, and I hope that the Minister will say that he is prepared to consider that or have a pretty good reason why he will not. Also, the possibility of pedestrian crossings has long been mooted around Hillsborough. Fellow councillors are here, and they will know that the matter has been raised at Lisburn council for donkey's years, but nothing ever seems to be done. The only real local congestion is around the primary school at certain times of the day. The area gets a bit frenetic, but that is what you would expect in a busy, thriving population area with a busy, thriving school.

We always come back to the weight limit. It intrigues me that, when royalty comes to Hillsborough, suddenly, we can ban HGVs and most other vehicles from the village centre, and it works OK. I live on a road on the other side of Lisburn, which has a five-ton weight limit. I regularly see that limit being flouted, mainly because nobody living in Whinney Hill can be bothered to report the vehicles using it as a shortcut. Also, it has a very steep hill, and, sooner or later, there will be some serious problems there. However, in a conservation area such as Hillsborough, there would certainly be enough, dare I say, vigilantes to make sure that, if lorries transgressed a weight limit, they would soon be reported for having done so and probably photographed, which is the way to deal with it. Roads Service loves to get that sort of information.

I agree with the thrust of what Mrs Hale said, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister in due course.

Mr Craig: I declare an interest as a resident of Hillsborough. I will put the issue in context: we are referring to a small rural village. Hillsborough has not changed in the 45-odd years that I have lived there, despite numerous housing developments. Like Trevor, I

am one of those who can remember the days before the A1 bypass — some Members here cannot remember that far back, but I can. I recall quite clearly that, in those days, there was total gridlock in the village for between four and five hours a day. Then, the biggest issue for the village was large articulated lorries travelling through its small, narrow, Georgian streets. In the winter, they came down a very dangerous hill. The entire village was gridlocked for four or five hours every day, other than Saturdays and Sundays. We all lived with that when I was going to school. I remember standing waiting for a bus that was late every morning because of the gridlock. I cannot remember worrying about that as a youngster, but that is where we were 30 years ago. Unfortunately, Minister, almost 30 years later, we find that we have reverted to that situation. I do not think that anyone envisaged this happening, or planned it, but, today, we are almost back to the same gridlock.

As Mrs Hale stated, the problem goes back to 2009. When the flyover was developed at the Dromore end of the village, everyone thought that it was a huge step forward because there had been many serious accidents at that junction. In fact, lives had been lost, and it was thought that the flyover would stop serious road accidents. None of us envisaged that, a few years later, we would find that people who travel from the Dromore/Newry end of the A1 are actually using that same flyover to take a shortcut through the village to the roundabout at the Lisburn end. Everyone thought that the roundabout at the bottom end of the village was working. Unfortunately, the reality seems to be that at peak traffic hours the roundabout at the Lisburn end of the village becomes gridlocked. Traffic backs up very heavily towards the Dromore end of the A1. That is what tempts people to go through the village itself. Unfortunately, that takes us back 30 years to the gridlock that I remember as a young man standing waiting for the bus to Dromore High School.

That is the unfortunate situation in which the village now finds itself. We must do something about it. The very same things that I witnessed 30 years ago are now happening again in the village of Hillsborough. Not only are cars there, but lorries are coming back. Lorry drivers are being tempted to use the shortcut as well, and they are doing so. Not only are they using it at that end, they are using the Culcavy Road as a shortcut to the A1 as well. That is causing major gridlock at that end of the village as well. All of that has brought us back 30 years.

When it was planning improvements to roads around Lisburn, Roads Service could never have envisaged that situation. Therefore, I appeal to the Minister to take a look at the roundabout and find some way to release the gridlock there at peak hours to try to get traffic moving again in the village and to stop people being tempted to use Hillsborough as a shortcut to the roundabout. I appeal to the Minister to look at the serious issue of the use of heavy vehicles, especially on the Culcavy Road. Quite frankly, that road is not designed to take heavy traffic. It is causing damage to properties on that road. We need to look for a solution to that. I suggest to the Minister that, if we are looking at roads improvement around the development of the Maze and other major developments on that site, we need to look at something that will take heavy industrial traffic away from the Culcavy Road.

I welcome this topic being brought to the Assembly. I welcome the fact that we are talking about the place where I was brought up. However, I am afraid, Minister, that despite all the good work that the Department has done, we find ourselves in a situation where, traffic-wise, Hillsborough has reverted to where it was 30 years ago. That is not acceptable.

Mr Givan: I commend my colleague Brenda Hale for bringing forward the Adjournment topic this afternoon. It is timely that we discuss the issue of traffic in Hillsborough. Other areas of Lisburn have traffic problems. However, traffic has been a considerable and acute problem in Hillsborough for a long time. Indeed, problems have been exacerbated by measures that we thought would have alleviated them and have proven not to do so. The Minister is aware of that. Therefore, I will not repeat everything that my colleagues have said. I just want to elaborate on some points.

Mr Lunn commented on the primary school. It is worth noting that Hillsborough is a vibrant village. Downshire Primary School is one of the largest in the Lisburn area. There is a park in the centre of Hillsborough. There is Hillsborough forest park and the tennis club. Large volumes of young people, in particular, are in the village. It is widely used. Anyone who goes through the village will know the degree of pedestrian use in it, coupled with the traffic congestion that exists. Therefore, a public safety aspect to all of this is of concern to many people. Given the amount of traffic that goes through the village, there is genuine fear that we could be talking about people being injured, or worse, in the village if the issue is not dealt with properly.

4.45 pm

Colleagues indicated the need for work around the Maze development site. That will have an impact because the Maze site is a key area on the island of Ireland and the amount of traffic coming up from the Newry end of the dual carriageway to that site will be immense. Unless we have proper traffic infrastructure in place to deal with the amount of traffic that will be generated by that site, the situation at Hillsborough will get worse. Therefore, there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that the area at the Halftown Road and Culcavy Road is not the main entrance point for the Maze site as it currently is. That needs to be accessed directly from the M1 and that will require considerable investment. Otherwise, traffic congestion will get worse in that area and the residents will be negatively impacted, and we all want to avoid that.

The residents have been very vocal in all this, and rightly so. They have articulated different ideas and solutions, so it is important that the residents are properly consulted and their ideas properly harnessed. If we need to think outside the box to come up with ways to try to deal with this issue, residents and public representatives will have a key role.

The Sprucefield junction is impacted by the Knockmore Road and Sprucefield link roads, which have been discussed for many a year. That, again, needs to be addressed. I am taking a degree of liberty in expanding the discussion a little bit from Hillsborough to mention those roads because it all feeds in to how that overall junction at Sprucefield on the Hillsborough A1 dual carriageway roundabout and the flyover are managed. You have to look at that in a holistic approach, and it is important that the

Knockmore/Sprucefield link road comes on stream so that we have a properly functioning infrastructure scheme in place to deal with the traffic impact on Hillsborough and the wider Lisburn area.

Mr B McCrea: I apologise to colleagues for my delay in getting here. I had to deal with Committee business. I suppose that I need to start by genuinely declaring an interest in that I am a resident of Hillsborough, just off the Culcavy Road, so there is a real interest there for me.

I have been involved in a number of attempts to deal with the amount of heavy traffic that travels up and down the road. The amount of traffic has increased significantly over the years, largely due to a change of use of one of the facilities nearby. It was not a change of use in planning terms but just a change of use from what it was used for beforehand. So, we get an awful lot of industrial traffic along the Culcavy Road through Hillsborough, some of it heading to the South and the A1. For many residents in proximity to that road it really is quite intolerable. People have become quite exercised about the fact that there appears to be nothing that they can do about it, certainly retrospectively.

The solution seems to be, as Mr Givan indicated, that we really could do with some investment in link roads, a proper junction when the Maze is developed or some other construction to take away the load that is there. I suppose that I should thank my colleague, the Minister for Regional Development, because we recently had the road resurfaced. However, that does not do justice to the particular issue.

What I am interested to hear from the Minister is whether there is any prospect of significant development in and around that busiest of junctions and to see what is possible. We are all aware of the constraints that he operates under in terms of the financial circumstances facing us all, so it will be interesting to see whether there is any light at the end of the tunnel.

Hillsborough is one of the most historical and attractive villages in Northern Ireland. It seems a shame that we cannot find a way of building it as a tourism and economic opportunity for people in the area by dealing with the blight of heavy traffic moving through it. On that point, I will take my leave.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond. I am also grateful to the Member for bringing forward this important issue. The attendance at this Adjournment debate is higher than usual; Members have come from Upper Bann, South Antrim and East Londonderry. If you do not already claim to live in or near Hillsborough, you are not really at it.

I note all of the comments expressed by Members. I am very familiar with many if not all of the concerns raised by local residents and public representatives. I have not only met residents and elected representatives on a number of occasions; I, as Members will know, regularly travel the A1 route, and, of course, I have been in Hillsborough with the sponsor of the topic to see for myself how these issues impact on the local community on a daily basis. As Minister, I want to see improvements across our road network to reduce journey times and support the economy. However, it is sometimes difficult to strike a balance between the needs of road users and the wishes of local communities.

Members will be aware that Hillsborough lies close to the A1 and the M1. There is a high level of passing traffic and local traffic that wishes to access or leave those roads. Perhaps the most pressing issue relates to northbound traffic on the A1 at the Hillsborough roundabout during the morning peak period. Traffic approaching the roundabout from the Newry and Banbridge direction and travelling towards Sprucefield experiences delays on occasion, and some queuing occurs. Some traffic, in an attempt to bypass that, leaves the A1 at the preceding Dromore Road junction to the south of the village, travels through the village and rejoins the A1 to the north at the roundabout. This raises other issues, such as the ability of road junctions in the village to cope with the additional traffic and the potential impact that the additional traffic could have on road safety and on the environment.

I fully appreciate the quite understandable concerns raised by residents and Members in that regard. Officials in Roads Service have looked at a number of options to improve the traffic capacity of the Hillsborough roundabout to reduce delays and thereby encourage strategic or through-traffic not to divert off the A1 and travel through the village.

Detailed assessments confirmed that a free-flow lane, similar to one that is provided at the A1/A101 Sprucefield roundabout, is not suitable at this location due to the presence of a number of road junctions and private accesses in the vicinity of the roundabout. Roads Service experts believe that the situation could be improved noticeably in the short term by the installation of traffic signals at the roundabout to minimise delays in the morning peak.

A scheme to provide part-time traffic signal control was designed and funding was set aside for its construction towards the end of the previous financial year. Regrettably, initial informal consultation indicated that there was limited support for the scheme among the various representatives, so it did not proceed at that time. However, my door remains very much open. My officials were led to believe that the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson MP was planning to arrange a meeting of local representatives to discuss the proposal further. In an attempt to move things on, and in the spirit of assistance, I intend to convene a meeting of local representatives to hammer out some consensus on the way forward.

Longer-term plans include the grade separation of the junction as part of the M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass proposals. The regional development strategy identifies the M1/A1 as one of the five key transport corridors, part of the eastern seaboard corridor that runs from Larne to Belfast and on across the border to Dublin. The Belfast metropolitan transport plan also recognises the strategic significance of that route. The proposed scheme, which is included in the strategic road improvement programme, will provide a high-standard link between the M1 motorway and the A1 and address delays in the Sprucefield area.

Roads Service has commissioned consultants to consider a range of options and an evaluation of all the viable options for capacity enhancement along the route. The first stage of that work has been completed and the findings published in a stage 1 report, which determined route corridors within which further options will be examined. The focus of the strategic road improvement programme during the current Budget period to 2015 is on delivering

the A8, the A5 and the A2. Therefore, progression of the M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass proposals beyond that period will be subject to available funding.

In terms of the village itself, and congestion within the village centre at road junctions, such as, as Mr Givan said, around Downshire Primary School at the junction of the Ballynahinch Road and the Carnreagh Road, I am aware that there can be congestion around that junction, which is related to parents parking close to the school premises at start and finish times. Road Service officials are not aware of any particular persistent problem associated with the inability of large vehicles to negotiate that junction. The existing island at the junction benefits —

Mrs Hale: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: I cannot; I have to make progress.

The existing island at the junction benefits pedestrians, including those walking to and from the nearby school, and its removal or reduction in size would be undesirable from their perspective. Under my Department's safer routes to school programme, Roads Service has recently erected flashing signs on each approach to the school. The provision of additional car parking spaces at the school is more a matter for education authorities to consider.

Mr Lunn and others raised the issue of a possible weight restriction, in an attempt to minimise any risk of damage to buildings by vibrations caused by heavy goods vehicles. It may be understandable that people are and feel concerned in that regard. However, research has shown that traffic-borne vibrations do not cause damage to otherwise structurally sound buildings. Weight restrictions are generally implemented where a road, or a structure under it, is being damaged by heavy vehicles. At this point, that has not proved to be the case in Hillsborough.

I have heard the concerns about increased traffic use, particular heavy goods vehicle traffic, which is not confined to the centre of the village but occurs on a number of connecting roads, such as Culcavy Road and Halftown Road. I recognise the representations that have been made by locally elected representatives to seek a reduction in the number of HGVs that use those roads. Roads Service does not consider that the number of HGVs that use those roads is unusually high compared with other, similar roads. However, that is not to ignore the concerns that many have expressed. We have received requests to provide traffic-calming measures on the Culcavy Road, and officials are considering the results of a residents' survey on proposals for such measures within the existing 30 mph speed limit.

I want to assure Members that Roads Service is aware of the issues of concern among the residents of Hillsborough and their elected representatives, and that it is working hard to address those concerns in respect of the current issues and future developments in and around the village. Going forward, I am hopeful that many of the issues will be resolved through the M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass proposals, although those are still some time away.

I think that it is important that Members re-engage with officials and local residents — indeed, I encourage it — in order to consider further the merits of my Department's proposal to install traffic signals at the existing roundabout on the A1, even as part of the pilot scheme. I hope that, by working together, we can move things forward. I look forward to the ongoing representations from, and the co-operation of, elected Members on this issue.

Adjourned at 5.00 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Environment

Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme

Published at 12.00 noon on Monday 15 October 2012

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): In 2008 the Executive approved a strategic waste infrastructure programme at local government level. This programme recognised the challenge facing councils in meeting new landfill diversion targets through to 2020 and the requirements of the European Union. In addition, the environment around and understanding of the waste hierarchy was developing.

In support of this programme the Executive agreed and DOE has provided funding on behalf of the Executive to meet pre-procurement costs incurred by the three Waste Management Groups in taking forward the procurement of new waste infrastructure. (The Waste Management Groups are arc21, SWaMP2008 and the North West Regional Waste Management Group. "arc 21" comprises eleven councils in the eastern region; the Southern Waste Management Partnership "SWaMP 2008" comprises eight councils in the southern and western region; and the "North West Regional Waste Management Group" comprises seven councils in the north and west region). These three regional groupings reflect the preferred delivery model adopted by the councils to meet their statutory waste management obligations when this matter was being decided a number of years ago.

I am providing this statement to advise Members that the Southern Waste Management Partnership (SWaMP) is announcing today that it is to terminate its procurement of a long term waste treatment contract. This contract was intended to provide waste management services in the south west region, to reduce the use of landfill for domestic waste and support increased recycling. The procurement has recently been the subject of a legal challenge. SWaMP has concluded that in light of a number of factors, including expense, their legal advice and the subsequent uncertainty associated with mounting a legal defence to that challenge, it could not justify committing public funds to such a defence. The Joint Committee of SWaMP's constituent councils has therefore decided to terminate the procurement. I also wish to confirm that the total amount of pre-procurement financial support provided by my Department to the SWaMP partnership since 2008 has been some £3.1 million. The total amount provided to date to the three waste procurement groups has been £9.2 million.

Today's outcome arises from a legal challenge. However, this development and my general view on the waste procurement strategy, demonstrates the need for tight monitoring and vigilance on procurement projects, the risks inherent in such projects (including legal challenge), the need to challenge and be seen to be challenging in relation to the contracts (in relation to affordability and deliverability) and to deploy best practice and best oversight in relation to these procurements.

Monitoring and vigilance have been central to my approach over the last 18 months. I have therefore been taking appropriate actions to subject the three waste management procurements to rigorous scrutiny and review to ensure that they continue to offer a reasonable prospect of achieving their stated procurement objectives. It was and remains my wider view that there is a need to create certainty and avoid doubt in relation to waste procurement and in relation to each of the three procurement groups. Moreover I am also committed to ensuring that the cost of these procurement exercises to the public purse, to councils and to ratepayers, remains proportionate, value for money and transparent.

When I became Minister of the Environment, one of my early acts was to review the progress made by the three Waste Management Groups. I have met with each of them individually to seek clarity from them about the deliverability and affordability of their proposed solutions for meeting their councils' landfill diversion responsibilities. I have set firm milestones by which I expect them to reach key stages in the delivery of their contracts. I have linked the release of funding to the achievement of those milestones, and I have made clear that my Department's commitment to providing financial support for the procurement exercises is not open ended, and in any event will not extend beyond the end of the present financial year.

At the same time, I have undertaken a root and branch review of the overall scale of the planned waste infrastructure procurement in Northern Ireland. Major waste infrastructure procurements can take upwards of three years to reach a point where decisions can be taken on their viability. That said, Members will know that in the period since the Programme was approved by the Executive in 2008, a number of factors have impacted on overall waste infrastructure requirements in the North, notably increases in recycling, the success of waste prevention measures and the overall economic downturn, all meaning that less waste is produced.

Indeed, a recent analysis of 2020 Residual Waste Infrastructure Requirements that I commissioned confirms that less new infrastructure is now required to provide

the assurance that we in the North will be able to make a proportionate contribution to meeting EU waste diversion targets by 2020.

We are now entering a critical phase in the Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme. As I said earlier there is a need for certainty and avoidance of doubt. I have been determined that the procurement exercise measures up to the need for affordability and deliverability and does so with full regard to the current and emerging waste environment. In the coming weeks, my focus will be to subject the remaining two procurement exercises being undertaken by councils to robust and ongoing scrutiny to ensure that waste procurement is modelled to serve needs of the councils in the North, to do so in a way that is fully compliant with European obligations, is affordable, is deliverable and is the necessary and best option for our waste requirements.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Delivering Social Change Signature Projects

Published at 9.30 am on Wednesday 10 October 2012

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): We are pleased today to announce 6 significant signature programmes under the Delivering Social Change delivery framework which are designed to tackle multi-generational poverty and to improve children's health, wellbeing, educational and life opportunities. This is about investing in early interventions which can assist everyone to reach their full potential and which can support a strong society and economy.

In our commitment to deliver social change where it is most needed, we have identified a number of key challenges that are contributing to the continuation of poverty and deprivation. These include problems with literacy and numeracy; the need for parenting support and early development intervention for children, and lack of employment opportunities coupled with local community dereliction. Addressing these severe, long term and structural problems will require a partnership across society including people and communities, businesses and wider civic society. However, we are determined that the Executive will play the best possible role in stimulating change.

Delivering Social Change is about actions. When we announced the Programme for Government, we stressed the need to deliver real improvements which people can see and feel on the ground. These six signature programmes represent the first concrete step in pursuing this aim. They are:

- Department of Education (DE) to undertake additional literacy and numeracy measures. An additional 230 recent graduate teachers, who are not currently in permanent work, will be employed on a 2 year fixed term contract to deliver one to one tuition, where appropriate, for children in primary and post primary schools who are currently struggling to achieve even basic educational standards. Each teacher will work with a number of schools to deliver a minimum of 25 one to one tuition sessions, where appropriate, every week. 80 teachers will be employed to support basic reading and maths skills at Key Stage 2 in primary schools. 150 teachers will be engaged with post-primary schools to support pupils in year 4 and 5 in attaining a minimum of a C in GCSE English and Maths, where the school feels this is not likely without intervention. The impact of this initiative will be measured over the course of the next 2 years. Recruitment will start as soon as possible and teachers should be in place very early in the new year.

- Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to take forward the establishment of 10 Family Support Hubs over the next 2 years. These are coalitions of community and voluntary organisations and agencies which provide early intervention services for children and young people locally in order to enhance awareness, accessibility, co-ordination and provision of Family Support resources in local areas .
- Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety to take forward additional high quality support to new and existing parents living in areas of deprivation through positive parenting programmes. This would include potentially engaging 50 additional health workers on a 2 year basis to support this work and will provide guidance, training and information for up to 1200 families.
- The Department for Social Development along with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment (DETI) to take forward the development of approximately 10 Social Enterprise Incubation Hubs servicing areas of multiple deprivation over a 2 year period. This is designed to tackle dereliction and community eyesores but also the lack of local employment by encouraging social enterprise business start up within local communities.
- Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to scale up and roll out the pilot intervention to support young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) in developing skills and linking them to the employment market through structured programmes and projects. DEL's pilot currently targets 20 families (10 rural and 10 urban). The intention would be replicate this model and increase the target number of families to 500.
- Department for Social Development (DSD) along with Department of Education to take forward and fund an additional 20 Nurture Units to be rolled out across Northern Ireland in addition to the 7 nurture units already being rolled out by DSD. These units are based within schools with specialists that work with targeted children to provide support, encouragement and help. The pilot run by DSD so far has shown significant improvements with young people engaging in the Nurture Units.

Departments will now come together to deliver these actions through the Delivering Social Change governance structures. We have asked Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister officials to work with the Departments as they develop their plans to deliver these early actions and to report back to us on progress. We are proposing to make available some £26 million of the central funds to support these programmes over the next 2 years.

Amendments to the Terms of Reference of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

Published at 10.00 am on Thursday 18 October 2012

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Our 31 May 2012 Statement to the Assembly set out the Terms of Reference for the Executive's Inquiry and Investigation into Historical Institutional Abuse, in which the "relevant period" meant the period between 1945 and 1995 (both years inclusive).

We have considered very seriously representations from stakeholders and from the OFMDFM Committee that the Terms of Reference should be amended.

Having consulted the Chair we have concluded that it is appropriate to amend the relevant period of the inquiry from 1945-1995 to 1922-1995 and to add the words "Bearing in mind the need to guard against future abuse". Otherwise, everything is as announced on the 31st of May 2012.

These Terms of Reference will be referred to in Clause 1 of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, which will state that "The terms of reference of the inquiry are as set out in a statement to the Assembly made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly on 18th October 2012.

Terms of Reference

The NI Executive's Inquiry and Investigation into historical institutional abuse will examine if there were systemic failings by institutions or the state in their duties towards those children in their care between the years of 1922-1995.

For the purposes of this Inquiry "child" means any person under 18 years of age;

"institution" means any body, society or organisation with responsibility for the care, health or welfare of children in Northern Ireland, other than a school (but including a training school or borstal) which, during the relevant period, provided residential accommodation and took decisions about and made provision for the day to day care of children; "relevant period" means the period between 1922 and 1995 (both years inclusive).

The Inquiry and Investigation will conclude within a 2 year 6 month period following the commencement of the legislation establishing its statutory powers.

The Inquiry and Investigation under the guidance of the Panel will make as many preparations as practicable prior to the passing of the relevant legislation, this will include the commencement of the research element. Commencement of the work of the Acknowledgement Forum is not dependent upon the commencement of legislation and will begin its work as soon as practicable.

The Chair of Investigation and Inquiry Panel will provide a report to the Executive within 6 months of the Inquiry conclusion. If additional time is required the Chairman will, with the agreement of the Panel, request an extension from the First Minister and deputy First Minister which will be granted provided it is not unreasonable.

The Inquiry and Investigation will take the form of

- an Acknowledgement Forum,
- a Research and Investigative team and
- an Inquiry and Investigation Panel with a statutory power which will submit a report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The functions of each are as follows:

An Acknowledgment Forum

An Acknowledgment Forum will provide a place where victims and survivors can recount their experiences within institutions. A 4 person panel will be appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to lead this forum. This Forum will provide an opportunity for victims and survivors to recount their experience on a confidential basis. A report will be brought forward by the panel outlining the experiences of the victims and survivors. All records will be destroyed after the Inquiry is concluded. The records will not be used for any other purpose than that for which they were intended. If necessary, the Forum will have the authority to hear accounts from individuals whose experiences fall outside the period 1922 – 1995. The Acknowledgment Forum will operate as a separate body within the Inquiry and Investigation accountable to and under the chairmanship of the Inquiry and Investigation Panel Chair.

A Research and Investigative team

A Research and Investigative team will report to and work under the direction of the Chair of the Inquiry and Investigation. The team will:

- Assemble and provide a report on all information and witness statements provided to the Acknowledgement Forum;
- Provide an analysis of the historical context that pertained at the time the abuse occurred; and
- Provide a report of their findings to the Acknowledgement Forum and to the Chair of the Inquiry and Investigation.

An Investigation and Inquiry Panel

An Inquiry and Investigation Panel will produce a final report taking into consideration the report from the Acknowledgement Forum, the report of the Research and Investigative team and any other evidence it considers necessary. The Panel will be led by a Chairperson supported by two other members, who will be appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Chairperson of the Inquiry and Investigation will also be responsible for the work of the Acknowledgement Forum and for the Research and Investigative Team.

On consideration of all of the relevant evidence, the Chairperson of the Inquiry and Investigation will provide a report to the NI Executive within 6 months of the conclusion of their Inquiry and Investigation. Bearing in mind the need to guard against future abuse, the report will make recommendations and findings on the following matters:

- An apology - by whom and the nature of the apology;
- Findings of institutional or state failings in their duties towards the children in their care and if these failings were systemic;

- Recommendations as to an appropriate memorial or tribute to those who suffered abuse;
- The requirement or desirability for redress to be provided by the institution and/or the Executive to meet the particular needs of victims.

However, the nature or level of any potential redress (financial or the provision of services) is a matter that the Executive will discuss and agree following receipt of the Inquiry and Investigation report.

The Northern Ireland Executive will bring forward legislation at the beginning of this process to give a statutory power to the Inquiry and Investigation to compel the release of documents and require witnesses to give evidence to the Inquiry and Investigation. It is hoped that the legislative power will not be needed, however; the power will be available if required. As far as possible the Inquiry should be inquisitorial in nature rather than adversarial.

A Witness Support Service will be established by to support Victims and Survivors throughout their contact with the Inquiry process. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will establish a wider Victims Support Service to provide support and advice to victims before, during and after the inquiry.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Social Development

4 October 2012

Charities Bill [NIA 11/11-15]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Paula Bradley
Ms Pam Brown
Mrs Judith Cochrane
Mr Fra McCann

Witnesses:

Mr Kieran Doyle	} Department of the Environment
Mr Roy McGivern	

The Chairperson: We are going through the Bill clause by clause. It may not take as long as you might think. Members have the Bill folder before them. Bear in mind that we have a 1.00 pm welfare reform briefing. I remind members that we do have the Bill folder. It will be helpful also to bring out the explanatory memo, the delegated powers memorandum and report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and the clause-by-clause table.

From the Department, we have two officials, Roy McGivern and Kieran Doyle, to advise us and take us through the Bill. You are both very welcome. Obviously the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. As we work through the clauses of the Bill, the officials will guide us. Is there anything that you want to address members on before we start, Roy or Kieran, or are you happy enough?

Mr Roy McGivern (Department for Social Development): Not particularly. We spoke to the Committee last week on the general principles of the Bill. We are happy to offer any advice that we can during the clause-by-clause scrutiny.

The Chairperson: There is an issue of delegated powers in the memorandum. It is about the position of the Examiner of Statutory Rules that orders under clause 9 do not amend. That is the advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and we need to take that into consideration. Do you have a view on that?

Mr McGivern: Yes. We were made aware of that issue. You will see that, in clause 9, there are different delegated powers, and that is set out in the memorandum. Clauses 9(1) and 9(2) are not subject to Assembly control, as the Bill is set out, because they provide for the making of minor and technical provision only to allow for implementation

of the Bill. That is consistent with current practice that allows the parent Department, the Department for Social Development, to commence various provisions of the Act. Clause 3 is different in that it enables the Department to amend, modify or repeal statutory provisions to give full effect to the Bill. That is subject to Assembly control through draft affirmative resolution. We have looked at that and sought advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel, and the Department is willing to consider an amendment to clause 9 to make clauses 9(1) and 9(2) subject to Assembly control through negative resolution, if the Committee agrees.

The Chairperson: That seemed to be the concern of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. Thanks for that, Roy.

Before we go through the clauses, I remind members that all the organisations that responded to the call for evidence were in favour of the Bill, and there were no other suggested amendments from any member or organisation. I am just making people aware of that. None of the stakeholders has said that the Bill needs to be changed. They all welcomed the Bill. That is helpful. We will go through this today, and if we have a consensus, that is good. If we do not, we will have to divide the Committee.

Clause 1 (The public benefit requirement)

The Chairperson: I want to gallop through this quickly, and, hopefully, we will not have any major issues. It is up to members. Clause 1 is about the new public benefit provision. Are members content that they have read the Bill and had the discussion? There are no suggested amendments.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Gifts for mixed purposes)

The Chairperson: This clause re-enacts section 24 of the Charities Act 1964. I do not want to go through any of this if it is not necessary.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Persons disqualified for being trustees of a charity)

The Chairperson: There are no suggested amendments.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clauses 4 to 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Power to make supplementary and transitional provision etc.)

The Chairperson: This is the one that we spoke about earlier. The Department has indicated that it is content to *[Inaudible.]* on this. Does anyone want to propose the amendment? We could propose the amendment as per the recommendation of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. Can that be written in? Are members content with that amendment?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clauses 10 and 11 agreed to.

Schedules 1 to 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: Next week, we will go through this, just for the formalities, having taken account of the report of today's meeting. Can the Department bring forward that amendment next week?

Mr McGivern: We should be able to do that. We will get advice on the exact wording of the amendment, but I think that that will be possible.

The Chairperson: Thanks very much for that. That concludes the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill for today. Next week, we will consider a draft Committee report based on what we have dealt with today. Roy and Kieran, thank you for your support this morning. See you next week.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Social Development

11 October 2012

Charities Bill [NIA 11/11-15]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)

Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Paula Bradley

Ms Pam Brown

Mr Gregory Campbell

Mr Michael Copeland

Mr Sammy Douglas

Mr David McClarty

The Chairperson: I remind members that we have a proposed amendment to clause 9 of the Charities Bill. You will also find a draft Committee report at tab 2 of your papers. This session will be recorded by Hansard. Last week, as you know, we had the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Charities Bill, and the Committee was content to accept the advice of the Examiner of Statutory Rules on clause 9. The Committee asked the Department to provide text for a proposed amendment to clause 9. The Department has proposed the following amendment:

"Clause 9, Page 4, Line 21

At end insert

'(5) Any other order under this section is subject to negative resolution.'"

Are members content to support that amendment?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 9, subject to the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

The Chairperson: That completes the Committee's formal clause-by-clause scrutiny. At next week's meeting, the Committee will be asked to agree its report on the Bill. As I said earlier, a copy of the draft report, which will be updated to reflect the last amendment, is in tab 2 of your packs.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First
Minister and deputy First Minister

17 October 2012

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill [NIA 7/11-15]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Colum Eastwood
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Paul Givan
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr John McCallister
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Harkin
Mrs Cathy McMullan
Ms Maggie Smith

} Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: Members should have copies of the amendments bundle, which was e-mailed to you this morning. Those amendments have been provided mostly by the Department, and we have seen those before. They are at annexes 1, 2, 3 and A. Colum Eastwood wishes to propose draft amendments. They have been labelled annex Y. Annex Z on page 13 of your bundle contains a possible Committee amendment, which is designed:

*“to make explicit the Inquiry’s power to make
recommendations ... to prevent future abuse”.*

We also have the three amendments from the Department that we discussed in closed session. There, you will find the Department’s response to the Committee’s request to explicitly provide the inquiry — by way of a further bullet point in its terms of reference — with the power to make recommendations about changes to the law, procedure and practice to prevent future abuse. It states:

“Ministers are of the view that the Terms of Reference already have considerable scope. They consider that the Committee’s proposed amendment would take the inquiry well beyond the scope of what it was set up to do, and so they will not adopt it.”

Mr Lyttle: May I make a quick comment on that?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: It seems a bit contradictory to say that the scope of the inquiry is already sufficient but that this short clarifying comment would take it “well beyond the scope”. Perhaps we can draw that out in our discussions, but I found that quite strange.

The Chairperson: I welcome John McCallister to the Committee.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: Do members have any comments?

Mr Eastwood: I agree with Chris. I still think that, if nothing else, it does no harm to have it in the report. I know that the Children’s Law Centre has not sent us much information about what they talked about, but if there are issues that should be dealt with, and if there are proposals that could be made by the inquiry, I do not see what problem there would be in doing that. I, like Chris, would still like to see an additional bullet point.

The Chairperson: OK; I think that it would be fair to say that the Department had previously offered to amend the terms of reference, rather than the Bill, to address this issue. On page 8 of the amendment bundle, there is a reference to inserting:

“Bearing in mind the need to prevent future abuse”.

So, the option is to accept that line in red in the proposed amended terms of reference or to consider a Committee amendment at page 13, annex Z.

Ms McGahan: I am not sure how that suggestion can prevent abuse.

The Chairperson: I think that it is a question of whether the chairperson and his panel want to explicitly say, “We make the following recommendations to minimise the prospect of future abuse”.

Ms McGahan: I would be cautious about that, because I do not know how we can prevent future abuse. We can certainly put mechanisms in place, but I do not feel that we can prevent future abuse. I just think that we need to —

The Chairperson: To whom do you refer when you say, “we”?

Ms McGahan: I mean that I cannot prevent future abuse; maybe somebody could explain to me how we do that. I am open to suggestions, but —

Mr Eastwood: I do not think that what this does is say that we can, in all cases, definitely prevent any future abuse. This says that the inquiry should be allowed to make recommendations that ensure that the state does everything in its power to fulfil its responsibility to prevent future abuse. I think that that makes sense.

Mr Givan: Chairman, did you say that the Department had sent a written response to this issue somewhere? I may have missed it, and I am trying to find it.

The Chairperson: Have you got a line in red on page 8 of the amendment bundle?

Mr Givan: Yes; but I mean a response to our letter to the Department last week, asking whether that was something that we could put in the Bill or the terms of reference. Did it officially come back to us?

The Committee Clerk: I think that that is in members’ tabled items.

The Chairperson: Yes; it is the second-last document in your tabled items, Paul. It is dated 16 October and came from the departmental liaison officer.

Mr Givan: I indicated last week that my view was that the terms of reference would cover this. I think that we all agree that the purpose of all of this is, yes, to deal with what happened in the past but also to do what we can to make sure that something like this does not happen again. So, there is no division among us about what we want the outcome of all of this to be.

There is a difference on which mechanism best deals with it. Would that be by putting the bullet point in the inquiry's terms of reference or through the legislation that cites the terms of reference, which can be amended much more readily and quickly than legislation ever can? My view is that the terms of reference will allow us to deal with all of this. I think that the legislation will pinpoint:

"Bearing in mind the need to prevent future abuse".

That will be cited. We have that covered in the terms of reference. So, this is more a difference of opinion on mechanism than principle, and, on this side, our view is that the terms of reference will cover that, as opposed to the proposed Committee amendment.

The Chairperson: We are all agreed, I think, that Paul's analysis applies; we are all agreed on the outcome and the question is one of the mechanism.

Mr Eastwood: That is right. It would have been more helpful of the Department to say that it would change the terms of reference, but it has not and that is its view.

The Chairperson: But it is changing the terms of reference.

Mr Eastwood: Not to what we wanted.

Mr Lyttle: The Department had crafted a concise, neat phrase that could have been inserted into the terms of reference. It put that in writing in its submission to the Committee. I read that submission in the record last week, but I do not have that to hand this week. To me, that did not take the scope of the inquiry "well beyond" that originally intended. It merely clarified that it is not precluded from making recommendations. I think that it was a very balanced phrase that could have gone into the terms of reference. I agree that this does not have to be done by way of amendment per se, but many people who gave evidence to the Committee were concerned that there was an omission or a lack of clarity around the scope for making recommendations. Indeed, they went as far as to ask for the 1995 barrier to be removed for that very reason. As far as I can see, we are not changing that 1995 limit, but nor are we going even that slight bit further to clarify that recommendations can be made. I think that the request was reasonable, so I am surprised by the response.

Mr Givan: I disagree with Chris's analysis because the terms of reference clearly cite, prior to the recommendations in bullet points:

"Bearing in mind the need to prevent future abuse",

and then it states that it will make recommendations and findings on "the following". So, it puts the issue of preventing future abuse upfront. Whether in the legislation

or the terms of reference, it will have the same impact. We are in danger of arguing over technical mechanisms when the same objective will be achieved, and the terms of reference are a much more flexible mechanism. If we need to amend other aspects, the terms of reference will be the place to do it, as opposed to amending primary legislation, which, as we all know, will take much longer. So, I caution members —

The Chairperson: Before you come back in, Chris; there is one other factor that we must bear in mind, and that is that we have had testimony from Sir Anthony Hart, who will chair the inquiry, saying that he is content that the current framework will allow him to make recommendations, and I have no doubt that he will do so if he sees fit.

Mr Lyttle: I agree with a fair amount of what Mr Givan said about not needing an additional legislative mechanism, but my point was about seeking straightforward clarification. Also, there is concern that the terms of reference state:

"Bearing in mind the need to prevent further abuse, the report will make recommendations and findings on the following matters".

It then restricts the types of recommendations that it will make. I understand the concern to clarify that there is scope for making recommendations, if necessary, given the weight of evidence requesting that clarification. That is my opinion.

The Chairperson: The officials are with us again. We welcome Cathy McMullan, Michael Harkin and Maggie Smith. Maggie, can you add anything on that specific issue?

Ms Maggie Smith (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We sent through amended terms of reference in recognition of that point. Ministers have taken on board that it is important that the inquiry has the necessary scope and that this does not prevent it from making recommendations for the future. By putting in the sentence beginning "Bearing in mind the need", the Ministers recognise that it is important that the inquiry bears in mind the need to safeguard children in the future and prevent future abuse. However, the scope of the inquiry is to focus on the four issues set out in the bullet points. The inquiry was designed to do that, and the planning for the legislation and the whole set-up are focused on those four areas. The bullet point that you suggested would require going much further than that. It would require an in-depth inquiry into how things operate now, which would be a different exercise entirely.

The Chairperson: Maggie, I propose that, if you are agreeable, you will speak to the amendments, particularly the ones that arrived with the Committee today. Colum will then propose some amendments of his own. If you can stay on, we will let Colum speak to those, and we might ask for an opinion or clarity from you. Then, when we go to the clause-by-clause scrutiny, perhaps you would withdraw but remain in the room in case we need to seek further clarity. Is that OK?

Ms Smith: Certainly. We sent you some new amendments. I am conscious that the version that we have is slightly different from yours. We will start with the first of the amendments dated 17 October, which are at annex B.

The Chairperson: Are those the amendments dealing with the privacy of the acknowledgment forum and making it an offence to convene a restriction order?

Ms Smith: Yes. These amendments are about protecting the people who come forward to the acknowledgement forum. Clause 7 concerns the scope of the forum chairman to allow the proceedings of the inquiry to be public. Clearly, it would be completely inappropriate for any aspect of the acknowledgement forum to be held in public. So the amendment ensures that the part of clause 7(1) that makes the proceedings public does not apply to the acknowledgement forum.

The Chairperson: Are members happy?

Members indicated assent.

Ms Smith: I will move on to the contravention of a restriction order. A restriction order is an order that the chairperson can make to restrict access either to the proceedings of the inquiry or to evidence. Clause 13 had been drafted in a way that it would be an offence not to comply with a restriction order. The amendment simply tightens that up. It broadens the scope by stating that, if people contravene a restriction order, that is also an offence. It is an additional safeguard. An example of that might be where a restriction order is in place and a journalist gets access to information, by whatever means, and puts it in the paper. That would be a contravention, and it was not covered in the original wording. This amendment makes it stronger.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Ms Smith: Next is a rule-making power to protect —

The Chairperson: Sorry to interrupt, Maggie, but is there not an amendment to clause 14?

Ms Smith: Yes, I beg your pardon. Still at annex B, the amendment to clause 14 is about enforcement against the offence. It states that, if the order is contravened, that can be enforced through the High Court.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Ms Smith: The next amendment is to clause 18 and concerns powers to protect documents. Again, that is to do with the acknowledgement forum and reflects the chairman's concern that we ensure that there is maximum protection for records of the inquiry, particularly those generated by the acknowledgement forum. The Department is taking rule-making powers to make rules stating that the papers generated during the inquiry will be available only to the chairman, who can then decide whether they are made available to other parts of the inquiry or made public. They would be made public only in circumstances required under the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Ms Smith: I turn now to clause 11, which is to do with the payment of expenses. By expenses, we mean legal and other expenses associated with attending the inquiry, or otherwise in relation to the inquiry. As I have mentioned to the Committee a couple of times before, we will set out

in regulations — subordinate legislation that will come to you — the parameters for the way in which expenses are dealt with. That includes the rate of expenses, the criteria against which decisions will be made and the administrative arrangements for the payment of expenses. As drafted, clause 11 did not make it entirely clear that OFMDFM will, of course, pay the expenses but the decisions will be made by the chairperson of the inquiry. What had been drafted as "OFMDFM", and appears as such a number of times, should correctly be "the chairperson of the inquiry".

We also have an amendment to clause 11 as a result of some of the amendments already discussed. Last time, we discussed an amendment that would allow the chairperson to take evidence via live TV links from outside Northern Ireland. So we are broadening the wording of clause 11(3) (a) so that not only people attending the inquiry to give evidence will be eligible for an award but those who give evidence by whatever means. So they do not need to be in the room but, clearly, they still need legal advice.

As a consequence of that, we also make it clear in clause 12 that OFMDFM must pay any amounts awarded under clause 11. That makes it crystal clear that, of course, OFMDFM will pay those bills.

Then we come to the rules that OFMDFM is making. They will be made not under clause 11 but under clause 18. So we have a small amendment to clause 18 to clarify that it is the chairperson making the decision.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Three points arise. Is the chairperson, Sir Anthony, content with all this?

Ms Smith: He is, yes.

The Chairperson: Is the protection of documents only for the acknowledgement forum, or does it cover everything?

Ms Smith: Its original purpose was to protect the documents that emerge from the acknowledgement forum. However, as you can see, it now refers to documents "of the inquiry".

The Chairperson: So it becomes global.

What about clause 19?

Ms Smith: That is as far as we have got.

The Chairperson: So there will be something?

Ms Smith: This is all we have at the moment.

The Chairperson: You are still looking at clause 19?

Ms Smith: Yes.

The Chairperson: Colum, you are proposing an amendment, are you not?

Mr Eastwood: I will not take up too much time. We have been through all these points in quite a bit of detail already.

My first amendment relates to the possibility of an interim report on redress. We have had fairly compelling evidence from victims that they would like something on that, because many of the victims are quite elderly. The proposed amendment would not compel Justice Hart to provide an interim report, but it would allow him to do so

if he felt that the circumstances were correct and that it would not get in the way of his work. So I do not think that there is any harm in it. I do not want it to be exhaustive, but I think that it is a good idea, and victims would be fairly happy with it.

My second amendment covers a number of technical changes, but the final bit is the important bit. It means that, if the inquiry were terminated, there would have to be a draft of the Order laid before and approved by resolution of the Assembly. It is just an extra safeguard. We talked about that last week as well.

Those are the two amendments.

The Chairperson: Maggie, have you any comments from a departmental point of view?

Ms Smith: We discussed the second amendment previously. We came back from one of the previous discussions and said that that was not an amendment that the Ministers were planning to take on.

As to the first amendment, our position has been that we would not ask Sir Anthony to produce an interim report on redress.

The Chairperson: Have members any comments on Colum's proposed amendments?

Mr Givan: I explained last week why we were not supporting either of the proposed amendments, and that remains our position.

Mr Lyttle: I think that his proposals are made in good faith, and I would have supported them, Chair.

The Chairperson: It remains open to Colum to propose them as we go through the Bill clause by clause.

Maggie, thank you very much. Please stay with us, but take your ease.

Members, before we begin our formal clause-by-clause consideration, I want to clarify whether we want to stick with the page 8 amendment to the terms of reference or go with the possible Committee amendment at annex Z. I think that members seated to my right were in favour of the terms of reference. Is there any contrary view from those on my left?

Mr Eastwood: I would support the Committee amendment.

Ms Fearon: We are happy with the page 8 amendment to the terms of reference.

Mr Lyttle: The sensible option would have been to insert a brief bullet point into the terms of reference, but that has not been done. I take it that there is no longer time for that to happen. The Department has said that there is not. However, I agree that the legislative proposal may not be the ideal option.

The Chairperson: The fact that Sir Anthony is content that what is proposed gives him sufficient scope makes me content that the proposal on page 8 is good enough. Unless you want a recorded vote —

Mr Eastwood: I know that we will probably not win, but, for the record, I propose the Committee amendment.

The Chairperson: We will come to that at the time, if that is OK, Colum. First, do members agree to proceed to the clause-by-clause decision-making phase?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: As we proceed, members, please indicate if you have any other amendments or clauses that you would like to insert. The purpose of the session is to work our way through the Bill, clause by clause, and take decisions. You have a copy of the Bill and explanatory memorandum, and you will want to have them to hand as we consider the clauses. You should also have to hand the amendment bundle and the additional three amendments provided today.

The Bill has 23 clauses. Each clause and the long title will need to be considered in turn, in conjunction with the Department's proposed draft amendments and Colum's draft amendment. In relation to decision-making on each clause, the Committee has four options. The first is to agree that the Committee is content with the clause as drafted. The second option is to agree that the Committee is content with the clause, subject to an amendment proposed by the Department. That could be an amendment that the Committee requested from or agreed with the Department or one that the Department produced of its own volition. Members will remember that, at last week's meeting, we said that we were largely content with the Department's proposed amendments. In the absence of agreement with the Department, the third option is to recommend a Committee amendment, which members can propose as we move through the clauses. Finally, the Committee may agree that it is not content with the clause as drafted, and, although the Committee may not be proposing an amendment, it can actively oppose the inclusion of such a clause by tabling opposition to its standing part of the Bill.

We can reach a decision on each clause by consensus or by division. Members will have the opportunity to consider any amendments to each clause following the reading of that clause. We will first take a decision on any proposed draft amendments. If the Committee is content with a proposed amendment or amendments to a clause, the question put will be whether the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments at annex 1 or annex A, and so forth. Where there are no amendments, the question will be whether the Committee is content with the clause as drafted. If members are content, shall we proceed with clause-by-clause scrutiny?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 1 (The inquiry)

The Chairperson: The explanatory and financial memorandum states:

"This clause authorises the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly to set up an inquiry into historical institutional abuse between 1945 and 1995, the terms of reference for which were announced to the Assembly on 31 May 2012 and which the Ministers acting jointly may amend."

There were a number of areas where the Committee was minded that changes be made to the Bill, and most would impact on clause 1 and the terms of reference, namely, changing 1945 to 1922; the inquiry's right to

make recommendations on changes to the law to prevent future abuse; and Ministers' powers to amend the terms of reference to control by way of draft affirmative order. The Department's proposed amendments to clause 1 are in annexes 1 and 2. Are members content with those amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We have put forward a Committee amendment, and we have Colum Eastwood's proposed amendment.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 1, line 5, leave out

"subject to this section,".

The Chairperson: Are you proposing the Committee's amendment?

Mr Eastwood: The possible Committee amendment.

The Chairperson: As I understand it, we can vote in favour or against, or members can abstain, which is an active abstention, rather than simply not voting. Those are the four options.

Question put.

The Committee divided:

Ayes 2; Noes 7.

AYES

Mr Eastwood, Mr Lyttle.

NOES

Mr G Robinson, Mr Givan, Mr McCallister, Mr Moutray, Mrs Hale, Ms Fearon, Ms McGahan.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 1, line 16, insert

"(6) Without prejudice to any finding it may make in its final report, the inquiry panel may publish an interim report on the requirement or desirability for redress to be provided by the Executive to victims of historical institutional abuse."

Question put.

The Committee divided:

Ayes 2; Noes 7.

AYES

Mr Eastwood, Mr Lyttle.

NOES

Mr G Robinson, Mr Givan, Mr McCallister, Mr Moutray, Mrs Hale, Ms Fearon, Ms McGahan.

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's

proposed amendments.

The Committee divided:

Ayes 8; Noes 0; Abstentions 1.

AYES

Mr G Robinson, Mr Givan, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr Moutray, Mrs Hale, Ms Fearon, Ms McGahan.

NOES

No members voted no.

ABSTENTIONS

Mr Eastwood.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Appointment of members)

The Chairperson: As stated in the explanatory memorandum, clause 2 enables the Ministers, acting jointly, after consulting the presiding member, to make further appointments, either to fill vacancies that arise or, if necessary, to increase the number of panel members. Members raised no issues during Committee deliberations on 3 October. The Department's proposed amendments are to leave out "presiding member" and insert "chairperson" at five points in the clause, which have been listed for members.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Duration of appointment of members)

The Chairperson: This clause deals with the duration of an inquiry member's appointment, including the Ministers' power to terminate appointment. Members will recall that officials emphasised the reasonableness of the grounds needed for Minister's to exercise their power. Members raised no issues when the clause was discussed on 3 October. The Department's proposed amendment, at annex 2, changes "presiding member" to "chairperson" in a couple of places. Are members happy with the proposed amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: If there are no other amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Assessors)

The Chairperson: Clause 4 allows for the assessors to be appointed to provide the inquiry with the expertise needed to fulfil the terms of reference. Members raised no issues. The Department's proposed amendments are at annex 2 and change "presiding member" to "chairperson" on three occasions. Are members content with the amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: If there are no other amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (End of the inquiry)

The Chairperson: Clause 5 provides that the inquiry ends when its report has been submitted and its terms of reference fulfilled. It further provides that Ministers acting jointly after consulting the presiding member, may bring the inquiry to a close. The Department's proposed amendments change all instances of "presiding member" to "chairperson". Are members content with those?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Do members have any more amendments?

Mr Eastwood: My amendments are at annex Y.

The Chairperson: I will give members a moment to read Mr Eastwood's seven proposed amendments to clause 5. Are members content with those amendments?

Members indicated dissent.

The Chairperson: So, Colum Eastwood and Chris Lyttle are in favour, and everybody else is against. If there are no other amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Department's proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Colum Eastwood abstained; everybody else voted in favour.

Clause 6 (Evidence and procedure)

The Chairperson: Clause 6 deals with evidence and procedure, in particular how the chair must act with fairness and with regard to the need to avoid any unnecessary cost, whether it is to public funds, witnesses or others. A concern was raised that the requirement to give regard to the need to avoid any unnecessary cost might impact on the requirement on the chair to act with fairness in so far as that touched on legal representation. However, most members were broadly content with clause 6.

There are proposed departmental amendments at annex A on the use of live television links to hear evidence from victims. That will facilitate the hearing of evidence from witnesses who, because of age, infirmity, distance or whatever, would have difficulty attending the inquiry in person. It also provides for the Perjury (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 to apply in such cases. Members discussed those proposed amendments with officials last week and raised no issues with them. Are Members content with those amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: There are also amendments at annex 2, once again, changing all references to "presiding member" to "chairperson". Are members content with those amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Public access to inquiry proceedings and information)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) and (2) require the presiding member to take whatever steps he judges reasonable to ensure that the public can attend the inquiry, or see and hear a transmission of it, and can access evidence available to it. Members raised no issues in relation to the clause.

The Department's proposed amendments are at annex 2: once again, changing "presiding member" to "chairperson". This is the first clause for which there are also amendments in today's correspondence at annex B. There are two proposed amendments to clause 7. Members have had time to consider those. Are Members content with those amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Restrictions on public access, etc.)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (8) enable the presiding member, during the course of the inquiry, to issue restriction orders. The purpose of such orders is to restrict attendance at all or part of the inquiry, or to restrict disclosure of information in the context of the inquiry, or to restrict disclosure by those who have received information only by virtue of it being given to the inquiry.

During our consideration of clause 8, members were content with the clarification provided by officials that normal legal principles would require anybody affected by an order to be given an opportunity to make a case before an order restricting access was made.

The Department's proposed amendments are at annex A, in relation to protecting witnesses' identities, and at annex 2, once again, changing "presiding member" to "chairperson".

In relation to the proposed amendment at annex A on orders restricting the disclosure or publication of the identity of any person, at our deliberations last week, there was some discussion on that. Officials advised that the inquiry chairperson had sought that amendment. Paul, I think that you raised that issue.

Mr Givan: I am content.

The Chairperson: Officials also advised that OFMDFM would make rules so that the chairperson could, in turn, make orders, and that the rules would come before the Committee for consideration.

Members indicated last week that they were broadly content with the Department's proposed amendments to clause 8. Are Members content with those amendments?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Powers to require production of evidence)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) and (2) give the presiding member powers to compel by notice witnesses and evidence. Subsection (4) enables the presiding member to vary or to revoke a notice. Members raised no issues in relation to the clause. The Department's proposed amendments are at annex 2, once again, changing all references to "presiding member" to "chairperson". Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Privileged information, etc)

The Chairperson: Subsection (1) ensures that witnesses before the inquiry have the same privileges, in relation to requests for information, as witnesses in civil proceedings.

Members raised no issues and there are no proposed departmental amendments. As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 10 agreed to.

New Clauses

The Chairperson: We come to new clauses that the Department has brought forward in response to the Committee's request that the inquiry chairperson's role in publishing the report be made explicit. These are at Annex A, pages 9 and 10, and they deal with the delivery of the report to Ministers two weeks before publication, to make it clear that the chairperson must publish the report in full, but providing certain limited grounds for withholding certain material from publication. They also deal with the laying before the Assembly of the inquiry report by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Members indicated at last week's meeting that they were content with these new clauses. Members have had a chance to read annex A.

Question, That the Committee is content with Department's proposed amendment to insert a new clause after clause 10, "Submission of reports", as set out at annex A, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the Department's proposed amendment to insert a new clause after clause 10, "Publication of reports", as set out at annex A, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the Department's proposed amendment to insert a new clause

after clause 10, "Laying of reports before the Assembly", as set out at annex A, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 (Expenses of witnesses, etc.)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (4) enable OFMDFM to award reasonable amounts to cover witness costs. These include the legal costs of certain witnesses called to the inquiry. This was discussed at our meeting on 3 October, and my sense was that most members were broadly content with it. There will be rules dealing with expenses, which will come before the Committee in due course.

There are proposed departmental amendments, which came to us today, and are at annex D. There are no other proposed amendments, so I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Payment of inquiry expenses by OFMDFM)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (5) require the Department to meet the expenses of the inquiry and delineates the circumstances in which these will not be paid. We heard from officials on this provision on 3 October, and members indicated that they were content with the clause. Before today, the Department had proposed one amendment, which is at annex 2, changing "presiding member" to "chairperson", but we now have further amendments, which are outlined at annex D.

There are no other proposed amendments, so I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Offences)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (8) make non-compliance with notices served under clause 9 or clause 8 an offence. The clause also deals with evidence and privileged information. Members raised no issues in relation to this clause.

As members are aware, the Department's proposed amendments are at annex 2, again, changing "presiding member" to "chairperson". The Department has drafted further proposed amendments at annex B. There are no further proposed amendments, so I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 13 agreed to.

Clause 14 (Enforcement by High Court)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) and (2) provide that, where a person breaches a restriction order or a notice issued under section 9, or threatens to do so, the presiding member may certify the matter to the High Court, which can then take steps to enforce the order.

Members raised no issues in relation to clause 14. The Department's proposed amendment at annex 2 is, again, to change "presiding member" to "chairperson". There is also a proposed amendment to clause 14 at annex B.

There are no other proposed amendments, so I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 14 agreed to.

Clause 15 (Immunity from suit)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (3) provide immunity for the inquiry panel, the inquiry's legal advisers, assessors, staff, and anyone else engaged to assist it, from any civil action for anything done or said in the course of carrying out their duty to the inquiry. Members raised no issues. There are no proposed departmental amendments.

As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 15 agreed to.

Clause 16 (Time limit for applying for judicial review)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (4) provide for a time limit for judicial review of 14 days, subject to the 14 days being extended by the High Court. The explanatory and financial memorandum states:

"The time limit of two weeks in this section runs from the date on which the applicant becomes aware of the decision, not from the date on which the decision was made."

In light of the advice to the Committee and the view of the inquiry chair, no issues were raised in relation to clause 16 when the Committee considered it on 3 October. There were no proposed departmental amendments.

As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 16 agreed to.

Clause 17 (Power to make supplementary, etc. provision)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) and (2) provide that OFMDFM may, by order, make such supplementary, transitional, incidental or consequential provision as it considers appropriate, subject to negative resolution. We discussed clause 17 on the 3 October, when members were content.

As there are no proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 17 agreed to.

Clause 18 (Rules)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (3) enable OFMDFM to make rules, subject to negative resolution, in relation to evidence and procedure; to the return or keeping of documents; and, in particular, to the award of witness expenses. Members raised no issues at our meeting on 3 October. The Department's proposed amendment to

clause 18 is at annex C, and it supersedes the previous proposed amendment. There are further proposed departmental amendments at annexes C and D, members.

As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 18 agreed to.

Clause 19 (Application to the Crown)

The Chairperson: It is worth bearing in mind, Clerk, that the Department has indicated the likelihood that it will bring forward an amendment to clause 19.

The Committee Clerk: That is correct, Chairman, but I think that we have to consider the clause as currently drafted.

The Chairperson: With that in mind, we will stick to what we have in front of us.

This clause binds the Crown so that the powers conferred by the Bill can be exercised in relation to Departments. Members raised no issues in relation to clause 19.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 19 agreed to.

Clause 20 (Consequential amendments)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) to (3) provide detail of consequential amendments. Members raised no issues. There are no departmental amendments, and, as there are no other amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 20 agreed to.

Clause 21 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: Members raised no issues in relation to clause 21, other than, again, the change in terminology from "presiding member" to "chairperson". The Department's proposed amendments at annex 2 provide for that change.

Annex 2 also provides for the insertion of the following definition on page 10, line 11:

"'chairperson' means chairperson of the inquiry".

Annex 2 also provides for another insertion on page 10, line 15: "member" includes chairperson".

Also, on page 10, annex 2 makes provision to leave out line 18, which was the definition of presiding member.

Finally, annex 2 proposes, on page 10, line 22, to leave out "presiding member" and insert "chairperson".

In annex 1, there is another proposed departmental amendment to clause 21. It proposes to insert, on page 10, line 12, this definition of harm: "harm" includes death or injury". With officials on 10 October, we discussed that definition and how it related to clause 8, in particular. It was inserted at the request of the inquiry chair. Members indicated that they were broadly content with all the annex 1 amendments at the conclusion of that meeting.

Are Members content with those departmental amendments to clause 21?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 21 agreed to.

Clause 22 (Commencement, etc.)

The Chairperson: Subsections (1) and (2) provide detail of when the Bill comes into effect, which is on the day after the day on which it receives Royal Assent. Members raised no issues.

As there are no other amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 22 agreed to.

Clause 23 (Short title)

The Chairperson: This Act may be cited as the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2012. Members raised no issues. There are no departmental amendments.

As there are no other proposed amendments, I will put the Question.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 23 agreed to.

Long title

The Chairperson: The long title of the Bill is:

“A Bill to make provision relating to an inquiry into institutional abuse between 1945 and 1995”.

The Department’s proposed amendment to the long title is to leave out “1945” and insert “1922”, as set out in annex 1. Are members content with that amendment?

Members indicated assent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes our clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. I thank the officials.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 5 October 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

OFMDFM: Executive Papers

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how many draft Executive papers, which have been circulated to ministerial colleagues by Ministers, have yet to be placed on the agenda for an Executive meeting; (ii) the date on which the paper was circulated; and (iii) the subject matter of each paper.

(AQW 13716/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

OFMDFM: Executive Papers

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what guidelines pertaining to timeframe govern the circulation of final Executive papers to Ministers prior to the Executive meeting at which any such paper is due to be discussed; and how many times since 2007 these timeframes have been breached.

(AQW 13717/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We would refer you to the answer we gave to AQW 13716/11-15.

OFMDFM: Executive Papers

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail, from May 2007 to date (i) the date each approved draft Executive paper was circulated to Ministers; (ii) the date on which each respective paper was discussed at the Executive; and (iii) the subject matter of each paper.

(AQW 13718/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As we have indicated previously, the content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the declarations of political interests by members of the Maze Regeneration Board, (i) to which political party has Joe O'Donnell made donations; (ii) to which MLA is Jack Gallagher a part-time assistant; (iii) for which party is Paul Stewart a councillor; and (iv) to which party has Tony Gallagher provided administrative help at election time.

(AQW 14128/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The information requested was publicly released on 14 September and is on the Executive's website at:

www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-ofmdfm/news-ofmdfm-140909-further-announcements-mlk.htm .

Maze/Long Kesh: Regeneration

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what are the income projections from the land disposal arrangements for the Maze site.

(AQW 14211/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The newly established Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation will take forward the regeneration of the site and will consider how to maximise the site's economic potential.

European Commissioners: Visits to Northern Ireland

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of visits by European Commissioners to Northern Ireland in 2011.

(AQW 14293/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In 2011 there was one visit, by Mr Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner for Regional Policy, who opened the Peace Bridge in Derry/Londonderry on 25 June 2011.

Welfare Reform Advisory Group

Mr Durkan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Government commitment to establish a Welfare Reform advisory group.

(AQW 14370/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We have established an advisory group to assist all Ministers in alleviating hardship, including any implications of the UK Government's Welfare Reform Programme. The membership of the Group includes:

- Les Allamby – Director, Law Centre
- Lindsay Conway – Director of Social Service, Presbyterian Church's Presbyterian Church Board for Social Responsibility
- Marie Cavanagh – Director, Gingerbread
- Neil Gibson – Director, Regional Services Division, Oxford Economics
- Prof Donal McKillop – Professor of Financial Services, QUB
- Monica Wilson – Director, Disability Action

Through its terms of reference, we asked the Group to consider the scope for intervention by the Executive to alleviate, mitigate and avoid further financial hardship, taking account of the impact of welfare reform; rising levels of fuel poverty; and the prospects for economic growth and to consider particularly the impact on those in receipt of welfare benefits and those in low paid employment.

The Group has already met on six occasions and is currently finalising its preliminary report. We expect to receive the Group's report shortly.

OFMDFM: Travel and Subsistence

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 116/11-15, what was the total travel and subsistence costs incurred by their Department on trips outside Northern Ireland in each year of the 2007-11 mandate.

(AQW 14404/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Information is not held on the departmental accounting system at the level of detail requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

“The Gathering”

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they intend to initiate a gathering of parliamentarians and former parliamentarians from Britain and Ireland as a contribution to The Gathering in 2013.

(AQW 14489/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We consider that an event to bring together parliamentarians as part of the initiative “the Gathering” would be more appropriately a matter for consideration by the relevant legislatures.

Gender Equality Strategy

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will commission an official audit of women's participation in public life including the judiciary, policing and truth recovery mechanisms such as, public inquiries within this Assembly term.

(AQW 14507/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Women's representation in political and public life is one of the strategic objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy which will be reviewed in the near future.

Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the mid-inquiry meeting which the Planning Appeals Commission was to hold in September on the proposed John Lewis Development at Sprucefield.

(AQW 14772/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, its Chief Commissioner has been asked to provide a response directly to you, and we understand that she has written to you in the following terms:

"In November 2009, Sprucefield Centre Limited applied to the Department of the Environment for planning permission for retail, restaurant and associated infrastructural development at Sprucefield, Lisburn. The proposals involved a John Lewis department store and unit shops. The Department designated this as a major planning application in accordance with Article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) 1991 Order and requested the Commission to hold a public inquiry.

The inquiry opened on 7th June 2010 but was adjourned on the same day. There were persistent complaints from objectors to the proposed development about the adequacy of the environmental statement and its addenda. Following judicial review proceedings, the applicants submitted further environmental information to the Department in July 2011 and February 2012. The Department has now advised the Commission that it has all the environmental information necessary to meet the requirements of the European Union Directive and domestic Regulations on environmental impact assessment.

A mid-inquiry meeting was held on 11th September 2012 at which applicants confirmed that they wish to submit an updated retail statement and consolidated transport and environmental information to the Commission by late November 2012. They also wish to submit a new statement of case in February 2013. The other parties to the inquiry will be entitled to comment on the new information and evidence. The Commissioners have established a detailed timetable leading to the resumption of the inquiry on Monday, 15th April 2013 in the Commission's premises at Park House, 87-91 Great Victoria Street, Belfast.

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet you to discuss the matter if you would find that more suitable".

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Animal Welfare: Convictions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many prosecutions have been secured for cruelty to animals in each of the last two years, broken down by council area.

(AQW 14223/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Table A below details the number of convictions for animal welfare offences relating to farmed animals over the last 2 calendar years. My Department does not hold a breakdown of this information by council area.

Table A – Farmed Animal Welfare Convictions

Year	Number of people convicted
2011	4
2010	17

My Department enforces the legislation in relation to farmed animals only. However, information provided recently by the Public Prosecution Service to my officials shows that since July 2011, 11 people have been convicted for offences under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 in relation to other animals.

Fish Stocks

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures her Department has taken to enhance and protect fishing stocks in the Irish Sea.

(AQW 14258/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department enhances and protects fish stocks in the following ways.

Our Sea Fisheries Inspectorate fully enforces the rules of the common fisheries policy to avoid over exploitation of fish stocks and reduce damage to non-target species and juvenile fish. This includes compliance with fish quotas, days at sea restrictions, closed areas, minimum landing sizes, and various fishing net specification requirements.

The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) collects fisheries data and carries out fish stock surveys that contribute to Irish Sea stock assessments issued by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas. These assessments are then used to set sustainable levels for fish quotas and days at sea. AFBI also carries out a range of research and monitoring of the general marine environment that is used to improve and monitor its management.

My Department also funds additional scientific research through the European Fisheries Fund. This includes trials of fishing methods that help to reduce by-catches of unwanted fish, thereby allowing non - target fish to survive unharmed. As a result of these trials our entire prawn fishing fleet will be equipped with highly selective fishing gear before the end of this year that will move us significantly closer to achieving our aim of eliminating discards of unwanted fish.

Sea Bass: Ban

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) whether she is aware of the views of commercial fishermen in relation to the increased number of Bass appearing in coastal waters; and (ii) what consideration her Department has given to rescinding the ban on commercial fishing of Bass to ensure a fair quota for commercial fishermen.

(AQW 14280/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware of the concerns of commercial fishermen in the south of Ireland who have not been able to land sea bass for many years and who may be affected by the creation of a new Total Allowable Catch (TAC) based on recent landings. Currently there is no prohibition on commercial fishermen in the north and therefore the current EU proposal will not affect our fishermen. You will be aware of our proposed "Protection and Conservation of Sea Bass Regulations". Whilst these introduce a number of measures to conserve Sea Bass they will continue to allow the small by-catches of sea bass to be landed and recorded and therefore contribute to any future adjustments of a Sea Bass TAC if introduced.

DARD: Executive Papers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 13791/11-15, and excluding the specific content of the Executive papers, to detail the (i) quantity (ii) dates; and (iii) general topic of the papers awaiting approval.

(AQW 14286/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As outlined in response to AQW 13791/11-15, all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

DARD: Capital Budgets

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) for her assessment of the benefits of annualised budgets when planning and delivering large capital infrastructure projects such as the East Belfast Flood Alleviation Scheme; and (ii) what consideration she has given to holding the funding for projects as allocated project budget that could be spent over an agreed number of years.

(AQW 14320/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) While I can see the attraction of project funding, particularly for major capital schemes, we must operate within the constraints of the financial framework provided by the Executive. The Department currently allocates its capital budgets on a programme basis, profiled by financial year. The Department's capital plans are also included in the draft Investment Strategy (ISNI) which includes indicative budget allocations up to 2021. This is the financial framework within which all Departments operate and is considered best practice.

The benefits of annualised budgets are:

- The annualised budget period aligns with the accounting period, within which the annual accounts will measure the actual spend relative to the budget allocations.
- Immediate focused goals and solid plans will be set in place; variances from the goals will be identified at an early stage within the Department's in-year financial management processes. This will result in early corrective actions being taken and improved motivation to meet the financial goals.
- The in-year monitoring rounds provide the opportunity for budget reallocations to be made, on the basis of priorities. These reallocations may be within my own department or returned to the Centre for reallocation by the Executive.

- (ii) As the Department's budget is set on an annual basis within the constraints of the financial framework provided by the Executive, the holding of budgets for future years' spend is not an option.

DARD: Flooding

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to recent flooding, (i) for her assessment of the need for a more integrated response and better co-ordination between agencies; (ii) what lessons have been learnt; and (iii) whether clear roles and responsibilities have been identified and agreed with the agencies involved.

(AQW 14322/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am satisfied that Rivers Agency co-operated as well as could be expected with other government agencies and local councils given the nature and speed of the flooding event. Intensive short duration rainfall over urban areas is exceptionally challenging as it causes flooding to develop before it is possible to mobilise any meaningful response. There is however still scope to improve further the response to flooding in respect of the resources deployed to assist the public on the ground and the integration and coordination between the agencies involved. This issue, along with clarity on roles and responsibilities for all agencies involved, is something the Rivers Agency has been working on and the active role that Belfast City Council played in distributing sandbags during the flooding event is welcomed. I am hopeful the current report commissioned by the Executive as a response to the flood event and being produced by the Government's Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit will highlight the need for all responders to work closely together.

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the (i) criteria; (ii) assessment process; and (iii) business case used to determine Ballykelly as the location of her Department's new headquarters.

(AQW 14338/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In relation to the decision to relocate to Ballykelly, there were a number of steps taken before reaching my final decision. The first stage in the process was to develop a long list of potential locations. The list was taken from the new Regional Development Strategy. Using the 23 local government districts my officials scored each against a defined set of criteria. This included 9 different socio-economic factors considering such things as unemployment levels, deprivation and earnings levels, as well as practical considerations such as the number of public sector and civil service jobs already sited in the area.

The top two areas in this analysis were both in the North West. I made my decision to relocate to Ballykelly based on two further factors namely the availability of the Executive- owned site at Shackleton Barracks and the availability of buildings on that site which could potentially be converted to office accommodation. Using this site and the buildings available has the potential to reduce the cost of this relocation from the £26m that is the estimated cost of a new build.

I have asked my officials to provide me with a business case that outlines the options for relocating my Departmental headquarters to Ballykelly. The business case will consider such issues as value for money and potential savings.

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, excluding Ballykelly, to list the locations assessed and evaluated for her Department's headquarters.

(AQW 14340/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In reaching my decision on the location for the DARD Headquarters my officials considered all relevant Executive strategies and policies and developed a long list of potential locations. The agreed long list of potential locations was made up of the 23 areas outlined in the Regional Development Strategy: Shaping Our Future. Each of these 23 local government districts were then against a defined set of criteria.

Table 1: Long-list of Potential Locations for the future DARD HQ

Antrim	Coleraine	Limavady
Ards	Cookstown	Lisburn
Armagh	Craigavon	Newry & Mourne
Ballymena	Derry	Newtownabbey
Banbridge	Down	North Down
Belfast	Dungannon	Omagh
Carrickfergus	Fermanagh	Strabane
Castlereagh	Larne	

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what private sector design and build project options were assessed and evaluated prior to Ballykelly being selected for the new headquarters.

(AQW 14343/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have asked my officials to produce a business case detailing the options for a new headquarters on the site at Ballykelly. This will include a procurement strategy which will inform the most appropriate mode of delivery.

The Department will seek advice from Central Procurement Division, in DFP to inform the options within the procurement strategy.

Slurry Tanks

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the connection between the rising number of farm deaths and the changes in scale, size, and capacity of, and regulations on, slurry tanks.

(AQW 14344/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) has reported that 6 deaths associated with slurry tanks have occurred in the last 10 years. However, there is no association between the deaths and changes in scale, size, and capacity of, and regulations on, slurry tanks.

The risk from inhalation of slurry gasses when slurry is mixed, rather than the slurry tanks, poses the greatest threat to farmers. Slurry gas is invisible and heavier than air and in high concentrations its effect is to render any person who is exposed unconscious almost immediately.

Farm Modernisation Programme

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department will consider including safety measures at slurry tank mixing and emptying points within the third tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme.
(AQW 14395/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As you are aware I launched Tranche 3 of the Farm Modernisation Programme on 4th September. The eligible items included in this tranche were consulted on with Industry representatives and a number of items whilst not specific to slurry tanks were added under the enhanced occupational safety and business efficiency.

If there is a further tranche of the FMP we will consult with stakeholders on safety items which could be included specifically in relation to slurry tank mixing.

However Safety equipment is only part of the solution to creating a safe working environment for farmers and their families. The recent tragic events only confirm my belief that Health and Safety awareness must be incorporated into the day to day activities of the entire farm family. I am keen that my department develops a new health and safety short course directed towards the farming family. My Department is working closely with HSENI to progress this as quickly as possible.

Forest Service: Fire Breaks

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how often do the Forest Service maintain the fire breaks in its forest estate.
(AQW 14418/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Forest Service manages the risk of fire to forests through its Emergency Fire Plan which was developed in co-operation with the NI Fire and Rescue Service. Fire breaks form one component of the management of risk.

The most effective fire breaks identified on Forest Service land tend to be natural features such as rivers and streams and these are not maintained. Additionally, forest roads provide a man-made fire break and are also identified as a protection measure, with maintenance carried out in line with routine road maintenance requirements. Occasionally, fire traces which have vegetation removed may be utilised as fire breaks although these traces are normally a temporary measure and are not maintained.

Unfortunately, many of these fire breaks proved ineffective during the gorse fires of May 2011 due to the abnormal conditions caused by two very cold winters, a prolonged dry spell and very strong winds with reports of fires jumping county roads. I acknowledge the hard work, dedication and professionalism of NI Fire and Rescue staff and my staff in Forest Service who worked in close cooperation to reduce the potential for further damage to property during these very difficult and dangerous fire incidents.

Fishing: Data Collection

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the observers involved in the testing of Area 7a were withdrawn from the Sentinel Fishery on 7 September 2012 when it had been agreed that they would remain in position until 15 September 2012.
(AQW 14419/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department and AFBI were approached by industry to have a data collection project that would involve 3 vessels fishing for a week. The agreed objectives were (1) to target cod with semi-pelagic gear to be able to compare catch rates to that previously observed and (2) to determine whether there was a higher than previously observed abundance of older fish.

The 3 vessels were each given authorisation letters covering a 3 week period to enable them to participate in the project. This was done to ensure that the fishing trips could be undertaken at the time the skippers judged was best to do so.

By 7th September the 3 vessels involved had each been on 2 fishing trips involving more than 20 fishing/observer days. DARD and AFBI were unable to allocate any more resources to this project which had already exceeded the time anticipated and suggested by industry. AFBI has confirmed that it has more than sufficient information to address both project objectives.

Fishing: Days at Sea

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to resolve the problem of a lack of days at sea for the Portavogie fishing fleet in the Clyde (west coast) fishery.
(AQW 14420/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under the Cod Recovery Plan Member States are allocated an amount of fishing effort that can be taken in each sea area. This year due to a change in fishing patterns much more effort than usual has been expended by Scottish and local vessels in the West of Scotland. If the same amount of effort is expended in the second half of the year as was expended in

the first half we would greatly exceed our effort allowance and would face a reduction in our effort allocation for 2013/14. The reduction might be greater than a one for one reduction depending on the extent of any effort overshoot.

Officials met with industry representatives in July 2012 to discuss possible options for managing fishing effort in the West of Scotland for the remainder of the year. A number of options were discussed but all would have created difficulties for certain parts of the fleet. The option that was introduced should benefit the Portavogie fleet to a greater extent than the others considered. This option allocated the remaining effort to those vessels that normally fish in the West of Scotland during the autumn and winter. The allocation was on a flat rate basis of 15 days per eligible vessel.

The options for acquiring additional effort are very limited and that is why the focus is on trying to live within our allocation. However we are trying to secure spare effort from other Member States. The English fleet also has some spare effort that we can use. Our share of any additional effort will only be in proportion to our overall share of West of Scotland effort which is 20%.

We can't make a decision on changing allocations until we are able to assess the effect of the restricted allocation that was introduced in August. Officials expect to be able to discuss this with the industry on 2nd October.

Fishing: Days at Sea

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the methodology used in determining the allocation of fifteen days at sea for fishermen on the Clyde (west coast) fishery.
(AQW 14422/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The table presented below details the methodology that was used to allocate 15 days at sea to those vessels in our fleet that normally fish in the West of Scotland from August to February 2012/13.

	Kilowatt days
NI TR2 2012 Basic Allocation	593170
NI TR2 Total Available Buy back	197723
NI Transfer to TR2 from NI TR1	38077
Total TR2 Available	828970
NI TR2 Used to 31st July (estd.)	540000
Remaining effort available (Aug-Jan)	288970
Power of NI WoS TR2 Fleet (Kilowatts)	(18526)
Days at Sea per eligible TR2 Vessel	15.6

The maximum effort available to the prawn fleet (TR2 effort) in the West of Scotland comes from various sources such as, the basic annual allocation under the Cod Recovery Plan (basic allocation), effort that is "bought-back" through the adoption of cod conservation measures (buy-back), and spare effort not used by whitefish vessels (TR1 Effort). The remaining effort for use in the year is the maximum, less that amount used to date. The amount used at the end of July was an estimate as there is always some delay in the Administrations receiving log sheets and these being placed on our data systems. The amount of effort remaining in kilowatt days was then divided by the total vessel power (kilowatts) of all the vessels that fished in the West of Scotland between August and February 2011/12. An allocation of 15 days each was made on this basis.

Farm Safety

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the Farm Safety Partnership Action Plan.
(AQW 14426/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Farm Safety Partnership has agreed the following actions for 2012 -13:

Raising Awareness

- 60 Focus Farmers are delivering a short (5-10 minutes) health and safety message at the start of each visit to their farm. On average 3500 farmers visit focus farms each year.
- CAFRE is also delivering a short (5-10 minutes) health and safety message at training events and is distributing advisory leaflets prepared by HSENI.
- CAFRE is allocating space to HSENI for displays at the large scale Greenmount open days. This has included the Grassland Event in May and the recent Horticulture 2012 event. A further five events are planned.
- The UFU, in partnership with HSENI, is delivering health and safety presentations at UFU Regional Group meetings.
- The UFU focused on health and safety issues in the industry at its stand in Balmoral Show.
- The UFU is encouraging the insurance industry to offer discounts to farmers who have attended formal health and safety courses.
- The HSENI will deliver a health and safety awareness day for farmers.

Training

- DARD officials are currently developing a Health and Safety training programme for the farming family.
- HSENI has organised practical health and safety demonstrations at major regional agriculture shows.
- HSENI has worked with the organisers of regional agriculture shows regarding the safe operation of machinery during demonstrations and the safe handling of livestock.

Education

- CAFRE is ensuring health and safety is an integral part of provision within education programmes for those people entering the industry
- CAFRE is continuing to work with HSENI in carrying out inspections of farms where CAFRE students are placed for work experience.

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the level of income generated, during the 2011/12 financial year, for work carried out on behalf of the private sector by her Department's Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute at Newforge.

(AQW 14470/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Agri-food and Biosciences Institute generated £3,060,356 worth of revenue for work carried out on behalf of the private sector, during the 2011/12 financial year.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding is available for rural community groups that are celebrating centennial events associated with their institutions.

(AQW 14471/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Funding is available under Measure 3.3 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-13, Encouragement of Tourism Activities, for new festivals, which could conceivably include events of the kind mentioned, subject to a competitive application process. In order to qualify for funding, such festivals are required to demonstrate that they are open to the wider community. This measure is delivered in South Down by the Down Rural Area Partnership (DRAP).

DARD Headquarters: New Posts

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many new posts will be created as a result of moving her Department's headquarters to Ballykelly.

(AQW 14473/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: One of the main reasons for relocating my Departmental Headquarters is to ensure a more equitable spread of high quality public sector jobs across all of the north. It is too early in the process to speculate whether there will be any new posts created, however this relocation will provide greater employment and career progression opportunities for people in the North-West.

People currently living in the North-West who are working in Civil Service posts in the Greater Belfast area will be afforded the opportunity of taking up posts closer to home and will in future be able to go for promotion with a prospect of being able to remain in a location in the North-West.

Furthermore, the NICS Terms and Conditions of Employment also ensure that staff in non-mobile grades do not have to move to a new post if it is an unreasonable distance from their current work location. My Department does not expect all the staff currently in those posts to transfer to Ballykelly and so this may open up some employment opportunities for people living in the North-West. At this stage it is not possible to try to quantify the numbers involved.

Tree Planting

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to plant more trees.

(AQW 14483/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I remain committed to the policy of expanding tree cover from the current 8% to 12% of land area. To achieve this, my Department encourages tree planting by providing financial support from the Rural Development Programme through the Woodland Grant Scheme and agri-environment schemes.

Forest Service provide advice for farmers to help them identify suitable areas for planting which will integrate and complement their existing farming activities. Forest Service also publishes press articles and advisory information aimed at encouraging farmers to plant more trees.

Forest Service acknowledges that the current level of planting is insufficient to achieve 12% woodland cover by the middle of this century. To encourage an increased rate of planting, my Department, in consultation with stakeholders will explore ways to revise the nature of support for tree planting in the context of CAP reform and the draft Rural Development Regulation.

Hedgerows

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to encourage farmers to grow and maintain hedgerows.

(AQW 14484/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department recognises the importance of well-managed hedges in our landscape, which provide food and shelter for wildlife and act as a barrier to livestock.

All farmers who receive direct payments, such as Single Farm Payment, contribute to maintaining hedgerows by meeting Cross-Compliance standards and keeping their land in good agricultural and environmental condition which includes requirements for cutting, retention and maintenance of hedges.

Agri-environment participants go beyond the minimum cross-compliance standards by managing hedges for wildlife and planting hedges by carrying out field boundary restoration.

To manage hedges for wildlife Agri-environment Scheme participants are encouraged to maintain a variety of hedge heights, widths and shapes to provide an invaluable habitat for wildlife, cut a hedge no more than once in two years, and leave a 1m uncultivated strip as a buffer from farming operations from the edge of the field boundary.

Scheme participants are encouraged to plant new hedges through payments in return for field boundary restoration. Restored hedges are required to have a mix of native hedge and tree plant species and must be protected from grazing animals and weeds. All hedge restoration and planting must follow the exact line of an original boundary. Agri-environment scheme participants restore over 500 km of hedgerows annually.

Woodland Cover

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that one of the reasons for relocating the Forest Service headquarters to Fermanagh is because 15 percent of Fermanagh is already forested, and that this represents 38 percent of all forests managed by the Forest Service, how these percentages will change when her Department meets its aim to double the area of tree cover over the next fifty years.

(AQW 14490/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Forestry Strategy aims to increase woodland cover to 12% of land area. Since this increase is likely to take place on land with limited agricultural potential, the table below illustrates how such an increase would look, by county, assuming that expansion takes place on 20% of surface water gley soils with poor and impeded drainage (based on the soil survey published by Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute) and excluding land over 300 metres elevation and sites designated for environmental conservation which are unsuitable for tree planting.

County	Current woodland cover as percentage of land area	Estimated increase in woodland cover as percentage of land area
Fermanagh	15	23
Derry	9	12
Tyrone	8	13
Antrim	6	11
Armagh	5	12
Down	4	5
Average	8	12

Any change in the relative percentage of Forest Service and non Forest Service woodland will depend upon how much of the new planting occurs on Departmental land and how much is planted by farmers and landowners.

The current area of Forest Service woodland in County Fermanagh as a percentage of all Forest Service woodland is 30%, rather than the 38% which I stated in my earlier correspondence with you.

Forest Service Headquarters: Relocation

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a breakdown, by grade, of the 61 Forest Service posts based in Belfast that will be moving to Fermanagh as a result of the relocation of Forest Service headquarters.

(AQW 14491/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are currently 61 posts based in Belfast, however it is now expected that over time 57 of these posts will transfer to the new HQ in Fermanagh. This reduction is a result of a review which separated out headquarters functions from operational functions associated with eastern forests.

The breakdown of the 57 posts is as follows:

Grade	No of posts
Chief Executive	1
Accountant (Deputy Principal)	1
Administrative Assistant	3
Administrative Officer	10
Deputy Principal	5
Director PPTO (Grade 7)	2
Director Grade 7	2
Executive Officer I	2
Executive Officer II	8
Forest Officer Grade III	3
Forest Officer I	3
Forest Officer II	3
Director Forest Operations Grade 6	1
Mapper	4
Personal Secretary	1
PTO Graphic Designer	1
Senior Mapper	1
Staff Officer (Accountant)	1
Staff Officer	5
Grand Total	57

Forest Service: Non-industrial Jobs

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many non-industrial Forest Service jobs are based in each county.

(AQW 14492/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The number of non-industrial Forest Service jobs based in each county is as follows:

Co Antrim	61
Co Fermanagh	17
Co Down	9
Co Derry	8

Wild Animals: Circuses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to introduce legislation to ban the use of wild animals in circuses.

(AQW 14498/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As stated in my previous answer to you, while I have no immediate plans to introduce a ban on the use of wild animals in circuses it is a matter that I am keeping under review. I have asked my officials to continue to monitor developments in Britain regarding the proposed licensing system, and eventual ban, announced by Minister Jim Paice earlier this year. I also want to examine developments in the south of Ireland, and to take account of legal rulings in Europe.

As I said in my earlier response I would also want to engage fully with circus operators and welfare organisations. With this in mind I hope to meet the Born Free Foundation to discuss the issue with them in the near future.

Farms: Gas Detectors

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department can provide financial assistance for farmers to install gas detectors to warn them of danger when they are mixing slurry.

(AQW 14531/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There is no financial assistance for gas detectors currently available. Current HSENI advice on pocket sized meters to measure slurry gases is that whilst they may be a useful guide as to the level of gases in the immediate area, as gas concentrations rise so quickly at the start of mixing this device may not give adequate warning or time to escape. Therefore HSENI recommend breathing apparatus with its own air supply and that such work is best left to fully trained competent contractors.

If there is a further tranche of the FMP we will consult with stakeholders on safety items which could be included specifically in relation to slurry tank mixing and will consider if they can be financed under this Programme.

However Safety equipment is only part of the solution to creating a safe working environment for farmers and their families. The recent tragic events only confirm my belief that Health and Safety awareness must be incorporated into the day to day activities of the entire farm family. I am keen that my department develops a new health and safety short course directed towards the farming family. My Department is working closely with HSENI to progress this as quickly as possible.

Farms: Gas Detectors

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether there are any plans to make installing gas detectors a specific requirement when building new slurry tanks.

(AQW 14532/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: New slurry tanks must be built with two outside mixing points; safety gang slats; and incorporate as much ventilation as possible to the tank with at least a door at each end of the building.

This facilitates a safe system of work and the Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) encourages all farmers to develop and follow a safe system of work.

HSENI also advise that gas detection monitors/meters are not a substitute for a safe system of work. Using a meter at the start of mixing as a safety measure is no use as the slurry gas concentration rises so quickly it is dangerous to remain in the building and a meter will not give adequate warning or time to escape. At the start of mixing slurry gas concentration rises and readings above 500 parts per million are very common in livestock buildings during tank mixing. Such levels will render most monitors ineffective.

HSENI has published guidance on working safely with slurry and on slurry gas detection monitors. This is available on its website www.hseni.gov.uk

Farms: Gas Detectors

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the need for firms supplying slatts or dealers supplying slurry tanks to be required to include gas detectors.

(AQW 14533/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: New slurry tanks must be built with two outside mixing points; safety gang slats; and incorporate as much ventilation as possible to the tank with at least a door at each end of the building.

This facilitates a safe system of work and the Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) encourages all farmers to develop and follow a safe system of work.

HSENI also advise that gas detection monitors/meters are not a substitute for a safe system of work. Using a meter at the start of mixing as a safety measure is no use as the slurry gas concentration rises so quickly it is dangerous to remain in the building and a meter will not give adequate warning or time to escape. At the start of mixing slurry gas concentration rises and readings above 500 parts per million are very common in livestock buildings during tank mixing. Such levels will render most monitors ineffective.

HSENI has published guidance on working safely with slurry and on slurry gas detection monitors. This is available on its website www.hseni.gov.uk

Farm Modernisation Scheme: Gas Detectors

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether gas detection systems could be included in farm modernisation schemes.

(AQW 14534/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As you are aware I launched Tranche 3 of the Farm Modernisation Programme on 4th September. The eligible items included in this tranche were consulted on with Industry representatives and a number of items, whilst not specific to slurry tanks, were added under the enhanced occupational safety and business efficiency.

If there is a further tranche of the FMP we will consult with stakeholders on safety items which could be included specifically in relation to slurry tank mixing. HSENI advice on pocket sized meters to measure slurry gases is that whilst they may be a useful guide as to the level of gases in the immediate area, as gas concentrations rise so quickly at the start of mixing this device may not give adequate warning or time to escape.

However Safety equipment is only part of the solution to creating a safe working environment for farmers and their families. The recent tragic events only confirm my belief that Health and Safety awareness must be incorporated into the day to day activities of the entire farm family. I am keen that my department develops a new health and safety short course directed towards the farming family. My Department is working closely with HSENI to progress this as quickly as possible.

Farm Quality Assurance Scheme: Gas Detectors

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether gas detectors could be a Farm Quality Assurance requirement.

(AQW 14535/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Farm Quality Assurance Scheme is a voluntary industry funded scheme managed by the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) and as such, my Department has no remit in this scheme.

The specific requirements of such voluntary schemes are determined by the respective Scheme Standard Setting Committees. However, as I am sure you would agree, there is no substitute for safe working practices on all farms, whether in assurance schemes or not. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is the appropriate authority in this regard and its website includes good guidelines on safe farm working.

DARD Headquarters: Civil Servants

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of civil servants expected to move to the new departmental headquarters in Ballykelly to occupy (i) full-time permanent posts; and (ii) temporary posts.

(AQW 14538/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: It is not possible to say how many civil servants may choose to move. The Department has currently around 800 permanent posts in its offices at Dundonald House and Hydebank, which will be affected by the relocation of the new headquarters at Ballykelly. It is not possible at this point to predict how many temporary posts may exist at the time of relocation.

DARD Headquarters: Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of the expected cost of providing new buildings and equipment for the new departmental headquarters at Ballykelly; and whether this has been provided for in the estimates.

(AQW 14539/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The estimated cost of providing modern office accommodation for headquarters staff is £26m. It follows that by using the Executive-owned site, and utilising the buildings on the site, there is potential to reduce that cost significantly.

I have asked my officials to produce a business case detailing the options available at Ballykelly. The final cost of the project will be dependent upon the agreed configuration.

Farm Safety Partnership: Website

Mrs Dobson asked Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration her Department has given to creating a website for the Farm Safety Partnership and publication of associated documentation or making the information available on an existing website.

(AQW 14570/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: All documentation relating to promotion and advice regarding health and safety issues on farms is available on the Health and Safety Executive NI (HSENI) website. My Department, as part of the Farm Safety Partnership, is considering how the information currently available can be developed to reflect more fully the work of the Partnership. We are also considering opportunities to develop further links with the HSENI site for farmers using the DARD website.

Aspergillosis

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the scale of the problem of aspergillosis.

(AQW 14656/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Aspergillosis is the name given to a wide variety of diseases caused by infection by fungi of the genus *Aspergillus*. The most common cause of such disease is *Aspergillus fumigatus* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aspergillus_fumigatus which may grow in compost, damp and mouldy feeding or bedding material such as hay or straw.

Currently in the North low numbers of cases of aspergillosis are diagnosed annually by the AFBI Veterinary Laboratories, usually single figures.

There is no evidence that the disease levels are significant or rising.

Laying Hens Directive

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the level of compliance with the regulations banning the use of battery cages for laying hens.

(AQW 14673/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Egg producers in the north of Ireland are now fully compliant with the requirements of Council Directive 99/74/EC (the Laying Hens Directive), as are those in the rest of Ireland and Britain.

DARD Headquarters: Benefits to North-west

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of how much the North West will benefit economically from moving the departmental headquarters to Ballykelly,

(AQW 14683/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The North West region will benefit from this project in a number of ways.

As well as the construction jobs supported through the refit of the accommodation at the site, local businesses and suppliers in the area will benefit from a larger customer base. The new headquarters will need to be serviced, with functions such as cleaning, catering and security services which will impact on employment in the area. I will also ensure that the development of the site benefits the local community – how that will be met will be included in the business case but I envisage, for example, my Department being able to open up its conference rooms for community use.

This relocation will also open up employment and promotion opportunities and ensure greater accessibility to DARD services for those living in the region.

I believe that this relocation to Ballykelly, taken with the wide distribution across the region of other DARD premises, emphasises that DARD is a Department that promotes regional economic re-balancing and is committed to the sustainability of rural communities.

As you will appreciate, quantifying these benefits will not be easy. I have directed my Permanent Secretary to provide me with a business case which will consider the options available to accommodate the DARD headquarters at Ballykelly. This business case will consider in more detail the benefits, economic and otherwise, of the relocation.

Animal Welfare

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what efforts are being made to introduce a single point of contact to report acts of animal cruelty or other animal welfare issues.

(AQW 14723/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As I advised you during Oral Questions on Monday 24 September 2012, I have recently discussed the issue of a single point of contact for animal welfare matters with the Chief Constable. The USPCA have also raised the matter with me at a meeting earlier this year as they believed that members of the public were not always sure of the best point of contact, given the respective roles of the PSNI, DARD and Councils in animal welfare matters and rural and wildlife crime.

As I said in my reply to you, I think that one single point of contact would be very helpful. However, it will take time to discuss the matter with Councils and the PSNI and the staffing and financial implications, as well as operational matters, will need to be carefully explored.

In the meantime, I can assure you that we have done much work to date in promoting the fact that there are now 5 Council appointed Animal Welfare Officers who are doing sterling work across the north of Ireland.

Information on the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 along with the contact numbers for my Department, Council Animal Welfare Officers and the PSNI can be found on the NIDirect website and on Council websites.

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the relocation of her Department's headquarters, whether her previous statement that none of the 800 civil servants would be forced to move to Ballykelly applies to all staff across all grades and specialisms.

(AQW 14864/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have said publically that I do not want to see any existing staff forced to move. I recognise that relocation could cause some problems for some of the existing staff and I will take the time that we have to develop and implement change. That can include looking at more flexible working, and doing things differently including optimising the use of ICT. Staff have rights and responsibilities under their existing contracts. Those rights will be honoured. I expect that the key element in all of this will be to work with the trade unions in the time ahead. We will continue that dialogue until 2015.

I do not expect that existing members of staff will be forced to move but it may not be possible in all situations.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Performing Arts

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department is taking to ensure that small and medium sized enterprises within the performing arts sector of our creative industries are supported in making the transition into established production companies which are able to fulfil their export potential, and to prevent talented individuals within these groups leaving Northern Ireland for better paid opportunities elsewhere.

(AQW 13736/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The Arts Council has a range of programmes to which emerging drama companies and actors can apply. These include the Small Grants Programme, Lottery Project Funding for organisations as well as the various strands of the Support for Individual Artists Programme.

In addition the Creative Industries Innovation Fund can offer support to theatre companies and other creative enterprises where they demonstrate innovation through people via:

- Investment in the development of exceptional talents
- Encouragement of entrepreneurial activity and of an enterprise culture
- Creative talents in traditional industries
- Internationalisation of talent by drawing talented people and resources back to the region; exposing local talent to new international markets and showcasing the creative industries to develop the region's image and brand.

Boxing: Sectarianism

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide details of the investigation into the allegations of sectarianism by Sandy Row Boxing Club; and when she expects this to be completed.

(AQW 13745/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In 2011 Sport NI investigated allegations of sectarianism within boxing in the north of Ireland that were raised by Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC) with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). As part of this process, Sport NI met with SRABC and the governing body for boxing, the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council (UPBC). The purpose of these meetings was to explore the possibility and practicalities of implementing an '8 Point Plan' proposed by SRABC as a means of addressing its concerns. As a result of these discussions the UPBC agreed to implement, as far as practicable, the '8 Point Plan'. The Sport NI investigation was completed last year on the understanding that the UPBC would move forward on that basis.

Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support her Department has offered to Sandy Row Boxing Club in light of the allegations of sectarianism in the sport.

(AQW 13746/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department's Officials have met with Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC) to discuss the club's areas of concern. They have also discussed the matter with the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) and encouraged both parties to engage to seek a satisfactory resolution. My Department, through Sport NI, has also worked with the IABA and SRABC to implement the proposals in the club's '8-Point Strategy for the Reform of Boxing'.

Furthermore, DCAL, through Sport NI, is developing a new boxing strategy initiative, the aim of which is to assist sport to promote inclusivity, address any issues of inequality and ensure that anyone who wishes to take part in boxing at participative and competitive levels has the opportunity to do so.

Boxing: Investment

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures will be taken to ensure that the recently announced investment in boxing clubs will be used to benefit boxing clubs in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13752/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The recently announced investment in boxing clubs in the north of Ireland will be administered and managed by Sport NI.

Any awards made through the programme will specifically target the needs of individual clubs either through the provision of equipment for training and competition, or capital works carried out at premises used by clubs.

Minority Sports

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the success of athletes from Northern Ireland in the Olympics and Paralympics, whether a strategy is being, or has been, developed to support and encourage participation in minority sports.

(AQW 13753/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither my Department nor Sport NI recognises the term “minority sports”. DCAL has, however, in association with Sport NI, already developed a strategy to support and encourage participation in sport as a whole across the north of Ireland. Sport Matters, the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019, recognises the diverse nature, size and needs of different sports and sets out Government’s commitment to promote sport in general and to support the governing bodies of all recognised sports. I am continuing to consider options in this regard.

Minority Sports

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what monies have been allocated to minority sports and their governing bodies in each of the last five years.

(AQW 13754/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither my Department nor Sport NI recognises the term “minority sports”. It is therefore not possible to provide the information requested.

Boxing: Investment

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether a portion of the recently announced investment in boxing will be used to develop and establish boxing in working class Protestant areas.

(AQW 13755/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that decisions on the distribution of funding will be taken on the basis of identified boxing needs. Sport NI are currently carrying out an exercise to establish boxing’s needs in the north, including those in working class Protestant areas.

Re-imaging Communities

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the next round of Re-Imaging Communities funding will be available from the Arts Council.

(AQW 13764/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council applied to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) for funding to build upon the key successes of the Re-Imaging Programme.

The Arts Council has advised that it recently received confirmation of this funding and it is expected that the programme will re-open later this year. The re-opening of the programme will be publicised in the media, the Arts Council’s e-newsletter and its website.

DCAL: Freedom of Information

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, for each of the last three financial years, (i) the number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests received by her Department; (ii) the number of FOI requests responded to within the 20 working day requirement; (iii) the number of FOI requests that have taken longer than 20 working days to complete; and (iv) the number of FOI requests which were refused, broken down by the reason for refusal.

(AQW 13770/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The information requested is published in a series of FOI Annual Reports which are on the basis of calendar years, not financial years. The reports can be accessed from the OFMDFM website at:

http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/index/improving-public-services/information_management_and_central_advisory_branch/annual-reports-and-statistics.htm

The Member should note that statistics for 2011 are provided on a quarterly basis and cannot be seen as validated until the publication of the 2011 FOI Annual Report.

DCAL: Executive Papers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) how many draft Executive papers, for approval by the Minister, have not yet been approved; (ii) the date the Minister received each paper; and (iii) the subject matter of each paper

(AQW 13788/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Boxing: Funding

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what the Minister expects will be achieved through the recently announced funding for boxing clubs.

(AQW 13809/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The main aim of the Boxing Investment Programme is to help the sport of boxing address the strategic facility and equipment needs of boxing clubs in the north of Ireland.

It is anticipated that the funding will help the sport to improve participation opportunities across the community and contribute more effectively to the Sport Matters Strategy.

Portavoe Reservoir: Disabled Car Parking

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Departments plans to review disabled parking provision at Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 13812/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: NI Water has advised the Department of a schedule of remedial works that will close particular reservoirs, including Portavoe, to DCAL permit holders for an estimated 12 months. Consequently the Department has suspended the review of disabled car parking until NI Water has undertaken and completed the remedial works.

Lough Neagh: Salmon

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of salmon caught on Lough Neagh in each of the last five years, broken down by month.

(AQW 13817/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A small number of fishermen on Lough Neagh are licensed by DCAL for the capture of salmon and freshwater fish. Catches of salmon are monitored through a carcass tagging scheme and the numbers declared per month are detailed below:

Year	June	July	August	Total
2007	0	41	7	48
2008	0	43	13	56
2009	0	0	0	0
2010	0	6	3	9
2011	2	26	8	36

Bushmills Research Station: Salmon

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any salmon detected by the Bushmills Research Station in the last 9 months showed signs of net marks.

(AQW 13818/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the past 9 months two salmon passing through the Bushmills Salmon Research Station were detected with physical stress marks on their bodies.

It cannot be confirmed that these were net marks.

Boxing: Funding

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the criteria that will be used to allocate the recently announced funding to boxing clubs.

(AQW 13819/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Boxing Investment Programme is still at a developmental stage; however, I can confirm that decisions on the distribution of funding will be taken on the basis of identified needs. It is anticipated that eligibility and assessment criteria will be consistent with other Sport NI programmes.

Indoor Athletics

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has any intention of developing an indoor athletics area.

(AQW 13828/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are a number of indoor athletics areas currently available in the north of Ireland. Sport NI, which is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport, provided £2.5 million towards the development of a competition standard indoor athletics facility at the Odyssey Arena which hosted the Irish Indoor Athletics Championships in February 2012. In

addition to this, facilities are also available at the Meadowbank Sports Arena in Magherafelt and the Sports Institute at the University of Ulster campus in Jordanstown. I have no plans at present to develop further indoor athletics areas.

Pipe Bands: Funding

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding is available for pipe bands.
(AQW 14308/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding in support of bands in the north of Ireland is disbursed through the Arts Council and the Ulster Scots Agency.

The Arts Council's Musical Instruments for Bands Programme provides grants from £500 to £5k for the purchase of instruments. This scheme is available to bands based in the north of Ireland, which are formally constituted.

Funding is also awarded by the Arts Council through its lottery funded Small Grants Programme for band related activity (which includes equipment and tuition). For items over £10,000 funding is available from its Equipment Programme

Bands can also apply for funding for musical tuition from the Ulster-Scots Agency through its Financial Assistance Scheme.

Boxing Clubs

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a list of boxing clubs, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 14366/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither the Department nor Sport NI retains information on boxing clubs, broken down by constituency. This would be a matter for the governing body of the sport, the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council.

Boxing: Funding

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the boxing clubs which received funding from the Sports Council in each of the last five years.
(AQW 14367/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The list below details the boxing clubs who have received funding from Sport NI in each of the last five years:

2007/2008 Financial Year

Name of Club	Total (£)
Bishop Kelly ABC	9,780
Dromore ABC	7,500
Oliver Plunkett ABC	6,920
St Agnes ABC	8,650

2008/2009 Financial Year

Name of Club	Total (£)
Holy Trinity ABC	10,000
Keady ABC	9,900
Monkstown ABC	10,000
Saints ABC	8,920
Star ABC	7,821

2009/2010 Financial Year

Name of Club	Total (£)
All Saints ABC	8,000
Banbridge ABC	9,353
Cairn Lodge ABC	2,374
Ligoneil ABC	3,000
Lurgan ABC	9,487
Monkstown ABC	10,000

Name of Club	Total (£)
St Pauls ABC	9,540

2010/2011 Funding Year

Name of Club	Total (£)
Canal Amateur Boxing Academy	21,366
Castlereagh ABC	19,926
Derrylin ABC	8,959
Eastside ABC	30,000
Gleann ABC	16,722
Holy Family Boxing Club	24,344
Holy Trinity ABC	24,322
Immaculata ABC	29,395
Ligoneil ABC	28,826
Poleglass ABC	4,245
Monkstown ABC	13,898
Silverbridge ABC	1,700
St Pauls ABC	29,574

2011/2012 Funding Year

Name of Club	Total (£)
Canal Amateur Boxing Academy	2,299
Derrylin ABC	6,000
Saints ABC	4,980
St. John Bosco ABC	3,800

Boxing: International Competitions

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how boxers can compete for the UK at international events, such as the Olympics.

(AQW 14407/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the case of the Olympics, boxers can compete for and as part of Team GB and NI provided they are members of the British Amateur Boxing Association and are selected by the British Olympic Association through an International Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) approved qualification system. At World and European boxing championships, boxers can only compete for IABA affiliated national federations. In the case of the Commonwealth Games, boxers can only compete for countries/nations that are defined by and form part of the Commonwealth Games Federation.

Football Pitches: Drainage

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there are any grants available to help communities fix drainage problems on football pitches.

(AQW 14413/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of funding to sport in the north of Ireland and providing advice on grants that may be available, including those that might be used to help communities fix drainage problems on football pitches.

Sport NI does not currently have any grant programmes available that could help fix football pitch drainage problems. However, Sport NI's website, www.sportni.net/Funding, provides information on current funding programmes and also provides links to a range of other funders, including charitable trusts that may be able to assist communities in this regard.

Currach Racing

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding is available from her Department for the currach racing.

(AQW 14509/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI has responsibility for the distribution of funding to sport throughout the north of Ireland. Curragh racing is not currently recognised by Sport NI as a sporting activity, and is not therefore eligible to apply for Exchequer funding at this time.

DCAL: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many departmental staff are currently (i) suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations.

(AQW 14559/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The information requested in respect of DCAL staff is contained in the table below.

Number of DCAL Staff	
(i) suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations	0
(ii) not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations	1

Languages: First and Second

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide the most up-to-date statistical breakdown of all recorded first and second languages, including indigenous languages, minority ethnic languages, and sign language.

(AQW 14571/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department does not hold the information pertaining to languages in the format you have requested.

In the 2011/12 Continuous Household Survey my Department included a series of questions on language usage and knowledge of Irish and Ulster-Scots. Also included was a question on knowledge of Sign language. The results of the survey are currently being analysed and the figures will be available later this year.

The 2011 Census included a question on the two indigenous languages (Irish and Ulster-Scots). The statistics will be published within the next few months.

Culture Night Belfast 2012

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the success of Belfast's Cultural Night.

(AQW 14642/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: This event has become part of the cultural calendar giving the arts sector the opportunity to thank the public for subsidising the arts, by offering free events, and to celebrate and showcase the strength and quality of the arts in Belfast.

It is too early at this stage to give an accurate assessment of the success of Belfast's Cultural Night. However, the Arts Council has advised that over 220 artists and organisations participated in the event and that audience figures for the past 3 years have been in excess of 20,000.

River Bush: Anglers

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of anglers who used the River Bush; and (ii) the revenue generated as a result, between March and August in 2012.

(AQW 14717/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Anglers can purchase day tickets for the special stretches of the River Bush and the number of day tickets sold and the income generated is detailed below.

Year (March – August)	Number of day tickets sold	Income generated
2012	668	£15,554.50

It is not possible to confirm the numbers of anglers using the unrestricted stretches of the River Bush as these are covered by general angling licences and permits, which allow anglers to fish a range of waters.

Libraries: Stock Update

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the expenditure on updating library stocks in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14828/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI has informed me that its total spend on library stock in each of the last 3 years is as follows:

2009-2010	£3,376*
2010-2011	£3,460*

2011-2012	£4,146* (subject to audit)
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*Total to the nearest £'000

Department of Education

Post-primary Schools: Admissions

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the post primary schools which are unable to meet the 500 enrolment figure for years 8-12 due to the Department's capping of admissions at fewer than 100, broken down by (i) type of school; and (ii) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 14337/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): There are 58 post primary schools with an admissions number of fewer than 100, as detailed in table (1) below, broken down by type of school and Education and Library Board. Of these, the 21 schools listed in table (2) were fully or over subscribed with applications for admission to Year 8 in September 2012 and the number of pupils they could admit was restricted by their approved admission number.

Admissions numbers are derived from the enrolment number of a school which is a reflection of the physical capacity of the school. Where a school wishes to expand its capacity it can seek to do so through the normal Development Proposal process by which requests for significant changes to schools are considered. Where schools are oversubscribed with applications for admission they can request a temporary increase of the admissions number from the Department. In considering such requests, the Department takes account of any demographic pressures in the area and the availability of places in other school of the same educational category within reasonable travelling distance of the pupil's home address.

School's admissions and enrolment numbers do not include pupils with statements of special education need, or pupils admitted on appeal or pupils admitted through the Exceptional Circumstances Body.

Table 1

Management Type	Board	School
Controlled	North Eastern	Ballycastle High School
Controlled	North Eastern	Garvagh High School
Controlled	South Eastern	Nendrum College Comber
Controlled	South Eastern	The High School Ballynahinch
Controlled	South Eastern	Saintfield High School
Controlled	Southern	Aughnacloy College
Controlled	Southern	Drumglass High School Dungannon
Controlled	Southern	Fivemiletown High School
Controlled	Southern	Markethill High School
Controlled	Southern	Newry High School
Controlled	Southern	Newtownhamilton High School
Controlled	Southern	Rathfriland High School
Controlled	Western	Castlederg High School
Controlled	Western	Collegiate Grammar School Enniskillen
Controlled	Western	Lisnaskea High School
Controlled	Western	Omagh Academy
Vol Grammar	North Eastern	Dominican College Portstewart
Vol Grammar	South Eastern	St Patrick's Grammar School Downpatrick
Vol Grammar	Southern	St Louis Grammar School Kilkeel
Vol Grammar	Southern	St Joseph's Grammar School Donaghmore
Vol Grammar	Southern	The Royal School Dungannon
Vol Grammar	Western	Mount Lourdes Grammar School

Management Type	Board	School
Vol Grammar	Western	Portora Royal Enniskillen
Roman Catholic Maintained	Belfast	St Gemma's High School
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	Our Lady of Lourdes High School Ballymoney
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	St Colm's High School Magherafelt
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	St Joseph's College Coleraine
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	St Mary's College Ballymena
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	St Paul's College Coleraine
Roman Catholic Maintained	South Eastern	De La Salle Secondary School Downpatrick
Roman Catholic Maintained	South Eastern	St Colmcille's High School Crossgar
Roman Catholic Maintained	South Eastern	St Columbanus College Bangor
Roman Catholic Maintained	South Eastern	St Colman's High School Ballynahinch
Roman Catholic Maintained	Southern	St Brigid's High School Armagh
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	Dean Maguirc College Omagh
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Aidan's High School Derrylin
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Comhghall's College Enniskillen
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Eugene's High School Castlederg
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Eugene's College Rosslea
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Franchea's College Enniskillen
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St John's High School Dromore
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Joseph's College Enniskillen
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Mary's College Irvinestown
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Mary's High School, Belleek
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Patrick's High School Dungiven
Controlled Integrated	North Eastern	Crumlin Integrated College
Controlled Integrated	South Eastern	Priory College Holywood
Controlled Integrated	Southern	Brownlow College Craigavon
Grant Maintained Integrated	North Eastern	North Coast College Coleraine
Grant Maintained Integrated	North Eastern	Sperrin Integrated College Magherfelt
Grant Maintained Integrated	North Eastern	Ulidia Integrated College Carrickfergus
Grant Maintained Integrated	South Eastern	Blackwater Integrated College Downpatrick
Grant Maintained Integrated	South Eastern	Shimna Integrated College Newcastle
Grant Maintained Integrated	South Eastern	Strangford Integrated College
Grant Maintained Integrated	Southern	New-Bridge Integrated College Loughbrickland
Grant Maintained Integrated	Southern	Integrated College Dungannon
Grant Maintained Integrated	Western	Drumragh Integrated College Omagh
Grant Maintained Integrated	Western	Erne Integrated College Enniskillen

Table 2

Management Type	Board	School
Controlled	South Eastern	Nendrum College Comber
Controlled	South Eastern	Saintfield High School
Controlled	Southern	Newtownhamilton High School

Management Type	Board	School
Controlled	Southern	Rathfriland High School
Controlled	Western	Collegiate Grammar School Enniskillen
Controlled	Western	Omagh Academy
Vol Grammar	North Eastern	Dominican College Portstewart
Vol Grammar	South Eastern	St Patrick's Grammar School Downpatrick
Vol Grammar	Southern	St Louis Grammar School Kilkeel
Vol Grammar	Western	Mount Lourdes Grammar School
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	St Colm's High School Draperstown
Roman Catholic Maintained	North Eastern	St Paul's College Coleraine
Roman Catholic Maintained	South Eastern	St Columbanus College Bangor
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	Dean Maguirc College Omagh
Roman Catholic Maintained	Western	St Franchea's College Enniskillen
Grant Maintained Integrated	North Eastern	Sperrin Integrated College Magherfelt
Grant Maintained Integrated	North Eastern	Ulidia Integrated College Carrickfergus
Grant Maintained Integrated	South Eastern	Shimna Integrated College Newcastle
Grant Maintained Integrated	South Eastern	Strangford Integrated College
Grant Maintained Integrated	Southern	New-Bridge Integrated College Loughbrickland
Grant Maintained Integrated	Western	Drumragh Integrated College Omagh

Schools: Post-primary Preferences

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education under what circumstances would it be appropriate to allow families to change their school preferences in the knowledge that their children were unsuccessful in achieving a grammar school place.

(AQW 14369/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In most cases parents will not know which post-primary school has offered their child a place until they receive the placement letter on 25 May (2013 Transfer Procedure timetable). In the process parents are advised to nominate at least three post-primary schools - at least one of which should be a non-grammar school – and, assuming they do so, it is likely the pupil will have been placed in a school in accordance with stated parental choice. Should they wish to change their preference after placement they would have to approach the appropriate Education and Library Board for information about schools which still have places available, and an application to one of those schools would then be processed. If only one school was nominated on the Transfer Form by a parent and the application was unsuccessful, the appropriate Board would write to the parent and ask for additional preferences. If the parent asked to change their preference at this stage they would be advised that revised preferences would not be processed until after placement letters have issued.

In exceptional circumstances a change of preference can be accepted up to a specific date in May but a child not being selected by a grammar school would not be considered to be an exceptional circumstance.

Schools: Major Projects

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in relation to his statement on 25 June 2012, to detail on what date will each of the new schools open.

(AQW 14378/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My statement of 25 June 2012 gave approval for 18 major school projects to proceed. All these projects were identified as the highest priority projects following a rigorous selection process. The design and planning work still required on all these projects to enable them to reach tender approval /construction stage is a complex process which also involves a number of statutory approvals. As such, at this stage in the overall design process it is not possible to give definitive opening dates for any of these projects.

DE: Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of membership vacancies within the governance structures of each of his Department's non-Departmental Public Bodies, including the length of time each post has been vacant, and the projected timescale for filling each vacancy.

(AQW 14380/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

Non-Departmental Public Body	Number of Vacancies	Vacant From	Projected timescale for filling each vacancy
Belfast Education & Library Board	1 General (Teacher) Member 4 Councillor Members 1 General (Other) Member	September 2012 May 2011 February 2012	December 2012 Currently under review* Currently under review*
General Teaching Council	1	October 2010	April 2013
Council for Integrated Education	1 vacancy 1 vacancy 1 vacancy 1 vacancy	April 2005 April 2006 September 2009 May 2011	Currently under review*
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment	1 Council Member 1 Chair	July 2010 January 2011	December 2012 December 2012
North Eastern Education & Library Board	1 Councillor Member	May 2012	Currently under review*
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	5 Education & Library Board Members	January 2010	Currently under review*
Youth Council	1 vacancy 1 vacancy 1 vacancy 1 vacancy 1 vacancy 3 vacancies 1 vacancy	September 2005 March 2006 September 2006 December 2006 June 2007 January 2010 October 2010	Currently under review*

* The timescale for filling these vacancies is currently under review in the context of the timescale for the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority.

Schools: Uniform Grants

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary school pupils are in receipt of school uniform grants, broken down by (a) school type; and (b) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 14382/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of school uniform grants awarded by the Education and Library Boards to date in the current school year are set out in the following tables. The Boards have advised that, as they are currently processing a number of applications for the uniform grant, the figures are subject to change.

BELB

School Type	Number of Pupils
Controlled Primary	3,630
Maintained Primary	4,722
GrantMaintained Integrated Primary	180

School Type	Number of Pupils
Voluntary Grammar Preparatory Depts	4
Controlled Special Primary	248
Maintained Special Primary	64
Total Primary	8,848
Controlled PostPrimary	1,553
Maintained PostPrimary	2,988
GrantMaintained Integrated PostPrimary	582
Voluntary Grammar	713
Controlled Special PostPrimary	206
Maintained Special PostPrimary	95
Total Postprimary	6,137

NEELB

SCHOOL TYPE	Number of Pupils
Controlled Primary	5,442
Maintained Primary	2,208
GrantMaintained Integrated Primary	360
Voluntary Grammar Preparatory Depts	4
Controlled Special Primary	160
Maintained Special Primary	6
Total Primary	8,180
Controlled PostPrimary	2,303
Maintained PostPrimary	1,255
GrantMaintained Integrated PostPrimary	487
Voluntary Grammar	506
Controlled Special PostPrimary	191
Maintained Special PostPrimary	7
Total Postprimary	4,749

SEELB

SCHOOL TYPE	Number of Pupils
Controlled Primary	2,990
Maintained Primary	2,291
GrantMaintained Integrated Primary	81
Voluntary Grammar Preparatory Depts	0
Controlled Special Primary	179
Maintained Special Primary	0
Total Primary	5,541
Controlled PostPrimary	1,441
Maintained PostPrimary	1,432
GrantMaintained Integrated PostPrimary	262
Voluntary Grammar	431

SCHOOL TYPE	Number of Pupils
Controlled Special PostPrimary	205
Maintained Special PostPrimary	18
Total Postprimary	3,789

SELB

SCHOOL TYPE	Number of Pupils
Controlled Primary	2,875
Maintained Primary	6,308
GrantMaintained Integrated Primary	296
Voluntary Grammar Preparatory Depts	0
Controlled Special Primary	102
Maintained Special Primary	0
Total Primary	9,581
Controlled PostPrimary	1,278
Maintained PostPrimary	3,026
GrantMaintained Integrated PostPrimary	220
Voluntary Grammar	778
Controlled Special PostPrimary	84
Maintained Special PostPrimary	0
Total Postprimary	5,386

WELB

SCHOOL TYPE	Number of Pupils
Controlled Primary	2,192
Maintained Primary	6,168
GrantMaintained Integrated Primary	311
Voluntary Grammar Preparatory Depts	0
Controlled Special Primary	3
Maintained Special Primary	0
Total Primary	8,674
Controlled PostPrimary	839
Maintained PostPrimary	3,026
GrantMaintained Integrated PostPrimary	495
Voluntary Grammar	730
Controlled Special PostPrimary	262
Maintained Special PostPrimary	0
Total Postprimary	5,352

ALL ELBs

School Type	Number of Pupils
Controlled Primary	17,129
Maintained Primary	21,697
GrantMaintained Integrated Primary	1,228
Voluntary Grammar Preparatory Depts	8
Controlled Special Primary	692

School Type	Number of Pupils
Maintained Special Primary	70
Total Primary	40,824
Controlled PostPrimary	7,414
Maintained PostPrimary	11,727
GrantMaintained Integrated PostPrimary	2,046
Voluntary Grammar	3,158
Controlled Special PostPrimary	948
Maintained Special PostPrimary	120
Total Postprimary	25,413

Schools: Starting Age

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what consideration he has given regarding greater flexibility in the school starting age. (AQW 14437/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Currently the only provision in education legislation which allows for a child not to commence primary school upon reaching compulsory school age is under Article 16 of the Education (NI) Order 1996 which relates to young children of compulsory school age with Statements of Special Educational Needs.

The revised curriculum was introduced in schools on a phased basis from 2007 – 2010 and provides separately for Foundation Stage (P1-P2). The Foundation Stage is designed to allow teachers the freedom to reassert what has always been regarded as best practice i.e. that very young children should be allowed to learn at their own pace.

A key aspect of the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy is the transition from pre-school to the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum. During consultation on the draft Early Years Strategy reference to the school starting age attracted some interest. The draft Strategy acknowledges the flexibility provided by the Foundation Stage of the curriculum in providing a range of educational approaches to meet the needs of individual children who learn at a different pace and in differing ways

I am aware that we have one of the lowest school starting ages in Europe. Any change to the school starting age here would require a review of the content and structure of the revised curriculum.

I will study the comments made and issues raised during the Early Years Strategy consultation and I will finalise my proposals by November 2012 for an Early Years Education Strategy in line with my statement to the Assembly on 2 July 2012.

Schools: Physical Education

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what his Department is doing to encourage an increase in physical exercise in schools. (AQW 14487/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Physical Education is a compulsory part of the curriculum for all pupils at every Key Stage from age 4 to 16. Legislation governing the revised curriculum prevents the Department from prescribing the amount of time to be allocated to any particular subject within the curriculum. However, the Department has issued guidance to schools recommending a minimum of two hours Physical Education (PE) per week.

The Department of Education is further contributing towards participation in PE through its funding of the Curriculum Sports Programme. The programme aims to develop the general physical literacy skills of our youngest pupils through enjoyable PE activities and is being delivered in over 560 primary schools in the north of Ireland.

The Department is also supportive of DCAL's Sport Matters Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019. As a response to this strategy, the Department has committed to establishing a baseline for the number of pupils participating in a minimum of 2 hours quality PE per week. An online questionnaire was issued to all schools, with a view to developing this baseline information, and the responses have been analysed and will be published on the DE website in the near future.

Schools: Transport

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has had with Translink in relation to the school to home transportation of pupils who are allocated a place on privately contracted transport and who choose to attend after-school activities. (AQW 14496/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There have been no discussions with Translink in relation to the transportation of pupils who are allocated a place on privately contracted transport and who choose to attend after-school activities.

Education and Library Boards provide transport assistance in accordance with Department of Education Circular 1996/41 on School Transport. The Board determines the most suitable method of transport assistance for each pupil, taking into account available resources and this may involve pupils travelling on public transport, Board buses or privately contracted buses or taxis. The Board is only obliged to provide transport assistance that coincides with normal school hours and has no statutory obligation to pupils who attend after school activities. Pupils issued with sessional bus passes may travel on later public services. This is at the discretion of Translink and only where suitable public services are available. In all other cases it is a parental responsibility to organize transport for their children attending extra circular activities

Schools: Board Vacancies

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the schools which have vacancies on their Boards of Governors; and (ii) the nominating body under which each vacancy lies.

(AQW 14501/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: This information is not readily available. However, it is being requested from schools by the Education & Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Department. I will write to you with the information as soon as it is available.

Schools: Relationship and Sexuality Education

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education (i) whether the teaching of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is mandatory in primary schools; (ii) if not, whether he intends to make SRE mandatory in primary schools; (iii) if so, when will this take place; and (iv) what provision will be made for parents who do not wish their children to receive SRE at primary school.

(AQW 14513/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The revised curriculum aims to prepare young people better for all aspects of life and the Department recognises the importance of delivering appropriate age-related relationship and sexuality education within a clear values framework as a means of developing the child as a whole.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is an integral part of the revised curriculum in both primary and post-primary schools and must be delivered within schools in a sensitive manner which is appropriate to the age and understanding of pupils and to the ethos of the school.

RSE is an important element within the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding area of learning in the revised curriculum for primary schools. At primary level the focus is mainly on enabling pupils to understand how to sustain their health and develop their self esteem and self confidence.

The Department requires each school to have in place its own written policy on how it will address the delivery of RSE. A school's RSE policy should be subject to consultation with parents, and should be endorsed by a school's Board of Governors. It should show clear links with pastoral care and should set out the aims of the teaching programme.

If parents have any concerns relating to the teaching of RSE to their children, they should raise them with the school Principal.

Priorities for Youth

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to outline the rationale for his Department's policy that 90 percent of youth work resources should be focussed on 9 to 18 year olds, given the evidence that spending on early years is more effective in improving outcomes for young people.

(AQW 14554/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I recently launched the draft Priorities for Youth policy document for public consultation. The draft policy does not set funding limits for any age group.

The policy proposes that the age range for youth work provision will be 4 to 21 (with some limited provision for 22 – 25) and, within this, the priority age group will be 9 to 13 and 14 to 18. The level of funding allocated to youth providers, will be informed by a composite assessment of need at a local and regional level.

The proposed age ranges are in line with developmental needs and how these relate to the delivery of youth work during the journey from childhood, through adolescence, and into young adulthood. In the proposed priority age ranges, young people have more freedom, are thinking more independently and establishing their own personal values. High quality youth work can be particularly relevant to help and support young people as they go through these stages.

I recognise the value of investment in early years provision, and my Department invests over £200 million in education services for the 0 – 6 age range, including £120 million for Foundation Stage years and £80 million for pre-school provision and Sure Start.

Educational Psychologists: Referrals

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children referred to educational psychologists in each of the Education and Library Boards, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14555/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executives of the education and library boards have advised that the number of children referred to educational psychologists in each of the last three academic years is as follows:-

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
BELB	1,825	1,671	1,636
NEELB	1,534	1,571	1,714
SEELB	1,527	1,362	1,262
SELB	2,158	2,339	2,027
WELB	1,653	1,671	1,738

These figures include referrals for assessment at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (COP), reviews at Stage 3 of the COP, statutory assessments at Stage 4 of the COP and statutory reviews at Stage 5 of the COP.

Educational Psychologists: Referrals

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria for referral to education psychologists used by each Education and Library Board.

(AQW 14556/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executives of the education and library boards have confirmed that educational psychologists have regard to the Code of Practice for the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (COP) during consultations with schools about which children to refer at Stage 3 of the COP.

Prior to stage 3 referral, schools are required to provide evidence that they have conducted school based assessments of the child's needs and implemented education plan(s) at Stage 2 of the COP. During the review of the plan(s), schools also have to demonstrate that the child does not appear to be making adequate progress despite the school having put in place relevant and purposeful measures and having made reasonable adjustments.

If these actions have not met the individual needs of the child, then the school can consider referring the child to an educational psychologist.

Schools: Boards of Governors

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many appointments his Department has made to Boards of Governors in the (i) primary school and (ii) post-primary school sectors, in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 14563/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department makes direct appointments to the Boards of voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools. It has made appointments in each of the last 12 months as follows:

	(i) Primary schools 2	(ii) Post-primary schools 101
October	0	0
November	0	0
December	0	0
January	0	0
February	0	52
April	0	2
May	0	11
June	0	11
July	2	14
August	0	3
September	0	8

Schools: Asbestos

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the schools in each Education and Library Board area where asbestos is present, (ii) the assessment of the risk in each case and (iii) the action planned to remove all traces of asbestos from these schools to minimise risk to pupils and staff.

(AQW 14576/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Schools: Old Gransha Road Site, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has plans to sell any of the Old Gransha Road School site in Bangor.

(AQW 14579/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The site on the Old Gransha Road previously occupied by the old Gransha Boys High School has already been subject to the sale of approximately nine hectares of land to Bangor Grammar School for its new build project, which is currently in the construction phase. Following this sale the South Easter Education and Library Board retained just over four hectares.

At present, and subject to approvals, the SEELB is considering a proposal for two hectares to be considered as part of a 'land swap' in order for the Board to secure additional land beside Bangor Central IPS.

Should the land swap proceed the Board will then have only approximately two hectares still in its ownership. It is intended that this land will be disposed of through the normal processes set down by Lands and Property Services.

Hollywood Primary School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education when does he expect the new build for Hollywood Primary School to be approved.

(AQW 14582/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: While Hollywood Primary School will be disappointed that they were not included in my capital investment announcement to the Assembly on 25 June, this in no way implies that they will not be considered for funding at a later stage within the area planning process.

Area plans for Primary Schools will require scrutiny and public consultation. In the interim I will continue to examine the case for capital investment and expect to make a further announcement before the end of the calendar year. Proposals for a new school for Hollywood Primary will be considered alongside other new build propositions as part of any future announcement.

Bangor Grammar School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline the plans for Bangor Grammar School playing fields at Ballymacconnell Road, Bangor.

(AQW 14584/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Any plans for the future of Bangor Grammar School's playing fields are a matter for their owners, the school's Board of Governors.

Children and Young People's Strategy

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the ongoing partnership with Forest Service to deliver the 'Strategy for Children and Young People'.

(AQW 14600/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome any initiative that supports schools/teachers in the delivery of the curriculum and which makes learning interesting and fun for pupils. Giving pupils the opportunity to learn about our environment in a "hands on" way hopefully will inspire them to be protective of our environment and the world around us.

The revised curriculum provides pupils with the opportunity to learn about the environment through such areas as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which is included in the curriculum across all Key Stages. Through ESD, pupils explore issues such as environmental and climate change and the need to manage human impact on the environment. They will come to understand the interdependence of society, the economy and the environment; to develop respect for the needs of both present and future generations and to act towards promoting an improved environment.

I welcome the opportunity to work with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on such initiatives. My officials have met with Forestry officials to discuss the possible development of further opportunities to provide outdoor learning in a forest environment for schools and also to put in place arrangements for the Forest service to work directly with the Education and Library Boards Curriculum Advisory and Support Service to develop this further.

Post-primary Schools: Careers Advice

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to review (i) the availability; and (ii) the content of careers advice in post-primary education.

(AQW 14601/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The joint Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), Preparing for Success strategy, launched in 2009, stated that after five years and in line with good practice and policy, the Departments would commission its review. The published commitment to review the strategy is scheduled for 2014. There are no plans to review it before this date.

Careers provision in post-primary schools forms part of the statutory curriculum at Key Stage 3, where Career Management is a specific part of Employability within Learning for Life and Work. The statutory Minimum Content for Career Management states that, "Exploring Career Management provides opportunities for young people to investigate the changing concept of career which is moving away from the likelihood of a job for life to the expectation that individuals will experience several career changes and this will involve lifelong learning, updating knowledge and skills, self marketing and effective personal career planning."

Key Stage 4 provision builds on Key Stage 3, and the statutory Minimum Content for Employability at that stage states that pupils should be enabled to "develop a personal career plan based on relevant information and guidance."

The curriculum, including careers provision, was extensively revised prior to its phased introduction from 2007/08 and there are no plans to further review it at this time. Rather the focus is on giving teachers greater flexibility to determine the delivery of the revised curriculum in a way that best suits the needs of their pupils and allowing teachers to build on existing good practice across all curricular areas.

Schools work in partnership with the DEL's Careers Service. Each school's Partnership Agreement with the careers Service is reviewed annually to ensure the needs of pupils continue to be met.

Primary Schools: Modern Languages

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education whether there are any plans to introduce the compulsory teaching of languages to children at an earlier age, in keeping with the rest of Europe; and whether this would include children in the early years age group.

(AQW 14617/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Modern languages are not a compulsory part of the statutory curriculum at primary level and I currently have no plans to change this position. Schools are however encouraged to offer a wider range of modern languages and the revised curriculum provides them with greater flexibility to do so, with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment providing support and resources for primary schools that wish to introduce an additional language.

To support primary schools wishing to deliver language learning, the Primary Languages Programme was introduced in 2007 to give pupils at Foundation Stage/Key Stage 1 the opportunity to learn an additional language in school. The programme offers primary schools the opportunity to work with peripatetic language tutors to deliver Irish, Spanish and Polish and has been very successful. As at September 2012, 415 schools are participating in the programme.

My department has also commissioned an Irish language primary pilot programme for pupils in Key Stage 2 which aims to build upon and complement the provision made available via the Primary Languages Programme. The programme is scheduled to run for 4 years and commenced in 10 primary schools in the Derry/North west area in October 2011.

School Transport: Magherafelt

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education how many pupils from the Magherafelt District Council area travel to schools in the Cookstown District Council area and receive transport assistance for travel by bus, broken down by school.

(AQW 14619/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Southern and North Eastern Education and Library Boards have provided the information detailed in the tables below in respect to pupils travelling by bus between the Magherafelt and Cookstown District Council areas.

(1) Schools in the Cookstown District Council area attended by pupils resident in Magherafelt District Council area in 2012/13 who receive transport assistance for travel by bus

School name	School type	Pupils from Magherafelt D.C. area
Moneymore Primary School	Primary	14
St Patrick's Primary School, Loup	Primary	7
Woods Primary School	Primary	12
Holy Trinity College	Post primary	1
Total		34

(2) Schools in the Magherafelt District Council area attended by pupils resident in Cookstown District Council area in 2012/13 who receive transport assistance for travel by bus

School name	School type	Pupils from Cookstown D.C. area
Kilronan School	Special	19
Magherafelt High School	Post Primary	39
Rainey Endowed	Post Primary	158
Sperrin Integrated College	Post Primary	95
St Mary's Grammar School	Post Primary	347
St Pius X College	Post Primary	367
Total		1,025

School Transport: Magherafelt

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education how many pupils from the Cookstown District Council area travel to schools in the Magherafelt District Council area and receive transport assistance for travel by bus, broken down by school.
(AQW 14620/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Southern and North Eastern Education and Library Boards have provided the information detailed in the tables below in respect to pupils travelling by bus between the Magherafelt and Cookstown District Council areas.

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Total		1,025

AS Results

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education why all schools do not issue AS results to students on the same day.
(AQW 14621/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All AS results are issued to centres on the same day.

All Awarding Organisations (including CCEA) are part of the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). JCQ publish key dates in the examination cycle on behalf of the six member Awarding Bodies. This includes the key dates for the issue of results.

The key date for the restricted release of results to all centres (i.e. schools) is consistent across all 6 JCQ Awarding Organisations. This means that all centres receive their results on the same day from all JCQ Awarding Organisations. The release of results to candidates is one day after the restricted release of results to centres.

JCQ regulations require centres to distribute provisional statements of results to all candidates, either electronically or in hard copy, without delay and regardless of any disputes (such as non-payment of fees). Centres are not permitted to withhold provisional results from candidates under any circumstances.

GCSE: Grading Issues

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what action he has taken to ensure that no pupil who sat GCSE examinations this year has been disadvantaged by the grading controversy during the summer.

(AQW 14624/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Following the publication of GCSE results on 23 August, there were a significant number of schools and colleges in England and Wales that expressed concerns that their English results were not in line with performance last year or with predicted outcomes. Similar concerns were expressed by some schools here. However, I should make the point that the overall grade outcomes for GCSE English here were in line with last year's results.

I asked the CCEA regulator to look into these matters and report to me on any issues. I met with CCEA at the start of week beginning 10 September 2012 and they presented me with their initial findings. In light of these I asked CCEA to investigate further with centres a range of complex issues that appear to have affected GCSE English results this year. I will receive the full report shortly.

I appreciate the complexity of the issues with GCSE English this year. There were new specifications being taught for the first time, and significant changes had been made to the assessment. The changes are aimed at promoting alignment with English/literacy skills within the 4-16 curriculum here. This is important as I want to ensure that 14-19 Education builds on the aims of our revised curriculum.

I will continue to seek to ensure that no learner will be disadvantaged as a result of this matter and that no unnecessary obstacles are placed in the way of fairness and equity in the examinations process.

GCSE: Awarding Organisations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many pupils sat GCSE examinations set by examination boards other than CCEA, in 2011/12.

(AQW 14625/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A total of 171,354 GCSE grades were issued in summer 2012. Of these, CCEA awarded 123,375 grades, other awarding organisations awarded 47,979.

GCSE English: Ofqual

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what role the Qualifications regulator played in relation to the Ofqual investigation into the setting of grade boundaries for GCSE English.

(AQW 14626/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Ofqual investigation related to England. The qualifications regulator here played no role in it. The investigation focused on how the awarding organisations in England managed the awarding process. However, the regulator here agreed to CCEA supplying Ofqual with data concerning its awarding of GCSE English this year. This was purely for comparison and information purposes.

As all of the other GCSE awarding organisations - AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC (based in Wales) - had candidates here, our regulator was kept informed of Ofqual's investigation, and with the report completed by the Welsh government about issues in Wales.

Schools: Inspections

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many schools had their last full school inspection (i) in the last three years; (ii) between three and five years ago; (iii) between five and ten years ago; and (iv) more than ten years ago, broken down by (a) school type; and (b) Education and KLibrary Board area.

(AQW 14627/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following tables provide the answers to (i) and (ii) – please note that the figures are based on academic years.

- (i) Schools which have had their last full school inspection in the last three years broken down by school type and Education and Library Board area.

	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	Grand Total
Grammar	14	8	5	27
BELB	3	2	0	5

	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	Grand Total
NEELB	4	1	2	7
SEELB	2	1	0	3
SELB	2	2	3	7
WELB	3	2	0	5
Nursery	21	12	7	40
BELB	5	5	2	12
NEELB	5	0	1	6
SEELB	5	3	2	10
SELB	3	2	1	6
WELB	3	2	1	6
Preps	1	5	2	8
BELB	1	4	0	5
SEELB	0	1	2**	3
Pre-School	39	48	52	139
BELB	3	4	4	11
NEELB	9	9	21	39
SEELB	9	7	6	22
SELB	12	15	14	41
WELB	6	13	7	26
Primary	99	90	125*	314
BELB	9	14	5	28
NEELB	30	20	27	77
SEELB	12	16	29	57
SELB	35	16	46	97
WELB	13	24	18	55
Secondary	22	19	25***	66
BELB	4	1	2	7
NEELB	5	4	8	17
SEELB	3	2	6	11
SELB	4	9	3	16
WELB	6	3	6	15
Special	8	3	5	16
BELB	3	0	2	5
NEELB	2	1	1	4
SEELB	1	1	2	4
SELB	1	0	0	1
WELB	1	1	0	2
Grand Total	204	185	222	610

* = 14 inspections incomplete due to TU action

** = 1 incomplete inspection

*** = 2 incomplete inspections

- (ii) Schools which have had their last full school inspection between three and five years ago broken down by school type and Education and Library Board area.

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	Grand Total
Grammar	10	7	14	31
BELB	2	2	3	7
NEELB	4	2	4	10
SEELB	1	2	2	5
SELB	1	0	2	3
WELB	2	1	3	6
Nursery	6	10	21	37
BELB	1	4	5	10
NEELB	2	1	5	8
SEELB	1	1	5	7
SELB	0	4	3	7
WELB	2	0	3	5
Preps	0	0	1	1
BELB	0	0	1	1
SEELB	0	0	0	0
Pre-School	59	46	39	144
BELB	8	5	3	16
NEELB	15	8	9	32
SEELB	11	8	9	28
SELB	18	12	12	42
WELB	7	13	6	26
Primary	74	73	99	246
BELB	8	7	9	24
NEELB	13	18	30	61
SEELB	12	12	12	36
SELB	19	18	35	72
WELB	22	18	13	53
Secondary	16	14	22	52
BELB	3	2	4	9
NEELB	4	3	5	12
SEELB	2	2	3	7
SELB	3	6	4	13
WELB	4	1	6	11
Special	8	6	8	22
BELB	1	3	3	7
NEELB	3	0	2	5
SEELB	1	0	1	2
SELB	2	2	1	5
WELB	1	1	1	3

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	Grand Total
Grand Total	173	156	204	533

- (iii) The data relating to this question is prior to 2007. All data prior to 2007 is held in manual records and an exercise to collate this would result in disproportionate costs.
- (iv) The data relating to this question is prior to 2007. All data prior to 2007 is held in manual records and an exercise to collate this would result in disproportionate costs.

Schools: Broadband Access

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the advantages that children who attend schools with broadband access have over children who attend rural schools without broadband access.

(AQW 14636/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In the north of Ireland, no schools are disadvantaged as the C2k managed ICT service provides broadband access for all grant-aided schools.

Prior to April 2012, post primary schools were each provided with 2Mb circuits and up to 4 primary schools shared a 2Mb circuit. In a number of cases where a 2Mb circuit could not be provided to a school because of location, other technologies such as adsl, satellite and eps8 were provided.

I am very conscious of the need to provide schools with much increased bandwidth, as the resources they wish to use are available over the internet and are more bandwidth hungry. I have therefore been very mindful that we need to put in place improvements in bandwidth, to keep pace with schools' needs. The new C2k contract (Education Network), which is being rolled out from 1 April 2012, will therefore deliver increased bandwidth to all schools. This will ensure that schools receive un-contended bandwidth based on pupil numbers. The bandwidth to be provided to schools under the Education Network contract is outlined below.

Post primary schools (500+ pupils)	Initial bandwidth 100Mb
Post primary schools and Special Schools (Up to 499 pupils)	Initial bandwidth 10Mb
Primary Schools (500+ pupils)	Initial Bandwidth 10Mb
Primary Schools (Up to 499 pupils)	Initial bandwidth 4Mb

This will be of great benefit to our schools and the improved bandwidth is currently being rolled out and is scheduled to be delivered to all schools by June 2013. To date, 120 post primaries, 22 special schools and 236 primaries schools have received their new bandwidth provision.

In addition, we recognise that the bandwidth needs of schools will most likely increase over the period of the five year contract, with this in mind I am pleased that there is potential for the bandwidth to be further increased, at no cost to the school, should a school's sustained usage require it.

Schools: Formal Transformation Process

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the schools which have undergone a formal transformation process, broken down by (i) management type; and (ii) Education and Library Board area; and how their current enrolment meets the integrated test.

(AQW 14664/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Only controlled schools have undergone the formal transformation process to integrated status. The latest religious balance data for integrated schools was gathered during the 2011/12 school census. The table indicates transformed integrated schools by Education and Library Board area and whether they currently meet the religious balance requirements:

Education and Library Board Area/School	Meets religious balance requirements
Belfast Education and Library Board	
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	Yes
North Eastern Education and Library Board	
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	Yes
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	No
Crumlin Controlled Integrated Primary School	No
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	No
Carhill Integrated Primary School	No

Education and Library Board Area/School	Meets religious balance requirements
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	Yes
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	Yes
Round Tower Integrated Primary School	No
Crumlin Integrated College	Yes
Parkhall Integrated College	No
South-Eastern Education and Library Board	
Kircubbin Primary School	No
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	Yes
Bangor Central Primary School	No
Annsborough Primary School	Yes
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	No
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	No
Priory College	No
Fort Hill College	No
Southern Education and Library Board	
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	No
Brownlow Integrated College	Yes
Western Education and Library Board	
Groarty Primary School	No

Schools: Animal Welfare Awareness

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education what measures his Department currently takes, and could introduce in future, to increase awareness of animal welfare amongst young people.

(AQW 14666/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The revised curriculum, which has been taught to all pupils of compulsory school age in grant-aided schools since 2009/10, provides opportunities for animal welfare issues to be taught in our schools.

The minimum to be taught by schools is detailed as Areas of Learning within The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007. There are a number of Areas of Learning which give teachers the opportunity to teach young people about animal welfare issues. These include The World Around Us at primary level and Environment and Society and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level.

However, one of the key factors about the Revised Curriculum is the greater flexibility it provides for teachers to tailor their teaching to meet the needs of their individual pupils. Therefore, the Department tries to delegate as much funding and decision-making as possible to schools which are best placed to assess the needs of their pupils, using their professional judgement. The Department does not prescribe the specifics to be taught and practice across schools will therefore vary.

Certificate in Religious Education

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to ensure teachers from a Protestant background are not discriminated against because they do not hold a Catholic Certificate of Education.

(AQW 14669/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Certificate in Religious Education is a mandatory requirement for all those seeking appointment to a permanent teaching position in a Catholic Maintained nursery or primary school in the North of Ireland.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) provides general information on their website relating to the Certificate including information on routes to obtaining a certificate. In terms of the teacher training colleges, St Mary's students are advised by the college about the requirement and can opt to take the certificate there. Stranmillis students are also advised about the requirement. The college has a partnership with the University of Glasgow which enables students to acquire, through part-time distance learning, a Certificate in Religious Education. University of Ulster (UU) students are also advised about the requirement. The UU Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course includes integrated study for the religious certificate.

The Department is currently undertaking a review of employment opportunities for teachers which will consider the implications of the requirement to possess the certificate. The review will be published early in the New Year.

Hollywood Schools Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education why the Hollywood schools scheme was not included in his recent announcement on new builds.

(AQW 14674/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: While the schools within the Hollywood Schools scheme will be disappointed that they were not included in my capital investment announcement to the Assembly on 25 June, this in no way implies that they will not be considered for funding at a later stage within the area planning process.

Area plans for schools will require scrutiny and public consultation. In the interim I will continue to examine the case for capital investment and expect to make a further announcement before the end of the calendar year. Proposals for the Hollywood Schools scheme will be considered alongside other new build propositions as part of any future announcement.

Teachers: Performance-related Pay

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of performance related pay for teachers.

(AQW 14699/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Boards of Governors have a legal responsibility to ensure that teachers' performance is reviewed annually in accordance with the negotiated Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD) Scheme. Review statements agreed under the Scheme form part of the evidence used to determine pay progression on the Leadership and Upper Pay Scales. Depending on their position on the pay scale, teachers progress up the pay scale either annually or biannually.

The PRSD Scheme came into operation on 1 September 2005 and was reviewed in conjunction with the recognised Teachers' Unions in 2007 and 2009. The Scheme is well embedded in schools and has become integral to performance management, staff development and overall school improvement.

Gaelscoil Eoghain, Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils in each year at Gaelscoil Eoghain School in Cookstown.

(AQW 14702/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Information collected from the school indicates that, in the current academic year, there are 13 pupils, all in Year 1, in Gaelscoil Eoghain.

Schools: Area Planning

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education how the Area Planning process will operate within the Dickson Plan area.

(AQW 14721/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The focus of the area planning process is on developing a planned network of viable and sustainable schools to provide high quality education to meet the needs of children and young people in an area. Regardless of the structure emerging, this will mean schools working together to ensure that all pupils are offered access to the full breadth of courses set out in the Entitlement Framework.

The process for schools in the Dickson Plan area is therefore no different to that for schools elsewhere. The Southern Education and Library Board Post Primary Area Plan which is currently out for public consultation includes proposals for schools in the Dickson Plan area.

The Board's public consultation on the area plan will ensure that that all interested parties have the opportunity to provide comment before a final draft plan is submitted for my consideration.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education how Dickson Plan will operate within the Education and Skills Authority.

(AQW 14722/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A unique feature of the Dickson Plan is that pupils transfer to Junior High Schools at age 11 and then to Senior High Schools at age 14. I have therefore interpreted this question as asking about the operation of admissions processes within the Dickson Plan area.

Under the 1997 Education Order the Education and Library Boards have a range of duties in respect of the administration of all admissions processes. These duties will transfer to the Education and Skills Authority when it becomes operational. .

Goal Line Youth Centre

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the contribution of Goal Line Youth, Portadown; (ii) whether he is aware of its urgent funding needs which, if unmet, will lead to the organisation closing its doors on 31 October 2012; and (iii) what assistance his Department can provide to the organisation as it seeks to continue to meet the needs of over two hundred children, almost 50 percent of whom have special educational and disability needs.

(AQW 14742/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funding and monitoring for local youth provision is a matter for Education and Library Boards. The Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) has advised that Goal Line Youth Club, Portadown, is registered with the SELB as a part-time club supporting a recognised youth work programme of 27 hours per week.

- (i) The unit offers a range of quality programmes within the area, providing what is considered to be good value for the level of grant-aid support offered. In particular, the ability of the unit to recruit young people with special needs has been highlighted.
- (ii) The SELB advises that it has not been informed that Goal Line Youth Club is considering closing in October 2012 and it has not received any request for additional support for the unit.
- (iii) The SELB Youth Service offers core funding to the club and, in addition, the club has accessed different Schemes of Assistance, when available. Total funding (approved and claimed) is detailed in the table below. Core funding for this youth club from the SELB has been consistent over a number of years and there are no immediate plans to change this.

SELB Funding approved/claimed

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Annual Core Grant approved	7809.03	8,523.72	8696.93
Annual Core Grant claimed	6739.62	7625.15	Not yet known
Additional funding approved	9404.75	7509.17	4698.95
Additional funding claimed	9231.83	6824.75	Not yet known

The SELB has advised that there are additional programmes run in the centre which are funded from other sources. It is not clear at this time whether the funding arrangements for these additional programmes have changed.

Ulster Covenant: Centenary

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what material was issued by his Department to schools in connection with the celebration of the centenary of the Ulster Covenant; and how did his Department mark and facilitate this milestone.

(AQW 14780/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No material has been issued by my Department in connection with the Ulster Covenant. My Department has no plans to celebrate the event, it is a matter for individual schools as to how they may wish to mark the Covenant or any other centenary.

DE: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to his Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.

(AQW 14816/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

Bodies linked to the Department of Education at 8 May 2007	Number of people serving on the Body at 8 May 2007*
Belfast Education & Library Board	32
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta	2
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	21
General Teaching Council	3
Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd	5
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment	17
Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)	3
NI Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal	13
North Eastern Education & Library Board	33

Bodies linked to the Department of Education at 8 May 2007	Number of people serving on the Body at 8 May 2007*
South Eastern Education & Library Board	4 Commissioners
Southern Education & Library Board	35
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	13
Western Education & Library Board	33
Youth Council	11
Total	225

ii)

Bodies linked to the Department of Education at 28 September 2012	Number of people serving on the Body at 28 September 2012*
Belfast Education & Library Board	6
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta	2
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	12
Exceptional Circumstances Body	49
General Teaching Council	3
Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd	5
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment	8
Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)	0
North Eastern Education & Library Board	22
South Eastern Education & Library Board	3 Commissioners
Southern Education & Library Board	15
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	6
Western Education & Library Board	13
Youth Council	6
Total	150

Some of the Bodies listed were not classified as Executive Non Departmental Public Bodies in 2007 but have been included in this answer as the Bodies existed in 2007.

*Includes Department of Education Public Appointments only.

Early Years Strategy

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Early Years Strategy.
(AQW 14825/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In my statement to the Assembly on 2 July 2012 I outlined my approach to the development of a revised strategy with a clear focus on early education and learning. I am also seeking to explore the Delivering Social Change Framework as a potential mechanism for achieving collaboration and integration for early years but as part of a much wider theme of early intervention.

Officials have been engaging with key stakeholders as outlined in my statement and I will finalise my proposals by November 2012.

Certificate in Religious Education

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has completed, and published, a review to assess the impact that the requirement of a religious certificate has on current and future recruitment opportunities in the teaching sector, including any course accessibility issues; and, if so, to detail the recommendations contained within the report.
(AQW 14986/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Certificate in Religious Education is a mandatory requirement for all those seeking appointment to a permanent teaching position in a Catholic Maintained nursery or primary school in the North of Ireland.

The Department is currently undertaking a review of employment opportunities for teachers which will consider the implications of the requirement to possess the certificate. The review will be published early in the New Year.

Department for Employment and Learning

Jobless Households

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of recent statistics that suggested that Northern Ireland has the UK's second highest percentage of households where no individual has a job, what is being done to tackle this issue.

(AQW 14092/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): My Department offers a range of measures to assist people to move into sustainable employment and to meet the needs of our widening client base.

The Employment Service, through its network of Jobcentres and Jobs and Benefit offices, offers tailored advice to meet individual's needs, provides information and support to clients, and refers clients to specialist provision when appropriate.

Steps to Work (StW) is the Department's main adult return to work programme. It is available to anyone who is aged 18 years old or over (aged 16 or over in the case of a lone parent) and aims to assist people who are unemployed to find and sustain employment.

My Department took the lead in the development of the Executive's cross departmental strategy "Pathways to Success" to address the challenge presented by young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). The strategy, which was endorsed by the Executive on 31 May 2012, aims to deliver a three tier package of measures aimed at preventing young people falling into the NEET category in the first place; helping young people in the 16-18 age group, especially those facing barriers; and assisting unemployed young people aged 18-24 more generally.

A key objective of 'Pathways to Success' is to pilot community family support in 2013. The Employment Service has developed a model and proposes to trial the Family Support approach in Northern Ireland (NI). The introduction of a Community Family Support Pilot, tested through the LEMIS service, will focus on the needs of disadvantaged families to support parents, help prevent younger family members falling into the NEET category and help other young family members already in this situation to re-engage with education, training or employment. A multi-agency / departmental approach will be used to deliver the pilot including the harnessing and use of existing services that currently work with disadvantaged families.

In order to tackle the growing problem of youth unemployment, I have introduced a Youth Employment Scheme, for young people aged 18-24, which has a range of measures to specifically help unemployed young people. The programme will consist of enhanced support through additional Adviser time from both the Employment and Careers Services and a series of work experience placements and training opportunities designed to ensure early engagement with the labour market.

The Department, through the Disability Employment Service and its teams of specially trained Employment Advisers also delivers programmes and services aimed at helping and supporting people with health conditions and disabilities to consider their options for returning to work. This service is about promoting work as a positive, healthy and realistic option and supporting those who wish to actively pursue this goal.

Finally, the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) is an initiative designed to help unemployed and economically inactive people in the community overcome those issues that may be preventing them from finding and keeping a job. The service which is independent of the statutory employment service is provided by local community employment organisations in the Belfast area, Londonderry, Strabane, Newry & Mourne, Moyle and Cookstown District Council areas.

Youth Unemployment

Mr B McCreagh asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people have taken up places on the Northern Ireland Youth Employment Initiative 'Sustainable Skills for Growth and Jobs' since its launch.

(AQW 14319/11-15)

Dr Farry: Addressing youth unemployment is an Executive priority. After initial approval by the Executive my immediate priority was to put in place the delivery framework. That work is only recently complete and already, 9 people have started work experience placements, 4 opportunities are currently advertised and more than 90 expressions of interest from employers are being followed up. Many of these expressions of interest were secured at the major employer promotional event held in Titanic Building Belfast on 26 September where well over 100 employers were in attendance. My Department has planned a further series of promotional events across Northern Ireland during the autumn and I am confident that we will secure the number and range of opportunities needed to make this a successful initiative. However, it is not a short-term solution and our initial focus will be on building quality into all aspects of the Scheme, followed by increasing the numbers of work placements, skills development opportunities and subsidised jobs over time. This is a long-term initiative designed to deliver long-term benefits. My Department will publish data on the numbers of opportunities available monthly from October 2012.

Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial support his Department has provided to the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre, Bangor, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14347/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not have any statutory basis or remit to core fund any voluntary or community organisations to deliver training or education and has provided no direct funding to the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre in any of the last three years.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) whether all colleges will only accept a doctors certificate to confirm that a pupil is unwell; and (ii) if a doctor refuses to provide a certificate, what action a student should take, as this causes problems when claiming Education Maintenance Allowance.

(AQW 14457/11-15)

Dr Farry: I can advise the member that the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme is based on attendance and colleges must provide evidence of all absences. I can confirm (i). Each college will apply their own general absence policy when considering if an absence was authorised or unauthorised. Colleges are encouraged to make their criteria for authorising absences clear and consistent to apply to all students. A student might be able to self-certify an absence for up to five days, but it is at the college's discretion how many five-day certifications they accept. After two weeks, evidence such as a medical certificate should be produced.

- (ii) The absence policy of each college will again be applied if a doctor refuses to provide a medical certificate. This may involve for isolated absences, a letter from the student or the parent/guardian.

Foyle College: Lands

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the recent decision by the Minister of Education to make Foyle College lands available, for an update on the business case for the Magee Campus of the University Of Ulster.

(AQW 14465/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster prepared a Strategic Outline Case for the expansion of the Magee campus which my department approved in the autumn of 2010. I understand that the University has exercised its option on the future purchase of the site. At present it is estimated that the College will vacate the site in 2016. The funding required for the physical development of the site would be a matter for the University. The University is, however, seeking funding from government for 1,000 additional undergraduate places. Initially over the three year period to 2014-15, I have allocated an additional 322 undergraduate places to the University. The University has said that these places would all be deployed on the Magee campus.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he has any plans to change Education Maintenance Allowance provision.

(AQW 14497/11-15)

Dr Farry: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 14159/11-15. I understand AQW 14159/11-15 is relevant and the most recent response.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the effectiveness of Education Maintenance Allowance provision.

(AQW 14499/11-15)

Dr Farry: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 14161/11-15. I understand AQW 14161/11-15 is relevant and the most recent response.

St Mary's University College: NDPB

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he will take steps to prevent an anomalous and prejudicial situation arising to the detriment of Stranmillis College, Belfast in the event that St Mary's University College, Belfast successfully appeals its designation as a non-Departmental Public Body.

(AQW 14516/11-15)

Dr Farry: I do not agree with your view that any change in the designation of St Mary's University College as a non – Departmental Public Body would be to the detriment of Stranmillis College.

Steps to Work

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many (i) participants completed the Steps to Work programme in each month since January 2010; and (ii) participants were offered full-time jobs on completion.

(AQW 14574/11-15)

Dr Farry: The numbers of participants who completed the Steps to Work programme in each month since January 2010 is shown in Annex A.

Annex A

Month	Total leaving StW	Total Moved to Employment	Month	Total leaving StW	Total Moved to Employment
Jan '10	1,335	416	Jan '11	1,698	617
Feb '10	1,366	434	Feb '11	1,783	578
Mar '10	1,560	562	Mar '11	2,182	766
Apr '10	1,422	529	Apr '11	1,885	762
May '10	1,515	569	May '11	2,149	839
Jun '10	1,616	529	Jun '11	2,017	693
Jul '10	1,383	473	Jul '11	1,867	663
Aug '10	1,503	591	Aug '11	2,092	777
Sep '10	2,059	753	Sep '11	2,639	978
Oct '10	2,035	827	Oct '11	2,383	905
Nov '10	1,935	734	Nov '11	2,223	830
Dec '10	1,243	437	Dec '11	1,685	587

The latest statistics available are up to December 2011 as it is necessary to wait for a period of time after participants leave the programme to obtain information on employment outcomes.

“Total Moved to Employment” refers to participants considered as having moved to full time employment (16 hours or more per week) within 13 weeks of leaving Steps to Work based on Department for Employment and Learning /Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs data.

DEL: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many departmental staff are currently (i) suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations.

(AQW 14611/11-15)

Dr Farry: No Departmental staff are currently suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations; nor are there any staff who are currently not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations.

Steps to Work/Step Ahead

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of participants on the (i) Steps to Work Programme; and (ii) Step Ahead Programme, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14652/11-15)

Dr Farry: The number of participants on (i) Steps to Work, and (ii) Step Ahead for the last 3 years is detailed below in 6 monthly cycles.

All participants on Steps to Work (June 2009 to June 2012)

	Steps to Work (StW)	Step Ahead (included in overall StW figure)
June 09	6,384	0
December 09	7,465	16
June 10	9,259	148
December 10	12,198	285
June 11	15,425	389

	Steps to Work (StW)	Step Ahead (included in overall StW figure)
December 11	16,673	754
June 12	18,458	17

Notes:

- (1) Figures relate to the last Friday of each month.
- (2) Occupancy figures continue to fluctuate somewhat for several months after the occupancy date due to delays in recording leavers' end dates.
- (3) Includes those who have received an invitation but have not yet attended their first interview.
- (4) Step Ahead introduced in Northern Ireland on 28 September 2009 and ceased in February 2012.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

FG Wilson

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what financial and other support FG Wilson has received from her Department since 1999.

(AQW 14245/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Since 1999 Invest NI (and previously IDB) has offered £24.8m of direct financial assistance to F G Wilson (Engineering) Ltd in support of its operations in Larne, Monkstown and Springvale, Belfast. Details of this assistance are set out in the table below.

F G Wilson Financial Support since 1999 (at September 2012)

Offer Date /Start Date	Amount Offered	Paid to date	Balance
Selective Financial Assistance			
27-Jul-00	8,531,800.00	8,129,456.25	402,343.75
10-Aug-04	200,000.00	98,394.84	101,605.16
21-Jan-05	234,000.00	227,250.00	6,750.00
01-Mar-06	11,504,000.00	10,261,781.14	1,242,218.86
16-Apr-07	125,533.00	117,213.88	8,319.12
	20,595,333.00	18,834,096.11	1,761,236.89
Company Development Programme /Business Improvement Training Programme			
14-Jan-02	270,000.00	208,025.00	61,975.00
01-Jan-04	696,000.00	588,358.00	107,642.00
13-Sep-04	458,150.00	408,275.00	49,875.00
01-Jan-07	56,634.00	45,306.00	11,328.00
04-May-09	704,058.00	223,260.00	480,798.00
	2,184,842.00	1,473,224.00	711,618.00
R & D			
17-Feb-99	6,801.00	2,020.32	4,780.68
27-Apr-00	12,274.00	7,589.37	4,684.63
03-Nov-00	183,277.00	84,437.02	98,839.98
15-Jan-01	192,173.00	46,485.69	145,687.31
22-Oct-02	93,722.00	36,747.65	56,974.35
14-May-09	22,630.00	6,540.44	16,089.56
10-Jun-09	50,000.00	35,152.14	14,847.86

Offer Date /Start Date	Amount Offered	Paid to date	Balance
	560,877.00	218,972.63	341,904.37
Centre of Excellence ECE			
09-Apr-03	1,436,750.00	1,424,963.00	11,787.00
Total	24,777,802.00	21,951,255.74	2,826,546.26

In addition to this the company has availed of the following Invest NI services:

- Trade: Participation on 42 Trade Missions
- Sustainable Development: 4 Carbon Trust surveys carried out
- Consultancy support to develop an Energy Management strategy
- Participation on CE Marking programme
- E-Business: review of IT capabilities

Belfast International Airport

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with representatives of Belfast International Airport concerning the development of air routes to (i) Germany and Austria; (ii) Belgium; and (iii) Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

(AQW 14266/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department and Tourism Ireland are in contact with Belfast International Airport (BIA) on an ongoing basis in relation to any opportunities for new, extended or re-instated services. Any negotiations with airlines are of a commercial and confidential nature.

Germany is a priority market for Northern Ireland and is one of the top four markets – along with Great Britain, the US and France – which together deliver over 80% of visitors to Northern Ireland. Direct access is essential if Northern Ireland is to realise its full potential in the German market and my Department and Tourism Ireland have been working closely with BIA to case make to airlines in respect of the introduction of new routes from Germany.

With regard to Austria, Tourism Ireland has recently agreed a co-operative marketing programme to promote a new inbound charter flight from Austria to BIA with Lauda Air. This service, which will operate from April to June 2013, will help to boost the number of inbound Austrian visitors to Northern Ireland and will also provide a positive example to other inbound charter carriers that Northern Ireland can be an option for their business.

Denmark, Sweden and Norway are not currently high priority markets for tourism to Northern Ireland. However, Tourism Ireland maintains ongoing dialogue with BIA, along with Northern Ireland's other airports, to monitor opportunities in these markets for new services to Northern Ireland.

Foyle: Job Promotion

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many jobs have been promoted in the Foyle constituency in 2012/13 financial year to date.

(AQW 14298/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Between 1st April and 31st August 2012, Invest NI promoted 142 new jobs in the Foyle Parliamentary Constituency Area.

Economy: Pipe Bands

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the financial contribution pipe band competitions make to the economy.

(AQW 14310/11-15)

Mrs Foster: No assessment has been made by my Department or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

However, Belfast City Council commissioned Millward Brown Ulster to carry out an Events Evaluation of the European Pipe Band Championships 2011. The evaluation reported that 11,094 attended the European Pipe Band Championships 2011 and the estimated economic impact of the event was £212,000.

I would also refer the member to the reply I gave to AQO 2358/11-15 on Monday 10 September 2012. My department wants to support pipe bands in any way that we can. We recognise that they bring visitors into areas for their competitions, and I hope that we can work with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to develop that more.

Fleadh Cheoil 2013: Accommodation

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she will consider relaxing the 1992 legislation in relation to accommodation to allow for host families during the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2013 in Derry.
(AQW 14317/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has provided advice to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) on how alternative accommodation options, such as a host family scheme, might potentially be accommodated under the existing legislation governing the certification of tourism accommodation.

In providing this advice, my Department officials have highlighted the need for further information before a definitive position on the potential legislative implications can be reached.

Officials in DETI will continue to work in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to ensure that accommodation options for 2013 are maximised.

Small Businesses: Grants/Schemes

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether grants and schemes available for small businesses are currently being promoted to boost confidence and aid financial strain.
(AQW 14324/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The ongoing impact of uncertainty in global markets continues to impact on our local business base and is evident in reduced demand, tighter financial markets and a loss of confidence to invest for the future. Invest NI has responded quickly to this, through its Boosting Business initiative, which has involved reviewing its existing products and services to see if, and how, they can be made either available to a wider business base, or make them easier for businesses to benefit from. Invest NI has also considered what new products or services it may be able to introduce to help business and has made many of these available to a much wider business base than has historically been the case.

Since the campaign was launched in November 2011, some 11,000 enquiries have been made to Invest NI's Business Support Team, through a number of channels including a free phone telephone number, online enquiry form and text message facility. It is encouraging that over 80% of the enquiries received to date have come from businesses that would not previously have engaged with Invest NI.

From April to September of this year almost 1,500 individuals from a wide range of businesses attended one of around 75 events which have been organised covering all aspects of business. Between September and December a further 80 events and workshops are already scheduled and, so far, some 800 individuals have already registered for these.

The range of Invest NI support, both financial and advisory, is regularly promoted through high profile advertising, both online and mainstream and through targeted communications to those businesses which are most likely to benefit from the support available.

Invest NI also continues to provide a range of financial assistance to support the establishment and growth of new and existing export focused businesses. This support is targeted particularly at businesses that sell in markets outside Northern Ireland, are actively pursuing growth plans, and can contribute to increased NI productivity. Financial support is based on the needs of the project and is normally targeted at areas such as Research and Development, Marketing and Employment.

Further Information on the full range of advice and support available can be found on Invest NI's Website www.investni.com

Child Trust Fund

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any negotiations she has had with the Department for Work and Pensions or the Financial Services Authority to extend the ability of Northern Ireland based Credit Unions to act as agents for Child Trust Fund payments.
(AQW 14352/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not had any negotiations with the Department for Work and Pensions or the Financial Services Authority about Child Trust Fund payments. The Government announced in May 2010, its intention to end new eligibility to Child Trust Fund accounts and to reduce and then stop payments to existing accounts by January 2011.

Gas Network: Extension

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the final gas network extensions paper will be published.
(AQW 14360/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Outline Business Case on gas network extension which my Department commissioned from external consultants earlier this year is nearing completion and is expected to be finalised by the end of September 2012. Thereafter the Department will need time to consider the appraisal in detail, prior to any decision to publish its conclusions.

Fuel Poverty: Gas Network Extension

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that natural gas is currently cheaper than oil or coal, what steps she intends to take to help families in fuel poverty who do not have the option of connecting to a mains gas network to reduce their bills.

(AQW 14361/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In addition to promoting gas network extension, which my Department recognises could contribute to alleviating fuel poverty levels, it is also working with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry to ensure greater competition within both the electricity and gas markets.

In May 2012, my Department launched a scheme to provide financial assistance for domestic customers to switch to renewable heat technologies. The Renewable Heat Premium Payment (RHPP) scheme provides support for a range of technologies with the level of support varying depending on the technology installed.

DETI is also proposing an energy efficiency measure within the new Energy Bill. The proposal would require all energy suppliers to support a range of energy efficiency measures for households, as poor energy efficiency is one of the contributors to fuel poverty. Furthermore, in July 2012, I announced a roll-out of electricity smart meters aimed at shifting customer behaviour and which may assist families in fuel poverty to better manage their energy consumption.

Furthermore, my colleague Nelson McCausland recently launched a new £12 million boiler replacement scheme for homeowners across Northern Ireland. This scheme, provided by funding from the Northern Ireland Executive, offers owner occupiers a grant of up to £1,000 to replace inefficient boilers with energy efficient condensing oil boilers, or switching to a wood pellet boiler.

Gas Network: Extension

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the gas network being extended to Millisle and Bushmills, whether small villages such as Carnlough, Glenariffe, Cushendal and Cushendun will be considered priority areas for an extension of the gas network.

(AQW 14362/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Extending the natural gas network to new areas can only take place where it is economically viable to do so. Locations given priority for any extension of the gas network will depend on the availability of suitable gas loads in such areas, interest by a gas company in developing new gas networks, and the commitment of companies and public sector organisations in new areas to connect to natural gas in the event of it becoming available.

Given the expected gas loads, it is unlikely that extending the gas network to the villages mentioned would be considered economically viable.

Business Subsidies: Rural Areas

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans there are to provide subsidies to businesses in rural areas that may never receive natural gas, given that this is an impediment to attracting investment in rural East Antrim.

(AQW 14364/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department will shortly launch the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) which will provide financial incentives to non-domestic consumers in the first instance wishing to utilise renewable heating technologies such as biomass, heat pumps, solar thermal panels and other technologies. This may be of particular interest to businesses which may not become connected to the natural gas network.

Invest NI provides a range of support for businesses to help reduce the cost of water, energy or materials consumption. This support includes the provision of free project management technical consultancy to identify, prioritise and take forward appropriate cost saving projects including renewable energy projects where appropriate. Invest NI also provides the funding for the Energy Efficiency Loan Fund delivered by the Carbon Trust which offers interest-free loans from £3,000 - £400,000 to Northern Ireland businesses to help them deploy more energy efficient and/or carbon reducing solutions; and the £12 million Sustainable Productivity Programme 2012/13 to 2014/15 which covers a range of activities to help the wider business community achieve operational savings in water, energy and waste. Support includes advice and, where appropriate, financial support through loans and/or grants.

Gas Network: Extension

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's plans to extend the natural gas network; and which towns and villages will benefit from such extensions.

(AQW 14365/11-15)

Mrs Foster: An Outline Business Case on gas network extension to additional towns in the West and North West and in East Down was commissioned by my Department and is nearing completion. The towns under consideration for extension of the natural gas network include Dungannon, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Coalisland, Omagh, Enniskillen/Derrylin and Strabane in the West/North West and Hillsborough, Ballynahinch, Downpatrick, Crossgar and Saintfield in County Down.

The Department will need time to consider the Outline Business Case in detail and the next steps in co-operation with the Utility Regulator, including which towns should form part of any new or extended gas licensed areas.

FG Wilson: Grant Aid

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the grant aid her Department has paid to FG Wilson in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14391/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Over the past five calendar years F G Wilson has been paid a total of £6.1million, the breakdown of which is shown in the table below. Given the nature Invest NI offers, much of what has been paid over this period would relate to earlier offers. During the past five years the company has received new offers totalling £0.959million.

Assistance Type	2007/08*	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	Total
Selective Financial Assistance	1,969,906	1,141,278	778,323	1,513,592	0	5,403,099
Research & Development	0	0	41,692	0	0	41,692
Trade	250	2,471	3,633	1,991	4,971	13,316
Training	115,282	238,579	85,253	137,703	110,036	686,853
Total	£2,085,438	£1,382,328	£908,901	£1,653,286	£115,007	£6,144,960

* Year from August to September

Invest NI's assistance has been increasingly focussed on encouraging the company to develop higher value activities. Assistance has been provided towards developing the company's R&D capability and training activities.

FG Wilson: Grant Aid

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the job losses announced on 13 September 2012 by FG Wilson whether she is expecting any repayment of grant aid paid to the company.

(AQW 14392/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The redundancies announced recently may result in grants becoming repayable by Caterpillar. However, it is not possible at present to be definitive on the exact amount involved as a number of factors need to be taken into consideration including what level of benefits we have received and over what period of time the company has maintained its target employment. It is worth noting that the company's management has confirmed that it will meet all its contractual obligations under any offers of assistance it has received in the past from Invest NI.

Caterpillar/FG Wilson

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any meetings or contact she, or her departmental officials, had with Caterpillar/FG Wilson since March 2012.

(AQW 14393/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Since March this year, I have written to and received a reply from the CEO of Caterpillar Inc., in which he confirmed the company's plan to continue to manufacture large gensets in Northern Ireland. I also had two telephone calls with the Head of Caterpillar's global Electric Power Division which was followed by a face-to-face meeting (along with Invest NI's Chief Executive) in the US last week. My team in Invest NI specifically had two telephone calls with senior officials in the US as well as eleven face-to-face meetings with senior management in Northern Ireland and from the wider Caterpillar organization. In addition there have been numerous e-mail exchanges and telephone calls on a range of matters relating to this decision.

Invest NI: Business Funding

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail InvestNI's 73 percent funding for indigenous businesses in 2011/12, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 14400/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below shows assistance offered by Invest NI to both locally and externally-owned businesses between 1st April 2011 and 31st March 2012, broken down by constituency.

Invest NI Assistance Offered by Ownership & Parliamentary Constituency Area (2011-12)

Pca	Externally-owned £m	Locally-owned £m	Total £m
Belfast East	6.26	7.02	13.28
Belfast North	1.51	1.22	2.74
Belfast South	5.88	16.12	22.00
Belfast West	3.49	0.76	4.25
East Antrim	0.27	1.33	1.59
East Londonderry	0.00	1.75	1.76
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	0.48	2.71	3.20
Foyle	1.45	2.67	4.12
Lagan Valley	0.24	4.07	4.31
Mid Ulster	1.15	6.13	7.29
Newry and Armagh	0.55	2.33	2.88
North Antrim	0.66	1.85	2.52
North Down	0.00	1.68	1.68
South Antrim	0.76	3.57	4.33
South Down	0.34	2.67	3.00
Strangford	0.14	1.18	1.32
Upper Bann	0.31	6.29	6.60
West Tyrone	0.15	1.58	1.73
Not Yet Located	0.73	0.00	0.73
Total	24.38	64.93	89.32

Notes:

1. Table totals may not add due to rounding.
2. Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.
3. 'Not Yet Located' refers to cases where the company has not identified a final location for the project.

Invest NI: Landholding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the land bank, in acres, in public ownership in the (a) Carrickfergus; (b) Larne; and (c) Newtownabbey areas, that is suitable for industrial development; and (ii) if she has any plans to improve the availability of serviced sites, given the increased need for jobs.

(AQW 14401/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Within my Department, Invest NI has responsibility for the provision of property in support of economic development projects brought forward by qualifying businesses with an approved business case and an immediate demonstrable property need.

Within the Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey District Council areas Invest NI holds a total of 427 acres. Whilst a significant proportion of this has been developed and is occupied by businesses there remain 121 acres available. A table has been attached at Annex A providing a breakdown of these figures by Council area.

In addition to the property within its ownership the organisation is also aware of a range of properties of various sizes provided by both Local Enterprise Agencies and the private sector in each area. Further information can be found through the Northern Ireland Business Info website.

Invest NI recently completed infrastructural works at its Trooperslane and Global Point Business Parks, in Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey respectively, which released 39 acres of new serviced land to support economic development. This has been included within the figures provided in the table.

Invest NI proactively markets all of its available property to both foreign and indigenous investors although the final decision on location rests with the investor.

Annex A**Table showing Invest NI Landholding and Availability in the Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne Council Areas**

District Council	Landholding (acres)*	Land Availability (acres)*
Newtownabbey	283.2	97.39
Carrickfergus	108.06	18.80
Larne	35.7	4.70
Total	426.96	120.89

* Figures correct as at 30 June 2012.

Invest NI: Council Visits

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of visits InvestNI has arranged with those seeking to invest in each of the last three years, broken down by either District Council area or postcode area.

(AQW 14405/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below details the number of visits by DCA by potential inward investors. It should be noted that potential investors may visit more than one DCA during a visit programme.

Number of Invest NI Visits by Potential Inward Investors to District Council Areas (2009-10 to 2011-12)

Council Area	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Antrim	0	2	0
Ards	1	0	0
Armagh	0	0	1
Ballymena	0	1	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0
Banbridge	1	0	0
Belfast	60	71	82
Carrickfergus	0	0	0
Castlereagh	4	1	3
Coleraine	4	2	4
Cookstown	0	0	1
Craigavon	0	0	2
Londonderry	13	10	7
Down	0	0	0
Dungannon	0	0	0
Fermanagh	0	0	0
Larne	2	3	0
Limavady	1	0	0
Lisburn	3	7	1
Magherafelt	0	0	0
Moyle	0	1	0
Newry & Mourne	1	6	2
Newtownabbey	11	18	15
North Down	4	2	0
Omagh	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0
Total	105	124	118

Fusion and Acumen Programmes

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 13667/11-15, how many of these jobs are still in existence.

(AQW 14406/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information sought is not readily available and may only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Electricity: Costs

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any figures her Department holds on electricity network costs compared with those in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 14440/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not hold details of this nature.

Biomass Heating

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the level of biomass heating that can be sustained (i) with existing indigenous fuel sources; and (ii) from indigenous sources in the future.

(AQW 14462/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Research carried out by my Department into the potential development of the Northern Ireland renewable heat market in 2010 suggested that heating from existing biomass resources could account for up to 5% of Northern Ireland's total heat demand. It was also assessed that with future development in this market and increased growth of energy crops that by 2020 indigenous biomass resource could account for 10% of total heat demand.

My Department is seeking to develop the renewable heat market through the introduction of the Renewable Heat Incentive and has set a target of 10% renewable heat by 2020.

Oil/Gas Exploration

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the legislative requirements for commercial companies undertaking oil or gas exploration; and (ii) the minimum insurance liability required for each of the companies that currently hold an oil or gas exploration licence.

(AQW 14464/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I would refer the member to the answers I gave to:

- AQW 8471/11-15
- AQW 12271/11-15
- AQW 13397/11-15

Growth Loan Fund

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the uptake of the £50 million Growth Loan Fund for small businesses; and the average interest rate charged.

(AQW 14521/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Growth Loan Fund opened for business in early June 2012 and has completed its first phase of recruitment, with 6 full time employees now in place.

103 loan enquiries have been made from SMEs in NI since the Fund was launched. Following these enquires 27 Business Plans have been received and are currently being analysed.

Seven loans have been approved by the Fund's investment Committee.

The first loan has been made by the Fund and was announced last week. It is therefore not deemed to be appropriate to provide details of the average interest rate charged as this would be identifiable to a specific loan and this information is considered to be commercially sensitive.

Oil/Natural Gas: Prices

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the difference between the current consumer prices of oil and natural gas.

(AQW 14541/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Retail heating oil prices are currently considered to be around 35% higher than the regulated retail price of natural gas for domestic consumers in Greater Belfast at similar usage rates.

Gas Network: Extension

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she plans to include the Maze/Long Kesh site in her Department's Gas to the West proposal paper.

(AQW 14542/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has commissioned an Outline Business Case (OBC) on gas network extension to additional towns in the West/North West and East Down which is nearing completion. The areas under consideration for extension of the natural gas network do not include the Maze/Long Kesh site which falls within firmus energy's existing gas licence area.

Tourism: Upper Bann

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 8982/11-15 and AQW 13889/11-15, (i) to list the tourist attractions/events in the Upper Bann constituency that her Department has identified as motivating key customer segments; and (ii) given that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) works closely with the Orange Order, to list the festivities relating to the Order and the Royal Black Preceptory that have been promoted in NITB literature.

(AQW 14569/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Lough Neagh Discovery Centre and Oxford Island Nature Reserve have featured extensively in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) marketing campaigns. Information on these attractions, along with the Bronte Homeland Interpretative Centre, F. E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio, Fergusons Irish Linen Centre, Millennium Court Arts Centre and The Tannaghmore Gardens Farm & Museum all appear on the NITB consumer website www.discovernorthernireland.com

The Tourism Flagship Parades were listed in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's summer events flyer which was inserted in The Belfast Telegraph, The News Letter and The Irish News on the 23rd and 24th March 2012. The Tourism Flagship Parades and The Sham Fight at Scarva were also listed on the events section of the NITB consumer website www.discovernorthernireland.com.

Job Creation

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) the number of new jobs created; and (ii) the level of financial investment for job creation, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 14573/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Tables 1 to 5 detail the 24,016 jobs that Invest NI has supported by Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA) over the past 5 years. The tables also provide the amount of financial assistance offered by Invest NI to secure these jobs and the amount of investment that is planned by businesses to create these jobs. In addition, Table 6 shows the 7,918 jobs supported through the Enterprise Development Programme. This is presented separately because there are no investment figures associated with the programme.

It should be noted that all the information contained in this response is based on the number of jobs expected to be created, as this is the metric used by Invest NI as part of its investment decision-making process.

Table 1: Invest NI Support Offered to Job Creation Projects by PCA (2007-08)

PCA	New Jobs Supported	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
Belfast East	299	13.03	96.04
Belfast North	51	0.41	4.25
Belfast South	527	4.36	33.01
Belfast West	62	0.88	8.72
East Antrim	284	1.80	17.34
East Londonderry	389	3.06	9.72
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	250	7.33	71.37
Foyle	994	10.20	46.79
Lagan Valley	107	0.55	3.73
Mid Ulster	398	3.54	39.35
Newry & Armagh	425	5.18	118.97
North Antrim	95	3.44	17.59
North Down	37	0.30	1.96
South Antrim	65	0.69	3.87

PCA	New Jobs Supported	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
South Down	61	0.81	3.39
Strangford	61	0.22	2.55
Upper Bann	102	1.18	12.00
West Tyrone	199	1.71	19.86
Total	4,406	58.68	510.52

Table 2: Invest NI Support Offered to Job Creation Projects by PCA (2008-09)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
Belfast East	1,089	24.35	545.20
Belfast North	116	1.01	13.80
Belfast South	358	2.93	38.49
Belfast West	92	0.56	3.67
East Antrim	30	0.24	1.20
East Londonderry	52	0.64	4.79
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	397	4.01	30.25
Foyle	215	1.95	11.53
Lagan Valley	102	0.95	5.03
Mid Ulster	356	2.67	36.44
Newry & Armagh	928	7.41	82.30
North Antrim	191	1.61	9.25
North Down	91	0.78	7.69
South Antrim	212	2.83	18.46
South Down	569	7.17	23.47
Strangford	134	0.63	8.41
Upper Bann	262	13.33	66.92
West Tyrone	71	1.12	10.67
Total	5,265	74.19	917.57

Table 3: Invest NI Support Offered to Job Creation Projects by PCA (2009-10)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
Belfast East	376	7.00	31.13
Belfast North	472	4.54	36.25
Belfast South	602	14.01	55.99
Belfast West	44	0.59	5.17
East Antrim	53	0.52	3.21
East Londonderry	73	0.73	4.32
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	149	1.94	11.84
Foyle	252	14.89	60.39
Lagan Valley	186	2.36	11.04
Mid Ulster	228	6.93	53.36

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
Newry & Armagh	121	2.65	17.98
North Antrim	40	2.08	8.27
North Down	167	0.96	5.84
South Antrim	118	1.98	9.27
South Down	148	1.84	13.08
Strangford	137	2.21	16.68
Upper Bann	713	12.76	59.69
West Tyrone	106	1.26	7.50
Not Yet Located	20	0.24	1.16
Total	4,001	79.50	412.17

Table 4: Invest NI Support Offered to Job Creation Projects by PCA (2010-11)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
Belfast East	931	12.55	64.21
Belfast North	383	3.29	21.30
Belfast South	867	8.18	57.25
Belfast West	5	0.04	0.20
East Antrim	113	1.71	14.73
East Londonderry	50	0.40	2.87
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	192	1.24	19.41
Foyle	357	1.65	10.86
Lagan Valley	244	3.89	29.83
Mid Ulster	123	0.90	8.64
Newry & Armagh	601	5.66	39.20
North Antrim	96	5.58	37.86
North Down	25	0.28	2.07
South Antrim	678	6.01	50.19
South Down	115	0.62	6.15
Strangford	33	0.32	2.68
Upper Bann	116	1.17	11.82
West Tyrone	34	0.31	1.83
Total	4,961	53.79	381.08

Table 5: Invest NI Support Offered to Job Creation Projects by PCA (2011-12)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
Belfast East	219	1.88	13.59
Belfast North	447	1.45	14.35
Belfast South	1,070	8.42	76.61
Belfast West	710	3.67	33.45
East Antrim	73	0.45	2.08

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£million)	Total Planned Investment (£million)
East Londonderry	77	0.62	2.58
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	191	1.36	10.08
Foyle	349	2.48	24.15
Lagan Valley	333	2.72	19.91
Mid Ulster	585	3.67	27.21
Newry & Armagh	209	1.30	12.03
North Antrim	119	0.86	8.12
North Down	139	1.23	8.09
South Antrim	206	1.33	9.88
South Down	227	1.49	10.34
Strangford	125	0.65	5.21
Upper Bann	156	0.63	5.09
West Tyrone	129	0.78	4.22
Not Yet Located	20	0.18	1.59
Total	5,383	35.16	288.61

Notes to Tables 1 to 5:

- 1 New Jobs Promoted represent the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
- 2 Planned Investment includes Assistance Offered.
- 3 Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.

Table 6: Invest NI Jobs Supported through Enterprise Development Programme by PCA (2007-08 to 2011-12)

Pca	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	Total
Belfast East	84	68	58	92	50	353
Belfast North	77	63	78	108	52	377
Belfast South	86	73	76	120	63	418
Belfast West	85	61	62	78	36	323
East Antrim	97	65	56	68	74	359
East Londonderry	149	99	87	139	93	567
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	202	143	124	148	95	711
Foyle	164	97	74	84	58	478
Lagan Valley	78	53	58	94	54	337
Mid Ulster	166	105	124	181	97	674
Newry & Armagh	136	86	81	116	72	492
North Antrim	142	81	52	81	71	426
North Down	56	50	34	69	45	254
South Antrim	76	57	53	88	58	333
South Down	132	79	79	105	82	476
Strangford	72	47	42	76	45	282
Upper Bann	108	93	67	101	81	450
West Tyrone	148	109	111	134	89	591

Pca	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	Total
Unknown	0	0	3	7	6	15
Total	2,058	1,431	1,321	1,888	1,220	7,918

Notes to Table 6:

- 1 These figures are based on an estimate of jobs created by an individual EDP offer. This estimation process is derived from an independent evaluation of the programme.

Abbey Lodge Hotel Site, Downpatrick

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has received any requests for grant aid for new accommodation on the former Abbey Lodge Hotel site in Downpatrick.

(AQW 14613/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI have been in receipt of an application (16 January 2009) for financial assistance toward the development of tourism accommodation at the former Abbey Lodge Hotel site in Downpatrick. All such applications are treated as commercial in-confidence. No offer of financial assistance has been made in relation to the application received.

Broadband: Rural Areas of South Down

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of broadband provision in rural areas of South Down.

(AQW 14637/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Broadband services in Northern Ireland are delivered via a mix of technologies including fixed-line, satellite, radio (wireless) and mobile. This is similar to many regions globally where there are geographic and topographic challenges to network development.

My Department has taken forward a number of initiatives aimed at improving broadband access for consumers across Northern Ireland, particularly those located in rural areas including South Down. This includes the £51million Next Generation Broadband (NGB) project, which has facilitated the roll-out of the highest level of fibre-to-the-cabinet technology in the UK.

Through the NGB project, 164 street cabinets from a total of 168 have been fibre enabled within the South Down Parliamentary Constituency. This represents 98% across the eighteen telephone exchanges, delivering access to speeds of between 2 to 40 megabits per second (Mbps). Those interested in acquiring a service, can use the two websites that have been created to check availability in their area - www.fasterbroadbandni.com and www.nibroadband.com.

However, as fibre-to-the-cabinet technology is distance related, not all premises will be able to access the fibred services. Nevertheless, the recent OFCOM Communications Market Report indicates that, by March 2012, Northern Ireland had the highest household availability of superfast broadband services, at 94%. This is well above the UK average of 60%.

Customers in South Down can access the satellite broadband services available under the Department's contract with Onwave Ltd. Onwave offers services with download speeds of 8, 12 and 18 Mbps. Details of Onwave's services can be found on the company's website at www.onwave.co.uk/ni or by contacting the company directly on 0845 43 43 500.

My Department also established the £1.9million Northern Ireland Broadband Fund, through which there has been significant deployment of fixed-wireless broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland. One of the companies supported under the Fund, North West Electronics (NWE), is currently delivering fixed-wireless broadband services in many areas across South Down. NWE offers services with download speeds of between 10 Mbps and 100 Mbps. More information can be found on North West Electronic's website at www.nwewn.com or by contacting them directly on 028 7135 1999.

In addition, the Fund supported Net 1 Ltd in deploying fixed-wireless technology in a number of locations in South Down, using fixed-wireless technology. Net 1 offers services with download speeds of 5, 6 and 8 Mbps. More information can be obtained on the company's website at www.net1.co.ni or by calling 0845 557 6036.

Looking forward, my Department has secured £4.4million under the UK Coalition Government's Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) initiative, which together with its Budget allocations for 2011-2015, will be used to extend the delivery of higher speed services, into those areas of Northern Ireland where, despite previous investments, a minimum download speed of 2Mbps via fixed-line technology cannot currently be attained.

My officials are also in discussions with BDUK to source additional funds to deliver an innovative project, aimed at improving mobile broadband coverage across Northern Ireland. Work on scoping both projects is underway.

Broadband: Rural Areas of South Down

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the efforts of her Department to improve access to high speed broadband in rural areas of South Down, particularly Saval, Hilltown and the Mayobridge area.

(AQW 14639/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Broadband services in Northern Ireland are delivered via a mix of technologies including fixed-line, satellite, radio (wireless) and mobile. This is similar to many regions globally where there are geographic and topographic challenges to network development.

My Department has taken forward a number of initiatives aimed at improving broadband access for consumers across Northern Ireland, particularly those located in rural areas, including South Down. This includes the £51million Next Generation Broadband (NGB) project, which has facilitated the roll-out of the highest level of fibre-to-the-cabinet technology in the UK.

Customers in Saval, Hilltown and Mayobridge are served by the Newry, Rathfriland and Mayobridge exchanges respectively. Through the NGB project, 57 street cabinets from a total of 58, representing 98%, have been fibre enabled within the Newry, Rathfriland and Mayobridge exchanges, including all of the cabinets that serve Saval, Hilltown and Mayobridge.

These upgrades deliver access to speeds of between 2 to 40 megabits per second (Mbps). Those interested in acquiring a service, can use the two websites that have been created to check availability in their area - www.fasterbroadbandni.com and www.nibroadband.com.

However, as fibre-to-the-cabinet technology is distance related, not all premises will be able to access the fibred services. Nevertheless, the recent OFCOM Communications Market Report indicates that, by March 2012, Northern Ireland had the highest household availability of superfast broadband services, at 94%. This is well above the UK average of 60%.

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DETI officials are also in discussions with BDUK to source additional funds to deliver an innovative project, aimed at improving mobile broadband coverage across Northern Ireland. Work on scoping both projects is underway.

Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas of South Down

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the efforts of her Department to improve mobile phone coverage in rural areas of South Down.
(AQW 14641/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Coverage targets for 3rd Generation (3G) mobile services are set as part of spectrum licensing obligations on a geographic basis and at a UK national level by Ofcom (the telecommunications regulator), meaning that Mobile Network Operators can effectively meet their targets by providing coverage in the largest towns and cities in the UK.

The impact of this is that in many areas of the UK there is a limited commercial case for investment from Mobile Network Operators to improve coverage and quality of service. This particularly impacts on Northern Ireland, having a high density of rural dwellers.

Deficiencies in access to mobile voice services is recognised by Government on a UK-wide basis, which is why the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is taking forward a project – the Mobile Infrastructure project – the aim of which is to improve access to 2nd Generation (voice and text) mobile services across the UK, including parts of Northern Ireland. The precise locations within Northern Ireland to benefit from the project will not be known until the procurement process has been completed and a contract awarded in early 2013. My officials continue to engage with DCMS on this project. In addition to this, DETI, under its Telecommunications Action Plan 2011-2015, is currently scoping a project aimed at delivering improvements in 3rd Generation (voice, text and mobile broadband) services across Northern Ireland while, at the same time, future-proofing networks for the delivery of 4th Generation (voice, text and high speed mobile broadband) services when commercial roll-out commences in 2013.

Tourism: Capital Assistance for Accommodation

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has made any offers of grant aid for new hotel developments in the South Down area in the last five years.
(AQW 14671/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In the last five years Invest NI has received eight applications for capital assistance towards tourism accommodation developments in the South Down constituency. Of these, two were for hotels. In one case the application has not been progressed at the request of the client and in the other case no offer of financial assistance has been made.

Project Kelvin

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to what extent Project Kelvin has featured in persuading inward investment companies to locate to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14684/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI uses the benefits of the region's world class telecoms infrastructure, including the transatlantic link provided by Project Kelvin, to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities, and to secure additional projects from existing international investors.

While Invest NI does not hold information on which companies have chosen to take advantage of the transatlantic link, the agency has conducted an informal survey to assess the extent to which Project Kelvin was important to investment decisions.

The survey found that, between going fully operational in Spring 2010 until the end of Financial year 2011-12, approximately 25% of first time investors rated the transatlantic link as either crucial to their investment decision or a contributing factor.

The survey also found that the investment location was not linked to a Project Kelvin point of presence and that, in all cases, other factors (including availability of skilled labour, availability of office space, other infrastructure related issues, presence of an existing sectoral cluster etc.) contributed to the location decision.

Invest NI will continue to use the Northern Ireland's telecoms infrastructure, including the benefits that Project Kelvin provides, to sell the region as a place to do business.

Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the international sales conference held in the Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart in March 2011, whether (i) potential inward investors have been identified; and (ii) any specific benefits have been derived.

(AQW 14685/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The stakeholder event held at the Flowerfield Arts Centre on 30 March 2011, as part of Invest Northern Ireland's annual sales conference, represented an ideal forum to outline the Coleraine inward investment proposition to Invest NI's Overseas Sales Teams. This allowed the overseas sales teams to understand the initiatives that the Council has undertaken in strengthening certain sector propositions such as that of the ICT sector in launching Digital Causeway.

Following the conference, the number of visits to the Coleraine District Council Area (DCA) increased from two in financial year 2010-11 to four in 2011-12. These visits have not as yet resulted in new first time investment in the Coleraine DCA. However, it should be noted that the investment decision is the end result of an extensive process that can span 18-24 months or even longer.

It is also important to note that the decision on where to invest is taken by the investor and that it is crucial to allow companies the scope to locate where they feel that the business can thrive.

Invest NI will continue to review the Coleraine DCA investment proposition when seeking to meet the needs of prospective investors.

Science Park

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what was the value of the grant given to the Northern Ireland Science Park.

(AQW 14708/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Up to 30 September 2012, the Northern Ireland Science Park has received the following grant aid:

- £21,977,000 has been provided to co-fund the building and expansion of the Science Park
- £3,319,000 was provided to fund the running costs during the construction and establishment of the Science Park.
- £1,100,000 has been provided to support Halo business angel network and NISP Connect programme.

Solar Power: Grants

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what grant assistance is available to self-builders for the installation of solar power products.

(AQW 14709/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In May 2012, I launched the Renewable Heat Premium Payment (RHPP) scheme that provides financial assistance for domestic consumers wishing to install renewable heating technologies such as solar thermal panels. To date, my Department has offered £400,000 of assistance, resulting in a total investment of £1.5million. The RHPP is a forerunner to the Northern Ireland Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) which will be launched following the passage of appropriate legislation.

The RHI will support non-domestic renewable heat installations via ongoing payments over the lifetime of the technology. The RHI will be extended to the domestic sector in due course.

Solar photovoltaic (PV) panels are incentivised by the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) which provides a revenue stream for the renewable electricity generated in the form of Renewables Obligation Certificates which can be sold to electricity suppliers. DETI does not offer grants towards the installation of solar PV panels for renewable electricity.

Further information on the RHPP, RHI and NIRO can be found at www.energy.deti.gov.uk.

Innovation Strategy

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the inquiry into research and development, what progress has been made on the development of an Innovation Strategy.
(AQW 14729/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Economic Strategy has highlighted innovation as being the key factor to rebalancing our economy toward a greater focus on generating high value exports. The ETI Committee's Inquiry Report into Innovation and R&D is therefore particularly welcome as it will provide a valuable contribution to the development of the forthcoming Innovation Strategy. The Innovation Strategy is currently being drafted and I intend to present it to the Executive Sub Committee on the Economy later this year, with an aim to publishing in 2013.

Broadband: Onwave

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what assurance can be given that her Department's appointment of Onwave Ltd, on 6 January 2012, to provide satellite broadband services to rural residents and business, who are unable to avail of fast telephone-line broadband, has resulted in services being offered which are (a) more competitive than comparable services; and (b) comparable, in terms of quality and cost, to broadband services available in urban areas; and (ii) what plans she has to open up the provision of rural broadband services to competition.
(AQW 14748/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Broadband services in Northern Ireland are delivered across a range of technologies. It would be misleading to compare the services of one product over another, given the different technologies involved and the competitive nature of the marketplace. I can, however, confirm that my Department is unaware of any complaints about the quality of the services provided by Onwave from customers who have bought an Onwave product.

The cost of services is a commercial matter for individual telecommunications companies, taking account of market conditions. The Remote Broadband Services contract awarded to Onwave contains a pricing ceiling above which the company cannot charge its customers. In recognising that telecoms is already an open market, my Department seeks to encourage further competition, but has no remit to intervene or influence the pricing policy of private companies.

Mourne Granite Trail

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department has considered the extension of the Mourne Granite Trail to include other quarries, given the success of the current trail linking King Street, Newcastle to Thomas' Mountain.
(AQW 14792/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Neither my Department nor the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has considered the extension of the Mourne Granite Trail.

Department of the Environment

Planning Application B/2011/0057/F

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment whether an Environmental Impact Assessment was submitted for planning application B/2011/0057/F.
(AQW 6483/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): As the site of planning application B/2011/0057/F was located within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) the Department carried out an EIA assessment under Category 11 (B) of Schedule 2 of the Planning (EIA) Regulations to determine whether the planning application should be accompanied by an Environmental Statement. Following consideration of the application details, an EIA determination was carried out on 25 March 2011. It was determined that the proposed development was not likely to have significant effects on the environment and that an Environmental Statement was not required. I have asked for further details on this assessment.

You may however be aware that this planning application was refused at Council on 26 June 2012 and I can confirm that the Department subsequently issued the decision notice on 10 July 2012 refusing planning permission.

Road Freight Operator's Licence

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment how many Road Haulage Operator licences have been revoked in each of the last five years; and what were the reasons involved.

(AQW 12041/11-15)

Mr Attwood: An applicant for a road freight operator's licence must meet specified criteria in relation to repute, financial standing and professional competence. The number of licences revoked in each of the last five years and the reasons for revocation are tabulated below.

Year	Licences Revoked	Reason for Revocation
2007-08	2	Loss of repute – 1 Inadequate financial standing - 1
2008-09	None	
2009-10	None	
2010-11	None	
2011-12	15	Loss of repute – 4 Inadequate financial standing - 11

I met with hauliers in recent weeks to discuss this issues and the condition of the industry, mindful of the recent loss of TARGET jobs. A number of strategies were discussed including the sharing of HMRC and DVA information with other authorities and how new structures in place since early July can be developed in relation to repute and other issues.

National Parks

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has held any recent discussions with the Ulster Farmers' Union in relation to the National Parks proposals.

(AQW 13984/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am very well aware of the differing views in support and in opposition to national parks. I have said I am "taking stock" and am arranging to meet a wide range of queries. I have, of course, met the UFU in January, in August at a farmers meeting in Cookstown and the issue has been raised in other meetings. I have also met the National Beef Association twice on National Parks. I will continue to meet the farmers organisations on this, on the end of the slurry spreading season and any other relevant matters.

Planning Applications: Traffic Flow

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment who has responsibility to ensure that planning restrictions placed on applications, in regard to traffic flow, agreed activity and vehicular activity are monitored; and what penalties are in place when an applicant is found to be in breach of these restrictions.

(AQW 14228/11-15)

Mr Attwood: DoE Planning is responsible for planning control in Northern Ireland. This responsibility includes the determination of planning applications and taking whatever action considered necessary for the enforcement of planning control.

As part of the assessment of an application advice may be sought from a number of agencies and organisations, such as DRD Roads Service, to inform the decision on an application. A copy of the decision notice will normally issue to Roads Service.

Following the grant of planning permission, planning officers will identify particular developments which require proactive monitoring to ensure that development is carried out as approved and conditions complied with. In cases involving restrictive conditions such as traffic flow and activity, the Department will take reasonable steps through effective monitoring and liaison with Roads Service to ensure that conditions are complied with.

Roads Service officials regularly alert DoE Planning of concerns in relation to the implementation of a permission granted, including compliance with traffic and road safety conditions stipulated as part of the planning permission.

Where planning permission has been granted subject to conditions, and one or more of these conditions has not been complied with, DoE Planning may serve a breach of condition notice. Failure to secure compliance with the notice is an offence and anyone found guilty of such an offence may be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £1000.

North Down Coastal Path

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to upgrade the Bangor to Hollywood coastal path to make it useable by both cyclists and pedestrians.

(AQW 14248/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The North Down Coastal Path which extends from Bangor to Hollywood is currently a well used walking route and an important section of the Ulster Way. I understand that there are several sections of this route that are already suitable for multi-use access.

For example, I can inform you that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) through its Natural Heritage Grants Programme previously provided £60,000 in grant aid to the North Down Borough Council between 2008 and 2010 for upgrades to two sections of the route at Glen Road and north of Rockport School to make them accessible for cyclists and all-ability use. In addition NIEA worked with Sustrans to create a specific cycle route through part of Crawfordsburn Country Park which connects to the North Down Coastal Path.

Whilst I recognise the benefits of upgrading paths into 'all ability' walking and cycling routes in appropriate locations, development of such access provision is the responsibility of the local council, in this case North Down Borough Council. You may therefore wish to approach North Down Borough Council directly regarding its plans to upgrade the coastal path.

Beaches

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what powers his Department has in relation to the safety and cleanliness of beaches.

(AQW 14257/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The legislative powers in relation to the safety and cleanliness of beaches are mainly exercised by District Councils. There is a fairly wide range of such powers and details of these are set out below. For completeness I have also provided additional information covering other initiatives currently under way designed to improve the state of our beaches.

Section 82 of the Public Health Acts Amendment Act 1907 ("the 1907 Act") provides that a Council may make bye-laws to prevent danger, obstruction, or annoyance to persons using the seashore in its district. This would include beaches. Examples of the types of activity that may be covered include:

- erection and placing of booths, tents and stalls;
- vehicles; and
- playing of games.

Most of the 1907 Act (including section 82) does not extend to Northern Ireland. A Council may, however, apply to the Department for an Order extending parts or sections of the 1907 Act to its district.

It is a matter for each Council to decide whether to apply for such an Order and whether to make provision, in bye-laws, for its beaches.

Under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 district councils are under a statutory duty to ensure that land for which they are responsible is, so far as is practicable, kept clear of litter. In cases where land is not the responsibility of the District Council, for example, Crown land, the duty applies to the appropriate authority. District Councils and other duty bodies are required by law to have regard to the Code of Practice on Litter in discharging the above duty. The Code gives specific guidance in relation to beaches and for ease of reference I have reproduced the relevant section below:-

"This land use includes amenity beaches (including inland beaches where substantial number of bathers or beach users may congregate). As a minimum standard, amenity beaches should generally be kept clear of all types of litter between the traditional bathing season of 1st May and 30th September inclusive. It is expected that during this time of the year, beaches be subject to a frequent monitoring routine and be cleansed to as practicable a standard as possible. The Code recognises that a Grade A [no litter] is not always achievable, due to the terrain and conditions in a beach environment. A Grade B [predominantly free of litter apart from some small items] would be a suitable cleanliness standard under these circumstances.

Due to changing holiday and climatic patterns, beaches are increasingly being used outside of the traditional bathing season. Although the duty does not extend beyond the bathing season, it is recommended as good practice that duty bodies are aware of the different nature of beaches within their area, that they carry out regular monitoring programme of those beaches and develop an appropriate cleansing regime.

By virtue of the Litter (Non-Relevant Land) Order (Northern Ireland) 1995 (SR 1995 No. 184), land below the place to which the tide flows at mean high water springs is not to be treated as relevant land of a district council or as relevant Crown land. Again, it is recommended as good practice that duty bodies are aware of the impact of litter in the inter-tidal area, and where appropriate carry out cleansing.

District councils should identify those beaches for which they have responsibility, which might reasonably be described as amenity beaches. Any assessment should take into account the level of use of the beach for recreational purposes.

The duty applies to items or materials originating from discharges directly to the marine environment as well as discarded items from beach users. As a guide, only litter comprising manufactured or processed items of materials that have been

discarded, disposed of or abandoned, by intent or accident, should be removed. Litter should include processed food items but it does not include seaweed or twigs, which contribute to maintaining the local ecosystem.

There may be issues of practicability relating to litter removal from beaches and particular care will be needed in respect of sensitive habitats."

Under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 any accumulation or deposit which is prejudicial to health or a nuisance constitutes a statutory nuisance. If an Environmental Health Officer of a Council is satisfied that such a statutory nuisance exists in the district of the council, for example, on a part of a beach, they shall serve an abatement notice on the person responsible for the nuisance. The notice can impose a range of requirements to deal with the nuisance.

Under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, the consent of the Department is required to discharge any trade or sewage effluent to the aquatic environment. In addition, potentially polluting activities carried out on farms are controlled under the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010.

These control measures, together with substantial pollution prevention activities, are combined into River Basin Management Plans. These set ecologically based targets for all waters and especially for protected areas such as bathing waters designated under the EC Bathing Waters Directive. The responsibility for implementing these pollution control and prevention powers rests with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

Protecting bathers' health is therefore another important consideration. Twenty-three of Northern Ireland's bathing waters are identified under the EC Bathing Waters Directive and are monitored for water quality. District Councils and other beach managers monitor safety at these most popular family beaches and many have life guards during the summer months. The Quality of Bathing Water Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 require that where either the Department or a bathing water operator is aware of the presence of waste, including tarry residues, glass, plastic or rubber, the operator shall take such operator management measures there as it considers adequate to protect bathers' health and, where necessary, remove the waste.

I place great importance on the quality and standards of our beaches and the series of Good Beach Summits I am hosting are designed to focus efforts on improving the state of our beaches. I have also instructed officials to develop a strategy to address the problem of marine litter on our beaches. A consultation on a Draft Northern Ireland Marine Litter Strategy, which will provide an overarching framework for coordinated activity, will issue shortly.

I am also committed to the ongoing good work being done in conjunction with coastal councils and other key groups that are targeting increased beach cleanliness, better facilities and appropriate beach information signage.

I know that a number of Councils are very proactive in this area and have undertaken risk assessments and put in place beach safety procedures and signage. In August 2012 I wrote to coastal councils requesting they review their health and safety arrangements and signage at beaches. I will be seeking an update on this important issue at the forthcoming Good Beach Summit on 3 October 2012.

The NIEA continues to work with coastal councils to improve beach cleanliness, facilities, signage and beach safety. Information on bathing water quality, amenities and facilities as well as beach safety is available through a number of local web sites which the public are encouraged to use as part of their planned beach outing. These include:

- Beach NI web site – <http://beachni.com/>
- NIEA Bathing Water Quality – <http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/water-home/quality/bathingqualityni.htm>
- RNLI Beach Safety – <http://www.beachni.com/useful-info/beach-safety/>

Climate Change Adaptation Programme

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether his Department intends to introduce a Climate Change Adaptation Programme or Plan; (ii) how it would be introduced; (iii) when it would commence; (iv) how much it is anticipated to cost; and (v) to outline the reasons for its introduction.

(AQW 14290/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I chair the Cross Departmental Working Group on Climate Change which has the responsibility to prepare and deliver a cross-departmental climate change adaptation programme. I have been pressing my own Department and other Departments on adaptation.

I intend to introduce a Climate Change Adaptation Programme through the Northern Ireland Assembly, in 2013, as required by the UK Climate Change Act 2008.

I fully recognise that we must take action to address our climate change risks and opportunities, otherwise the costs both to our economy and to our environment will increase exponentially. Early adaptation is therefore essential to reduce long term costs and disruption caused by climate change. Our response of course needs to be proportionate to the risks, and have the right balance between our economic sectors and the challenge and growing risks of climate change.

Councils: Casual Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many casual staff are registered with each council.
(AQW 14328/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Council	Number of Casual Staff
Antrim Borough Council	140
Ards Borough Council	194
Armagh City & District Council	193
Ballymena Borough Council	4
Ballymoney Borough Council	0
Banbridge District Council	120
Belfast City Council	362
Carrickfergus Borough Council	46
Castlereagh Borough Council	330
Coleraine Borough Council	48
Cookstown District Council	93
Craigavon Borough Council	219
Derry City Council	114
Down District Council	103
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	73
Fermanagh District Council	164
Larne Borough Council	44
Limavady Borough Council	95
Lisburn City Council	159
Magherafelt District Council	104
Moyle District Council	0
Newry & Mourne District Council	0
Newtownabbey Borough Council	267
North Down Borough Council	92
Omagh District Council	215
Strabane District Council	108

Marine Strategy Framework Directive

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department can achieve good environmental status across all the descriptors under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, or implement an ecologically coherent and representative network of Marine Protected Areas if an MCZ is not a purely environmental designation, will be primarily for seabed features and is not intended to displace any other activity or industry.

(AQW 14356/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department's objective is for an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas, which will include MCZs and European designations. This network will assist in meeting the UK's obligation to achieve Good Environmental Status in our marine waters by 2020; the overall objective of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Identification of potential MCZs will be science-based, however socio-economic data will also be considered when defining areas likely to be impacted and assessing possible management measures.

The Marine Bill is based on sustainable development principles, in that the economic and social consequences are to be taken into account in providing environmental protections. Socio-economic considerations will not override the coherence of the MPA network but will determine the site location and size of the MCZs within the network, without compromising the network's coherence. The aim is to find the right balance between all those who have an interest in the marine area.

It is envisaged that the designation of MCZs will primarily be for specific seabed features and habitats. Many mobile marine species are already protected throughout Northern Ireland territorial waters under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Areas of Townscape Character

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of recent success of the film and television industry, for his assessment of the retention and preservation of areas that are used as filming locations which are also of considerable character or heritage such as Rugby Road in South Belfast.

(AQW 14357/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has designated as Conservation Areas or Areas of Townscape Character a number of areas which it has assessed as exhibiting a distinct character based on their historic built form or layout. Rugby Road is one of many such areas that have been designated in draft BMAP as an Area of Townscape Character. Policy for the control of development within Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape Character (ATC) is set out in Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage and the Addendum to Planning Policy Statement 6: Areas of Townscape Character. In addition the Department has published Supplementary Planning Guidance for individual Conservation Areas and many of these areas also contain listed buildings and protected trees.

The Department is therefore supportive of the retention and preservation of areas which display considerable character or heritage and which as a result provide opportunities for filming.

Upon being advised of the proposal by Roads Service, I spoke with relevant Roads official, explained my interest, the concern of the residents and the film industry and the opposition of residents. I also contacted the Roads Minister.

Minister Kennedy has written to inform me that he has requested Roads Service to postpone the proposed scheme in Rugby Road until consultation with the local community and their public representatives has been carried out.

I believe that the proper outcome is the one requested by residents. I hope this will prevail.

Planning Policy Statement 21

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment how the criteria for farm development in PPS21 helps young farmers and new entrants into the industry, who wish to start new farm businesses and be able to construct farm buildings to house livestock or farm machinery.

(AQW 14421/11-15)

Mr Attwood: PPS21 supports the operational needs of farm enterprises through policy CTY12 'Agriculture and Forestry Development' which permits agricultural buildings on active and established farm holdings subject to certain criteria. For consistency the policy criteria for determining an active and established farm business are the same as that for CTY10 'Dwellings on Farms'. This requires that the holding is active and has been established for at least 6 years.

In cases where a new farm business has been established, and there are no existing building on the farm, an application for a farm building will be assessed against the all the criteria set out in CTY12, other relevant planning policies, and other material planning considerations. However, the welfare of livestock or the need to store farm produce or equipment are material planning considerations which need to be balanced against the requirements of CTY12, including the requirement that the farm business is established at least 6 years.

In such cases non-compliance with the six year rule will not usually render an application unacceptable.

The latest planning statistics on the number of approvals of agricultural buildings show that from April 2011 to March 2012 244 such applications were received and 234 applications were approved. This represents an approval rate of 96%. This high rate of approvals indicates that the majority of farmers are able to submit proposals which satisfy the requirements of CTY12.

Planning Applications: External/Internal Consultees

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) why consultation responses from internal consultees, such as Landscape Architects Branch, are no longer available to the public; (ii) how this complies with his Department's aims of openness and transparency; and (iii) whether this complies with the Aarhus Convention.

(AQW 14425/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Earlier this year, revised arrangements were put in place in for seeking advice on planning applications from civil service staff within the Department's Planning and Local Government Group (PLGG). These revised arrangements were introduced on that basis that there was a clear distinction between (i) external consultees to the Planning process, such as DRD Roads Service, (ii) internal Departmental consultees, such as NIEA and (iii) other sections of the Department where staff have a level of expertise.

Certain sections, such as Landscape Architects Branch, form part of the internal structures of PLGG. Therefore the advice that those sections provide on planning applications will now be sought informally, where necessary, and this will be taken into consideration along with other material planning considerations in the preparation of the Development Management Officers report and following discussion at Development Management Group Meeting.

Following consideration by Development Management Group meeting and when a recommendation on an application has been made and referred to the Council, the Development Management Officer's report will be made available on the Planning Portal. This report will include the details of internal advice provided.

DOE is satisfied that it is meeting the requirements of the Aarhus Convention. Significant efforts have been made over recent years to make a wide range of information relating to individual planning applications available on the Planning Portal. The Development Management Officers report is a key document which sets out the considerations of the Department in making a recommendation on a planning application.

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to list the councils which have a payment term for invoices from suppliers of (i) less than; and (ii) more than 30 days.

(AQW 14450/11-15)

Mr Attwood: This information is not held centrally by the department and is being obtained from the 26 District Councils. Some councils have not been able to provide the necessary information within the deadline given. I shall therefore reply to Mr McClarty MLA as soon as all the information has been received.

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the supplier invoices paid by councils during the period 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012, (i) to detail the number of invoices paid within 10 working days of receipt of the supplier's invoice; (ii) to identify the councils which paid 90 percent or more of suppliers invoices within 10 work days of receipt; and (iii) to explain the performance of any council which failed to achieve the payment performance target of 90 percent.

(AQW 14451/11-15)

Mr Attwood: This information is not held centrally by the department and is being obtained from the 26 District Councils. Some councils have not been able to provide the necessary information within the deadline given. I shall therefore reply to Mr McClarty MLA as soon as all the information has been received.

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to supplier invoices paid by councils between 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012, to detail (i) the number of invoices paid; and (ii) the number paid (a) within 30 days; and (b) more than 30 days of receipt of the supplier's invoice.

(AQW 14452/11-15)

Mr Attwood: This information is not held centrally by the department and is being obtained from the 26 District Councils. Some councils have not been able to provide the necessary information within the deadline given. I shall therefore reply to Mr McClarty MLA as soon as all the information has been received.

Road Freight Operator's Licence

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment, in each of the last five years, how many Road Haulage Operators Licences have been revoked on the basis of the holder being deemed not to be of good repute.

(AQW 14456/11-15)

Mr Attwood: An applicant for a road freight operator's licence must meet certain specified criteria, including in relation to repute. The number of licences revoked in each of the last five years on the basis of the holder being deemed not to be of good repute is set out in the table below.

Year	Licences revoked on the basis of the holder being deemed not to be of good repute
2007-08	1
2008-09	None
2009-10	None
2010-11	None
2011-12	4

Cavanacaw: Gold Mine

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will give an assurance that the site at Cavanacaw near Omagh will be restored, specifically in relation to the mining pit.

(AQW 14478/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The original grant of planning permission for the Gold Mine includes a condition requiring a closure plan to be submitted to deal with remediation and restoration. While the permission associated with the implementation of the closure plan was recently quashed the Department will be retaking this decision with a view to ensuring proper restoration of the site in the future.

I am therefore confident that when this planning application is processed properly the restoration of the site will be secured.

Cavanacaw: Gold Mine

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment for a breakdown of all the costs incurred by his Department in the recent civil action concerning the Cavanacaw gold mine.

(AQW 14479/11-15)

Mr Attwood: It is too early to provide a full breakdown of costs.

While the Court has awarded costs against the Department the applicants' legal advisors have not yet submitted their costs to the Department for consideration.

Packaging: Alternatives to Glass

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the benefits of packaging alternatives to glass, in the context of environmental impact and recycling.

(AQW 14480/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am committed to the efficient use of resources and recognise the benefits that this can deliver for a sustainable economy and for our environment. In this context I am creating a legislative framework to encourage the application of the waste hierarchy and to promote resource efficiency. Whilst the choice of packaging must remain a commercial decision for business to make based on their products, and I cannot advocate substituting specific materials, I am amending the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 from 1st January 2013 to set higher targets to recover and recycle all packaging materials. This will minimise environmental impact by increasing the amount and availability of recyclable material for reprocessing, reducing the amount of packaging going to landfill and by encouraging producers to reduce packaging through innovative design. The Department is also working closely with the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to promote optimum packaging for all producers.

Recycling: Plant-based Plastics

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any research his Department has undertaken in the field of recyclable plant-based plastics and Polyethylene terephthalate bottles.

(AQW 14481/11-15)

Mr Attwood: No bespoke research has been conducted by the Department into these particular plastics. However the Department has directly and indirectly funded general research and studies on plastics.

In June 2008, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), who receive grant-in-aid funding from the Department, published the "Domestic Mixed Plastics Packaging Waste Options". The WRAP study concluded near-infrared systems can effectively remove polylactic acid bioplastics (plant-based plastics) and carton board from a mixed packaging stream thereby showing that automated systems on the market today can accurately sort natural plastics into pure streams within industry accepted norms and thus reduce barriers to their use. The report is at: <http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/domestic-mixed-plastics-waste-management-options>.

On 15th September 2011 Minister for the Environment, Community & Local Government, Mr Phil Hogan TD, and I launched the study, "The Irish Recycled Plastic Waste Arisings Study". The aim of the study was to provide business people and entrepreneurs with reliable data on the quantity, quality, type, origin, destination and end use of plastic waste generated on the island of Ireland to help them form ideas and make decisions on what they can do to reprocess plastic waste here on the island.

The study which was compiled by rx3, identified that many plastic reprocessors and manufacturers import plastic waste and recycle as raw materials for their operations here on the island of Ireland. The rx3 study, the first of its kind on the island of Ireland, found that while manufacturers have a need and demand for recyclable plastics as raw materials, in 2009 less than a third of the estimated 482,366 tonnes of plastic waste generated on the island of Ireland was collected for recycling. The study also estimated that 40,088 tonnes of PET (polyethylene terephthalate) packaging, roughly equivalent to 1.6 billion plastic 500 ml soft drinks bottles, were collected for recycling from households in 2009 across the island. The report is can be viewed at: <http://www.rx3.ie/MDGUploadedFiles/file/The%20Irish%20Recycled%20Plastic%20Waste%20Arisings%20Study.pdf>

Animals: Threat of Extinction

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what animals, including bird life, are currently under threat of extinction. (AQW 14485/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Species threatened with extinction in Ireland are included in published Irish red lists. Species assessed as critically endangered, endangered, or vulnerable are considered to be under threat of extinction.

For birds, a list of Birds of Conservation Concern for Ireland and the UK is used to assess conservation status.

In Northern Ireland a list of priority species is maintained which includes all species threatened with extinction and other species requiring conservation action. This list is published by my Department as required under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

The current list of 481 Northern Ireland priority species was published in 2010 and includes 343 animal species (of which 66 are bird species). Of these, 83 animal species (including 9 species of birds) are listed as threatened in Irish Red Data lists and a further 41 birds are red-listed Birds of Conservation Concern. These are listed in the attached appendix. The full priority species list can be found on the Northern Ireland Environment Agency website. http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/northern_ireland_priority_species_list.pdf

Appendix

Criteria 6: Irish Red Data Book (RDB) species classed as critically endangered (CR), endangered (EN) or vulnerable (VU)

Criteria 7: Red-listed species in either Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BOCCI) or the UK Birds of Conservation Concern (UK BOCC) lists.

Group	Latin Name	Common name	Criteria 6	Criteria 7
Birds	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	dunlin	√	√
Birds	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	nightjar	√	√
Birds	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	hen harrier	√	√
Birds	<i>Crex crex</i>	corncrake	√	√
Birds	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	common scoter	√	√
Birds	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	red-necked phalarope	√	√
Birds	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	golden plover	√	√
Birds	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	roseate tern	√	√
Birds	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	little tern	√	√
Bees	<i>Andrena coitana</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Andrena denticulata</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Andrena fuscipes</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Andrena nigroaenea</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Andrena praecox</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Andrena semilaevis</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Bombus (P.) barbutellus</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Bombus (P.) campestris</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Bombus (Psithyrus) rupestris</i>	a cuckoo bumblebee	√	
Bees	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>	moss carder bee	√	
Bees	<i>Colletes floralis</i>	northern colletes	√	
Bees	<i>Hylaeus brevicornis</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Hylaeus hyalinatus</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Lasioglossum nitidiusculum</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Lasioglossum rufitarse</i>	a solitary bee	√	
Bees	<i>Nomada goodeniana</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Nomada striata</i>	a bee	√	

Group	Latin Name	Common name	Criteria 6	Criteria 7
Bees	<i>Sphecodes ferruginatus</i>	a bee	√	
Bees	<i>Sphecodes gibbus</i>	a bee	√	
Beetles	<i>Agabus congener</i>	relative diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Agabus conspersus</i>	spattered diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Bagous frit</i>	short sloth weevil	√	
Beetles	<i>Bagous lutulentus</i>	horsetail sloth weevil	√	
Beetles	<i>Cyphon punctipennis</i>	transition marsh beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Donacia aquatica</i>	zircon reed beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Donacia cinerea</i>	hairy reed beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Haliphus apicalis</i>	saltmarsh crawler water beetle	√	

Group	Latin Name	Common name	Criteria 6	Criteria 7
Beetles	<i>Haliphus variegatus</i>	variegated crawler water beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Helophorus arvensis</i>	upland frenchman	√	
Beetles	<i>Helophorus fulgidicollis</i>	orangeman	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydraena minutissima</i>	diminutive moss beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydraena nigrita</i>	black moss beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydraena rufipes</i>	red-legged moss beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydrochus brevis</i>	bereft scavenger beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydrocyphon deflexicollis</i>	rockhopper beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydroporus glabriusculus</i>	three bs diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydroporus longicornis</i>	Sharp's parallel diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Hydroporus morio</i>	quicksilver diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Hygrotus novemlineatus</i>	nine-lined diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Ilybius chalconatus</i>	copper diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Ilybius subaeneus</i>	dull bronze diver	√	
Beetles	<i>Laccophilus hyalinus</i>	dinghy skipper	√	
Beetles	<i>Ochthebius bicolon</i>	:: moss beetle	√	
Beetles	<i>Ochthebius exsculptus</i>	a moss beetle	√	
Molluscs	<i>Acicula fusca</i>	point snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Anisus vortex</i>	whirlpool ram's horn	√	
Molluscs	<i>Anodonta anatina</i>	duck mussel	√	
Molluscs	<i>Anodonta cygnea</i>	swan mussel	√	
Molluscs	<i>Aplexa hypnorum</i>	moss bladder snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Arianta arbustorum</i>	copse snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Balea perversa</i>	tree snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Cochlodina laminata</i>	plaited door snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Gyraulus laevis</i>	smooth ram's horn	√	
Molluscs	<i>Helicella itala</i>	heath snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Hydrobia acuta neglecta</i>	a spire snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Leiostryla anglica</i>	English chrysalis snail	√	
Molluscs	<i>Limax cinereoniger</i>	ash-black slug	√	

Group	Latin Name	Common name	Criteria 6	Criteria 7
Molluscs	<i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>	freshwater pearl mussel	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Merdigera obscura</i>	lesser bulin	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Musculium lacustre</i>	lake (or capped) orb mussel	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Pisidium lilljeborgii</i>	Lilljeborg's pea mussel	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Pisidium pulchellum</i>	iridescent pea mussel	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Pupilla muscorum</i>	moss chrysalis snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Radix auricularia</i>	ear pond snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Spermodea lamellata</i>	plaited snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Succinella oblonga</i>	small amber snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Vallonia pulchella</i>	beautiful grass snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Ventrosia ventrosa</i>	a spire snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Vertigo angustior</i>	narrow-mouthed whorl snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Vertigo antivertigo</i>	marsh whorl snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Vertigo geyeri</i>	Geyer's whorl snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Vertigo lilljeborgi</i>	Lilljeborg's whorl snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Zenobiella subrufescens</i>	brown snail	✓	
Molluscs	<i>Zonitoides excavatus</i>	hollowed glass snail	✓	
Birds	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	skylark		✓
Birds	<i>Anas acuta</i>	pintail		✓
Birds	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	shoveler		✓
Birds	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	tree pipit		✓
Birds	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	golden eagle		✓
Birds	<i>Aythya marila</i>	scaup		✓
Birds	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	bittern		✓
Birds	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	knot		✓
Birds	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	lesser redpoll		✓
Birds	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	linnet		✓
Birds	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>	twite		✓
Birds	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	hawfinch		✓
Birds	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	quail		✓
Birds	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	cuckoo		✓
Birds	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>	bewick's swan		✓
Birds	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	yellowhammer		✓
Birds	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	white-tailed eagle		✓
Birds	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>	red grouse		✓
Birds	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	herring gull		✓
Birds	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	black-headed gull		✓
Birds	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	black-tailed godwit		✓
Birds	<i>Locustella naevia</i>	grasshopper warbler		✓
Birds	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	yellow wagtail		✓
Birds	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	spotted flycatcher		✓
Birds	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	curlew		✓

Group	Latin Name	Common name	Criteria 6	Criteria 7
Birds	Numenius phaeopus	whimbrel		✓
Birds	Passer domesticus	house sparrow		✓
Birds	Passer montanus	tree sparrow		✓
Birds	Phylloscopus sibilatrix	wood warbler		✓
Birds	Podiceps nigricollis	black-necked grebe		✓
Birds	Puffinus griseus	sooty shearwater		✓
Birds	Puffinus mauretanicus	Balearic shearwater		✓
Birds	Stercorarius parasiticus	Arctic skua		✓
Birds	Streptopelia turtur	turtle dove		✓
Birds	Sturnus vulgaris	starling		✓
Birds	Tringa totanus	redshank		✓
Birds	Turdus iliacus	redwing		✓
Birds	Turdus philomelos	song thrush		✓
Birds	Turdus torquatus	ring ouzel		✓
Birds	Tyto alba	barn owl		✓
Birds	Vanellus vanellus	lapwing		✓

Planning System: Reform

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what his Department is doing to make the planning application process quicker for businesses.

(AQW 14488/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am working on a number of fronts to reform and remodel the planning system so that it supports the future economic and social development needs of all users in Northern Ireland, including local businesses.

I have recently introduced legislation which provides new permitted development rights for extensions, alterations and other small scale development for shops, financial and professional services establishments, office premises and schools, colleges, universities and hospitals. The legislation also provides revised permitted development rights for industrial buildings and warehouses. Increasing the range of development that no longer needs planning permission will make it easier for owners of shops and offices to undertake minor building works such as small extensions to their property.

I have also introduced an enhanced streamlined scheme, to which 20 councils have now agreed. This enhanced scheme incorporates all minor and intermediate applications, housing developments up to 25 units and office accommodation up to a maximum of 200 square metres. Processing times for these applications will be significantly reduced and this will have a positive impact on business in Northern Ireland.

I have also set ambitious targets for 2012-2013 to speed up the planning process. These targets should ensure that planning applications for small business are processed in a timely manner.

I also intend to bring forward various reforms designed to speed up the processing of applications (including major applications) such as measures to ensure quicker responses from consultees and on a voluntary basis pre-application community consultation on key developments.

However, the Department's experience to date is that improved performance can only be achieved through working inclusively with all key stakeholders in the overall planning system. I would encourage applicants to engage with the local community and to enter into pre-application discussions with my Department prior to the submission of major planning applications.

I will continue to work with key stakeholders to ensure that planning delivers benefits to the economy in an efficient and timely manner and continue to monitor the performance within Planning.

In addition there are a further series of initiatives including:

- (i) Extension of Permitted Development rights;
- (ii) Moving resources into Strategic Planning;
- (iii) Concentrated work on a range of non Article 31 applications;
- (iv) Fundamental policy review to move towards a single Planning Policy Statement; and
- (v) Return of Planning staff on secondment to other parts of the NICS.

Local Government Service Delivery: Economic Appraisal

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has commissioned a new economic appraisal of the Local Government Reform Programme
(AQW 14544/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The economic appraisal of local government service delivery, published by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in October 2009, indicated that under the preferred option (i.e. Transformation with Regional Collaboration) implementation of the local government reform programme could involve expenditure of up to £118 million over five years and achieve savings of £438 million over twenty five years.

The Regional Transition Committee, which I chair, has commissioned the senior local and central government officers in the Finance Working Group to re-examine the costs and benefits of reform taking account a range of key factors. These include the 2015 timescale for reform set out in the Programme for Government 2011-15, the sector's Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency proposals and the changed economic climate in which reform is now being taken forward.

The group will be working closely with the Transition Committees in developing the costs and benefits of reform in their constituent councils.

The funding of RPA will need to come from a number of sources, including in my view direct central Government support.

Recycling

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what more his Department can do to increase recycling.
(AQW 14585/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department is currently delivering a comprehensive programme to divert waste from landfill through the prevention of waste and the increase of recycling. The Department's Rethink Waste programme includes:

- 1 A communications plan including promotion of the Love Food Hate Waste campaign to reduce the quantity of food waste arisings.
- 2 Grant-in-aid funding for the Waste and Resource Action Programme (WRAP) to provide technical advisory support to local councils in order to improve the quality and efficiency of collection and recycling services offered to households and businesses.
- 3 Support for voluntary agreements that encourage greater resource efficiency, including increased recycling, such as the Halving Waste to Landfill agreement (construction waste); Courtauld Commitment 2 (packaging waste); and the Hospitality and Food Service Sector Service agreement.
- 4 The delivery of Rethink Waste Capital and Revenue Funds. Capital funding is available to councils and Waste Management Groups to improve or extend their existing waste collection, re-use and recycling infrastructure. Councils, the private sector and the Community & Voluntary Sector are able to apply for revenue funding for initiatives which will improve resource efficiency and boost waste prevention, recycling and re-use activity.

Under the Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme, the Department is funding pre-procurement costs to assist local government in securing the network of major new facilities which it has identified as necessary to meet its legal obligations to divert waste from landfill. The new facilities will contribute to increased recycling by extracting recyclates from residual municipally collected waste in Mechanical Biological Treatment plants and extracting additional recyclates during Energy from Waste processes.

With increased recycling it is essential that the quality of recyclates is improved and a market is developed for recyclates. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has introduced seven quality protocols in the last several years in Northern Ireland. Quality protocols provide standards to enable fully recovered materials to be used without the need for waste management controls. This in turn leads to increasing market confidence in waste-derived products and driving markets for recyclates. The North South Market Development Steering Group has also commissioned a several studies to assist market development, such as the Irish Recycled Plastics Waste Arisings Study. The aims of this particular study were to establish baseline information on the quantity, quality, type, origin and destination of waste plastics across the island of Ireland, and identify potential domestic markets for plastics at all life-cycle stages including plastic waste, plastic recyclates and plastic end products.

Although there has been significant progress in recycling made over the last decade, I am mindful that we cannot be complacent but instead must increase the momentum of change towards a resource efficient and low carbon economy of which recycling plays an important part. Therefore I have recently announced my intention to introduce a statutory 60% recycling target for local authority collected municipal waste to be achieved over the next 10 years.

The review of the Waste Management Strategy will also include the introduction of landfill restrictions for food waste and policies to increase the quality of recyclates such as a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) Code of Practice. There will also be initiatives for waste prevention which sits above recycling in the waste hierarchy.

Slurry Spreading

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has had any discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in regards to extending the closed spreading period for slurry and farm yard manures.

(AQW 14590/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department of the Environment has joint responsibility with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on implementation of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (NI) 2006.

I have been, and will continue to, liaise with Minister O'Neill regarding the closed spreading period for slurry and farm yard manures.

Slurry Spreading

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment whether he intends to extend the closed spreading period for slurry and farm yard manures in 2012, given the level of rainfall in recent months.

(AQW 14591/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am very aware of the concerns of the local farming community regarding issues they have faced recently in spreading slurry and I appreciate the difficulties faced by farmers in a number of places in the North of Ireland. The rainfall figures have this summer again been above average, even in some places well above average. I have met with the Ulster Farmers Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, as to their view on ground conditions, on 27 September 2012.

I agree with their views that, as with 2011, where a farmer has "reasonable excuse" to spread after the end of the season, the farmer will be able to spread.

I must stress that, under Regulation 25(2) of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, farmers, on a case by case basis, may be able to rely on the defence of "reasonable excuse" in relation to spreading of organic manures and non compliance with the closed period. To be able to rely on this defence a farmer should provide evidence showing that they have managed their slurry properly and taken all reasonable steps to manage the situation and had no alternative to spreading during the closed period.

I have made it clear to NIEA that where individual farmers have taken all reasonable steps to manage the situation and had no alternative, the Agency should look positively at those cases.

I believe this approach should result in relief to and protection of farmers in genuine difficulty, in a way that protects the interests of the farmer, the government, the economy and the environment and that this is a proper intervention and a proportionate response to a difficult situation. I attach my press release issued on 28 September 2012 in this regard.

Slurry Spreading

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will extend the slurry spreading deadline to the end of October.

(AQW 14594/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am very aware of the concerns of the local farming community regarding issues they have faced recently in spreading slurry and I appreciate the difficulties faced by farmers in a number of places in the North of Ireland. The rainfall figures have this summer again been above average, even in some places well above average. I have met with the Ulster Farmers Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, as to their view on ground conditions, on 27 September 2012.

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Farming: Low Carbon

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the benefits of low-carbon farming; and for his assessment of whether low-carbon farming would be permitted in a National Park.

(AQW 14660/11-15)

Mr Attwood: DARD has key responsibility for farming methods, including low carbon approaches. DARD endorsed the low carbon farming approach in the document "Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases"¹ which includes examples of improved nutrient management, improved fertiliser management and other measures. Low carbon approaches benefit the environment through reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and can also benefit the farmer through improved sustainability and reduced costs associated with more efficient methods.

Minister Attwood has publically stated that national park designation would not affect existing farming methods or practices. Therefore it would be a matter for each farmer to decide if they would adopt such practices on their land.

Slurry Spreading

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the persistent wet weather and the wet summer forcing farmers to keep animals indoors which has resulted in increased levels of stored slurry, whether he will consider an extension of the slurry spreading deadline to allow farmers to empty tanks in preparation for winter.

(AQW 14697/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am very aware of the concerns of the local farming community regarding issues they have faced recently in spreading slurry and I appreciate the difficulties faced by farmers in a number of places in the North of Ireland. The rainfall figures have this summer again been above average, even in some places well above average. I have met with the Ulster Farmers Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, as to their view on ground conditions, on 27 September 2012.

I agree with their views that, as with 2011, where a farmer has "reasonable excuse" to spread after the end of the season, the farmer will be able to spread.

I must stress that, under Regulation 25(2) of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, farmers, on a case by case basis, may be able to rely on the defence of "reasonable excuse" in relation to spreading of organic manures and non compliance with the closed period. To be able to rely on this defence a farmer should provide evidence showing that they have managed their slurry properly and taken all reasonable steps to manage the situation and had no alternative to spreading during the closed period.

I have made it clear to NIEA that where individual farmers have taken all reasonable steps to manage the situation and had no alternative, the Agency should look positively at those cases.

I believe this approach should result in relief to and protection of farmers in genuine difficulty, in a way that protects the interests of the farmer, the government, the economy and the environment and that this is a proper intervention and a proportionate response to a difficult situation. I attach my press release issued on 28 September 2012 in this regard.

School Buses: Defects

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment how many buses, which were carrying school children, did the Driver and Vehicle Agency's enforcement team find to have defects, in the Western Education and Library Board area, since the beginning of this school term; and whether this includes the three operators from the Republic of Ireland whose contracts were reinstated by the Board on 1 September 2012.

(AQW 14776/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Since the beginning of this school term the Driver & Vehicle Agency's enforcement team has detected six buses carrying school children in the Western Education and Library Board area with defects present. Some of these buses were owned by operators whose contracts were reinstated by the Board on 1 September 2012.

Wind Turbines: ETSU-R-97 Methodology

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 4800/11-15, whether he has considered revising ETSU-R-97.

(AQW 14793/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The ETSU-R-97 methodology for the assessment of wind farm noise was developed by the Energy Technology Support Unit of the former Dept. of Trade and Industry (now the Department of Energy and Climate Change) in Britain. It is not therefore within my gift to revise the ETSU-R-97 methodology.

You will be aware from my previous answer that, at the request of DECC, the Institute of Acoustics (IoA) has established a working group to examine the application of ETSU-R-97. By way of an update, this group has now published a discussion paper and intends to issue a 'Good Practice Guide' on the application of ETSU-R-97 methodology later this year.

1 <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/de/efficient-farming-cuts-greenhouse-gases-2.pdf>

The aim of this guide will be to ensure that noise assessments are carried out in a thorough and, as far as possible, consistent manner and that the subsequent noise reports contain all necessary information required by the decision-maker.

Following its publication I will consider the lessons for Northern Ireland planning policy and best practice guidance.

Local Government: Debt Transfer

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment what provisions he intends to put in place for the transfer of existing local government debt, where debt associated assets will move to another council jurisdiction.
(AQO 2533/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The dissolution of the current twenty six councils, and the creation of the eleven new councils in 2015, will require the transfer of legal title of the assets and legal responsibility for liabilities, including debt, from a current council to its successor council.

It is, therefore, proposed to include provision in the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill for the creation of schemes which will transfer the designated assets and liabilities, including debt, from the current to the successor councils. Subject to the Executive's agreement, I intend to introduce this Bill to the Assembly before the end of the year.

The Finance Working Group, which comprises senior local and central government officials, is developing the detail of these transfer schemes for consideration of the Regional Transition Committee, which I chair.

It is 950 days to reorganisation. Councils, Councillors, Council Management need to accelerate the work of the VTC's to get reform over the line and to get reform right.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Rates: Exemptions

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there is any scope within the current Rates legislation to allow people who have been forced out of their homes due to flood damage to be exempt from paying rates whilst they cannot live at their homes.

(AQW 13801/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Only properties in the Valuation List are chargeable to rates and there is scope within the current legislation to remove houses (or apartments) from the valuation list if they are in such a poor condition that they are incapable of being lived in without significant repair.

This is a matter of degree and each case has to be considered on its individual merits, depending on the extent of the flood damage.

The property would have to need a considerable amount of money to be spent on repair work to render it reasonably habitable. Exactly how much depends on the sort of house it is and its capital value. This is a matter for the District Valuer within LPS to assess in the first instance.

'Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-2010'

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 will be published.
(AQW 14126/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The next report for Northern Ireland will provide fiscal balance estimates for both 2009-10 and 2010-11. It is anticipated that this report will be published in October.

Funding for Lending Scheme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions have taken place with the Treasury and banks regarding the Bank of England Funding for Lending Scheme.
(AQW 14165/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have been concerned for some time now that national initiatives taken by the Government to improve access to finance have not been effective in Northern Ireland. This is not acceptable and as banking is a reserved matter it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that such schemes are equally beneficial in all parts of the UK. This is a point I have made repeatedly to Treasury Ministers over the past couple of years and most recently when I met with the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Mark Hoban MP, on 4 July 2012 to discuss banking issues. At that meeting I emphasised how vital it was that the then to be announced Funding for Lending scheme was designed in a way which meant our banks could fully participate.

Mr Hoban subsequently advised me on 8 August 2012 that the Treasury officials had met with our four main banks who had reported that they viewed the new Funding for Lending Scheme and its design positively. Ulster Bank formally announced their participation in the scheme on 28 September and I hope that others will follow in the future.

Mr Hoban committed to monitor participation in this scheme in Northern Ireland. My officials are liaising with their counterparts in the Treasury and the Bank of England on this and I will be taking this forward with the new Financial Secretary as and when appropriate.

Taxation: Conacre System

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are the current tax implications for people who are receiving payment for conacre.

(AQW 14186/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The tax treatment of conacre let land is a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine. Concerns were raised previously in 2009 about how the “McClean” judgment (that conacre let land would no longer attract Business Property Relief from Inheritance Tax liability on the development value of the land) would affect local farming families. Fears were also raised in the local agricultural community that Agricultural Property Relief was also under threat.

Following on from these concerns, the then DARD Minister Michelle Gildernew and I sought and received clarification from HM Treasury that the UK Government was not planning to withdraw Inheritance Tax APR from conacre land. Neither were there plans to change the rules around APR. I have not received any indication of a change to this position.

Taxation: Conacre System

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he is aware of any impending changes in tax regulations that will have implications for people receiving payment for conacre.

(AQW 14187/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The tax treatment of conacre let land is a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine. Concerns were raised previously in 2009 about how the “McClean” judgment (that conacre let land would no longer attract Business Property Relief from Inheritance Tax liability on the development value of the land) would affect local farming families. Fears were also raised in the local agricultural community that Agricultural Property Relief was also under threat.

Following on from these concerns, the then DARD Minister Michelle Gildernew and I sought and received clarification from HM Treasury that the UK Government was not planning to withdraw Inheritance Tax APR from conacre land. Neither were there plans to change the rules around APR. I have not received any indication of a change to this position.

Family Law: Access Rights

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there is scope for legislation to be introduced to grant rights for grandparents to access their grandchildren, in cases where the children's parents are divorced or separated.

(AQW 14329/11-15)

Mr Wilson: This question has been referred to me as my Department is responsible for substantive private family law. We are undertaking a review of the law relating to parental responsibility and contact with children post-separation. At this stage we are hoping to go out to consultation in the Autumn of this year. However, that target date may fall to be revised in light of business demands.

Rates: HMOs

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why the owner or landlord is responsible for the collection and payment of rates for Houses of Multiple Occupation, regardless of the capital value or frequency of rent payment, yet for other private rented accommodation, the tenant is normally liable for the payment of rates.

(AQW 14518/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The landlord liability provisions in rating legislation, making the owner or landlord liable for rates rather than tenants in most circumstances, is a long established feature of the rating system here. It has origins in earlier legislation dating back 90 years.

It applies to lower value single family residences and all houses in multiple occupation because this is where problems are likely to occur in collecting rates directly from tenants, who tend to move about more often than most. Direct collection from such occupiers is uneconomic and this holds true today as it did back then, even through the type of households may have changed a lot.

Some changes were made to the powers in 2007, following research and public consultation. This was to reflect the change in the basis of assessment from net annual value to capital value and it also brought in the relatively new category of ‘houses in multiple occupation’ (HMOs), which replaced and extended the earlier definition of “properties let as apartments or lodgings”.

The reason there are no valuation limits on HMOs is because virtually all HMOs are occupied by the more transient tenant.

The enquiry is both a welcome one and a timely one because the issue of landlord liability is something I am actively considering at the moment.

There are certain complications around the way this measure is administered, and that concerns the frequency of rent payments for the lower value single household residences. They must be paid at quarterly intervals, or less, to bring them

within compulsory landlord liability. This is both expensive to administer and could lead to avoidance but more importantly it can lead to confusion about who is legally liable, the landlord or the tenant.

I would like to remove this stipulation and make some other changes to the arrangements for landlord liability. I am in the process of liaising with the DSD Minister before my Department writes directly to the Landlords Association, prior to a wider consultation.

Rates: Liability

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there are any plans to clarify rates liability by amending the Rates (NI) Order 1977.
(AQW 14519/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Rating legislation dictates that private landlords are liable for domestic rates in most circumstances.

These circumstances are where all houses where the capital value does not exceed £55,000 or where the capital value does not exceed £150,000 and the rent is payable or collected at intervals shorter than quarterly or houses in multiple occupation.

The law also allows the landlord of any house to enter into a voluntary arrangement with the department to pay the rates.

Disputes are uncommon but when they do arise it is generally because the landlord has not made the rates position clear to the tenant when a tenancy agreement is entered into.

I can confirm that I am in the process of bringing forward proposals that will both simplify administration and improve understanding of the rules governing landlord liability for rates and thus reduce the number of disputes that occur.

I am currently liaising with the DSD Minister before my Department writes directly to the Landlords Association, prior to a wider consultation.

Rates: Private Landlords

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what his Department is doing to address the problems arising around the payment of rates on rented properties, where a dispute over liability between the landlord and tenant exists.
(AQW 14520/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Rating legislation dictates that private landlords are liable for domestic rates in most circumstances.

These circumstances are where all houses where the capital value does not exceed £55,000 or where the capital value does not exceed £150,000 and the rent is payable or collected at intervals shorter than quarterly or houses in multiple occupation.

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I am currently liaising with the DSD Minister before my Department writes directly to the Landlords Association, prior to a wider consultation.

Rates: Non-payment

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, over the last two years, how many cases for non-payment of rates have been taken where a dispute exists between the landlord and tenant of the property over the liability for paying rates.
(AQW 14522/11-15)

Mr Wilson: No records exist on the number of cases taken for non-payment of rates where a dispute exists between the landlord and tenant of the property over the liability for paying rates.

Rates: Private Landlords

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures can be put in place to protect private rental tenants from action on non-payment of rates, where the landlord has declared responsibility for payment.
(AQW 14523/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Rating legislation dictates that private landlords are liable for domestic rates in most circumstances.

These circumstances are where all houses where the capital value does not exceed £55,000 or where the capital value does not exceed £150,000 and the rent is payable or collected at intervals shorter than quarterly or houses in multiple occupation.

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I am currently liaising with the DSD Minister before my Department writes directly to the Landlords Association, prior to a wider consultation.

Rates: Exemptions for Churches

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any church buildings qualify for rates exemptions. (AQW 14595/11-15)

Mr Wilson: A church, chapel or similar building, occupied by a religious body and used for purposes of public religious worship; and a church hall, chapel hall or similar building occupied by a religious body and used for purposes connected with the body or for purposes of any charity are exempt from rates under Article 41(2)(b) of the Rates (NI) Order 1977.

Executive: Bond Issuance

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has raised with the British Government the possibility of the Executive issuing bonds without an impact on the Block Grant. (AQW 14596/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Increased lending powers for the Scottish Government are being provided for on a phased basis in the Scotland Act 2012 in the context of broader agreement on the devolution of fiscal powers for Scotland. These lending powers are intended to enable the management of the increased budget volatility that will come with that fiscal devolution. As part of this the Government also included a provision in the Scotland Act 2012 which enables it to amend, in future, the way in which Scottish Ministers can borrow to include bond issuance, without the need for further primary legislation.

While the Finance Act 2012 provides for the devolution of long haul Air Passenger Duty rate setting powers to the Northern Ireland Executive, discussions are ongoing, and the Government has yet to decide whether it will agree to the devolution of Corporation Tax setting powers.

I have not raised the specific issue of bond issuance with the Government. However, following a decision on Corporation Tax devolution, how further borrowing powers over and above those we currently have through the Re-investment & Reform Initiative (RRI) might be used to manage any increased budget volatility is something we may need to consider. It is too early to say how beneficial bond issuance might be in this regard. A Government consultation on this matter in the Scottish context recently closed and I look forward to seeing the outcome of this work.

Executive: Bond Issuance

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether a proposal similar to that to allow the Scottish Government to issue bonds would be of benefit to the Executive. (AQW 14597/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Increased lending powers for the Scottish Government are being provided for on a phased basis in the Scotland Act 2012 in the context of broader agreement on the devolution of fiscal powers for Scotland. These lending powers are intended to enable the management of the increased budget volatility that will come with that fiscal devolution. As part of this the Government also included a provision in the Scotland Act 2012 which enables it to amend, in future, the way in which Scottish Ministers can borrow to include bond issuance, without the need for further primary legislation.

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Civil Service: Workforce Composition

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel given that previous surveys have identified that the Protestant community was under-represented in Administrative Assistant and Administrative Officer posts within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, what work is being undertaken to ensure that the previous under-representation is not repeated. (AQW 14662/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department carries out statutory monitoring and reporting on the community background of the Northern Ireland Civil Service workforce. The last Article 55 Review which used data on the workforce as at 1 January 2010 found fair participation between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the Administrative Assistant grade and a lack of fair participation by Protestants in the Administrative Officer grade. The Review also found an increase in the proportion of applications from Protestants for vacancies at both grades although in the case of Administrative Officer this was still lower than would be

expected. In response my Department decided to continue to use lawful outreach measures to improve the proportion of applications from Protestants for vacancies at Administrative Assistant and Administrative Officer.

In common with all employers, the Service's ability to bring about positive change in the composition of its workforce is largely determined by flows into, through and out of the organisation. Between February 2010 and November 2011, an embargo on recruitment and promotion applied in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. This will have had an effect on compositional change as fewer recruitment exercises mean fewer opportunities to change the profile of a grade. Although the embargo has been lifted, it is likely that recruitment activity will continue to be at a lower level than in previous years.

My Department will carry out a further Article 55 review next year and the results will be published.

Multiple Deprivation Measure

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the current Multiple Deprivation indicators; and whether they accurately illustrate contemporary levels of rural poverty and deprivation.

(AQW 14665/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010 is the current official measure of spatial deprivation in Northern Ireland.

The NIMDM 2010 is based on the internationally agreed methodology developed by the Social Disadvantage Research Centre in the University of Oxford, which was used in the NIMDM 2001, 2005 and current multiple deprivation measures in England, Scotland and Wales. The construction of the 2010 NIMDM was overseen by a Steering Group including representatives from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Rural Development Council.

In order to provide a relative deprivation measure and to allow meaningful area based comparisons, indicator data included were available for all of Northern Ireland and collected in a consistent form. Where any bias was identified, including potential urban/rural bias, the indicator was either omitted or corrected for this effect.

A full consultation on NIMDM 2010 was carried out and all concerns were addressed. As the 2010 measures included deprivation results at Output Area level, this enabled a more detailed picture across Northern Ireland to be presented and allows the identification of small pockets of deprivation in rural and urban areas. It may be more appropriate when assessing deprivation in rural areas to focus on the Output Area results.

Rates: Payment Deferment

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 14049/11-15, whether banks or financial institutions, who are mortgagees in possession following the repossession of a property, can defer payment of rates on these properties for any period of time; and if so, under what circumstances.

(AQW 14777/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are no legislative arrangements for the deferment of rates payments.

Land and Property Services (LPS) can spread out payments, without any legislative obligation, under what are termed payment arrangements.

These payment arrangements seek to resolve the current year's debt entirely within the same rating year and therefore are not regarded as deferment of debt. They are offered to a wide range of ratepayers.

Since the introduction of the rating of empty homes last year there have been occasions that arrangements have been put in place with ratepayers, such as when a sale is pending, and this can include financial institutions.

LPS will only agree to this if it facilitates effective collection of rates.

Public Sector: Decentralisation

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the decision to relocate the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development headquarters to Ballykelly, what other possibilities exist to de-centralise public sector employment.

(AQW 14797/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Individual public bodies, departments and Ministers can consider the relocation of public sector facilities and jobs subject to the normal requirements of business need, value for money and affordability.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Transforming Your Care: Neurological Conditions

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has held with representatives of people with neurological conditions and their carers concerning more localised health care services, as envisaged in "Transforming Your Care".

(AQW 14262/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I have had no discussions with representatives of people with neurological conditions and their carers concerning more localised health care services as envisaged in Transforming Your Care (TYC).

Transforming Your Care set out proposals for changing our health and social care system. These include delivering health and social care services closer to people in their homes and their communities; moving services out of hospitals where it is safe and appropriate to do so; and supporting a more personalised approach to care.

The development of Population Plans and an overarching Strategic Implementation Plan are key elements of TYC. They will form the basis of a public consultation exercise which it is anticipated will commence next month. This will provide the opportunity for everyone to provide their views on the proposals.

A Neurological Conditions Network is in place to ensure the delivery of appropriate treatment and support to people with long term neurological conditions in all settings to achieve the best possible outcomes. The Network includes membership from the HSC Board, the Public Health Agency and the voluntary and community sector.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department has adopted the Inflammatory Bowel Disease Standards; and what progress has been made on their implementation.

(AQW 14264/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has not endorsed any specific standards on Inflammatory Bowel Disease but has endorsed a range of guidance from the National Institute for Health and clinical Excellence (NICE) on specific aspects of the prevention and management of inflammatory bowel disease.

Clinical and services standards are developed by many organisations and some of these standards are endorsed by national organisations. Commissioners and providers of services are expected to take account of the best available evidence when planning and delivering services to patients, within available resources.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are any plans to establish a register of Inflammatory Bowel Disease patients.

(AQW 14265/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are currently no plans to establish a register of Inflammatory Bowel Disease patients in Northern Ireland.

Health Trusts: Translation Services

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much each Health and Social Care Trust has spent on essential language translation services in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14330/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below details how much each Health and Social Care Trust has spent on essential language translation services in each of the last three years.

	2011/12 £	2010/11 £	2009/10 £
Belfast Health & Social Care Trust	536,462	448,576	412,739
Northern Health & Social Care Trust	309,832	295,496	334,437
South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust	115,391	93,600	81,273
Southern Health & Social Care Trust	924,136	919,977	749,889
Western Health & Social Care Trust	220,052	166,239	172,699
NI Ambulance Service Health & Social Care Trust	1,268	2,357	1,208
Total	£2,107,141	£1,926,245	£1,752,245

Crohn's Disease/Colitis

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are diagnosed with (i) Crohn's Disease; and (ii) Colitis.

(AQW 14342/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information relating to the number of people diagnosed with either Crohn's Disease or Colitis is not routinely collected by the Department.

However, information is available on the number of hospital admissions where a diagnosis of (i) Crohn's Disease and (ii) Colitis was recorded in 2010/11 and is shown in the table below:-

Diagnosis	Admissions
Crohn's Disease	3,295
Colitis	2,070

Source:- Hospital Inpatient System

Figures do not include patients attending hospital as outpatients or who attended an Accident and Emergency Department. Deaths and discharges have been used to approximate admissions

Children: Healthcare in other Regions

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much each Health and Social Care Trust has spent sending children to other regions for assessment, treatment or care over the last five years.

(AQW 14376/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not available.

Prescription Drugs: Generic and Branded

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of prescription drugs dispensed in each of the last five years were (i) generic; and (ii) brand named.

(AQW 14417/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is detailed in the table below:

Financial Year	Generic (%)	Branded (%)
2007/08	54%	46%
2008/09	56%	44%
2009/10	58%	42%
2010/11	60%	40%
2011/12	64%	36%

Information supplied by Family Practitioner Services, Business Services Organisation.

Diabetes: Islet Cell Infusion Operation

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to introduce islet cell infusion operations for people with Type 1 Diabetes, given the success of this programme in Scotland in helping those who struggle to control their condition.

(AQW 14460/11-15)

Mr Poots: At present there are no plans to introduce islet cell infusion operations locally, for people with Type 1 Diabetes. NICE Interventional Procedures Guidance (IPG257) Allogenic pancreatic islet cell transplantation for type 1 diabetes mellitus, published in 2008, states that "serious complications may occur as a result of the procedure" and that "further audit and research should address the effect of the procedure on quality of life and its long term efficacy, particularly in relation to the complications of diabetes." Currently as there is no strong evidence base for the long-term benefits of the procedure, as outlined in the NICE guidance, and as the number of patients requiring pancreatic transplantation from Northern Ireland is such that a local pancreatic transplant service is unlikely to be sustainable there are no plans to commence islet cell transplantation locally.

However, patients from Northern Ireland, who are clinically suitable, can be referred to centres in Great Britain for assessment and, if appropriate, treatment, through existing extra contractual referral arrangements. In Northern Ireland since February 2011 the HSC Board has received and approved one request for islet transplantation to Nottingham University Hospital.

Dental Fluorosis

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 14012/11-15, to provide a further breakdown of sample areas, along with the number tested in each cohort.

(AQW 14558/11-15)

Mr Poots: Data on the prevalence of fluorosis is contained in the 'Children's oral health in Ireland 2002' report, published by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Health and Children is available at <http://www.dohc.ie/publications/pdf/coral.pdf?direct=1>. This report presented data on dental fluorosis on an aggregated basis in three categories i.e. Republic of Ireland Fully Fluoridated Areas; Republic of Ireland Non Fluoridated Areas; and Northern Ireland Non Fluoridated Areas (i.e. Northern Ireland as a whole). As such no further breakdown of results by geographic area is presented.

The 'Children's oral health in Ireland 2002' report used a stratified representative sample of 5-, 8-, 12- and 15-year-old children and adolescents in each of the 10 Health Board regions in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland as a whole. The numbers tested in each cohort are reproduced in the following table:

	AGE GROUP				
	5	8	12	15	Total
ECAHB	227	248	217	230	922
NAHB	272	356	325	335	1288
SWAHB	305	329	313	329	1276
MHB	308	274	337	260	1179
MWHB	382	402	413	350	1547
NEHB	3310	372	363	346	4391
NWHB	270	242	268	250	1030
SEHB	551	547	592	495	2185
SHB	658	650	700	622	2630
WHB	378	349	358	305	1390
Total RoI	6661	3769	3886	3522	17838
Total NI	831	302	346	633	2112

Number of children by age group, examined in each of the Health Board areas in the Republic of Ireland and for Northern Ireland as a whole as presented in for the 'children's oral health in Ireland 2002' report

(The Republic of Ireland's Health Boards listed are the East Coast Area Health Board (ECAHB); Northern Area Health Board (NAHB); South Western Area Health Board (SWAHB); Midland Health Board (MHB); Mid Western Health Board (MWHB); North Eastern Health Board (NEHB); North Western Health Board (NWHB); South Eastern Health Board (SEHB); Southern Health Board (SHB); and Western Health Board (WHB). The table presented in the report (table 1) also includes an additional row for the Eastern Regional Health Authority (ERHA) which is a Health Authority rather than a Health Board and comprises the first three listed Boards above.)

Gluten-free Food: Prescribing Guidelines

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 14052/11-15, whether there is a directive instructing pharmacists to only dispense gluten-free foods in accordance with the guidelines, regardless of the quantities prescribed by GPs.

(AQW 14581/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is recognised that adherence to a gluten-free diet is essential for patients with confirmed gluten-sensitive enteropathies. The HSC Board's guidance to prescribers on the prescribing of gluten free foods provides recommendations regarding the amount of gluten free food that a patient should receive on prescription each month based on the age of the patient, gender and levels of physical activity.

However, it remains the responsibility of the prescriber to make appropriate decisions on the quantities of gluten free food they are prescribing based on clinical knowledge and of course in the best interests of the individual patient.

Pharmacists should be dispensing in accordance with the instructions provided by the prescriber on the prescription form and there is no directive instructing pharmacists to only dispense gluten-free foods in accordance with the HSC Board's guidance regardless of the quantities prescribed by GPs.

Paediatric Physiotherapists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW12889/11-15, when the Western Health and Social Care Trust began the evaluation process and when the results can be expected.

(AQW 14589/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Western HSC Trust has received nearly 500 requests for Agenda for Change job evaluation and expects to be in a position to commence the Job Evaluation process early next year; Paediatric Physiotherapist Senior I posts will be scheduled into that process. As this is a very lengthy process the results cannot be expected earlier than September 2013.

While this timeframe may be considered unacceptable it is important to point out that these staff have already had two opportunities to have their job graded and both of these show the value of the job at Band 6. The small team in the Trust's HR Unit, undertaking this process in partnership with local trade union representatives, will endeavour to have the job evaluation process completed in a timely but accurate fashion. Individuals will be notified of the result by letter along with a copy of their job evaluation documentation.

Fire and Rescue Service: Grievances

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) why there are currently eleven grievances pending in the Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters; (ii) for how long each grievance has been lodged; (iii) the rank of each officer involved; and (iv) whether the results of the investigations into the grievances will be published.

(AQW 14593/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) and (iii) It is not possible to release information as to why grievances are pending or the rank of officers involved as to do so may breach Data Protection principles.
- (ii) The 11 grievances were lodged in the months below:

■ April 2010	■ January 2012
■ July 2010	■ March 2012
■ November 2010	■ February 2012
■ May 2011	■ July 2012
■ July 2011	■ August 2012
■ August 2011	
- (iii) The NIFRS does not publish the outcome of grievances.

Health: Direct Payments

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Direct Payment Scheme only covers private carers rates and not agency rates.

(AQW 14605/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is up to each Health and Social Care Trust to decide the amount of a Direct Payment and what it is intended to cover. The Department does not set any limit on the maximum or minimum amount of a Direct Payment, either in the amount of care it is intended to purchase, or on the value of the Direct Payment. It must, however, be enough to enable the recipient to secure the relevant service to a standard which the HSC Trust considers acceptable.

Health: Care Agencies

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what checks are in place for care agencies that work with Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 14606/11-15)

Mr Poots: Statutory and independent domiciliary care agencies are regulated (i.e. registered and inspected annually) by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) in accordance with the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 (the Order).

All agencies are subject to inspection against specific regulations made under the Order, the Domiciliary Care Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 and against minimum published care standards applying to all such agencies.

Whilst annual inspection is a prerequisite for continuing registration, RQIA has the legal authority to conduct further inspections, either announced or unannounced, where it considers necessary or has concerns.

Where an agency fails to comply with the regulations and standards, RQIA can require compliance within a certain timescale. Ultimately, RQIA can prosecute for failure to comply with regulations or exceptionally, close an agency, where it can not, or will not comply with statutory minimum requirements.

Sports Clubs: Defibrillators

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many defibrillators are currently available to sports club across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14633/11-15)

Mr Poots: Any organisation or individual may purchase a defibrillator. There is no requirement to register the purchase, possession or location of a defibrillator. It is therefore not known how many defibrillators are available to sports clubs across Northern Ireland.

A pilot programme to train people to use defibrillators, which my Department has just completed, has had the additional benefit of raising awareness, in some sporting organisations and District Councils, of the location and accessibility of defibrillators purchased by their organisation and also the need for maintenance of the defibrillator and training of staff in their use.

Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children: Clark Clinic

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the review of the Clark Clinic in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, to explain the term 'not sustainable'; and whether this is purely a financial issue.

(AQW 14713/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Expert Panel's report on the Review of the Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Service in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, in July 2012, did not find any immediate safety concerns with the current arrangements for the provision of paediatric cardiac surgery in Belfast but did conclude that the surgical element of the service is not sustainable and that potential safety risks should be addressed within six months.

This is unequivocally not a financial issue. The paediatric cardiac surgery and interventional cardiology elements of the service provided in Belfast has been recognised for over a decade to be inherently vulnerable, given the small number of patients being treated each year. This has given rise to concerns regarding the long term sustainability of the Paediatric Cardiac Surgical Service.

It was in this context that the Minister announced the Board's intention to undertake the external Expert Panel review.

The relatively small number of procedures being delivered in Belfast present a challenge for specialist surgeons to sustain the degree of quality which is expected in a field where standards are continuing to rise. Standards for this service are increasing across the UK with a move towards surgeons working in larger teams delivering higher volumes of activity, and ensuring a rota that can provide 24/7 surgical cover. Available evidence and professional consensus is that larger teams deliver better outcomes.

Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children: Clark Clinic

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the review of the Clark Clinic in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, how Northern Ireland will retain and attract top quality paediatric cardiologists, nurses and specialist staff if they cannot be offered the same training and opportunities as the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 14716/11-15)

Mr Poots: On 25 September 2012 I announced the commencement of a 12 week period of consultation in relation to the future delivery of Paediatric Cardiac Surgery and Interventional Cardiology for the population of Northern Ireland. As part of this consultation process, careful consideration will be given to the staff training implications of any potential changes to the existing arrangements.

Causeway Hospital: Car Parking

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has raised since the introduction of parking charges at the Causeway Hospital.

(AQW 14728/11-15)

Mr Poots: Car park charging was introduced at Causeway Hospital site on the 18th April 2011.

The total income generated from April 2011 until August 2012 from car parking charges at Causeway Hospital is £271,506. This is a gross figure and does not take account of maintenance and running costs of car parks.

Sleep Apnoea: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average age of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure machines currently used in the treatment of sleep apnoea in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and whether there are any plans to upgrade the stock.

(AQW 14730/11-15)

Mr Poots: Each patient diagnosed with sleep apnoea is provided with a new Continuous Pressure Airway machine which comes with a two year warranty. There are currently around 3500 patients in the Belfast Trust area receiving Continuous

Positive Airway Pressure therapy and to ascertain the average age of the machines in use would incur disproportionate cost. When a machine breaks down it is replaced with a new one.

The Belfast Trust has advised me that patients are given a self-adjusting Auto Titrating machine for a few nights to establish the pressure reading required to treat sleep apnoea. The pressure result is used to set the patient up on non-self-adjusting machine which is used long-term by the patient.

Sleep Apnoea: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether sleep clinics in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust can administer treatment for sleep apnoea using either self-adjusting or non-self-adjusting Continuous Positive Airway Pressure machines.

(AQW 14731/11-15)

Mr Poots: Each patient diagnosed with sleep apnoea is provided with a new Continuous Pressure Airway machine which comes with a two year warranty. There are currently around 3500 patients in the Belfast Trust area receiving Continuous Positive Airway Pressure therapy and to ascertain the average age of the machines in use would incur disproportionate cost. When a machine breaks down it is replaced with a new one.

The Belfast Trust has advised me that patients are given a self-adjusting Auto Titrating machine for a few nights to establish the pressure reading required to treat sleep apnoea. The pressure result is used to set the patient up on non-self-adjusting machine which is used long-term by the patient.

Doctors: Pension Contributions

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the proposed level of pension contribution for a newly qualified doctor.

(AQW 14734/11-15)

Mr Poots: The rate of contribution currently payable by a newly qualified doctor in receipt of a basic salary is 6.5%. This may increase to 8% if they receive a banding supplement for additional hours worked over their normal basic hours.

To date no decision has been taken on any further proposed increase to member contribution rates for 2013/14.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Meal Provision

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is a central location where food is prepared for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and if so, where is the location.

(AQW 14764/11-15)

Mr Poots: Within the Belfast Trust there are various methods of meal provision depending on local facilities and requirements.

Several of the hospitals provide a traditional meals service where the food is cooked on site and sent out to the various wards from a central kitchen. These are:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ■ Musgrave Park Hospital | ■ Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital |
| ■ Mater Infirmorum Hospital | ■ Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children |
| ■ Belfast City Hospital | |

Many community facilities also cook meals for the clients on site.

Knockbracken Foods is a Cook Chill Food Production Unit operated by the Belfast HSC Trust. It is based at Knockbracken Healthcare Park and produces approximately 60,000 meals and sandwiches per week. These meals and sandwiches are provided to hospital sites, community facilities within the Belfast Trust (not using traditional cooking methods), the home meals service and staff catering facilities.

The hospital facilities supplied by Knockbracken Foods are:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ Knockbracken Healthcare Park (Including the Medium Secure Unit at Shannon) | ■ Royal A Block |
| ■ Muckamore Abbey Hospital | ■ Neurology Unit at Musgrave Park Hospital |

The community facilities which receive meals from Knockbracken Foods are:

Elderly Persons Homes

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| ■ Fairholme E.P.H. | ■ Bruce House EPH |
| ■ Killynure E.P.H. | ■ Chestnut Grove |
| ■ Brae Valley House | ■ Grovetree EPH |
| ■ Pine Lodge | ■ Shankill EPH |
| ■ Orchardville House | |
| ■ Ballyowen EPH | |

Day Centre Facilities

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ■ Ravenhill Road Day Centre | ■ Grove Centre |
| ■ City Way Day Centre | ■ Ballyowen Day Centre |
| ■ K/Bracken Day Centre - Main Kitchen | ■ Carlisle Day Centre |
| ■ K/Bracken Day Centre- Dementia Unit | ■ Fallswater |
| ■ Mount Oriel Elderly | ■ Beechall |
| ■ Mount Oriel Young People | ■ Mica Drive Day Centre |
| ■ Island Day Centre | ■ Newington Day Centre |
| ■ Edgumbe Atu Day Centre | ■ Shankill Day Centre |
| ■ Edgumbe Trc | ■ Glencairn Day Centre |
| ■ Enler Day Centre | ■ Suffolk Day Centre |
| ■ Orchardville Trc | ■ Whiterock Day Centre |
| ■ Everton Day Centre | ■ Woodlands Day Centre |
| ■ North Belfast Day Centre | ■ 4 Sandhurst Road |
| ■ Fortwilliam Day Centre | |

Luncheon Clubs

- | | |
|---|--|
| ■ Cregagh Methodist | ■ Mount Oriel (Belvoir Age Concern) |
| ■ Mcquiston Lunch Club | ■ Belfast South Methodist Church |
| ■ St Bartholomews | ■ Tullycarnet Community Support Services |
| ■ St. Mary's Silver Threads Luncheon Club | ■ Tullycarnet Presbyterian Luncheon Club |
| ■ Mount Oriel (Braniel Age Concern) | ■ Belvoir Luncheon Club |

Children's Facilities

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ 60 North Road Childrens Home | ■ Beechcroft 2 (Children's) |
| ■ Beechcroft 1 (Adolescent) | ■ Iveagh Children's Home |

The home meals service is provided to the following Trusts:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| ■ Belfast Trust | ■ Southern Trust |
| ■ Northern Trust | ■ South Eastern Trust |

There are several staff catering facilities which receive chilled meals and/or sandwiches.

- Staff Facilities on Knockbracken Healthcare Park
- The Arches CTCC
- Mater Infirmorum Coffee Shop – Sandwiches
- Royal Group Hospital Staff Facilities - Sandwiches
- Health & Social Care Board – Linenhall Street
- Beeches Management Centre and Clady

Hospitals: Winter Pressures

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place in hospitals to deal with the expected increase in patients this winter, including staffing arrangements.

(AQW 14765/11-15)

Mr Poots: Health and Social Care services are under considerable pressure all year round, but tend to come under increased pressure during the winter months because of extra demands on services, particularly in unscheduled care. All Health and Social Care Trusts have plans in place for dealing with winter pressures. These include measures such as maintaining efficient patient flows through and out of the hospital, and increasing capacity and uplifting staff levels as appropriate to match need. Other measures include developing primary and community care services to support older people in their own homes and reduce the number of hospital admissions.

The Health and Social Care Board has been working closely with the Trusts to support improvements in emergency department performance. As part of this work the Board is finalising arrangements with Trusts to deal with potential increases in demand for services in the coming winter.

Domiciliary Care Workers

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the terms and conditions of employment of domiciliary care workers are applied consistently across all Health and Social Care Trusts irrespective of whether the care worker is a Trust employee or agency worker.

(AQW 14768/11-15)

Mr Poots: Health and Social Care Trusts are required to comply with the Agency Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011, which came into effect on 5 December 2011, for all agency staff including Domiciliary Care Workers. Under this legislation provided a worker has worked in the same job for 12 weeks, he/she qualifies for equal treatment in respect of pay and basic working conditions.

A&E: Threats to Staff

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on how many occasions were police called to assist Health Service staff because of the threat of violence at each acute hospital's Accident and Emergency department in 2011.

(AQW 14801/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of occasions where police called to assist health service staff because of the threat of violence at each acute hospital's emergency care department in 2011 is not available, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

However, information is available on the number of times the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) attended an incident of verbal or physical abuse against staff in each acute hospital; although, it should be noted that this information relates to all acute hospital attendances and not specifically to emergency care departments.

The table overleaf presents information on the number of times the PSNI have attended an incident of verbal or physical abuse against staff in acute hospitals which have an emergency care department, between 1st October 2010 and 30th September 2011 (the latest information available).

Table 1 - Number of times the PSNI attended an incident of verbal or physical abuse in acute hospitals (1st October 2010 - 30th September 2011)

Hospital	Verbal Incident	Physical Incident	Total Incidents
Belfast City	10	30	40
Mater	13	8	21
Royal Group of Hospitals	19	18	37
Antrim Area	3	7	10
Causeway	3	6	9
Ulster	1	1	2
Craigavon Area	11	13	24
Daisy Hill	9	5	14
Altnagelvin	3	0	3
Erne	4	2	6
Total	76	90	166

Source: HSC Trust Incident Report Forms

Goal Line Youth Centre

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for his assessment of the contribution of Goal Line Youth, Portadown; (ii) whether he is aware of its urgent funding needs which, if unmet, will lead to the organisation closing its doors on 31 October 2012; and (iii) what assistance his Department can provide to the organisation as it seeks to continue to meet the needs of over two hundred children, almost 50 percent of whom have special educational and disability needs.

(AQW 14812/11-15)

Mr Poots: I recognise and acknowledge the role played by organisations, such as Goal Line Youth, in working with young people in relation to a range of key issues.

The Southern Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team within the PHA previously provided small grant funding to Goal Line Trust Portadown in 2009/10. The award of £3,000 was to develop a young men's group (aged 14 to 17 with moderate learning

disabilities and/or autism/Aspergers) to address issues of drugs and alcohol misuse. However, I understand that they have not applied for any further funding since.

I understand that the Public Health Agency is currently advertising another Small Grant programme in the area and Goal Line Trust Portadown could consider applying for funding under this scheme if they believe they can meet the funding criteria. Further information and contacts in respect of the Small Grant funding is available here:

<http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/pha-southern-area-health-improvement-small-grants-now-open>.

Ulster Hospital: Car Parking

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans there are to increase the parking facilities at the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald.

(AQW 14826/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the car parking problems at the Ulster Hospital and the need to provide additional car parking spaces on the site to relieve the congestion as soon as possible. The changes to clinical services provided at the Ulster Hospital have significantly increased demand for car parking spaces. The South Eastern Trust is in the process of developing a business case which will explore a number of options to provide additional car parking areas on the site. This business case is due to be submitted to my Department shortly and will be considered accordingly.

Department of Justice

Prisons: CCTV

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the use of CCTV surveillance in prisons is approved under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000; and under which section of the Act it is approved.

(AQW 14270/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act is not applicable to the routine use of CCTV within prisons. NIPS are registered with the Information Commissioner for the use of CCTV and are fully compliant with the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998 and the CCTV Code of Practice.

Appeal Tribunals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether he intends to review the operation of Benefit Appeal Tribunals to ensure parity at all hearings; and (ii) given that the hearings are generally chaired by a legally qualified person, whether Legal Aid will be provided for appellants in the interest of access to justice.

(AQW 14273/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Appeals Tribunal is an independent judicial body. Responsibility for the operation of the Tribunals is a statutory function of the President of Appeal Tribunals, Mr Conall MacLynn. The President can be contacted directly at the Office of the President of Appeal Tribunals, 6th Floor, Cleaver House, 3 Donegall Square North, Belfast, BT1 5GA.

Legal aid is currently not available for hearings before the Appeal Tribunal. The Access to Justice Review report, published in September 2011, recommended that publicly funded representation should not be made available in all social security appeal cases but that contracts or grants for advice and assistance in welfare matters should include provision for enhanced advice and advocacy services in welfare matters.

Officials in my Department are currently examining this recommendation as part of my Department's work on legal aid reform.

Courts: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) why the court division of Fermanagh and South Tyrone is the slowest at progressing Crown court cases; and (ii) the reasons for the delays.

(AQW 14275/11-15)

Mr Ford: In 2011/12, the Fermanagh and South Tyrone division was the best performing of the seven divisions.

In the period from April to June 2012 the average waiting time from Committal to Hearing in the Crown Court in Fermanagh and Tyrone was 87 days compared to the Northern Ireland average of 128 days.

Prison Service: Prisoner Assessment Unit Report

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Prisoner Assessment Unit report, whether the PSNI has been informed of its redacted contents; and how many Northern Ireland Prison Service staff are under criminal investigation as a result of the report.

(AQW 14276/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Report has not been passed to PSNI and there are no Prison Service members of staff under criminal investigation as a result of the Report.

Prison Service: CAJ Meetings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13492/11-15, whether this is an accepted practice for an Acting Director General of the Prison Service; and how this compares with the previous post-holder's attendance at meetings with the Committee on the Administration of Justice.

(AQW 14277/11-15)

Mr Ford: During his time in post, the previous Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service attended one meeting with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) on 1 March 2011. The CAJ has not requested to meet with the Director General since that date. However, should the CAJ seek a meeting with the Director General NIPS will be happy to facilitate this.

High Court: Judgements Outstanding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to list all outstanding High Court judgements, indicating in each case the date the court hearing concluded and the identity of the presiding judge.

(AQW 14288/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below lists the outstanding reserved High Court judgments as of 19 September 2012.

Judgment	Judge	Hearing Date	Date For Delivery
Hanna v Sarcon McGarrity v Sarcon	Mr Justice Deeny	11.5.12	15.10.12
Lincoln Centre v NIHE NIHE v Lincoln Centre		28.6.12	8.10.12
Brendan Kelly & Anr	Mr Justice Gillen	10.9.12	To be fixed
Lawrence McCrudden		10.9.12	To be fixed
Declan Callan v Chief Constable	Mr Justice Treacy	16.12.11	4.10.12
Dr Malachy Murphy v NI Commissioner for Complaints		10.1.12	To be fixed
Artur Bransent v UK Border Agency		30.1.12	28.9.12
Gerard Pollock v PSNI		9.2.12	28.9.12
Serena Barlow v Western HSST		16.2.12	4.10.12
James Martin v Police Ombudsman		21.2.12	26.10.12
John Duggan v DHSSPS		24.2.12	26.10.12
In re Joseph Fitzpatrick In re Terence Sheils		18.4.12	9.11.12
In re Tullynaskeagh Farms Ltd		24.4.12	16.11.12
Donnelly v Roe Angling Association		9.5.12	To be fixed
McAlvenny v BHST		30.5.12	28.9.12
British Medical Association NI v DHSS		8.6.12	9.11.12
Patricia O'Hara v Belfast International Airport		12.6.12	9.11.12
Denise Brewster v NI Local Government Superannuation Committee		21.6.12	9.11.12
Elizeu Melo Da Silva & Ors v Immigration and Asylum Chamber (Upper Tribunal)		22.6.12	9.11.12

Criminal Justice: Offender Levy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the Offender Levy for victims of crime; and to detail the amount accrued since the inception of the levy.

(AQW 14311/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department along with colleagues from the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service, Police Service of Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Prison Service and Public Prosecution Service worked closely together to ensure the smooth implementation of the offender levy. Prior to the introduction in June 2012, training was undertaken and operational guidance was also issued, which has helped with the successful implementation of the levy.

Although the offender levy has only been operational for a number of months, I consider it to be working well.

The levy can be applied only in respect of offences committed since 6 June 2012. To date £13,455 has been accrued.

Criminal Justice: Brothel Keeping/Controlling Prostitution

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted of brothel keeping or controlling prostitution, broken down by (i) Magistrates court; and (ii) Crown court, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14312/11-15)

Mr Ford: During the period in question, offences of brothel keeping were prosecuted under Section 13(1) of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 and controlling prostitution for gain under Section 53(1) Sexual Offences Act 2003.

The table below gives the number of people convicted of brothel keeping or controlling prostitution broken down by magistrates' court and Crown Court for the calendar years 2007 to 2009 (the latest year for which figures are currently available).

Number of people convicted of brothel keeping or controlling prostitution broken down by Magistrates court and Crown court for the calendar years 2007 to 2009

Magistrates Court			
Year	Brothel keeping	Controlling prostitution	Total convictions
2007	2	0	2
2008	2	3	5
2009	0	3	3
Crown Court			
Year	Brothel keeping	Controlling prostitution	Total convictions
2007	0	0	0
2008	0	0	0
2009	0	0	0

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included. Data for 2009 are provisional.

Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 12644/11-15, on what grounds was a redacted document provided.

(AQW 14313/11-15)

Mr Ford: The copy of the document provided to the Member was redacted to protect the individual identities. The record held also contained additional comments, for example in relation to time, which were not attributable to the Secretary of State's approval.

Prisoners: Remand

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how the Northern Ireland Prison Service deals with remand prisoners, who are co-accused in an alleged crime, to prevent them having contact with each other, as would be part of bail conditions if they qualified for bail.

(AQW 14314/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is not a common bail condition to prevent co-accused from contacting each other. In exceptional cases, the Northern Ireland Prison Service can put in place specific measures to prevent remand prisoners, who are co-accused in an alleged crime, from having contact with each other if directed by the court or if a risk assessment determines that they should be kept apart for personal safety reasons.

Prisoners: Foreign National

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what accreditation is offered for foreign national prisoners who participate in English classes.

(AQW 14396/11-15)

Mr Ford: Foreign national prisoners who participate in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes can attain Edexcel accreditations at five different levels. Entry Levels 1- 3; Level 1; and Level 2.

Prison Service: CAJ Meetings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many meetings the Acting Director General of the Prison Service has held with the Committee on the Administration of Justice since he took up post.

(AQW 14397/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since taking up her post in July 2012, the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service has not attended any meetings with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). However, should the CAJ seek a meeting with the Director General NIPS will be happy to facilitate this.

DOJ: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many departmental staff are currently (i) suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations.

(AQW 14398/11-15)

Mr Ford: Suspension from duty is governed by the NICS Staff Handbook and careful consideration is given on a case by case basis. Within the Department of Justice, there are less than five members of staff facing criminal charges or criminal investigations. As such, the precise number, and whether they have been suspended or not, has been withheld. This is to protect the identity of the individuals concerned as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Criminal Justice: Refusal to Answer Questions by Her Majesty's Forces

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people charged with refusing to answer questions by Her Majesty's forces are currently in the court system, broken down by court division.

(AQW 14399/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the number of people currently before the courts charged with refusing to answer a question addressed to him by a member of Her Majesty's forces on duty or a constable in accordance with section 21(3)(b) of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007. All of the cases relate to questions posed by police officers.

Division	Persons before the courts
Belfast	1
Fermanagh & Tyrone	2
Londonderry	1

DOJ: Appointment of Funeral Director

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice to outline the tendering process that was used to appoint a Funeral Director to transfer the bodies of the deceased to Belfast to allow Coroner post mortem examinations to be carried out.

(AQW 14416/11-15)

Mr Ford: The procurement process for this service was facilitated by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in the Department of Finance and Personnel in adherence with Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy using a European Union open procedure.

Advertisements were placed in the Official Journal of European Union, eSourcingNI (which is the Northern Ireland Public Sector Portal for procurement opportunities) and three Northern Ireland newspapers. A series of briefing sessions were offered to potential suppliers. However only one session, facilitated by the CPD and Coroners Service, was availed of.

Tenders were submitted and evaluated against published selection and award criterion, outlined in the tender documents. These documents were accessible to all interested parties. Contracts were subsequently awarded to those suppliers who submitted the Most Economically Advantageous Tender for the respective districts.

North Belfast: Civil Disturbances

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the civil disturbances in North Belfast between 25 August and 5 September 2012, including the number of police officers injured.

(AQW 14423/11-15)

Mr Ford: I refer the Member to the replies I gave to Conall McDevitt and Megan Fearon on 18 September 2012. (Official Report Column - Volume 77, No WA2, Page 130/131.)

Since that date the total number of arrests and charges in relation to the disorder at Denmark Street/Carlisle Circus has risen to 17 and 10 respectively.

Animal Cruelty: Offences

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been (i) prosecuted for; and (ii) convicted of animal cruelty offences in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14430/11-15)

Mr Ford: Animal cruelty offences span a number of statutes. During the period in question offences were prosecuted under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The table below gives the number of prosecutions and convictions for animal cruelty for the calendar years 2005 to 2006. Conviction data only is available for 2007 - 2009 (the latest year for which figures are currently available).

Number of prosecutions and convictions for animal cruelty, 2005-2009

Year	Number of prosecutions	Number of convictions
2005	29	24
2006	19	17
2007	n/a	21
2008	n/a	17
2009	n/a	11

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Data for 2005-2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2009 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Courts: Delayed Cases

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many court cases, including contests, are currently delayed due to police officers being suspended and under investigation, broken down by (i) Magistrates Court; and (ii) Crown Court, in each court division.

(AQW 14441/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is not possible to answer this question as this is not recorded as a reason for adjournment in court records. However, a police officer who is currently suspended is still compellable to give evidence at court if required to do so.

Prison Service: Staff Dismissals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) how many prison staff who were dismissed for gross misconduct were awarded compensation on appeal; (ii) in how many of these cases the Polkey Factor was applied; and (iii) what is this figure as a percentage.

(AQW 14445/11-15)

Mr Ford: In the last five years, four prison staff were dismissed for gross misconduct and were awarded compensation on appeal. In each case the Polkey factor was applied with the percentage figures ranging from 0% to 100%.

Courts: Preliminary Inquiries

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) preliminary inquiries have been held in each court division, in each of the last three years; and (ii) cases did not proceed to trial.

(AQW 14447/11-15)

Mr Ford: Table A below sets out the number of cases for which a preliminary inquiry was held in the years 2009 - 2011. Table B sets out the number of cases for which a preliminary inquiry was held but where the case was not committed for trial in the Crown Court. Both tables are broken down by County Court Division.

Table A: Number of cases for which a preliminary inquiry was held

County Court Division	Year		
	2009	2010	2011
Antrim	187	179	122

County Court Division	Year		
	2009	2010	2011
Ards	126	156	189
Armagh and South Down	99	126	141
Belfast	490	527	513
Craigavon	117	167	166
Fermanagh and Tyrone	192	202	201
Londonderry	152	129	135
Total	1,363	1,486	1,467

Source: Integrated Court Operations System

Note: There may be more than one defendant in a case

Table B: Number of Preliminary Inquiry cases not committed for trial in the Crown Court

County Court Division	Year		
	2009	2010	2011
Antrim	9	5	6
Ards	2	5	5
Armagh and South Down	5	7	7
Belfast	22	47	20
Craigavon	4	6	2
Fermanagh and Tyrone	5	10	6
Londonderry	2	3	3
Total	49	83	49

Source: Integrated Court Operations System

Criminal Justice: Sexual Offences against a Child

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many cases of sexual offences against a child are currently in the court system, broken down by (i) Crown Court; and (ii) Magistrates Court, in each court division.

(AQW 14459/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below details the number of cases of sexual offences against a child currently before the Crown Court and Magistrates' Court broken down by County Court Division.

In addition, there is one appeal from the Magistrates' Court in the County Court Division of Ards and twelve appeals from the Crown Court before the Court of Appeal. This makes a total of 228 cases.

Division	Crown Court	Magistrates' Court
Antrim	14	18
Ards	7	14
Armagh & South Down	9	2
Belfast	71	26
Craigavon	12	3
Fermanagh & Tyrone	16	4
Londonderry	7	12
Total	136	79

Prison Service: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of governors within Northern Ireland Prison Service facilities, including Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre, who have been suspended during their career, either as a governor or at any staffing level, broken down by (a) grade; and (b) facility; and (ii) how many have been suspended more than once.

(AQW 14461/11-15)

Mr Ford: Suspension from duty for Prison Officer and Governor grades is governed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Code of Conduct and Discipline and careful consideration is given on a case by case basis. Within the NIPS, there are less than five Governors at separate Establishments who have been suspended during their career as a Governor. None of them have been suspended more than once during their career. The actual number, of staff at this level who have been suspended, has been withheld. This is to protect the identity of the individuals concerned as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Courts and Tribunals Service: Small Claims

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice why the briefing documentation made available to judges in a Small Claims Court case, by the Small Claims Court Processing Centre, is not provided to the plaintiff and the defendant.

(AQW 14466/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service (NICTS) Small Claims Guide provides information about the Small Claims Court including procedures and the appeal process.

When a small claims application is lodged in a court office it is forwarded to the Civil Processing Centre. This office is responsible for the administrative checking of small claims applications and entering relevant application details on the NICTS Integrated Courts Operating System (ICOS).

A copy of the application form and an information pack are posted to the applicant and the respondent by the Civil Processing Centre. If the claim is disputed the Notice of Dispute and/or Counterclaim is sent to the applicant on receipt.

All paperwork associated with the claim is provided to the applicant, respondent and District Judge. No additional briefing documentation is prepared by court staff for the District Judge.

On receipt of an appeal, court staff complete administrative checks to ensure that the details of the question of law under appeal are documented, the appeal period has not expired, there is proof of service and the appropriate fee has been paid. Relevant appeal details and the appropriate fee are recorded on the ICOS IT system. Provided the appeal documentation is in order, they and the original small claims case papers are referred to the County Court Judge who will give a direction as to the conduct of the appeal.

Edward Connors

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13727/11-15, to detail (i) the date and nature of the first breach; (ii) the date the warrant was (a) requested; (b) granted; and (c) executed; and (iii) the date, and on what terms, bail was subsequently granted.

(AQW 14502/11-15)

Mr Ford: Edward Connors was released from prison on 18 April 2012 in accordance with the release date of the custodial part of his sentence. He first breached the requirements of his Custody Probation Order (CPO) on 11 June 2012 by breaking hostel rules. An arrest warrant was applied for and obtained on 11 June 2012. Edward Connors was arrested overnight and produced at Court on the morning of 12 June 2012. There was no bail requirements associated with his subsequent release on 15 June 2012.

Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct, what legislation authorises a Secretary of State, or their Private Secretary, to approve rules or regulations provided for in Statutory Rules and Orders in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14503/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Devolution of Policing and Justice Function) Order 2010 the Secretary of State no longer has any power to approve legislation in respect of the Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct.

Domestic Abuse: Definition

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the new guidelines issued by the Home Office on the definition of domestic abuse apply to Northern Ireland; and, if so, when they will take effect.

(AQW 14504/11-15)

Mr Ford: The new definition of domestic violence, which was announced by the Home Office on 18 September 2012, and which will be implemented by March 2013, applies to England and Wales only.

The definition of domestic violence for Northern Ireland, as detailed within the 'Tackling Violence at Home' Strategy, takes into account psychological abuse and is all encompassing in that it recognizes that anyone can be a victim of domestic violence, regardless of age.

Work has begun on the development of a new combined domestic and sexual violence Strategy for Northern Ireland which is due to be published in September 2013. We will use the consultation on the new strategy to gauge views on our definition of domestic violence, taking cognizance of the new definition of Domestic Violence for England and Wales.

Edward Paul Murphy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13723/11-15, to detail (i) the times that this action has been used in the past and counted as legally acceptable; and (ii) the legislation which permits this action.

(AQW 14505/11-15)

Mr Ford: The power to award a compensation order is set out in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 (Articles 14–17) and provides that a court by or before which a person is convicted of an offence may, on application or otherwise, make an order for compensation.

I can confirm that there are no other cases that match the specific circumstances of the Edward Paul Murphy case. There are other instances where a compensation order has been made at the same time as adjourning a case for sentence. However, in Mr Murphy's case his solicitor asked the court to make a compensation order after the case had been adjourned and before the case was next listed.

Prisoners: Austin Creggan, Desmond Hamill, Tommy Hamill and Mark McGilloway

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether republican prisoners Austin Creggan, Desmond Hamill, Tommy Hamill and Mark McGilloway (i) are in separated conditions; (ii) have each signed the required compact; (iii) are on protest; and (iv) are, or have been, on hunger strike, and if so, on what date did this begin.

(AQW 14506/11-15)

Mr Ford: Austin Creggan, Desmond Hamill, Tommy Hamill and Mark McGilloway are not in separated conditions and as such are not required to sign a compact. All are reported to have refused to eat prison food for varying periods of time between 17 August and 22 September 2012.

Courts: Hearing Centres

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13774/11-15, whether he can give a more precise timeframe for the announcement of his decision.

(AQW 14510/11-15)

Mr Ford: I plan to present my decision on the proposals to close five Hearing Centres to the Justice Committee in November 2012.

Crime: Use of Glass Bottles

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the impact of the use of glass bottles in violent crimes, assaults and civil unrest.

(AQW 14586/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI do not collate information in relation to the use of glass bottles during periods of civil unrest.

The PSNI have advised that in 2011- 12 broken glass and / or a bottle was used in less than 7% of all serious and violent crime and assaults. This figure represents an almost 50% reduction in these types of offences since 2009/10.

I recognise that the use of any object, particularly glass, as a means of causing harm can often have serious and sometimes fatal consequences to the victims of these assaults and I remain committed to tackling these types of offences.

Crime: Use of Glass Bottles

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Justice (i) for his assessment of the use of glass bottles as weapons in licensed premises; and (ii) what measures can be put in place to restrict the use of glasses and glass bottles in licensed premises that have a record of violent incidents.

(AQW 14587/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI have advised that they do not collate data on locations where glass bottles are used as weapons in violent crime or assault.

I understand that if reported crime incidents are associated with particular licensed premises the PSNI actively engage with licensees, to identify possible causes and to try to develop a plan to address the issues.

Measures which could be used by licensees include strict table clearance policies on empty glasses and bottles, together with close internal supervision which can reduce the risk of incidents occurring inside the premises. In addition a policy of non removal of bottles and glasses from premises also reduces the risk of these items being used as weapons.

Small Claims Court

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice what time limits have been established for the submission of a case to the Small Claims Court.

(AQW 14608/11-15)

Mr Ford: The time limits applicable within which proceedings may be commenced in the Small Claims Court will depend on the cause of action. The Limitation (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 sets out the time limits for different types of actions and the court has power to extend this timeframe under certain circumstances.

Generally most actions heard by the Small Claims Court will require commencement within six years from the date on which the cause of action arose.

DOJ: Savings Delivery Plans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to outline any savings plans for his Department.

(AQW 14688/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice published detailed savings delivery plans for each of its spending areas in January 2011 in the consultation document "Draft Allocations and Savings proposals".

Throughout the Budget 2011-15 period, the Department will regularly monitor progress against these plans and will publish six monthly updates.

The most recent update, as at 31 March 2012, is available via the following link:

<http://www.dojni.gov.uk/index/publications/publication-categories/pubs-departmental-business/departments-of-justice-savings-delivery-plans.htm>

Thomas O'Brien

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice to detail why Thomas O'Brien, who was sentenced to nine years in prison for causing the death of Paul Flanagan, was allowed to participate in a resettlement programme, given that (i) he absconded from the scene of the accident; (ii) it was six years before he was brought to justice; and (iii) he has absconded from prison.

(AQW 14725/11-15)

Mr Ford: NIPS is unable to provide the information requested as it falls into the category of sensitive personal data as defined in the Data Protection Act 1998. To provide this information would be in breach of the first Data Protection Principle.

Legal Aid: Applications

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, given that civil Legal Aid should not be available to an individual for a judicial review when it advantages a group and circumvents it from funding proceedings, how a Carrick Hill resident received Legal Aid to challenge the Parades Commission decision in respect of the Covenant Parade on 29 September 2012, while a supporter of the Ballymacconnolly Band from Rasharkin was refused Legal Aid to challenge the Parades Commission decision in respect of the Ballymacconnolly Parade in August 2012.

(AQW 14907/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 I am precluded from discussing the details of individual applications for civil legal aid. However, all applications for civil legal aid are subject to the statutory means and merits tests and are considered on the basis of the facts submitted in support of the individual application.

Regulation 5 (11) of the Legal Aid (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1965 states that if an application is made by or on behalf of a person in connection with a cause or matter in which numerous persons have the same interest, legal aid can be refused if:

- (a) the refusal would not seriously prejudice the right of the applicant; or
- (b) that it would be reasonable and proper for the other persons having the same interest in the matter as the applicant to defray so much of the costs as would be payable from the Legal Aid Fund in respect of the proceedings.

Accordingly, each individual application must be considered on its own merits against this statutory provision.

Department for Regional Development

Car Parking: Residents

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's position on the introduction of residents parking schemes.

(AQW 14315/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is continuing to progress Residents' Parking Schemes and the legislation required as quickly as possible. It is anticipated that schemes in the Bogside, Londonderry and at Clarke Court and Masserene Street in Antrim are likely to be delivered in late 2013. Roads Service officials are currently working with residents' associations in the Stranmillis / Lower Malone Area of Belfast, with the aim of implementing a scheme in early 2014.

Roads Service has started discussions with residents of the Rugby Road/College Park Avenue area of Belfast and has re-engaged with local representatives from the Donegall Pass and Sandy Row areas of Belfast. Officials also hope to be in a position to consult with the Lower Malone, Stranmillis and Sandy Row communities, soon after the start of the university autumn semester.

Car Parking: Residents

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are any plans to hold further trials of residents parking schemes outside Belfast.

(AQW 14316/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has neither carried out, nor does it intend to implement, any trial residents' parking schemes. A significant amount of research has already been carried out to develop what officials consider to be an effective residents' parking policy. In addition, the degree of local consultation in each area is intentionally extensive to ensure that agreement is reached with both the residential and business communities, and they are fully aware of the details and operational conditions of a scheme.

DRD: Capital Projects

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) for his assessment of the benefits of annualised budgets when planning and delivering large capital infrastructure projects such as the East Belfast's Flood Alleviation Scheme; and (ii) what consideration he has given to holding the funding for projects as allocated project budget that could be spent over an agreed number of years.

(AQW 14321/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department, as with all Northern Ireland departments, operates within the financial framework set by HM Treasury to manage public expenditure across the United Kingdom.

The NI Executive operates an overarching Budget Exchange scheme which allows it to carry forward up to a capped amount of capital budget cover for use in the following financial year in line with the Executive's priorities.

My Department does make maximum use of the flexibilities allowed within the financial framework to effectively plan and deliver a large and varied capital programme.

DRD: Flooding

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to recent flooding, (i) for his assessment of the need for a more integrated response and better co-ordination between agencies; (ii) what lessons have been learnt; and (iii) whether clear roles and responsibilities have been identified and agreed with the agencies involved.

(AQW 14323/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have stated on several occasions that more effective coordination between all the agencies involved in preparing for, and responding to, flooding is required. The Executive-commissioned review into flooding, including issues such as lessons learned and the appropriate roles and responsibilities of government agencies is currently being considered. It would be inappropriate for me to comment in greater detail until the review has been published and I and my Executive colleagues have had an opportunity to consider its findings. However, I am willing to consider all the options for more integrated arrangements and clarity of roles.

Larne: Car Park Revenue

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development how much revenue has been raised by each car park, to date, since charges were introduced to car parks in Larne.

(AQW 14388/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is only required to keep financial records for the previous seven financial years.

The revenue generated by each charged car park in Larne for the period 2005/2006 to 2011/2012 is as follows:

■ Agnew Street	£126,782
■ Circular Road West	£75,594
■ Fairhill	£58,884
■ Narrow Gauge Road	£175,442

In relation to the Riverdale East car park where charges were introduced with effect from 5 July 2012, the revenue generated from that date to 31 August 2012, was £525.

North Down: Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how many parking tickets were issued in (i) Bangor, (ii) Holywood, (iii) Donaghadee and (iv) the rest of North Down, in the last three years, and the amount of revenue raised in each area.

(AQW 14424/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in Bangor, Holywood and Donaghadee, for the last three years, are set out in the table below:

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Bangor	3,672	3,156	3,411
Holywood	1,201	1,865	1,657
Donaghadee	171	352	234

My Department's Roads Service has advised that in the North Down District Council area, enforcement is primarily undertaken in the towns of Bangor and Holywood, with other smaller towns and villages subject to enforcement upon request. Consequently, there are no figures available for the revenue raised from PCNs for the rest of North Down. I should also advise that Donaghadee is located within the Ards District Council area.

Roads Service has further advised that it does not maintain details of revenue raised from PCNs, by council area. However, the total annual revenue from PCNs, for each of the last three years, is detailed in the table below:

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
PCN Income (NI)	£4,818,351	£4,491,987	£4,626,980

Holywood Esplanade: No-parking Area

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the rationale behind Roads Service's decision to designate the Esplanade in Holywood, lough side, as a no parking area between 8.30am and 6.30pm.

(AQW 14432/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has assured me that the current waiting restrictions along the Esplanade, which comprise a mixture of double yellow lines (no waiting at any time) and single yellow lines (no waiting Monday to Friday 08.30 – 18.30), have been in place for many years and there are no plans to introduce new restrictions.

However, your query may have arisen due to incorrect wording on replacement waiting restriction signage that officials advise has now been removed, pending the erection of the correct signage.

I regret any confusion or inconvenience that this may have caused.

Roads Service: Rubberised Asphalt Concrete

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the economic and environmental costs and the benefits of the use of rubberised asphalt concrete for new roads.

(AQW 14433/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is aware of the potential economic and environmental benefits relating to the use of Rubberised Asphalt Concrete (RAC). However, officials have advised that additional testing, analysis and approval of use, by obtaining the appropriate certification, will be required before RAC can be recommended for use on the Northern Ireland road network.

Car Parking: Footways

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he intends to introduce legislation on cars parking on, and obstructing, pavements; and to provide a timescale.

(AQW 14463/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that while there is currently no general prohibition on parking on footways, with the exception of the parking of heavy commercial vehicles which is prohibited and is a matter for the PSNI to enforce, there are other means of dealing with the issue.

Where parking restrictions apply on the adjacent carriageway, as indicated by road markings and/or traffic signs, the restrictions will generally also apply to the footway and are enforced by Traffic Attendants. Elsewhere, in areas where there are no marked or signed parking restrictions on the carriageway, and parking on footways is creating an obstruction, the matter can be referred to the PSNI, which has the powers to deal with it.

In these circumstances, and particularly since the PSNI already has powers to deal with obstructions, I currently have no plans to change the law on cars parking on footways.

Railways: Signal Boxes

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the plans for the continued usage of the Coleraine, Castlerock and Londonderry Northern Ireland Railway signal boxes.

(AQW 14486/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advises me that phase 2 of the Coleraine to Londonderry Line Renewal Project which has an economic appraisal approved, will see the consolidation of signalling operations for that section of the line to the Coleraine Box. As a result, the Londonderry and Castlerock boxes will be closed.

At present the Phase 2 works are planned for 2014/15 so Translink would envisage the signal boxes closing sometime in the first half of 2015.

Roads: Common Travel Area

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has made any representation to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport in relation to the EU Commission's review of the cabotage regulation; and (ii) for his assessment of the benefits of the creation of 'functional area' as an extension of the Common Travel Area between the north and south of this island and GB. (AQW 14493/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Although this question was tabled for the Minister for Regional Development to respond, it is more appropriate that I reply to the question, as the responsibility for cabotage lies within remit of the Department of the Environment.

The EU Commission and Member States are currently considering the details of a report, published in June 2012, by a High Level Group tasked with assessing the benefits of further liberalisation of national road transport markets. The report does not include the transportation of passengers, only the carriage of goods.

The report proposes a flexible and gradual opening of national road transport markets, to be flanked by measures to restore the attractiveness of the sector and ensuring that rules are applied fairly. The authors argues that benefits include more flexibility - allowing hauliers and shippers to optimise fleet management and reduce empty runs, thereby reducing emissions and fuel consumption whilst improving the competitiveness of the overall economy which relies on efficient logistics.

To date, I have not been directly in discussions with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport in relation to the contents of the report, but I can advise that my officials are working closely with their counterparts in the Department for Transport (DfT) to establish the full impact of the proposal. Furthermore, the report was discussed with industry representatives, including the Freight Transport Association (FTA) and the Road Haulage Association (RHA) in Northern Ireland at the meeting of the Northern Ireland Road Freight Forum on 24 September 2012; Forum members are also in the process of considering the proposals.

A well functioning logistics sector is of vital importance for the economies of both Ireland and the UK, as well as in improving the competitive efficiency of the EU as a whole. I welcome, therefore, the review of cabotage and look forward to hearing what the Commission's view of the findings are.

My Department intends to work closely with DfT, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the FTA and the RHA in an effort to establish the full impact of the scheme, particularly on road freight in the island of Ireland.

In terms of creating a "functional area" and what the benefits might be, I can advise that this issue has been considered by the Commission. Their view, expressed in October 2010, was that the aim of the current regulations is to grant entitlements for cabotage but not to restrict cabotage as such.

If further liberalisation were to be granted, however, the Commission's clear view is that the rules would have to comply with the general Treaty principles and, therefore, have to be non-discriminatory in nature, including on grounds of nationality. Their view, therefore, was that bilateral agreements in border regions would be in conflict with the principle of non-discrimination. However, I firmly believe we must continue to look creatively at how in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland we can work together for our mutual benefit.

A5 Dual Carriageway: Phased Implementation

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasoning for proceeding with the sections of the A5 between main towns on the North West Corridor rather than bypassing the towns.

(AQW 14524/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As you will be aware, the Executive agreed to proceed with two sections of the A5. This will include the construction of 15km of new offline dual carriageway between New Buildings and Strabane and approximately 23km between Omagh and Ballygawley. The construction of a 1.5km single carriageway bypass of New Buildings is also proposed.

The phased implementation of the project is necessary due to the Irish Government's deferral of further funding. I can advise that the following information was taken into consideration and is relevant to the choices made in phasing the project.

Dualling the section from Ballygawley to Omagh extends the benefits of the A4 dual carriageway project. It also improves access between Omagh and Belfast with motorway/dual carriageway provision over the entire length of the route, making Omagh, which is identified as a Main Hub in the Regional Development Strategy, more attractive to potential investors.

The proposed works between Londonderry and Strabane will bypass a number of small urban settlements along the existing A5, thereby improving access to Londonderry, the main centre of population in the North West with port and airport facilities. It will also improve access to Strabane, which has important cross-border links to Lifford.

Whereas the full A5 project recognises the benefits of a dual carriageway bypass of Omagh and Strabane, the Omagh Throughpass and single carriageway bypass of Strabane have improved traffic conditions in these town centres in the interim.

A2: Timescale

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the timescale for completion of the widening of the A2 road through Greenisland.

(AQW 14525/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, subject to a successful completion of the procurement process for this project, it is anticipated that the construction stage of the scheme will commence in early 2013 and will take approximately 2 years to complete.

North Down: Sewerage Network

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the sewerage network in North Down is up to the required standard.

(AQW 14527/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that its drainage systems are maintained to the standard required to meet its statutory obligations under the Water and Sewerage Services Order (2006). There are a number of on-going Drainage Area Studies within the North Down area which will identify improvements to the sewer network to alleviate intermittent discharges to water courses and flooding.

As a result NIW has a significant programme of capital works planned for the North Down constituency during the two year period from 2013 to 2015 which will ensure that overflows within the sewer network meet the standards which have been specified by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. It is estimated that £7 million will be spent on the Bangor network, £3.5 million on the Holywood network and £1.5 million on the Millisle network.

In terms of wastewater treatment, the major treatment works which serve the constituency have been the subject of major upgrades within the past five years and are deemed to be operating satisfactorily. In addition, £5.5 million has recently been invested on improvements to the sewerage network in the Bangor area.

North Down: Street Lighting

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many street light repairs have been carried out in North Down in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14528/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Road Service has advised that it does not maintain specific details of street light repairs in the format requested.

However, details of repairs carried out in Roads Service Eastern Division, which comprises North Down, Belfast, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus, in the last three financial years, are shown in the table below:

Year	Number of Repairs
2009/10	25047
2010/11	23085
2011/12	22916

Street Lighting: Daylight Hours

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what was the cost of street light being left on during daylight hours in the last financial year.

(AQW 14529/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, since street lighting electricity is not metered, there is no additional monetary cost for a street light operating during daylight hours.

Officials have further advised that when they are made aware of street lights operating during the daytime, as a result of faulty equipment or for routine maintenance purposes, they endeavour to attend to such issues promptly, as they appreciate energy is being used unnecessarily with consequential detriment to the environment.

North Down: Street Lighting

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any part of the street lighting network in North Down is not fit for purpose.

(AQW 14530/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that while some of the older lighting installations in North Down do not meet the present-day lighting standards, which apply to new installations, it is not aware of any part of the street lighting network in the area which is not fit for purpose.

Roads Service: Removal of Graffiti

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what direction has been given to Roads Service to remove paint and graffiti on kerbstones, lamp-posts and other equipment in towns and villages.

(AQW 14536/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would firstly point out that my Department's Roads Service does not approve of, or support, the unauthorised defacement of the Department's property. I can also advise that officials prioritise the removal of such defacement, in situations that are considered to present a road safety hazard, for example, the vandalism of road signs.

However, Roads Service must have due regard to the safety of its staff that are involved in removing/treating such items. When Roads Service becomes aware of graffiti on Departmental property, it will assess the situation to determine if action can be taken, either directly or in support of others. This often involves working with elected or local community representatives and the PSNI.

I would also advise the Member that officials must be sensitive in dealing with the removal of paint and graffiti. As I am sure the Member appreciates, such action has the potential to create tension within local communities and also inadvertently result in an escalation of the existing problem.

Cycles: Parking Facilities

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development which towns have provided parking facilities for cycles in their town centres.

(AQW 14537/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that those towns that provide parking facilities for cycles in their town centres are listed in the table below:

Towns providing parking facilities for cycles in their town centres

Ballymena	Cookstown
Ballymoney	Dunmurry
Belfast	Limavady
Carryduff	Londonderry
Coleraine	Omagh
Portrush	Strabane
Portstewart	Downpatrick
Portglenone	Newry

Rathlin Island: Ferry Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how many visitors to Rathlin Island used the ferry service in each year from 2000/01 to date.

(AQW 14568/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The table below provides a breakdown of the number of passenger journeys taken on the Rathlin Island ferry service from 1 April 2000 to 31 March 2012. My Department does not hold the specific information on the number of journeys undertaken by Rathlin Island residents prior to 1 April 2008.

Date	Total Journeys	Rathlin Island Resident Journeys
1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001	37,099	Not available
1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002	36,106	Not available
1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003	39,399	Not available
1 April 2003 to 31 March 2004	46,562	Not available
1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005	45,378	Not available
1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006	48,217	Not available
1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007	49,630	Not available
1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008	49,885	Not available
1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009	56,486	3,738
1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010	79,562	4,123
1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011	87,015	8,117
1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012	80,159	8,085

NI Water: Water Meters

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to NI Water's review of water meters (i) how many meters were identified as test meters; (ii) how many test meters were subsequently changed to chargeable meters; (iii) how many bills were then issued to customers; (iv) what time period the bills cover; (v) how many of the new bills included a domestic water and sewage allowance on first issue; (vi) how many bills were challenged by the customer due to (a) no domestic allowance being included; and (b) not being a commercial or farming customer, and therefore not liable for charges; (vii) how many bills were subsequently (a) reduced; or (b) reduced to zero; and (viii) what checks were carried out on the circumstances of each property prior to bills being issued.

(AQW 14577/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that:

- (i) 10,898 meters were identified through a data integrity project as having a meter classification of "test meter" and therefore were not billed. All "test meters" have been inspected;
- (ii) 2,699 test meters have been reclassified to chargeable meters on the basis of site visits and further office analysis;
- (iii) 2,647 customers have had retrospective bills issued to them as a result of the reclassification. The difference of 52 meters between these figures relates to test meters changed to revenue bearing where no bills were issued because the accounts either have no customer or a new customer had moved in after the last billable read;
- (iv) retrospective billing for test meters reclassification covers 1 April 2007 to most recent reading period;
- (v) In exercising due diligence, NIW does not presume a customers' eligibility for domestic allowance. Evidence of rateable status is a required to enable the allowance to be granted. Letters were sent to inform the consumers of their potential meter reclassification to non-domestic, prior to retrospective billing. This letter explained the availability of domestic allowance and encouraged the customer to apply for the allowance;
- (vi)(a) None, as the application is customer driven; and (b) 1490 accounts were reclassified to domestic therefore not chargeable as a result of additional information received from customer. 756 requests from customers to have domestic allowances applied have been granted according to the criteria set.
- (vii)(a) and (b) NIW is unable to quantify the number of test meter accounts that have been reduced, however adjustments have been made, for example where the customer meets the leakage allowance criteria. 756 customers have applied for and been granted domestic allowances.
- (viii) The review undertaken of test meters included a field survey and a desktop analysis that involved checking rateable status with Land and Property Service valuation lists, previous billing history, and internet to identify if the meter was supplying a non- domestic property.

DRD: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development how many departmental staff are currently (i) suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations.
(AQW 14609/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There are currently no staff in my Department who are suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations.

The Department is aware of one member of staff who is facing criminal charges and is not currently suspended from work.

Roads: Gritting

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department is prepared for the gritting of roads during this winter.
(AQW 14614/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Prior to the start of each winter service season, my Department's Roads Service carries out a significant amount of planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, ensuring all winter service equipment is in working order and that there is an adequate stock of salt.

Salt barns, which are strategically placed in depots throughout Northern Ireland, are normally stocked to hold sufficient quantities of salt to provide the winter service programme for a full season without the need to restock. Following the severe weather experienced over recent years, Roads Service has reviewed these levels and has increased stocks significantly in order to be well prepared, in the event of a prolonged period of wintry weather. I can confirm that salt barns are filled to capacity at this time. Additionally, and if necessary, Roads Service also has arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period.

In addition, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on other routes adopted or maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule. Roads Service currently provides approximately 4,800 salt bins and almost 50,000 grit piles on public roads.

Every night, from the end of October 2011 until the middle of April 2012, Roads Service will have over 300 people on standby ready to salt main roads, helping drivers across Northern Ireland cope with the wintry conditions.

Officials have assured me that my Department's Roads Service is well prepared and will be able to provide a high standard of service delivery for the gritting of roads during the incoming winter season.

Local Authorities: Speed Limits

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for his Department's assessment of the proposal to devolve responsibility on speed limits in England to local authorities.
(AQW 14654/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In England, local authorities already have responsibility for the setting of speed limits on local roads. However, the Department for Transport recently issued draft guidance with the aim of increasing flexibility for local authorities. Currently out for consultation, this new guidance encourages authorities to keep their speed limits under review with ever-changing circumstances, and consider the introduction of more 20mph limits and zones, over time, in urban areas, to ensure greater safety for pedestrian and cyclists, using the criteria.

In Northern Ireland, the Department for Regional Development is the sole Roads Authority and as such, is the only organisation that has powers to set speed limits. This includes the power to introduce local speed limits, where national limits are deemed to be inappropriate. Local Authorities in Northern Ireland do not have any powers in relation to the management of roads.

Initial proposals under the Review of Public Administration included the transfer of responsibility for the maintenance and development of local roads and associated traffic management from the Department to local authorities. However, this proposal was not advanced at that time, as councils were reluctant to take on responsibility for the full range of functions included.

As things stand, it is unlikely that councils would have the necessary technical expertise to carry out the assessments required, or the resources to draft, consult on and publish the necessary legislative orders to introduce local speed limits.

In addition, transferring this speed management function to councils would probably require primary legislation to be enacted. There is also the possibility that some councils would not support the transfer of the function for the afore-mentioned reasons.

Belfast City Centre: Traffic Congestion

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to address traffic congestion in Belfast City Centre, particularly for people travelling from rural areas where public transport is not an option.
(AQW 14687/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The roads works currently taking place in Belfast city centre are part of the Belfast on the Move initiative to provide increased priority for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. The bus lanes, which have recently been introduced, accommodate public transport, emergency vehicles, cyclists, motorcycles and permitted taxis and are operational from 7am to 7pm.

In relation to people travelling from rural areas my Department recognises that the provision of Park and Ride sites has an important role in promoting sustainable transport. Therefore, over the last few years we have continued to increase the number of Park and Ride locations and the number of spaces available for both bus and rail based services. My Department is currently planning to introduce additional Park & Ride facilities at the outer edges of the Belfast metropolitan area which will allow these people to make use of the improved public transport services in the city whilst at the same time reducing congestion in Belfast.

In relation to Belfast city centre, about 60% of the 30,000 vehicles per day which travel through the city centre on the roads in front and behind the City Hall is through traffic that does not have a city centre destination. My Department's Roads Service is urging drivers who do not need to travel via the city centre to use alternative routes such as the M3, Westlink and the Outer Ring Road (A55). In 2009, a survey showed that 18,847 people entered Belfast by private car, 7,299 by bus, 3,870 by walking and 285 by cycling. This survey also showed that the 18,847 people used 12,211 cars, while the 7,299 bus passengers used only 257 buses, highlighting the relatively small number of buses necessary to carry a proportionately larger number of people into the city centre. The current redistribution of road space is therefore fully justified in terms of moving people, rather than vehicles.

In our experience, when new or amended road layouts are first introduced there is a 'bedding in' period while the travelling public get used to the new arrangements and therefore it is likely to be some time before the full benefits of the bus lanes are realised. My Department's Roads Service has been monitoring traffic flows, both on the ground and by CCTV, to minimise delay to all road users to ensure that bus operations and traffic movements operate to their optimum. As the works are completed and traffic patterns are established, further traffic management measures can be considered, if necessary, to target specific issues.

Belfast City Centre: Bus Lanes

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development how his Department intends to measure the success of the newly introduced bus lanes in Belfast; and to outline any timescale for this action.

(AQW 14724/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The roads works currently taking place in Belfast city centre are the part of the Belfast on the Move initiative to provide increased priority for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. The bus lanes, which have recently been introduced, accommodate public transport, emergency vehicles, cyclists, motorcycles and permitted taxis and are operational from 7am to 7pm.

In our experience, when new or amended road layouts are first introduced there is a 'bedding in' period while the travelling public get used to the new arrangements and therefore it is likely to be some time before the full benefits of the bus lanes are realised. My Department's Roads Service has been monitoring traffic flows, both on the ground and by CCTV, to minimise delay to all road users to ensure that bus operations and traffic movements operate to their optimum. As the works are completed and traffic patterns are established, further traffic management measures can be considered, if necessary, to target specific issues.

Prior to the commencement of the works associated with the Belfast on the Move Sustainable Transport Enabling Measures surveys were carried out on traffic flows on all the arterial routes into and through the city centre. Following the completion of the works, scheduled for mid 2013, further surveys will be carried out to measure the success of the project. In addition my Department is liaising with Translink in relation to the impact the project have had on bus services within the city. Early indications from Translink are that there has already been a positive impact on Metro services.

Donaghadee: Dropped Kerbs

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what dropped kerb schemes are planned for the Donaghadee area. (AQW 14759/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is considering the installation of dropped kerb measures at The Parade/Manor Street junction in Donaghadee. The Member will be aware that he met on-site with officials on Friday 28 September 2012 to identify the precise locations where installation of dropped kerb measures would be of greatest benefit to the elderly and those using mobility scooters in this area.

Donaghadee: Street Lighting

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for the Donaghadee area.

(AQW 14760/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are no new street lighting schemes planned for the Donaghadee area in the current financial year.

Belfast City Centre: Bus Lanes

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to address the traffic congestion in and around Belfast as a result of the recent bus lane changes.

(AQW 14778/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The road works currently taking place in Belfast city centre are part of the Belfast on the Move initiative to provide increased priority for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. The bus lanes, which have recently been introduced, accommodate public transport, emergency vehicles, cyclists, motorcycles and permitted taxis and are operational from 7am to 7pm.

Apparently 60% of the 30,000 vehicles per day which travel through the city centre on the roads in front and behind the City Hall is through traffic that does not have a city centre destination. My Department's Roads Service is urging drivers who do not need to travel via the city centre to use alternative routes such as the M3, Westlink and the Outer Ring Road (A55). In 2009, a survey showed that 18,847 people entered Belfast by private car, 7,299 by bus, 3,870 by walking and 285 by cycling. This survey also showed that the 18,847 people used 12,211 cars, while the 7,299 bus passengers used only 257 buses, highlighting the relatively small number of buses necessary to carry a proportionately larger number of people into the city centre. The current redistribution of road space is therefore justified in terms of moving people, rather than vehicles.

In our experience, when new or amended road layouts are first introduced there is a 'bedding in' period while the travelling public get used to the new arrangements and therefore it is likely to be some time before the full benefits of the bus lanes are realised. My Department's Roads Service has been monitoring traffic flows, both on the ground and by CCTV, to minimise delay to all road users to ensure that bus operations and traffic movements operate to their optimum. As expected there are some additional delays to vehicles accessing Oxford St from Queen's Bridge and Donegall Quay. However, as the works are completed and traffic patterns are established, further traffic management measures can be considered, if necessary, to target specific issues.

Department for Social Development

Foyle: Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) mobility; and (ii) wheelchair bungalows in the Foyle constituency; and whether there are any plans to increase the current stock.

(AQW 14302/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely record separately the number of bungalows for mobility use and wheelchair use. However, the Housing Executive currently has a total of 506 mobility/wheelchair bungalows within its Collon Terrace, Waterloo Place and Waterside District Office areas.

Housing Associations have 112 mobility bungalows and 163 wheelchair bungalows in the Foyle constituency.

Not all bungalows within Social Housing Development Programme schemes are wheelchair/mobility bungalows, unless that is required by the client. With regard to plans to increase the current stock, the tables below show the number of bungalows within Social Housing Development Programme schemes which are (i) currently on site; and (ii) future planned schemes:-

Table 1 — New build schemes on site 31 March 2012:

Scheme	Wheelchair Bungalows	Bungalows	Total
Apex Acquisitions Phase 19A	0	1	1
Apex Acquisitions Phase 19B	0	1	1
Derry Acquisitions Phase 19C	1	1	2
Marian Hall	1	0	1

Table 2 — New build schemes programmed 2012 – 2015: -

Scheme	Wheelchair Bungalows	Bungalows	Total
Culaduff Gardens	Not yet known	4*	4
Bradley's Pass	2	1	3
Skeoge Road Phase 2 & 3	Not yet known	1*	1

* Details of scheme proposal have not yet been provided.

Disability Living Allowance: Medical Assessments

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of employing non-local Examining Medical Practitioners to carry out medical assessments for Disability Living Allowance claimants in their home (i) for the current financial year to date; (ii) the 2011/12 financial year; and (iii) the 2010/11 financial year.

(AQW 14349/11-15)

Mr McCausland: During the financial years 2010/11 and 2011/12 (up to June 2011 only), all Examining Medical Practitioners who carried out Disability Living Allowance assessments on behalf of the Social Security Agency were based in Northern Ireland. Therefore there are no associated costs for employing non-local Examining Medical Practitioners during this period.

Since 20 June 2011 the Medical Support Services have been provided on behalf of the Social Security Agency by Atos Healthcare. The Department for Social Development does not hold information regarding the location details of healthcare professionals employed by Atos Healthcare.

Clandeboyne Village Community Association

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what support his Department can provide to the Clandeboyne Village Association in its efforts to obtain a community house.

(AQW 14408/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the Clandeboyne area is of particularly high demand with a very low turnover in suitable properties which could be considered for use as a community house. In addition the Housing Executive is currently going through a process of regularisation of all existing community properties with Building Control and the Planning Service, with regards to statutory requirements. As such there has not been any new community houses allocated to community groups since this process began over a year ago and only when this is complete can this type of application recommence.

However, it is anticipated that applications for community lettings may be accepted later in this financial year. Following that it will then be down to local supply issues that exist for particular areas or locations as to whether a community letting can be made. However, it is not envisaged, given the high demand for housing in the Clandeboyne area that the Housing Executive's Bangor District office will be in a position to offer the Association a community house in the near future.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the level of Employment Support Allowance paid to claimants who are awaiting a hearing with the appeals service; and what is the current waiting time for an appeal to be heard.

(AQW 14414/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The majority of customers who appeal against a decision relating to their entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance will continue to receive the assessment rate of Employment and Support Allowance for the duration of their appeal i.e. from the date the appeal is received to the date of the Appeal Tribunal's outcome, provided they continue to supply current medical evidence. The assessment rate of Employment and Support is equivalent to the rate of Jobseekers Allowance.

The average waiting time for Employment Support Allowance appeals is currently 9.5 weeks. This is calculated from the date a valid appeal is received in The Appeals Service to the first date of hearing.

South Down: Disabled Facilities Grant

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in South Down who (i) applied for the Disabled Facilities Grant, in each year since 2008; and (ii) met the financial criteria.

(AQW 14442/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested because the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary constituency. However, the tables below provide information relating to the Banbridge, Down and Newry and Mourne local government areas. Table 1 details those cases where a Schedule of Works was issued to those who expressed an interest in applying for a Disabled Facilities Grant and, Table 2 details the cases where grant aid approvals were issued.

Table 1

Council Area	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Banbridge	49	46	37	28
Down	157	143	64	74
Newry & Mourne *	210	123	72	62

* Cases readily identifiable as outside of South Down have been removed

Table 2 **

Council Area	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Banbridge	21	30	21	23
Down	85	69	58	35
Newry & Mourne **	73	85	58	45

** Cases where the approval value was nil have been excluded

Housing: Waiting Lists for People with a Disability

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Social Development how many people with a disability are on the waiting list for suitable accommodation to be provided by the Housing Executive or Housing Associations, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 14444/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not collate information regarding applicants with a disability (other than where it pertains to the housing needs of the applicant) or by parliamentary constituency. However, there are currently 13,569 housing applicants on the waiting list with functional mobility problems relating to their current accommodation and the tables below provide a breakdown of that figure as follows:

Table 1 details persons on the waiting list with points for functional disability by Housing Executive District office; and

Table 2 details persons on the waiting list with points for functional mobility by Housing Association.

The Housing Executive has also confirmed that at 26 September 2012 there were 572 applicants requiring wheelchair accessible accommodation.

Table 1

NIHE District Office	Persons with points for functional mobility
Antrim	277
Armagh	249
Ballycastle	80
Ballymena	404
Ballymoney	112
Banbridge	222
Bangor	865
Carrickfergus	367
Castlereagh	449
Coleraine	485
Collon Terrace	260
Cookstown	124
Craigavon Lurgan	409
Craigavon Portadown	205
Downpatrick	413
Dungannon	219
East Belfast	686
Fermanagh	258
Larne	164
Limavady	106
Antrim ST	591
Dairy Farm	200
Magherafelt	136
Newry	440

NIHE District Office	Persons with points for functional mobility
N'Abbey1	343
N'Abbey2	324
Newtownards	626
North Belfast	731
Omagh District	120
Shankill	332
South Belfast	492
Strabane	201
Waterloo PI	383
Waterside	232
West Belfast	666
Total	12,171

Table 2

Housing Associations	Persons with points for functional mobility
Alpha	41
Apex	98
Ark	8
Clanmil	112
Connswater Homes	14
Filor	19
Flax	35
Fold	213
Gosford	3
Grove	5
Habinteg	105
Harmony Homes	17
Hearth	7
Helm	297
Newington	20
Oaklee Homes Group	175
Open Door	18
Rural	19
St Matthew's	7
Triangle	18
Trinity	86
Ulidia Association	27
Wesley	3
South Ulster	51
Total	1,398

Housing: Intimidation Points

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants to the Housing Selection Scheme who received housing points for intimidation in each year since 2008, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 14446/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary Constituency. However, the table below details the number of housing applicants awarded intimidation points by Housing Executive District Offices, including the Homeless Advice Centre, for the period 2008/09 to 2011/12: -

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Belfast West	4	11	23	6
Belfast East	5	11	9	22
Shankill	10	22	17	18
Belfast North	35	27	41	37
Belfast South	26	72	32	36
Homeless Advice Centre	20	25	24	5
Bangor	15	24	15	3
Newtownards	7	16	20	17
Castlereagh	16	13	22	18
Lisburn Antrim Street	36	40	22	19
Lisburn Dairy Farm	13	14	9	12
Downpatrick	5	13	14	2
Banbridge	1	0	3	2
Newry	0	1	2	10
Armagh	6	4	2	5
Lurgan/Brownlow	0	0	1	4
Portadown	3	2	2	1
Dungannon	9	13	10	3
Fermanagh	1	0	0	0
Ballymena	14	12	6	3
Antrim	1	21	19	20
N'abbey 1	8	4	2	2
N'abbey 2	8	14	11	4
Carrickfergus	9	8	6	4
Larne	2	3	1	7
Ballycastle	0	2	4	2
Ballymoney	1	1	1	2
Coleraine	19	10	5	8
Waterloo Place	2	5	6	2
Waterside	5	6	7	9
Collon Terrace	0	3	7	7
Limavady	2	3	2	2
Magherafelt	3	2	4	6
Strabane	0	2	3	2
Omagh	0	0	1	3
Cookstown	2	2	3	0
N.I. Total	288	406	356	303

Crilly Park, Killeter, County Tyrone

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for Social Development when a decision will be made by the Housing Executive on the leasing of land at Crilly Park, Killeter for a Children's Play Facility.

(AQW 14482/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The area in question is an adopted car park and the Housing Executive would only give approval to its disposal if the Strabane District Council provided alternative car parking. The Housing Executive is currently waiting on confirmation from the Council that planning permission has been obtained for this car parking.

The adopted car parking would have to be extinguished prior to a transfer to the Council. However, before this process can be initiated, an economic appraisal would have to be carried out to ascertain whether the land is surplus and if so how it should be disposed of. The Housing Executive would then have to refer the transfer of land to my Department for consideration.

Social Security: Computer System

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans his Department has to upgrade the Social Security computer system.

(AQW 14526/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department uses a number of major Social Security computer systems provided by the Department for Work and Pensions in Great Britain to process and pay social security benefits for Northern Ireland customers. Many of these computer systems are impacted by the changes proposed in the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill and correspondingly the Social Security Agency is developing extensive plans to upgrade and modernise these.

Working in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions and impacted Northern Ireland stakeholders, the Social Security Agency is undertaking a programme of work to introduce new computer systems to support processing for Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment and Discretionary Payments. It is also putting in place a number of enabling computer systems which will facilitate Identity Verification, Risk Assessment, Scanning, Fraud Management, Data Sharing and Passporting and other supporting processes. In addition, the Social Security Agency will also be implementing an upgraded desktop and telephone infrastructure.

These changes will be implemented over the next 3 – 4 years. Development of the new systems is being led by teams from the Department for Work and Pensions who are responsible for co-ordinating input from a range of contracted suppliers. The Social Security Agency has project resource embedded alongside these teams, and their role is to monitor progress, evaluate and communicate outcomes and ensure alignment with Northern Ireland specific requirements.

Helm Housing Association

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development, given that the final inspection report on Helm Housing identified a high level of tenant rent arrears, whether Helm Housing have a higher level of rent in comparison to other housing associations.

(AQW 14557/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Based on the Department's Annual Regulatory Return for 2010/2011 the average weekly rent for a Housing Association three bed decontrolled property was £75.57. The Return showed that across all Housing Associations the average weekly rent ranged from £67.28 per week to £86.57 per week.

Helm Housing Association charged an average weekly rent of £79.72.

Housing Executive: External Cyclical Maintenance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the External Cyclical Maintenance schemes planned for (i) Ards Borough Council and (ii) North Down Borough Council in 2012/13 and 2013/14.

(AQW 14567/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has provided details of its External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes programmed for its Newtownards and Bangor District Offices which reflect the Ards Borough Council and North Down Borough Council areas respectively.

Table 1 below shows the schemes planned for Newtownards District Office area; and Table 2 below shows the schemes planned for Bangor District Office area.

Table 1: External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes: Newtownards District Office: -

Scheme	Dwellings
2012/13	
West Winds Flats	202
Movilla	207*
Portaferry	184*

Scheme	Dwellings
Ballyhalbert/Ballywalter	248*
2013/14	
Comber 1	119
West Winds Houses	332
Scrabo	425
Comber 2	111

Table 2: External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes: Bangor District Office: -

Scheme	Dwellings
2012/13	
Loughview	291
Kilcooley	386
Hollywood	311*
2013/14	
Bloomfield/Rathgill/Willowbrook	410

* These schemes are reserve schemes and are part of the gross programme for 2012/13 but may slip to 2013/14.

Housing Executive: Extreme Weather

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Housing Executive is prepared to assist tenants affected by any heavy snow falls this winter.

(AQW 14615/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the event of any extreme weather conditions such as heavy snow falls, the Housing Executive will provide its full response maintenance service and will of course implement its emergency procedures as and when required.

North Down: Disabled Facilities Grant

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of Disabled Facilities Grants funding allocated to each electoral ward in North Down in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14631/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not record information on an electoral ward basis. However, the table below provides the value of Disabled Facilities Grants approvals for the past three financial years in the North Down Council area: -

Year	Approval Values
2009/10	£1,122,326
2010/11	£297,532
2011/12	£380,995

It should be noted that expenditure on Disabled Facilities Grants is wholly demand driven.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

North Down: Housing Executive Properties

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties in the North Down constituency are deemed as not fit for habitation, broken down by (i) type of dwelling; and (ii) electoral ward.

(AQW 14632/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The 2011 House Condition Survey carried out by the Housing Executive indicates that no Housing Executive properties in the North Down constituency were unfit.

DSD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study'

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration his Department has given to the Belfast City Council commissioned 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study' published in March 2012; and (ii) what action has been taken to implement the recommendations relevant to his Department.

(AQW 14644/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With regard to the "Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study", my officials have briefed me on the report. DSD has responsibility for two specific issues identified in the report; an accreditation scheme for student housing and the "new homes from old places" initiative.

My officials have recently undertaken a fundamental review of the policy and legislation regulating standards within Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and new proposals have been issued for public consultation. As well as seeking to improve physical and safety standards in HMOs, the proposals seek to introduce new controls on the behaviour of occupants within HMOs. Also, as part of this consultation process, officials will engage with stakeholders on how a separate accreditation standard for shared student housing might be developed and catered for within the wider regulation of all HMOs across Northern Ireland.

Officials in NI Housing Executive continue to encourage social housing applicants on the waiting list to widen their area of choice to include the Holylands and to promote development in the area by Housing Associations.

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development why, under the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, 'preferred bidder status' has been withdrawn for the (i) volunteering; and (ii) women in disadvantaged and rural areas themes; and on what date the decision on (ii) was taken.

(AQW 14645/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the areas of support for volunteering and women in disadvantaged and rural areas I decided that further analysis and research was required to determine how best to provide such support. I have serious concerns regarding the level of collaboration and partnership working in these areas and reservations as to whether the proposed arrangements would adequately deliver. For this reason I decided not to proceed with the proposed new arrangements. To ensure continuity of service delivery, the current level of support will continue until the end of this financial year as we continue to review how we deliver effective support to these key sectors. The decision to not proceed with the proposed new arrangements in these thematic strands was taken on 7 September 2012.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 13996/11-15, to detail the location of the estates and areas of Housing Executive properties that have yet to be double-glazed.

(AQW 14726/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The tables below details the Housing Executive's programme of window replacement schemes for the Portadown, Lurgan and Banbridge areas. These schemes, with the exception of that listed in Table 2, are due to be addressed over the next two years through a new double glazing contract being introduced by the Housing Executive in January 2013.

Table 1 - Portadown *

Scheme 1	Garvaghy Park, Churchill Gardens, Fitzroy St., Brownstown Park, Alexandra Gardens, Clounagh Avenue & Close, Marian Avenue Maghery	123 dwellings
Scheme 2	Ulsterville Park, Margaret Street, Seagoe Park, Rectory Park Estate, Clounagh Park, Parkside	256 dwellings

* Further to AQW 13996/11, Housing Executive advises that they have identified an additional 81 dwellings which have been added to proposed schemes.

Table 2 – Lurgan - due on site October 2012

Ashleigh Crescent, Festival Square, Larkfield Square, Orient Circle, Wheatfield Drive, Alfred Terrace, Gilpin Park Dollingstown, Cambrai Drive, Main Street, Waring Terrace Waringstown, Bleary, Derrymacash, Enniskeen, Kilwilkie Road, Lake Street, Levin Road	313 dwellings
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Table 3 – Remaining programme for Lurgan *

Scheme 1	Mourne Estate, Brookehill, Donard Gardens, Darling Avenue, Glenfield Road, Geddis Avenue, Houston Park, Hannon Drive, Mourne Road, Pollock Drive,	105 dwellings
Scheme 2	Meadowbrook	79 Dwellings

Scheme 3	Avenue Road Estate, Shankill Estate, Wakehurst Estate, Gilpinstown, Aghagallon, Taghnevan Close and Drive, Irwin Place Donacloney, Ardowen, Ennis Close, Windsor Close, Waringstown	236 Dwellings
Scheme 4	Taghnevan, Victor Place Dollingstown, Clarendon Park, Florenceville, Malcolmson Park Maralin, Baird Avenue, Donagh Park, Hillview, Donacloney, Churchill Place, Main Street Waringstown	182 Dwellings
Scheme 5	Drumgor Heights, Altmore, Clonmeen, Burnside, Rosmoyle, Drumbeg South, Crozier Park	228 Dwellings
Scheme 6	Beech Court, Edward Street, James Street, Maple Court, Thornleigh, George Street, Hill Street, Mark Street, Mark Street, New Street, Sloan Street	193 Dwellings
Scheme 7	Ennis Tarry, Ennis Green, Lurgan Tarry, Tarry Drive, Kilwilkie Estate,	157 Dwellings

* Housing Executive advises that the number for Lurgan has decreased by 1 due to a house sale.

Table 4 - Banbridge

Scheme 1	Moorefield, Mount Charles, Chestnut Place, Churchview Drive and Terrace, Mountview Park and Drive, Primrose Gardens, Mourneview Park Rathfriland	157 Dwellings
Scheme 2	Cline Road, Fort Street, Leamont Park, Forthill Green, Iveagh Drive, Huntly Bungalow, Scarva Walk, Reilly Court	198 Dwellings
Scheme 3	Woodlands, Castlevue, Churchview Villas Gilford, McCandless Terrace, Moybrick Grove Dromara, John Street, Stewarts Crescent, Hilltown Road Rathfriland, Katesbridge Road Ballyrone, Mount View Drive, Beech Grove Jubilee Park, Laganvale, Rampart Street Dromore	174 Dwellings

SHAC Housing Association

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development when the derelict housing properties currently under the ownership of SHAC Housing Association will be renovated and available for allocation.

(AQW 14740/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The first phase of improvements to 10 of the 25 properties owned by SHAC is due to commence in early 2013. The work will include the replacement of kitchens, bathrooms and windows. Following completion of this work, the four currently vacant dwellings in the first phase will be re let.

SHAC are hopeful that the completion of this first phase of works will generate further demand for housing in the area and therefore allow for implementation of the second phase of redevelopment to the remaining properties.

Civil Service Pension Centre

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AWQ 14495/11-15, (i) how many new posts will be created in the new pension centre; (ii) when the new posts that will be created will be filled; and (iii) when the existing vacancies will be filled.

(AQW 14770/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Fifteen additional posts have been created in the Pension Centre. Work is already underway to fill these posts in line with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Civil Service vacancy management policy. There is a series of options that need to be worked through as part of that process including consideration of NICS staff with priority based on disability or welfare or who are in posts which have been or will shortly be declared surplus; the potential to offer these posts to existing NICS staff and the use of external recruitment. Given the range of variables it is not possible at this stage to state precisely when all these posts might be filled but every effort is being made to ensure that the process is completed as quickly as possible.

In terms of the posts referred to in part (iii), arrangements have already been made to fill one vacancy during October. The remainder have been offered as recruitment opportunities. Once a candidate accepts an offer of employment, that employment will usually commence within a month. If they do not accept the offer then the process is repeated moving down the merit order.

John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has used, or will use, public resources to demonstrate the potential impact that the John Lewis development at Sprucefield would have on Belfast retail plans.

(AQW 14771/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department has been asked by the Planning Appeals Commission to attend the public inquiry into the planning application for the proposed expansion of Sprucefield to respond to questions about regeneration issues in

relation to Belfast City Centre. The Department is being advised by legal counsel and planning advisers on its preparation for attending the inquiry and is using public resources for this advice. This is the standard process followed by Departments in preparing for such an inquiry. The Planning Appeals Commission determines the terms of reference for the Department's attendance at the inquiry.

DSD Funding: Political Parties

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the guidelines in relation to political parties applying for public funding from his Department (i) as the sole applicant; and (ii) in partnership with other groups.
(AQW 14774/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development does not accept applications for public funding from political parties as sole applicants or in partnership with other groups. Applications where the proposed project's purpose is to promote any religious or political viewpoint are deemed ineligible for funding.

DSD Funding: Political Parties

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to list the applications for funding from his Department in which political parties have been (a) the sole applicant; and (b) an applicant in partnership with another group; and (ii) to detail whether each application was successful or unsuccessful and on what grounds they were unsuccessful.
(AQW 14775/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development has not received any applications for funding from political parties as the sole applicant or in partnership.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the number of homes that will benefit from the Warm Homes Scheme in this financial year.
(AQW 14800/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Warm Homes Scheme is my Department's primary tool in tackling fuel poverty. The scheme continues to be very successful and the Warm Homes Scheme managers have a target of installing energy efficiency improvements in 9,000 vulnerable homes during the current financial year. The scheme managers are on track to meet this target.

Housing: Co-ownership

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many co-ownership places will be available in the next financial year.
(AQW 14843/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association has been awarded £25 million of funding from my Department for the 2012/13 financial year.

In conjunction with private finance resources, such funding will allow Co-Ownership to support the purchase of 595 affordable homes; helping to meet the aspirations of those seeking to be homeowners, but who cannot do so without the assistance the Co-Ownership Scheme brings.

Living over the Shop

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on The Living Over The Shop scheme.
(AQW 14872/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Re-energising our towns and city centres remains a key policy priority for me. The new Housing Strategy will set out my intention to revitalize the Living over the Shops initiative as part of a broader package of town and city centre regeneration and work with a range of partners to extend the number of schemes ensuring synergy with the Department's mainstream urban regeneration initiatives.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 12 October 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Drivers: Ministerial

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1609/11-15 and AQW 766/11-15, whether any of the funding referred to in AQW 766/11-15 was utilised to meet the deputy First Minister's need for drivers.
(AQW 14455/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The funding referred to in AQW 766/11-15 was not used for that purpose.

British-Irish Council: UNSCR 1325

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if they will request that the British and Irish Government's National Action Plans on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 is included in the agenda for the next meeting of the British and Irish Council.
(AQW 14508/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Meetings of the British Irish Council (BIC) are intended to further co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of all eight member administrations, and agendas are drawn up by prior agreement between them. It would not, therefore, be appropriate to seek to use a meeting of the Council for the purpose suggested.

North/South Ministerial Council: Property

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister pursuant to AQW 12777/11-15, apart from the NSMC headquarters building, what property in Armagh City is the North South Ministerial Council using, for what purpose, at what cost and since when.
(AQW 14552/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We can confirm that, apart from the NSMC headquarters building, the NSMC is not using any other property in Armagh City.

Public Appointments

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to dispel the perception of cronyism in Ministerial appointments.
(AQW 14871/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Policy responsibility for public appointments rests with our Department and is based on the overarching principle of selection on merit. The policy also provides for us to appoint an independent Commissioner for Public Appointments whose remit is to regulate, monitor and report on the processes by which Ministerial public appointments are made.

Ministerial appointments to the public bodies that fall within the Commissioner's statutory remit are made in accordance with a Code of Practice published by the Commissioner. The Code sets out the procedures for making Ministerial public appointments and emphasises the need for appointments to be made on merit and in an open and transparent manner with equality of opportunity and equal treatment for all applicants.

A core principle of the Code is that the selection panel that is assessing candidates and making recommendations to Ministers should include a member independent of the Department and the public body to which the appointments are being made.

One of the Commissioner's statutory functions is to audit Departmental public appointment processes to check compliance with his Code of Practice and to publish his findings.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy. (AQO 2559/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We remain committed to building a united and shared community by continuing to improve community relations across our society. Bringing forward a robust community relations strategy with a clear framework for action will be a critical part of achieving our vision of a better future for everyone.

We very much recognise the importance of translating the Executive's commitment into clear, meaningful action and we have asked the cross-party working group to conclude its work on developing the strategy as a matter of urgency. We expect to receive a report from the working group within the coming weeks, which will allow a final strategy and high level action plan to be published shortly thereafter.

Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

Ms McCorley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 2568/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Following a formal offer of funding from the European Union Peace III Programme for the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre in January 2012, an architectural design team was appointed on 18 June 2012 to take forward the design and related construction procurement for the Centre.

Work is also ongoing with local and international organisations to secure their commitment to use the Centre once it becomes operational.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Dunne asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of steering groups for the implementation of the Social Investment Fund. (AQO 2570/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: On 4 October we announced the names of the community/voluntary, statutory and political members of the steering groups for the nine Social Investment Zones. Details of the membership have been published on the NIDirect website at: <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/the-social-investment-fund-steering-groups>.

The remaining statutory representatives will be formally appointed as soon as practicable and two business representatives will be formally appointed to each Steering Group shortly, when priorities are known. This will enable us to ensure that the right people are involved during delivery. We are also ensuring that mechanisms are in place so that all key statutory organisations are engaged throughout the area planning stage.

Public Appointments

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they review public appointments made by Executive Ministers since 2007 to establish any under-representation from communities and how any imbalance might be addressed. (AQO 2564/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Each Executive Minister is solely responsible for appointments to the public bodies sponsored by their respective Departments.

These appointments should be made in accordance with public appointment policy and, where applicable, the Code of Practice published by the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Whilst we make appointments to a number of public bodies sponsored by our Department, we have no locus for those appointments to public bodies which fall within the responsibilities of other Executive Ministers.

Both public appointment policy and the Commissioner's Code of Practice are governed by the overarching principle of selection on merit.

As part of its wider policy responsibilities and in the interests of openness and transparency, our Department publishes the Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Report.

This Report provides details of the number of applications received and the number of appointments made by each Department broken down into categories such as gender, age, disability and community and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The Annual Report is available from the Assembly Library or the OFMDFM website.

In recognition of the fact that some sections of our community are under-represented on the Boards of public bodies, we have put in place a range of measures to increase awareness of appointment opportunities including advertising vacancies on our website, maintaining a mailing list of individuals and organisations interested in public appointments, circulating information on forthcoming vacancies and publishing a guide to the appointments process.

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

Ms Ruane asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. (AQO 2565/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are pleased to say that, since the Assembly was last updated, significant progress has been made towards the Inquiry's establishment.

The Inquiry's registration scheme was launched on 1 October 2012, through which those who suffered in institutions here as children can register to have their experiences heard by the Acknowledgement Forum. This is an important milestone in the life of the Inquiry and we know it is also a significant moment for victims and survivors.

We would urge all those who spent time as children in institutions here and wish to have any experiences of abuse heard and acknowledged to register by phoning 0800 068 4935. Their information will be treated with the strictest confidence. Information about how to register can also be found on the Inquiry's website (<http://www.hiainquiry.org>) and we are following up this process with public advertisements providing the information.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

DARD: Headquarters

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the cost indicated in the business case for the relocation of her Department's headquarters to Ballykelly; and (ii) how much has been set aside for this purpose in each upcoming financial year. (AQW 13868/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I have asked my officials to produce a business case detailing the options and costs to relocate my Headquarters to Ballykelly. The final costs of the project will be dependent upon the configuration of the buildings that best meet the Department's needs. This will take time to consider and agree.

The Department has allocated £0.3m and £13m in the next two financial years.

National Parks

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) what is her Department's position on the proposition for National Parks; and (ii) what research has been carried out on how farming practices and farm freedom could be affected, including any cost implications for affected farmers. (AQW 13873/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) My Department has consistently held the position that farmers and rural dwellers must be fully involved in any debate on establishing National Parks and that their concerns must be taken into account. Also, that no additional controls should be placed on farming activities and a National Park could only proceed with the agreement of the people living in that area.
- (ii) As my Department would not support a National Park proposal that placed additional controls on farming activities, it has not carried out research on how farming practices and farm freedom could be affected.

Animal Welfare: Convictions

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of convictions for animal welfare and cruelty offences in each of the last ten years; and (ii) how many of the people convicted were licensed dog breeders. (AQW 14145/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) Table A below details the number of convictions for animal welfare offences relating to farmed animals in each of the last ten calendar years.

Table A – Farmed Animal Welfare Convictions

Year	Number of people convicted
2011	4
2010	16
2009	5
2008	10

Year	Number of people convicted
2007	13
2006	7
2005	6
2004	3
2003	7
2002	0

As my Department enforces the animal welfare legislation only in relation to farmed animals, I therefore sought information from the Department of Justice on the number of convictions relating to other animals.

The Department of Justice has provided the following information:

Animal welfare and cruelty offences span a number of statutes. During the period in question offences were prosecuted under the following legislation:

- Roads (NI) Order 1993
- Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 1972
- Dogs (NI) Order 1983
- Diseases of Animals (NI) Order 1981
- Control of Greyhounds etc Act (NI) 1950

Data is collated under the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

The number of convictions for animal welfare and cruelty offences in each of the ten calendar years 2000-2009 is set out in table B, as follows:

Table B – Other Animal Welfare Convictions

Calendar year	Number of convictions
2009	14
2008	17
2007	23
2006	18
2005	25
2004	23
2003	24
2002	12
2001	22
2000	30

Data from 2000 to 2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2009 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Data on convictions from 2007 to 2009 is provisional as a verification exercise is taking place. These years are based on a different source of data from the previous years and therefore caution should be used in making direct comparisons.

I understand that work is currently ongoing in the Department of Justice to collate the data from 2010 onwards.

In the meantime, information provided recently by the Public Prosecution Service to my officials shows that since July 2011, 11 people have been convicted for offences under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 in relation to other animals.

- (ii) The Department of Justice has advised that they are unable to distinguish dog breeders from other offenders and therefore cannot supply information regarding how many convictions relate to dog breeders.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's position on a proposed vessel decommissioning scheme for the fishing industry.

(AQW 14173/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The rationale for having a decommissioning scheme is that the financial performance of the vessels that remain would improve because they would benefit from the fishing quotas released by those vessels that opt for decommissioning. However any decommissioning scheme must have inbuilt safeguards to prevent the fleet sector from growing in size subsequently otherwise that would negate the purpose of public investment. The Department proposed to prevent this from happening by restricting the number of "special fishing permits" available to the fleet which would be fixed at that time of decommissioning to those that already have a special permit and those dormant licenses that would be entitled to a special permit if the dormant license is used to acquire another vessel. This would mean that new vessels can only be introduced to the fleet in future if there is a transfer of an existing Special Permit to the incoming vessel.

Earlier this year my Department developed a business case to restructure the nephrops and whitefish sectors of the local fishing fleet on these lines and submitted it to DFP for approval. DARD also took the opportunity to canvas the views of the industry on the scope and terms associated with the proposed scheme.

Comments received from our two Producer Organisations indicated that they opposed a scheme that would, through the introduction of a restrictive permit scheme, limit the future size of the fleet. Additionally, they suggested that there was insufficient financial incentive to decommission. For these reasons, both organisations concluded that the proposed scheme would, at best, have very limited uptake and may be detrimental to the long term development of the industry.

Controlling the future size of the fleet is absolutely fundamental to the proposal for a decommissioning scheme. The industry is strongly opposed to this but without such a control mechanism it would be impossible to produce a robust business case that would demonstrate that public investment in fleet restructuring represented good value for money. As a consequence I have decided not to proceed with a decommissioning scheme.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, if a vessel decommissioning scheme is not agreed for the fishing industry, will the reserved funding be reallocated within the overall European Fisheries Fund budget to allow for other projects.

(AQW 14174/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is currently completing a review of all funding allocations within the European Fisheries Fund to ensure that funding is fully utilised and reallocated to other measures where demand for funding support is likely to exceed the approved budgets.

This review will include consideration of how best to utilise the funding that had been earmarked for decommissioning.

Slurry Tanks

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department has carried out research into the safety measures used at slurry tanks in other (i) EU countries; and (ii) jurisdictions of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 14346/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Research on slurry gas hazards under local conditions has been carried out. This research was commissioned by the Health and Safety Executive NI (HSENI) in 2003 and 2006 and undertaken by the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute. The findings of this research remain valid.

The need for additional research in relation to safety and slurry handling is currently under consideration by my Department in conjunction with HSENI and the Ulster Farmers Union through the Farm Safety Partnership.

Slurry Spreading

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has had any discussions with the Minister of the Environment in regards to extending the closed spreading period for slurry and farm yard manures.

(AQW 14588/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I recognise that the recent wet weather and ground conditions mean that some farmers may be unable to spread slurry before the start of the closed period. My Department and the Department of the Environment have been liaising on this issue and appreciate the practical difficulties that some farmers are facing due to the exceptional weather.

I welcome Minister Attwood's announcement on 28 September which detailed the provisions available to farmers who may need to spread slurry after the deadline of 15 October.

DARD: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many departmental staff are currently (i) suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing criminal charges or criminal investigations.

(AQW 14610/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As at 1 October 2012 DARD has (i) no officers suspended due to criminal charges or criminal investigations and (ii) one officer currently not suspended whilst facing criminal charges.

Agriculture: Tuberculosis

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the £4 million which was highlighted in the Programme for Government for the eradication of tuberculosis is to be spent.

(AQW 14634/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Funding of around £4 million has been allocated in my Department's budget to conduct TB and wildlife research and studies to provide the evidence base to underpin strategies to address the issue of cattle to cattle spread of TB as well as the wildlife issue. It is important that we do not duplicate the expensive research work that is ongoing in other areas, but that we draw down the lessons from that work and also collaborate where appropriate.

In order to identify the priority evidence needs, my Department commissioned 5 Literature Reviews, which were completed in 2011/12 on TB tests in cattle; TB tests in badgers; cattle to cattle transmission; badger to cattle transmission; and badger vaccination. We discussed the evidence needs with industry and wider stakeholders to help develop the options for research and studies.

A number of studies have already been commissioned to help establish local evidence. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) has been commissioned to undertake a study to establish the extent of cattle-cattle and badger-cattle interactions at pasture and in and around farm buildings in a TB high incidence area in Co. Down. The study will also examine and develop strategies to mitigate the extent of badger-cattle contact in both a housed and a grazing environment.

Also commissioned is an evaluation by AFBI of the way we use the gamma interferon blood test in the TB programme to ensure we are making the best use of it.

More recently, we have commissioned AFBI to develop proposals for some further studies, namely:

- (a) to investigate the reasons why the greater number of reactor cattle come from chronic or repeat breakdown herds and what could be done to address this;
- (b) a Literature Review to establish the TB transmission risk from the spreading of slurry; and
- (c) to establish how strain typing information can best be deployed to give maximum practical benefit to the TB programme.

During May 2012, my Department hosted an International Vaccination Experts' Scientific Symposium on badger vaccination to consider all the relevant issues associated with vaccinating the badger to achieve a reduction in TB in cattle. Following this symposium, I have asked my officials to design and cost specific wildlife intervention research, which involves testing live badgers; vaccinating and releasing the test negative badgers; and removing the test positive ones. The purpose of the research is to assess the impact of this approach on the level of TB in cattle and in badgers in the field study area. This balanced approach should avoid removal of uninfected badgers and could lead in time to a reduction in TB in badgers and in reduced transmission of TB from this source to cattle.

My Department will continue to work with industry and wider stakeholders to identify and prioritise TB evidence needs throughout the remainder of the budget period in line with my Department's Evidence and Innovation Strategy. We shall also be interested to consider any evidence needs identified by the ARD Committee as a result of its Thematic Review of TB.

Lough Neagh: Public Ownership

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development which stakeholders were identified for consultation in regards to bringing Lough Neagh into public ownership.

(AQW 14635/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Lough Neagh Working Group is required to perform a high level scoping exercise, and report back to the Executive by November. Given the timescale for reporting its findings, and the high level nature of the exercise, there is no formal consultation at this time. As an alternative, each Department represented on the Working Group was asked to gather its own evidence and produce a short list of key stakeholders, to which a brief questionnaire was sent. In addition to this any organisations that had not been included in the short list of key stakeholders, but which have subsequently made contact with the Working Group in respect of the potential for being included, have been invited to complete the questionnaire. To date the questionnaire has issued to representatives of the 56 organisations listed below.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ■ Invest NI | ■ Dungannon and South Tyrone DC |
| ■ Geological Survey NI (DETI) | ■ Armagh DC |
| ■ Tourist Board | ■ Lisburn City Council |
| ■ NI Water | ■ Ballymena BC |
| ■ The Utility Regulator | ■ ECOS Centre |
| ■ Consumer Council | ■ Monaghan County Council |
| ■ Cookstown DC | ■ Quarry Product Association NI |
| ■ Magherafelt DC | ■ WWF |
| ■ Craigavon DC | ■ Woodland Trust |
| ■ Antrim BC | ■ Ballinderry Fish Hatchery |

- Six Mile Water Trust
- Ulster Angling Association
- The Honourable Irish Society
- Waterways Ireland
- Ulster Coarse Fishing Federation
- Lough Neagh Sand Traders Association (NI) Ltd
- AMK Association
- Rural Development Council
- Constructed Wetlands for NI
- Rural Community Network
- Ulster Farmers Union
- Portadown Boat Club
- Cullybackey and District Game and Sea Angling Society
- Rectory Lodge Trout Fishery
- Ballysaggart Lough Environmental Group
- NI Pike Society
- Ballyronan Marina
- Friends of the Earth NI
- Council for Nature Conservation and Countryside
- RSPB NI
- Norman Emerson Group
- Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
- Lough Neagh Partnership
- Lough Neagh Fishermans Co Op
- Outdoor Recreation NI
- Lagan Canal Trust
- Inland Waterways Association Ireland
- River Bann and Lough Neagh Association
- Kinnego Marina
- Lough Neagh Rescue
- Rams Island Management
- The Blackwater Regional (Tourism in Ireland)
- Countryside Alliance of Ireland (CAI)
- British Association for Shooting Conservation
- Scottish Association of Country Sports
- Sports NI

Farm Safety: Noxious Gas Detectors/Monitors

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to bring forward a funded scheme for the installation of noxious gas detectors and alarms on slurry tanks.

(AQW 14657/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The possibility of including farm safety items in a future tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme is under consideration by my Department, in conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive NI (HSENI) and the Ulster Farmers' Union through the Farm Safety Partnership.

Current HSENI advice is that noxious gas detectors/monitors can be a useful guide before entering a building after slurry mixing is complete to check the gas has had time to disperse. However, they can only be a backup to a safe system of work and not a substitute.

At the start of mixing slurry gas concentration rises and readings above 500 parts per million are very common in livestock buildings during tank mixing. Such levels will render most monitors ineffective. Therefore, HSENI recommends that at least 30 minutes, or longer, depending on the size of tank, is allowed before entering a building after mixing has started.

The Farm Safety Partnership encourages all farmers to develop and follow a safe system of work. HSENI has published guidance on working safely with slurry and on slurry gas detection monitors. This is available on its website www.hseni.gov.uk

Moyola River

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department is considering for the Moyola River.

(AQW 14710/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Moyola River is designated under the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973. As such it is subject to routine inspection and maintenance to provide a free flow of water. Rivers Agency will continue with its current inspection and maintenance programme for the channel and flood banks along the Moyola River, in line with the standards set out in the Agency's maintenance manual. Currently flood banks along the Moyola River, from Fort William Bridge to Curran village, are being maintained and repaired and work has commenced to remove overhanging branches, clear debris and carry out revetment work at locations from New Bridge to its confluence with Lough Neagh.

Agriculture: Mandatory Microchipping of Animals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will (i) amend legislation to introduce mandatory micro-chipping of agricultural animals either along with, or in replacement of, ear-tagging, to tackle the illegal dumping of carcasses and protect against rustling; and (ii) identify and prosecute people who commit such crimes.

(AQW 14747/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) As the identification rules for farmed animals are laid down in European Law I can only consider introducing mandatory micro-chipping as a means of identification where this is supported by European legislation.

Under EU Regulation 21/2004 sheep and goats must be identified with two identifiers bearing the same number and for sheep one of the identifiers must carry an electronic identification device (EID). The EU legislation does allow Member States to introduce microchipping as a means of EID, but we, in common with the south and Britain, did not allow its use. This is because of concerns that the chip could not be reliably recovered from the carcase before it enters the food chain. The most common identifiers used for identifying sheep are an EID tag plus a conventional tag; however, an EID Bolus is also an approved means of identification here. A bolus may be as effective as a microchip in deterring the theft of animals as it cannot be removed from a live animal.

Cattle must be identified with two ear tags bearing an individual number to comply with Regulation (EC) 1760/2000. The Commission is currently bringing forward proposals to introduce EID for cattle and this may introduce other means of identification. While a substantial number of keepers electronically identify their cattle at present this is done on a voluntary basis for management purposes.

- (ii) My Department is responsible for enforcing the disposal of fallen animals and responds to complaints about the incorrect disposal of animals from the public and other agencies. In the last three calendar years, 43 cases have been investigated for offences under Animal By-Product legislation which lead to 15 prosecutions. My Veterinary Service has been working closely with the PSNI on a number of measures as part of the Rural Crime Strategy and one of measures is to tackle the theft of livestock. I have also met the Chief Constable on a number of occasions to discuss means of combating rural crime.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 13842/11-15, how many farmers have (i) been offered; and (ii) taken up Field Boundary Management training.
(AQW 14750/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since 2009 AI Services have had responsibility for administering the training programme associated with the Countryside Management Scheme which includes organising Field Boundary Management training.

The first training course took place in January 2011 and since then (i) 212 Field Boundary Management training courses have been offered to 5863 farmers and (ii) 1891 farmers attended.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 13842/11-15, to detail (i) the date; (ii) location; and (iii) attendance of each individual who took part in workshops on Field Boundary Management training.
(AQW 14751/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since 2009 AI Services have had responsibility for administering the training programme associated with the Countryside Management Scheme which includes organising the workshops. Table 1 provides the details of (i) the date; (ii) the location and (iii) the number of individuals who attended Field Boundary Management training since January 2011.

Table 1: Date, Venue and Attendance at Field Boundary Management Training

Course Date	Course Venue	Attendance
14/01/2011	Enniskillen	11
14/01/2011	Ballymena	10
17/01/2011	Dungiven	8
17/01/2011	Saintfield	8
17/01/2011	Magherafelt	14
18/01/2011	Greyabbey	1
18/01/2011	Dungiven	7
18/01/2011	Magherafelt	5
19/01/2011	Enniskillen	39
19/01/2011	Tandragee	0
19/01/2011	Greyabbey	7
19/01/2011	Magherafelt	18
20/01/2011	Enniskillen	7
20/01/2011	Saintfield	4
20/01/2011	Dungiven	8

Course Date	Course Venue	Attendance
20/01/2011	Magherafelt	13
21/01/2011	Enniskillen	0
21/01/2011	Ballymena	23
24/01/2011	Dungiven	17
24/01/2011	Fivemiletown	5
24/01/2011	Magherafelt	8
24/01/2011	Garvagh	21
24/01/2011	Omagh	15
25/01/2011	Enniskillen	5
26/01/2011	Enniskillen	8
26/01/2011	Dungiven	0
26/01/2011	Fivemiletown	3
26/01/2011	Fivemiletown	1
26/01/2011	Garvagh	18
26/01/2011	Omagh	13
26/01/2011	Tandragee	0
27/01/2011	Saintfield	6
27/01/2011	Ballymena	0
27/01/2011	Dungiven	5
27/01/2011	Tandragee	0
28/01/2011	Saintfield	12
31/01/2011	Fivemiletown	18
31/01/2011	Garvagh	8
31/01/2011	Omagh	11
03/02/2011	Bushmills	12
03/02/2011	Magherafelt	17
04/02/2011	Magherafelt	6
04/02/2011	Enniskillen	20
07/02/2011	Ballycastle	20
11/02/2011	Ballymena	22
08/02/2011	Ballyclare	26
08/02/2011	Hilltown	35
10/02/2011	Tandragee	13
18/02/2011	Fivemiletown	15
09/02/2011	Magherafelt	13
10/02/2011	Strabane	26
10/02/2011	Castlederg	20
10/02/2011	Hilltown	35
11/02/2011	Ballyclare	14
15/02/2011	Enniskillen	5
17/02/2011	Dungiven	14

Course Date	Course Venue	Attendance
18/02/2011	Dungiven	10
14/02/2011	Armagh	16
14/02/2011	Ballyclare	20
15/02/2011	Greyabbey	19
16/02/2011	Saintfield	11
16/02/2011	Ballyclare	12
16/02/2011	Ballyclare	0
16/02/2011	Tandragee	16
18/02/2011	Tandragee	4
23/02/2011	Bushmills	9
22/02/2011	Hilltown	8
22/02/2011	Hilltown	10
23/02/2011	Hilltown	15
21/02/2011	Ballycastle	20
19/02/2011	Enniskillen	42
18/02/2011	Castlederg	15
25/02/2011	Downpatrick	13
22/02/2011	Downpatrick	16
23/02/2011	Limavady	13
28/02/2011	Enniskillen	6
28/02/2011	Ballycastle	5
10/02/2012	Ballymena	25
11/02/2012	Tandragee	7
14/02/2012	Tandragee	9
14/02/2012	Hilltown	7
14/02/2012	Enniskillen	16
15/02/2012	Omagh	16
16/02/2012	Armagh	13
18/02/2012	Omagh	14
17/02/2012	Castlederg	11
17/02/2012	Fivemiletown	16
17/02/2012	Dungiven	13
18/02/2012	Dungiven	11
17/02/2012	Tandragee	15
17/02/2012	Ballymena	12
18/02/2012	Ballymena	23
17/02/2012	Saintfield	7
18/02/2012	Saintfield	17
18/02/2012	Magherafelt	20
18/02/2012	Limavady	13
22/02/2012	Hilltown	11

Course Date	Course Venue	Attendance
21/02/2012	Hilltown	8
18/02/2012	Armagh	14
21/02/2012	Hilltown	8
22/02/2012	Hilltown	7
21/02/2012	Strabane	13
22/02/2012	Omagh	26
25/02/2012	Omagh	23
22/02/2012	Magherafelt	18
23/02/2012	Magherafelt	21
25/02/2012	Magherafelt	15
23/02/2012	Ballycastle	16
23/02/2012	Enniskillen	21
23/02/2012	Armagh	12
23/02/2012	Dungiven	11
24/02/2012	Dungiven	12
24/02/2012	Ballymoney	27
25/02/2012	Enniskillen	12
25/02/2012	Ballymena	19
25/02/2012	Ballyclare	24
25/02/2012	Greyabbey	3
25/02/2012	Bushmills	4
28/02/2012	Hilltown	26
28/02/2012	Hilltown	20
01/03/2012	Dungiven	33
02/03/2012	Enniskillen	30
03/03/2012	Enniskillen	56
01/03/2012	Strabane	22
02/03/2012	Armagh	22
03/03/2012	Saintfield	13
02/03/2012	Hilltown	13
03/03/2012	Enniskillen	25
03/03/2012	Ballymena	19
03/03/2012	Magherafelt	10
03/03/2012	Ballymena	33
03/03/2012	Dungannon	29
Total		1891

Agriculture: Tuberculosis

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the continued rise of tuberculosis, what studies are being conducted on the rising population of deer on lowland farmland and deer grazing on the same pastures as cattle.
(AQW 14753/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are no current accurate population estimates for the three main deer species (Red, Fallow and Sika) here, nor is there any scientific evidence to suggest that there has been a substantial increase in either the population or range of deer in the north.

Whilst there is no current evidence to suggest that interactions between deer and cattle at pasture present any significant or widespread risk of bovine TB transmission, this aspect is kept under review.

Although DARD veterinary advice remains that deer are an unlikely cause of the recent rise in cattle TB herd incidence in the north, the possibility of deer being a factor in some localised outbreaks is not discounted. Currently, in one area, based on epidemiological advice, my Department is arranging for laboratory investigation of samples taken from deer culled in the vicinity to establish if deer had any involvement in that disease breakdown.

The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) has been commissioned to undertake a Badger-Cattle Proximity Study in East Down to establish the extent of cattle-cattle and badger-cattle interactions at pasture and in and around farm buildings. It will be useful to see if the fixed point cameras being deployed in that study provide any evidence of deer-cattle interaction.

DARD: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to her Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.

(AQW 14814/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At the 8 May 2007 DARD sponsored 7 public bodies, namely: -the Agri – Food and Biosciences Institute , the Agriculture Wages Board, the Drainage Council , the Livestock and Meat Commission, the NI Fishery Harbour Authority, the Pig Production Development Committee and the Research and Education Advisory Panel. A total of 62 people were serving on these bodies on that date.

At the 28 September 2012 DARD sponsored 5 public bodies, namely: - the Agri – Food and Biosciences Institute, the Agriculture Wages Board, the Drainage Council, the Livestock and Meat Commission and the NI Fishery Harbour Authority. A total of 48 people were serving on these bodies on that date.

In addition DARD jointly sponsors with DETI the Agri-food Strategy Board. There are 9 people serving on this Board.

DARD Public Bodies

DARD Public Bodies - 8 May 2007	Serving Board Members
Agri-food and Biosciences Institute	12
Agricultural Wages Board	1
Drainage Council	17
Livestock and Meat Commission	6
NI Fishery Harbour Authority	6
Pig Production Development Council	8
Research and Education Advisory Panel	12
Total	62

DARD Public Bodies - 28 September 2012	Serving Board Members
Agri-food and Biosciences Institute	13
Agricultural wages Board	3
Drainage Council	18
Livestock and Meat Commission	7
NI Fishery Harbour Authority	7
Total	48
Agri-Food Strategy Board**	9**

** jointly sponsored with DETI

Agriculture: Paperwork and Records for Animals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she can offer an assurance that all abattoirs, meat processors and rendering facilities are compliant with the law on requiring agricultural animals to have the appropriate paperwork and records, including stock which is from the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 14836/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Officials in the DARD Veterinary Public Health Programme monitor the delivery of Food Safety Systems in the 20 slaughterhouses in the north. I can confirm that our monitoring indicates that all the Food Business Operators based in the north are fully compliant with the law on requiring agricultural animals to have the appropriate paperwork and records, including stock which is from the south of Ireland. Routine procedures in abattoirs at entry of animals for slaughter are supported by DARD's computer-based data. Daily verification checks by DARD officials of up to 10% of cattle and 5% of sheep are carried out. In addition, regular official audits are carried out by my specialist veterinarians on behalf of the Food Standards Agency in these establishments. Animals from other member states are required to have veterinary certification when entering an abattoir. Any discrepancy found in the documentation or identity of an animal results in that animal being excluded from the food chain.

Rendering plants are approved under the Animal By-Products (Enforcement) Regulations (NI) 2011 which cover the disposal of fallen animals. Fallen bovine animals over 48 months of age must be submitted for transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) sampling under the TSE Regulations. Regular checks are made on the operation of these approved plants. These checks include auditing paperwork, checking records for fallen animals and the operational requirements of the plant.

Failure to comply with the regulations will result in enforcement action being taken by the Department.

DARD: Annual Shows

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many annual shows she has attended in her official capacity from January 2012 to date.

(AQW 14846/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: From January 2012 to date I have attended seven annual shows in my official capacity as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Bovine Tuberculosis: Badgers

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the decision of the Westminster Government to approve licences for the culling of badgers in specific areas of England.

(AQW 14859/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: You will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on matters that are the responsibility of a Department in Britain.

Tackling TB in cattle is a key priority for my Department and we are committed to the ultimate eradication of TB in cattle here. However, Bovine TB is a very complex, multi-factorial and challenging disease that is difficult to eradicate. There is no simple, cost-effective solution or 'quick-fix' and eradication is not something that could be achieved within the immediate timeframe.

You may be interested to know that funding of around £4 million has been allocated in my Department's budget to conduct TB and wildlife research and studies to provide the evidence base to underpin strategies to address the issue of cattle to cattle spread of TB as well as the wildlife issue. It is important that we do not duplicate the expensive research work that is ongoing in other areas, but that we draw down the lessons from that work and also collaborate where appropriate.

During May 2012, my Department hosted an International Vaccination Expert's Scientific Symposium on badger vaccination to consider all the relevant issues associated with vaccinating the badger to achieve a reduction in TB in cattle. Following this symposium, I have asked my officials to design specific wildlife intervention research, which involves testing live badgers; vaccinating and releasing the test negative badgers; and removing the test positive ones. The purpose of this scientific research study is to assess the impact of this approach on the level of TB in cattle and in badgers in the field study area. This balanced approach should avoid removal of uninfected badgers and could lead in time to a reduction in TB in badgers and in reduced transmission of TB from this source to cattle. We expect the design for such a study will be complex and we want to be sure that we get it right.

Meanwhile my Department will continue to work with industry and wider stakeholders to identify and prioritise the TB evidence needs.

Watercourses: Saintfield Road, Belfast

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to address the deficiencies in watercourse management in the Saintfield Road area of Belfast.

(AQW 14860/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency officials carry out routine inspections and clearing of a number of grilles in the Saintfield Road area of Belfast. This is either weekly for category A grilles or monthly for category B grilles. On receipt of extreme rainfall weather warnings or reports of blockages, the grilles are inspected and cleared.

The Agency is also responsible for a network of culverts and open watercourses in the Saintfield Road area of Belfast, which have been designated under the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973. This network is routinely inspected and various maintenance and upgrade works are carried out on an on-going basis.

A number of undesignated watercourses exist in the Saintfield Road area. However it should be noted that the Agency does not have responsibility for the maintenance or for remedial action regarding undesignated watercourses. The responsibility for undesignated watercourses rests with the riparian occupiers of the land through which they flow or forms boundaries to.

DARD Headquarters: Staff

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what arrangements her Department intends to put in place to accommodate (i) administrative; (ii) specialist; and (iii) technical staff who do not wish to relocate to Ballykelly. (AQW 14865/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not expect existing staff to be forced to move, but it may not be possible to avoid in all situations. The Department will make full use of the existing NICS policies and procedures for dealing with staff transfers. In addition, my officials will be working closely with Corporate Human Resources in DFP and with relevant trade unions to develop further arrangements, including greater use of flexible working supported by modern technology, to seek to accommodate staff of all grades and disciplines who do not wish to relocate to Ballykelly.

DARD: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many members of staff in her Department are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations, and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations. (AQW 14912/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As at 9 October 2012 DARD has (i) no officers suspended due to internal (disciplinary) investigations and (ii) 7 officers not suspended whilst facing internal (disciplinary) investigations.

Internal investigation has been interpreted as disciplinary investigations as suspension is directly linked to the disciplinary procedures.

Rivers: Redesignation

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the process for redesignating rivers. (AQW 14989/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Designation is required to enable the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to undertake maintenance and schemes for drainage and flood defence purposes at public expense. There is no process to redesignate a river. If a watercourse was previously designated and then became de-designated, a new application to designate would be submitted to the Drainage Council which operates as an independent advisory Non Departmental Public Body. Criteria for the designation of watercourses are used objectively by the Drainage Council to ensure uniform treatment throughout the north of Ireland.

There are two key overriding conditions. Firstly, that the proposed works offer value for money with benefits outweighing costs. Secondly, that the works have sufficient priority to be included in Rivers Agency's programme. Viable works are programmed and this second condition has not resulted in designation being refused due to availability of funding.

There are five additional criteria beneath the two overriding conditions, with an application for designation needing to satisfy one or more of these. Firstly that there is sufficient area of disadvantaged agricultural land which is subject to poor drainage or flooding. Secondly, that works to reduce existing or potential flooding are outside the capability of the riparians to organise and carry out at their own expense. Thirdly, where works are required but it is not possible to identify the occupier/ riparian. Fourthly, where the watercourse requires works but it does not perform any function connected with the drainage of riparian land. Lastly, that works are required to provide an outfall for increased run-off from new housing and commercial development.

DARD Headquarters: Staff

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what provision is being made for staff in her Department who do not wish to relocate to the new departmental headquarters in Ballykelly. (AQW 15009/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department will make full use of the existing NICS policies and procedures to facilitate staff transfers in and out of the headquarters group. Staff who travel to the new headquarters will, of course, be entitled to assistance. In addition, my officials will be working closely with Corporate Human Resources in DFP and with relevant trade unions to develop further arrangements, including greater use of flexible working supported by modern technology. I do not expect existing staff to move if they do not wish to do so, but it may not be possible to avoid in all situations.

Fisheries Division: Relocation

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to relocate her Department's Fisheries Office to South Down.

(AQW 15079/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I took the decision to relocate the DARD headquarters to Ballykelly after careful consideration of a wide range of potential locations. In support of that decision I have given my Permanent Secretary a direction to provide me with a business case that will appraise the various possible options for relocating my Departmental headquarters on the Ballykelly site. In that context the business case will consider a range of issues such as value for money, potential savings and staffing implications. Part of the consideration the business case will also look at all areas of the Department's business, including those posts within the fisheries area, and make recommendations on the optimum configuration of the Headquarters which best serves the Department and its stakeholders.

DARD: Headquarters

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why Ballymena was not selected as the location for the new DARD headquarters, despite being included in the list of potential locations.

(AQW 15134/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In relation to the decision to relocate to Ballykelly, there were a number of steps taken before reaching my final decision. The first stage in the process was to develop a long list of potential locations. The list was taken from the new Regional Development Strategy. Using the 23 local government districts my officials scored each against a defined set of criteria. This included 9 different socio-economic factors considering such things as unemployment levels, deprivation and earnings levels, as well as practical considerations such as the number of public sector and civil service jobs already sited in the area.

The top two areas in this analysis were both in the North West. I made my decision to relocate to Ballykelly based on two further factors namely the availability of the Executive- owned site at Shackleton Barracks and the availability of buildings on that site which could potentially be converted to office accommodation. Using this site and the buildings available has the potential to reduce the cost of this relocation from the £26m that is the estimated cost of a new build.

In my view the relocation of the DARD headquarters represents an important first step to relocate a significant share of public sector jobs and could pave the way for a much larger programme of relocation in the public sector. It would naturally greatly enhance the economic and social development of rural communities and bring a greater realisation of the outcomes envisaged by Bain.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Ulster-Scots Strategy

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) which non-governmental organisations her Department consulted when planning its Ulster-Scots Strategy; and (ii) what discussions were held concerning combining the Ulster-Scots language with Ulster-Scots heritage and culture.

(AQW 14167/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

- (i) My department consulted with the Ulster-Scots Agency and Ministerial Advisory Group Ulster Scots Academy when planning its draft Ulster Scots language, heritage and culture strategy.
- (ii) No discussions were held concerning combining the Ulster-Scots language with Ulster-Scots heritage and culture.

Windsor Park

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department is taking to ensure maximum cross-community responses to the current consultation on the development of Windsor Park Stadium.

(AQW 14168/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Irish Football Association (IFA) is responsible for taking forward the consultation process in relation to the development of Windsor Park.

The IFA have put a comprehensive consultation process in place which encourages responses from the whole community and is accessible to all sections of the community.

Specifically:

- contact has been made with Greater Village Regeneration Group, South Belfast partnership Board and West Belfast Partnership Board;
- public notices were placed in three newspapers on the 22 August. The Irish News, News Letter and Belfast Telegraph;

- workshops were held on 26 July 2012 with focus groups, resident associations, trade associations, council officers and MLA's.
- The plans for the Stadium Redevelopment will also be on display at seven locations in Belfast where members of the public can submit their views by completion of questionnaires at:
 - Ballysillan Leisure Centre;
 - Andersonstown Leisure Centre;
 - Olympia Leisure Centre;
 - Ozone Complex Ormeau Park;
 - Greater Village Regeneration Trust Offices Donegall Road;
 - Irish FA Offices at Adelaide Business Centre,
 - Apollo Road and
 - Belfast City Hall.
- Details of the proposals will also be available on the Irish FA web site (www.irishfa.com) where a facility to record comments has been established.
- A public information day will also be held on 3/4 October during which members of the public will be able to submit their views in respect of the proposals.

I would encourage everyone with an interest to provide their views at the various locations or on the website.

Boxing Clubs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which boxing clubs have paid employees; and how many people are employed in each case.

(AQW 14215/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither my Department nor Sport NI retains information on which boxing clubs have paid employees or how many people are employed in each case. This would be entirely a matter for the governing body of the sport, the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council.

Salmon: Conservation

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's plan to develop a salmon conservation policy.

(AQW 14217/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has carried out a public consultation process on a range of salmon conservation measures for both commercial netting and recreational angling. The consultation closed in July and a statistical analysis of the responses has been completed.

My officials are considering the outcomes of the public consultation, together with scientific and other advice, and I will decide on what actions are required to provide robust protection of wild Atlantic salmon stocks in the DCAL jurisdiction.

Following this, I will bring forward the necessary legislation and I would anticipate this coming into effect during 2013.

Musical Instruments for Bands Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants are available from her Department for bands to purchase equipment.

(AQW 14222/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding by my Department in support of bands to purchase equipment is disbursed through the Arts Council's Musical Instruments for Bands Programme. It provides grants from £500 to £5,000 for the purchase of instruments. This scheme is available to bands based in the north of Ireland, which are formally constituted.

Funding is also awarded by the Arts Council through its lottery funded Small Grants Programme for band related activity (which includes equipment and tuition). For items over £10,000 funding is available from its Equipment Programme.

Video Games: Dangers

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the correlation identified between the playing of violent video games and aggressive behaviour, whether her Department has any plans to promote the dangers of excessive gaming.

(AQW 14230/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I support any actions that aim to protect children from exposure to inappropriate material. A change in legislation from 30 July brought in single age ratings system for video games - based on PEGI (Pan European Game Information) and to mark this, the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment, (Ukie) launched the Control. Collaborate.

Create campaign. This includes the re-launch of the www.askaboutgames.com website which is a resource for parents and the industry providing further information about video games ratings.

To help ensure that parents have a better understanding and to get across messages about safe gaming the Ukie campaign is an attempt to take the initiative on ratings issues, educating both players and parents on the potential risks of mature games and what content may be appropriate. It also offers real family stories and suggestions on how video games can be a creative and collaborative experience for all the family.

Pipe Bands: Funding

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she plans to provide any additional support or funding for pipe bands.

(AQW 14309/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no plans to provide any additional support or funding for pipe bands.

However, funding for instruments and tuition for music groups including bands will continue to be available.

Re-imaging Communities

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any funding streams are planned through the Re-imaging Communities Programme.

(AQW 14411/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council applied to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) for funding to build upon the key successes of the Re-Imaging Programme.

The Arts Council has advised that it recently received confirmation of this funding and it is expected that the programme will re-open later this year. The re-opening of the programme will be publicised in the media, the Arts Council's e-newsletter and its website.

Ulster-Scots Agency: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what level of funding her Department currently allocates to the Ulster Scots Agency.

(AQW 14580/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In accordance with the agreed funding arrangement, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) contributes 75% of the Ulster-Scots Agency budget and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht funds 25%.

The 2011 budget for the North South Language body which was approved by the North South Ministerial Council amounted to an allocation of £3,028,116 for the Ulster-Scots Agency of which DCAL's contribution equated to £2,271,087.

Boxing: Sectarianism

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 14080/11-15, (i) when (a) departmental officials; and (b) SportNI officials met Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC); (ii) whether any such meeting has been held since the publication of SRABC's report on sectarianism in boxing; and (iii) if a meeting has not taken place to detail the reasons.

(AQW 14658/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Outside of Ministerial meetings, DCAL officials met with representatives of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC), at the Department's request, on 13 January 2012 and 14 June 2012 to discuss the club's areas of concern. Sport NI officials met with the club on 12 October 2010. On the 12 April 2011 a further meeting was offered by Sport NI which was declined by the club. No meetings have been held since the publication of SRABC's report as the club has not sought a further meeting. The Department and Sport NI have not asked for a meeting as all the issues raised in the report were discussed at previous meetings.

Goal Line Youth Centre

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) for her assessment of the contribution of Goal Line Youth, Portadown; (ii) whether she is aware of their present urgent funding needs which, if unmet, will lead to the organisation closing its doors on 31 October 2012; and (iii) what assistance her Department can provide to the organisation as it seeks to continue to meet the needs of over two hundred children, almost 50 percent of whom have special educational and disability needs.

(AQW 14686/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the valuable contribution made by Goal Line Youth to the local community of Portadown and in particular to the health and well-being of children and young people in the area.

As a registered group engaged in youth work, the provision of youth service activities, including funding, falls under the remit of the Department of Education. In general, funding by my Department is disbursed through its arms length bodies (ALBs).

Funding in support of the arts is disbursed through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and for Sports activities through Sport Northern Ireland.

Marching Bands: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding her Department has allocated to marching bands in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14692/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding in support of bands in the North of Ireland is disbursed through the Arts Council and the Ulster-Scots Agency.

My Department also allocates funding to bands through the Community Festivals Fund which is administered by district councils.

A breakdown of funding is shown in the tables below:

Arts Council

Year	Total Awarded via Musical Instruments for Bands Programme	*Total Awarded via Small Grants Programme (or Awards for All in 08/09 and 07/08)	Total Amount
2007/08	£155,002	£42,565	£197,567
2008/09	£149,311	£16,020	£165,331
2009/10	£104,822	£18,750	£123,572
2010/11	£203,761	£12,951	£216,712
2011/12	£196,874	£3,200	£200,074
Total	£809,770	£93,486	£903,256

* The Small Grants programme (previously Awards for All) is Lottery Funding

Community Festivals Fund (CFF)

Year	Amount
2008/09	£9,870
2009/10	£9,146
2010/11	£7,342
2011/12	£7,839
*Total	£34,197

* These figures include 50% matched funding from district councils.

* Ulster-Scots Agency

Year	Amount
2007	£108,651.50
2008	£58,044.50
2009	£143,235.16
2010	£297,295.91
2011	£241,709.15
Total	£848,936.22

* Ulster-Scots Agency operate in calendar years.

Community Festivals Fund

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the issue of disproportionate distribution of the Community Festival Funding, between urban and rural areas, has been examined; and what action she intends to take to address this matter.

(AQW 14694/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The budget for the Community Festivals Fund (CFF) is £450k per annum of which 90% is allocated to district councils according to their population and 10% according to their level of income deprivation as measured by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010. Councils are required to provide match-funding.

A recent evaluation undertaken by my Department found that the distribution of CFF funding correlates closely with the distribution of urban and rural areas across the north of Ireland. In terms of the number of festivals, there is actually a disproportionately larger number in rural areas.

Culture Company 2013

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the nature of the relationship between the Culture Company and independent bodies such as, Comhaltas Ceóltoiri Éireann, Cumann Luthchleas Gael and Féile na nOg in their delivery of major events during 2013.

(AQW 14700/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Culture Company 2013 Ltd currently has no formal relationships with these independent bodies, however the Culture Company has been liaising with local and national representatives of these organisations. Discussions relating to Féile na nOg, the under 14s championship, have been held with Cumann Luthchleas Gael. Culture Company is working in partnership with a wide variety of bodies to develop and deliver elements of the City of Culture 2013 Cultural Programme.

2013: World Police and Fire Games/City of Culture

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the nature and extent of the co-ordination of events and visits in 2013 between the World Police and Fire Games and the Culture Company.

(AQW 14701/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Company established to deliver the Games, 2013 WPFG Ltd is aware of the need to ensure that there is close coordination and cooperation with the Culture Company and other stakeholders in major events taking place during 2013.

There has been formal engagement at CEO level between the Culture Company and 2013 World Police and Fire Games Ltd. Both organisations were also represented on the 2012 Stakeholder Group which was chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

On 25th September the members of the 2012 Stakeholder Group along with other organisations, who have an interest in 2013, met and established a 2013 Stakeholder Group which is chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure.

The remit of the 2013 Stakeholder Group is to:

- Continue the momentum of 2012 to 2013 and beyond.
- Champion and promote 2013 Events particularly the World Police & Fire Games and City of Culture.
- Provide a forum for communication on 2013 events.
- Provide oversight of 2013 events calendar in order to assist in the co-ordination of Ministerial involvement and messaging in relation to the 2013 World Police and Fire Games and City of Culture.

Fishing: Moyola River

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the terms of the lease of the Moyola River to the Moyola Angling Club.

(AQW 14711/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The details of the terms of any lease between the Moyola Angling Club and the owner of the fishing rights of the Moyola River are a matter for those parties and the Department does not have knowledge of these.

Sport: Team GB and NI/Team Ireland

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which sporting disciplines, that are currently part of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, give participants from Northern Ireland (i) the choice of competing for Team GB and NI or Team Ireland; or (ii) offer only the choice of competing for (a) Team Ireland; or (b) Team GB and NI.

(AQW 14743/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Athletes from the north of Ireland have the choice of competing for either Team GB and NI or Team Ireland in all of the Olympic and Paralympic sports assuming that the sport is played at the necessary standard and scale in the relevant jurisdiction.

Athletes must also meet the required eligibility and selection criteria that will vary across the sports and will be dependant on the affiliation structures within the sport, the rules and selection criteria and the processes of the governing organisations within the sport, and the rules, eligibility and selection criteria applied by the relevant national Olympic and Paralympic Committees.

Ulster Covenant: Centenary

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a breakdown of her Department's total anticipated spend in respect of the celebration of the centenary of the Ulster Covenant.

(AQW 14779/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The creative and cultural infrastructure and programmes already funded and supported by my Department will play a key role in telling the stories and different interpretations of significant anniversaries in the decade ahead. The centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant is being examined by a diverse range of events across the libraries network; at PRONI; and by the Ulster Museum. I enclose a summary of activity in Annex A.

Where a specific cost breakdown is readily available, it is clear that support to these and other initiatives is significant. For example, a recent landmark documentary on the BBC explored the story of the Ulster Covenant. This was supported by NI Screen, with £65,000 from the Ulster-Scots Broadcasting Fund. The only known copy of the 1913 Ulster Proclamation was purchased by NMNI for £18,750 and is a key feature of 'The Ulster Crisis: Irish Home Rule and the Ulster Covenant' exhibition at the Ulster Museum. An additional £10,000 is a conservative estimate of the further budget enabling this exhibition until March 2014. Around 1,000 related images will also be available to view online.

An extensive range of activity and resources is being supported within the existing budgets of the Arm-Length Bodies and PRONI. Specific costs will be variable but their inclusion and prioritization within the work of the ALBs recognises the importance of the Decade of Centenaries to promoting historical and cultural awareness, respectful remembrance and reconciliation.

These objectives, and the breadth and quality of these initiatives, are the more meaningful benchmarks by which they should be judged.

The Executive also unanimously agreed that the DCAL and DETI Ministers will jointly bring forward an approach to help people explore the political, social and cultural impact of the 1912-22 period. The key issue is not whether these events are remembered but how they are remembered in the context of a shared and accepting society. The approach format is now being finalized and will help set an inclusive tone and connect the events and stories behind these significant anniversaries.

Annex A

Ulster Museum	Irish Home Rule and The Ulster Covenant Exhibition (Sept 2012 – March 2014)
Ulster Museum	1912, A Hundred Years On. A play by Philip Orr will run from 16 to 21 Oct at the Ulster Museum with specific performances for schools, 3rd level students, lifelong learners, community groups and the general public
Ulster Museum	Home Rule? A drama commemorating the centenary of Winston Churchill's historic speech in Belfast in 1912 was performed on 9 September at the Ulster Museum as part of the European Open Heritage Days.
PRONI – "Decade of Change, Conflict and Transformation" lecture series in September 2012 - well-known historians and broadcasters deliver presentations relating to the impact of the Ulster Covenant and 3rd Home Rule Bill.	"Raiders of the Lost Archives: Covenant records at PRONI" by Stephen Scarth, Head of Public Services, PRONI (6 Sept)
PRONI	"Nationalism 1900-22" by Dr Eamon Phoenix, Stranmillis University College (13 Sept)
PRONI	"The Ulster Covenant and Ulster Unionist resistance to Home Rule, 1912-1914" by Dr Tim Bowman, University of Kent (20 Sept)
PRONI	"The Story Arc Of The Covenant: from signature to screen" by William Crawley and Brian Henry Martin (27 Sept)
PRONI	PRONI has partnered with Belfast City Council in a Decade of Centenaries exhibition entitled 'Shared History - Different Allegiances' which opened at City Hall on 6 August 2012 and features PRONI's Ulster Covenant application.
PRONI	PRONI hosted actor Patrick Scully on 8 September 2012 during European Open Heritage Day. Hi play – Lord Carson Signs Off – opened at the Crescent Arts Centre on 28 September. Patrick provided a 15 minute adaptation followed by a discussion on sourcing material at PRONI
PRONI	PRONI participated in a Collectors Fair & Ulster Covenant Exhibition at the Spectrum Centre, Shankill Road, Belfast on 22 September 2012.

Libraries NI Belfast Central Library	The Ulster Covenant – An Exhibition (Sept – Nov)
Libraries NI Enniskillen Library	The Story of the Ulster Covenant by Dr David Hume (4 Sept)
Libraries NI Killyleagh Library	Digital Film Presentation on the Ulster Covenant (7 Sept)
Libraries NI Ballymena Central Library	Ulster Covenant in the Ballymena Area by Dr David Hume (11 Sept)
Libraries NI Irish & Local Studies Library, Armagh	Home Rule, the Covenant & Growth of Militancy in Armagh by Dr Colin Cousins (12 Sept)
Libraries NI Larne Library	Ulster Covenant in the Larne Area by Dr David Hume (13 Sept)
Libraries NI Holywood Library	The Year of the Covenant, Belfast 1912 by Roger Dixon (21 Sept)
Libraries NI Portadown Library	Home Rule, the Covenant & Growth of Militancy in Armagh by Dr Colin Cousins (26 Sept)
Libraries NI Lisburn City Library	The Ulster Covenant by Gordon Lucy (26 Sept)
Libraries NI Newry City Library	Home Rule 1885 to 1914, Prelude to Revolution by Dr Peter Collins (27 Sept)
Libraries NI Shankill Road Library	The Year of the Covenant, Belfast 1912 by Roger Dixon (27 Sept)
NI Screen	“The Ulster Covenant” was screened on BBC 1 NI on 27th September at 9pm. In this one hour historical documentary presenter William Crawley marked the centenary of the Ulster Covenant by telling the story of this key moment in history.
NI Screen	The Digital Film Archive (DFA) outreach programme is a key community and education focused initiative by NI Screen. One notable event on Oct 17 will be the ‘Characters Behind The Covenant’. Presented by Professor Graham Walker and illustrated with DFA footage, this lecture is one of several Belfast City Council events which will mark the centenary of the signing of The Ulster Covenant.

Boxing: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding opportunities are available for boxing clubs.
(AQW 14803/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI has responsibility for the distribution of funding for sport throughout the north of Ireland. Sport NI has identified an indicative funding package within its Sports Lottery funding of up to £3.27m to assist with the development of boxing over the next 3 years. The boxing development programme will provide much needed investment in local amateur boxing clubs and help to address equipment and facility needs within the sport.

DCAL: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to her Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.
(AQW 14813/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) There were 10 QUANGOs attached to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as at 8 May 2007. 139 people served on the QUANGOs on this date.
- (ii) There are currently (as at 27 September 2012) 10 QUANGOs attached to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. 133 people currently serve on the QUANGOs.

Libraries: Stock Expenditure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the expenditure on library stocks in (i) Bangor library, (ii) Holywood library and (iii) Donaghadee library, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14827/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI has informed me that its current computer system can not provide the information regarding expenditure on library stock in individual libraries in the last three years in the format requested.

Libraries NI state that library stocks are updated every day. This stock is a mixture of newly published titles; stock purchased to satisfy requests; replacement copies or purchases to meet identified stock gaps.

The new stock is delivered to branches via an internal delivery network. Each branch receives a minimum of two deliveries per week. Some of the larger branches receive three to four deliveries. Bangor and Lisburn libraries receive a delivery every day. Each delivery will contain some new stock.

Libraries NI also rotate stock among libraries to refresh the choice available to borrowers.

Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she can offer an assurance that Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club will be eligible for funding, under her recent announcement of £3 million aid.

(AQW 14874/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of funding including determining the eligibility criteria for the £3.27m Lottery funding being provided to boxing as part of the emerging boxing strategy. It would not, therefore, be appropriate for me to offer assurances that any boxing club, including Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC), will be eligible for funding under this particular Sport NI investment programme. I am aware, however, that Sport NI is currently undertaking an exercise to determine the capital and equipment needs of boxing clubs in the north of Ireland, including SRABC. As part of this process, Sport NI has advised clubs, including SRABC, that they can have their needs assessed.

However, in line with all Sport NI club based programmes, direct funding is only currently being considered for boxing clubs that are governing body affiliated.

DCAL: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many members of staff in her Department are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations, and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

(AQW 14911/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are currently no members of staff in my Department (i) suspended due to internal investigations or (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

Alternative Ulster Covenant, 1913

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans there are to commemorate the Alternative Ulster Covenant of 1913.

(AQW 14955/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive unanimously agreed that the DCAL and DETI Ministers will jointly bring forward an approach to help people explore the political, social and cultural impact of the 1912-22 period. The approach is now being finalized to set an inclusive tone and connect the events and stories behind these significant anniversaries. The key issue is not whether these events are remembered but how they are remembered in the context of a shared and accepting society.

The creative and cultural infrastructure and programmes already funded and supported by my Department will play a key role in telling the stories and different interpretations of events from this important decade in our history. For example, PRONI delivered a lecture series throughout September 2012 entitled 'A Decade of Change, Conflict and Transformation'. Talks in this series explored the Ulster Covenant as well as Nationalism in the early 1900s. The Alternative Ulster Covenant of 1913 was referenced within this series.

Marching Bands: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the grants currently available to marching bands.

(AQW 14971/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding in support of marching bands to purchase musical instruments is disbursed through the Arts Council's Musical Instruments for Bands Programme. It provides grants from £500 to £5,000. This scheme is available to bands based in the north of Ireland, which are formally constituted.

Funding up to £10,000 is also awarded by the Arts Council through its Lottery funded Small Grants Programme for band related activity (which includes equipment, projects and tuition). For projects requiring over £10,000 funding is available through the Council's Project funding programme.

Support is available from the Ulster-Scots Agency through its Financial Assistance Scheme, which can provide funding for musical tuition.

My Department also allocates Community Festival Funding which district councils administer and bands may be eligible to apply.

Culture Night Holywood 2012

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the success of the cultural night in Holywood. (AQW 14973/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Culture Night has become part of the cultural calendar giving the arts sector the opportunity to thank the public for subsidising the arts, by offering free events, and to celebrate and showcase the strength and quality of the arts.

The Culture Night event in Holywood did not receive funding from my department and it would therefore be inappropriate for me to make an assessment of its success.

However, I believe that Culture Nights enrich and celebrate a collective creative spirit and are a catalyst for forging new relationships between town centre businesses and the local community.

Fishing: River Bush

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of catches on the River Bush between March and August in each year since 2007. (AQW 14996/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The catches detailed below relate to the special stretches of the River Bush, where anglers fishing day tickets have returned catch details to the Department. The figures held by the Department are for the total catch for the salmon fishing season from 1 March to 20 October. The 2012 figure is to 4 October.

Stretch	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Town	362	311	82	112	84	51
Leap	126	122	28	49	17	23
New	72	47	13	39	10	4
Dundrave	100	54	9	23	13	2
Total	660	534	132	223	124	80

Sport: Olympic Standard Swimming Pool, Bangor

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much Sport NI contributed to the olympic length swimming pool in Bangor. (AQW 15126/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, through Sport NI, has contributed £8.227m of exchequer funding to the Olympic standard swimming pool in Bangor, to the end of the 2011/12 financial year.

Department of Education

Rossmar Special School, Limavady: Ministerial Visit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many departmental staff accompanied him on his Ministerial visit to Rossmar Special School, Limavady on 24 May 2012; and what was the duration of the visit. (AQW 14592/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): On my Ministerial visit to Rossmar Special School, I was accompanied by my Private Secretary and Special Adviser. I spent approximately one hour at the school.

DE: Savings Delivery Plan

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how his Department performed in 2011/2012 against its published Savings Delivery plan. (AQW 14628/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department remained within budget in 2011-12. Indeed it reported in May's provisional outturn a Resource underspend of 0.67% and a Capital underspend of 0.71%.

Dickson Plan

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Dickson Plan.
(AQW 14720/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Dickson Plan is a form of academic selection and rejection with all the associated negative impacts this has on pupil self-esteem, disaffection and educational outcomes.

In terms of outcomes, the school leavers data for 2010/11 shows that the Dickson plan schools perform similarly to other schools. They are slightly better in terms of pupils achieving five plus GCSEs A*-C (or equivalent) including English and maths compared to the north of Ireland average (60.5% compared to 59.5%), whilst performance at 'A' level is below the north of Ireland average – 31.5% of school leavers achieved 3+ A levels A*-C compared to the north of Ireland average of 35.6%.²

Like the rest of our school system there is wide variation in the performance across the Dickson Plan schools and I am concerned that 39.5% of school leavers do not achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths. It is also notable that the three selective 14-18 schools admit far fewer pupils entitled to free school meals than the non-selective schools, which mirrors the inequitable position existing at selective schools across the north of Ireland.

My focus is on addressing educational underachievement wherever it exists and to drive out the inequities that exist in our education system. I have in place a coherent set of policies designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and to address the root causes when pupils are not achieving to their full potential. I also remain committed to ending academic selection and rejection at any age.

Education Promotion: Advertising Budget

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what is his Department's advertising budget for promoting education in the community.
(AQW 14735/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I launched the "Education Works" advertising campaign on 17 September 2012. The campaign is of vital importance to our society and aims to raise the value, we as a society, place on education. The campaign aims to inform and engage all parents, in particular those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to become more involved in their child's education. It is intended to impact upon home/family and attitudinal factors by providing parents with consistent, authoritative information on the importance of education and the steps they can take to support their child in achieving good educational outcomes.

Research has shown that children provided with good opportunities to learn in the home before they started school were over five times more likely to score well in English by the time they left primary school than those who were not and that those who had a bedtime story read to them in Primary 1 did much better at school than those who had not.

Parental involvement and encouragement, no matter how small, can have a direct and long-lasting effect on a child's educational achievements. It must be clear to parents that no matter who you are; no matter what your background; your child can achieve educationally and improve their life chances.

We know that parents want the best for their children. This campaign helps to give them ideas for simple steps they can take to make a difference. The campaign is supported by a dedicated website on NIDirect to give parents advice and guidance on how to develop their child's talking, reading and counting skills.

The campaign will run on television, radio, outdoor posters and online and will be taken forward in English and in Irish.

The budget required to support the development and implementation of the Education Works advertising campaign is £600,000 over the next three financial years.

Schools: Focused Audits

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education why his Department has written to all Voluntary Grammar schools and Grant-Maintained Integrated schools informing them of a proposed programme of focused audits in a sample of schools that are funded directly by his Department.
(AQW 14791/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The programme of focused audits has come about as a result of my Department's ongoing need to gain assurance on governance and accountability in areas where it expends funding. In this context, a number of issues were identified following an audit of one of the schools directly funded by DE. It was, therefore decided, that in order to provide the Departmental Accounting Officer with the assurance he requires, a programme of focused audits would be carried out in a random sample of those schools for which my Department fulfils the role of Funding Authority.

The Department considers this approach sufficient to provide the reassurance required whilst at the same being proportionate.

All Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools were formally advised that the Department would be undertaking these audits in a randomly selected sample of schools.

² Please note that all A Level figures include those schools without a sixth form as the denominator is all school leavers regardless of year group.

Schools: Enrolment Numbers

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education to explain the process used by his Department to determine the maximum enrolment number at (i) primary schools; and (ii) post-primary schools.

(AQW 14802/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Enrolment numbers are determined by the Department in line with its statutory duties under Article 11 of the Education (NI) Order 1997, having regard to a number of factors and in particular to the teaching accommodation available at a school. Paragraphs 13 to 21 of DE Circular 2012/12 "Open Enrolment in Primary Schools" (which can be viewed on the Department's website) explain how enrolment numbers are determined for primary schools.

For post-primary schools, enrolment numbers can also take account a number of additional factors including; the availability of places in an area; the Long Term Enrolment number and Pupil Teacher Ratios. The actual number of pupils in a school can exceed this figure for a number of reasons. Pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational need and pupils admitted on appeal, or by direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body (post-primary schools only) are supernumerary and do not count against the enrolment number. In addition, schools can apply to the Department for a temporary increase of their numbers which, if approved, would apply for one academic year only.

Schools: Area Planning

Mrs Dobson asked Minister of Education for his assessment of the time period given to schools within the Dickson Plan catchment area for responding to the consultation on Area Planning proposals, particularly in relation to Section 75 of The Northern Ireland Act.

(AQW 14834/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The consultation process for post-primary area plans lasts 16 weeks which exceeds the recommended minimum consultation period of 12 weeks. Schools within the Dickson Plan catchment area have therefore the same time period as all other schools to respond to this consultation which will end on 26 October 2012. I am confident that this timetable allows ample time for interested parties to respond to the consultation.

The consultation process complies with the Equality Commission good practice guidelines for public authorities in that the Boards are consulting with those directly affected.

The Area Planning process does not require a separate Section 75 screening as it facilitates the delivery of Departmental policies that have already been subject to separate individual screening exercises.

Special Needs Advisers

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Special Needs Advisors in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 14873/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executives of the education and library boards have advised that the number of full-time equivalent board officers directly involved in the statutory assessment and statementing process, excluding educational psychologists, is as follows:-

■ Belfast Education and Library Board –	12
■ North Eastern Education and Library Board –	12.89
■ South Eastern Education and Library Board –	11.9
■ Southern Education and Library Board –	14
■ Western Education and Library Board –	7.79

English Baccalaureate

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education when he first became aware that the Secretary of State for Education was going to make changes to GCSE examinations and develop a new English Baccalaureate Certificate in core subjects, which was formally announced on 17th September 2012.

(AQW 14882/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My officials were alerted to the decision by Michael Gove to develop a new English Baccalaureate, on Friday 14 September 2012. He formally made his announcement on Monday 17 September 2012. There was no prior communication or consultation with me or my officials, on this matter.

English Baccalaureate

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has had with the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment regarding the introduction of the new English Baccalaureate Certificate in core subjects.

(AQW 14883/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is in regular contact with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on a range of qualifications issues.

I was not consulted by Michael Gove in relation to the introduction of a new English Baccalaureate. Since he made his announcement on Monday 17 September 2012, you will be aware that I have tasked CCEA to undertake a comprehensive review of GCSE and GCE A Level qualifications here. This review will examine all types of qualifications taken across the jurisdictions, to inform the content of a final report, for my consideration.

DE: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many people employed in his Department are (i) suspended from work pending criminal charges or investigations; and (ii) continuing in their duties whilst facing criminal charges or investigations.
(AQW 14900/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) There are no staff employed in the Department of Education who are suspended from work pending criminal charges or investigations;
- (ii) The Department is not aware of any employees who are continuing in their duties whilst facing criminal charges and investigations.

Schools: Amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and Donegall Road Primary Schools

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and Donegall Road Primary Schools in a new school building on a site at Belfast City Hospital.
(AQW 14916/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware that the Board has been considering the amalgamation of these three schools with the view to publishing a Development Proposal. Part of that consideration includes site options and I understand that the potential of a site currently in the ownership of the Belfast City Hospital is included in that process.

The Education and Library Boards are planning to publish and consult on their draft area plans for primary provision in late Autumn. While I do not currently have a Development Proposal for such an amalgamation, I would expect the Belfast Board area plan to include details of this proposal. Should this be the case I will consider it in the context of the area plan.

Integrated Services for Children and Young People

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Integrated Services, led by the Belfast Education and Library Board in partnership with other statutory and community organisations and operating in West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area.
(AQW 14917/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Integrated Services for Children and Young People (ISCYP) project was managed by my Department until 30th September 2012. I can confirm that the project has fully expended its allocated budget and has substantially met the targets relating to delivery.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are leading on this project from 1st October 2012.

Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last two years, to detail and provide a breakdown on the number of teaching and non-teaching posts for each school in Upper Bann that were (i) suppressed; (ii) unfilled; and (iii) filled on a temporary basis.
(AQW 14932/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have been advised by the Southern Education and Library Board that the information is not available in the format requested and would only be available at disproportionate cost.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has confirmed the following:

	2011	2012
Suppressed	*3	*13
Unfilled	n/k	n/k
Filled on a temporary basis	*10	*4

*These figures relate to teaching staff only and are for the 2010-2011 and 2011-12 Calendar years.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Income

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the income received by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment for the provision of examinations to examination centres in England and Wales, in each of the last five years. (AQW 14941/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has provided the following information.

The CCEA income from England and Wales came from two different sources:

Direct sales of CCEA specifications.

Income linked to CCEA's partnership with the International Curriculum and Assessment Agency (ICAA) – description below.

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
ICAA Partnership (ended summer 2010)					
ICAA specifications in Wales	£17,091	£12,166	£13,516	£10,215	£0
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
ICAA specifications in England	£877,732	£758,530	£656,337	£581,243	£0
Total sales linked to the ICAA partnership	£894,823	£770,696	£669,853	£591,458	£0
ICAA percentage	£675,342	£581,609	£506,694	£438,871	£0
CCEA net income from the ICAA partnership	£219,481	£189,087	£163,159	£152,587	£0
CCEA Owned Exams/Specifications					
CCEA exams Wales	£1,532	£1,382	£1,375	£2,604	£2,151
CCEA exams England	£201,852	£227,929	£192,951	£186,410	£219,945
Total CCEA only sales	£203,384	£229,311	£194,326	£189,014	£222,096
Total income generated from England and Wales	£422,865	£418,398	£357,485	£341,601	£222,096

Note: The above figures relate to income only. Associated direct and indirect costs have not been included.

Integrated Services for Children and Young People

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the schools whose pupils have benefitted from Integrated Services in each of the last three years. (AQW 14943/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following schools have benefitted from Integrated Services in each of the last three years:

Nursery Schools/Units and Playgroups:

Blackmountain Nursery School	Shaftesbury Nursery School
Edenderry Nursery School	Springfield Playgroup
Harmony Nursery School	Springhill Playgroup
Hope Nursery School	Tudor Lodge Nursery School

Primary Schools:

Blackmountain Primary School	Harmony Primary School
Bun Scoil an Tseibhe Dhuibh	Holy Child Primary School
Edenbrooke Primary School	Malvern Primary School
Forthriver Primary School	Springfield Primary School
Gael Scoil na Lunaigh	Springhill Primary School
Gael Scoil na Mona	St Bernadette's Primary School
Gael Scoil Phobail Feirste	St John the Baptist Primary School
Gael Scoil Sluibh Dubh	St Oliver Plunkett Primary School

Glenwood Primary School	St Theresa's Primary School
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Post-Primary Schools:

Belfast Boys' Model School	Holy Trinity College
Belfast Model School for Girls	Malone College
Christian Brothers School	St Genevieve's Girls School
Colaiste Feirste	St Louise's College
Corpus Christi	St Rose's High School
De La Salle College	

Integrated Services for Children and Young People

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the current funding arrangements in relation to Integrated Services.
(AQW 14946/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: From 1st October 2012, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have assumed responsibility for leading on the Integrated Services for Children and Young People (ISCYP) project.

Schools: Absenteeism

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of absenteeism in (i) controlled schools; (ii) maintained schools; and (iii) Integrated Schools, at (a) primary; and (b) post-primary level, in the North Antrim area.
(AQW 14968/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Absence rates for primary schools in the North Antrim area by management type of school, 2010/11

Management Type	Overall absence rate (% of total half days absent)
Controlled	4.4
Maintained	4.3
Grant Maintained Integrated	5.9
Voluntary	3.4
Total	4.4

Absence rates for post-primary schools in the North Antrim area by management type of school, 2010/11

Management Type	Overall absence rate (% of total half days absent)
Controlled	8.2
Maintained	7.4
Grant Maintained Integrated	7.6
Voluntary	3.7
Total	6.7

Notes:

- Controlled includes controlled and controlled integrated schools. Maintained includes Catholic and other maintained schools.
- Figures for primary schools include Years 1-7 and for post-primary schools include Years 8-12.
- The figures are based on 63 primary schools and 14 post-primary schools in the North Antrim parliamentary constituency.
- Attendance is recorded for every pupil in half day sessions – morning and afternoon.

Schools: Workforce Composition

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education what statistics are held on the religion of people recruited as teachers and classroom assistants in schools; and whether Education and Library Boards, and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, are permitted to discriminate on grounds of religion when appointing teachers.

(AQW 14988/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 provides for employers to make annual monitoring returns to the Equality Commission about the composition of the workforce and those applying for employment. However, this provision does not apply to recruitment as a teacher in a school.

Information is held in relation to the perceived religious affiliation of non-teaching staff including classroom assistants employed in all schools. (Perceived religious affiliation is based on community background as defined by the Fair Employment monitoring regulations). This information is used for the purpose of completion of the annual monitoring return to the Equality Commission and is not available to anyone involved in the recruitment process.

Although the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religious belief or political opinion, fair employment legislation in the north of Ireland, since its inception in 1976, has not applied to the employment of teachers in schools. The Fair Employment and Treatment Order (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2003 restricted the exemption to the recruitment of teachers in schools.

Transport: Home to School

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's policy for home to school transport for (i) pre-school; and (ii) post-primary school pupils where their chosen school is outside the statutory distance and there is a school within the statutory distance.

(AQW 14998/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Under the Home to School Transport Scheme the Department is required to provide transport assistance to parents of eligible pupils in line with Article 52 (in conjunction with Article 44) of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (as substituted) and policy Circular 1996/41 (as amended). The Department is not required to provide transport assistance for pre-school pupils.

In relation to post-primary pupils, transport assistance is only provided to pupils who have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance, that is, 3 miles for secondary age pupils, of their home.

DE: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many members of staff in his Department are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations, and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

(AQW 15000/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are no DE staff currently suspended due to internal investigations under the NICS Disciplinary Procedures;

One member of DE staff is facing internal investigations under the NICS Disciplinary Procedures and is not suspended.

Schools: Welfare of Registered Pupils

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 14028/11-15 and in relation to primary school pupils who live outside the two mile limit, does the statutory duty on the Board of Governors to promote the welfare of registered pupils, when the pupils are on the school premises from 2.15pm to 3.15pm, include a responsibility to supervise these pupils free of charge.

(AQW 15006/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As indicated in my response to AQW 14028/11-15, the Board of Governors of a grant-aided school has a statutory duty under Article 17 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 to safeguard and promote the welfare of registered pupils of the school at all times when the pupils are on the premises of the school.

In respect of charging, each school is required to set out its policy in relation to pupils. The decision as to whether and how much to charge will be determined by the Board of Governors where the cost of the activity is paid from funds at its disposal; and the Education and Library Board in any other case.

The particular circumstances you describe do not appear to be addressed specifically in current policy guidance. My department will review this and issue guidance in due course.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the proposed timescale for the introduction and implementation of the legislation for the creation of the Education and Skills Authority.

(AQW 15010/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill was introduced on 2 October. The Programme for Government includes the commitment of bringing the Education and Skills Authority into operation in 2013.

Belfast Education and Library Board: Schoolchildren from North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many children from North Down attend schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 15011/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There were 873 children from the North Down constituency attending schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board area in 2011/12.

Figures relate to children, for whom a valid postcode was provided, attending nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Review of Qualifications

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education, in light of his announcement of a review of GCSE and A level qualifications by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), for his assessment of the appropriateness of CCEA to carry out this assessment, given that it has been delivering these qualifications.

(AQW 15038/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: CCEA has a statutory duty to advise my Department on all matters relating to the curriculum, assessment and examinations.

I have tasked CCEA to set up a review group comprising stakeholders from across the education and business sectors, to review the current suite of qualifications at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5.

The final report of the review group will set out its assessment of the current qualifications offer and make recommendations as to the way forward. I will make the final decision in the best interests of our young people. This will ensure that qualifications offered here will continue to be comparable, or better, than those taken elsewhere.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Review of Qualifications

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what funds he has set aside for the proposed review of GCSE and A Level qualifications.

(AQW 15042/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: CCEA has a statutory duty to provide advice to my Department on all matters relating to the curriculum, assessment and examinations.

I expect the review of GCSE and A Level qualifications to be managed within the existing CCEA budget. If any funding gaps are identified, to enable CCEA to carry out its statutory duties, that organisation will advise my Department as part of the normal financial monitoring process.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations Policy

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what input the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment will have on the development of examinations policy over A levels and GCSE's in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 15043/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: CCEA regulation works with the qualifications regulators in England and Wales to ensure standards are maintained between qualifications taken in the three jurisdictions.

Locally, CCEA provides advice to my Department on matters relating to the curriculum, examinations and assessment. I, as Minister review this advice and make appropriate decisions on all aspects of qualifications and examinations policy.

CCEA has no role in providing advice on the development of examinations policy over A levels and GCSEs in England or Wales. That is entirely the remit of the appropriate authorities in those jurisdictions.

Department for Employment and Learning

Stranmillis University College: Chairperson

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department has taken to advertise for a new chairperson of the Governing Body of Stranmillis University College, Belfast since the current incumbent's extended term of office is due to expire before the end of 2012.

(AQW 14514/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): My Department has this matter under active consideration.

Stranmillis University College: Chairperson

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he will ensure that the replacement Chairperson of the Governing Body of Stranmillis University College, Belfast will have the respect and confidence of staff.

(AQW 14515/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has this matter under active consideration.

Stranmillis University College: Financial Out-turn

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, with regard to previous forecasts of debt, what the financial outturn for Stranmillis College, Belfast shows for 2011/12.

(AQW 14517/11-15)

Dr Farry: The 2011-12 accounts for the College have not yet been audited but I have been informed that they are likely to show a surplus of £559,000 against an anticipated surplus for the year of £435,000. The College continues to receive a number of subsidies associated with its activities such as moderation funding (£0.2m), small institution funding (£0.45m) and a historical buildings premium (£0.08m). These are reflected in the above results and contribute to a higher level of funding per student at Stranmillis compared to other benchmarks. In addition the College has been allocated a higher number of trainee teacher places than had been anticipated. The College has forecast that deficits would begin to be incurred in 2012-13 and would reach a level of around £430,000 by 2014-15.

St Mary's University College: UCAS

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of St Mary's University College's ability to operate outside the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service system and the impact this has on Stranmillis University College being able to fill student places.

(AQW 14549/11-15)

Dr Farry: As you are aware, St. Mary's University College, in common with all other higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, is responsible for its own policies and practices, including admission procedures. While I am not aware that Stranmillis University College has had difficulty in the past in filling student places, I recognise that the use of different systems can impact on planning and admission processes of the various teacher training providers and also create differential opportunities for students applying to different institutions.

My preference would be for all institutions to operate the UCAS system and I have made this clear to St. Mary's on a number of occasions.

Teacher Education: Review

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the departmental review of Teacher Education in Northern Ireland, including the viability audit of the two University Colleges, is likely to be published.

(AQW 14550/11-15)

Dr Farry: Work on the First Stage of the Study of the Teacher Education Infrastructure in Northern Ireland is ongoing. The report will be available once this has concluded and the findings have been discussed with both university colleges.

DEL: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study'

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration his Department has given to the Belfast City Council commissioned 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study' published in March 2012; and (ii) what action has been taken to implement the recommendations relevant to his Department.

(AQW 14646/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has considered the report in detail, particularly those recommendations which emphasise the need to ensure a coherent approach to where and how students will live within the city in the medium and long term future.

Although my Department does not have a lead role in any of the recommendations I want to ensure its continued involvement in trying to find a long term solution to the ongoing problems in the area. Therefore, a Departmental official currently chairs a Student Housing Strategy Working Group, comprising representatives from Queen's University, the University of Ulster, Department for Social Development, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Belfast City Council, to take forward recommendations from the Strategic Study.

Departmental officials also continue to be involved with Belfast City Council's Holylands Inter-Agency Group.

Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he intends to visit the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre to discuss what action his Department can take to increase educational achievement in the Protestant community.

(AQW 14691/11-15)

Dr Farry: I met with representatives of the Kilcooley Women's Centre as part of a delegation from Training for Women Network earlier this year.

Improving the academic achievement of individuals within Northern Ireland is a key aim of my Department. This issue will be addressed through the implementation of both the higher education strategy 'Graduating to Success' and 'Access to Success' our Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

"Access to Success" will be implemented through a number of projects which will include an awareness raising campaign to promote the benefits of higher education and a campaign to raise aspiration and attainment among under-represented groups. Specifically, my Department will encourage institutions offering higher education courses to develop outreach activities in the workplace and in local disadvantaged communities to attract adult learners in order to raise their educational attainment levels to facilitate their entry to courses of higher education. You will be aware from my previous correspondence that the strategy has identified young males from a working-class Protestant background from lower participation neighbourhoods as a clearly defined target group.

In addition, through its higher education strategy 'Graduating to Success' my Department will support the development of increased flexibility in the delivery of higher education courses, and a lifelong learning ethos within the higher education sector for example through the introduction of modular learning opportunities for all learners.

As the main providers of adult education throughout Northern Ireland, further education colleges continue to encourage access to a wide and varied curriculum through their main campuses and network of community outreach centres.

My Department also developed and implemented the Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme. This programme allowed FE colleges to contract with third party organisations for the provision of learner support. Support was directed at those 'hard to reach' adults who are economically inactive, disengaged from the labour market, with few or no qualifications, to encourage them to enrol on and complete FE courses.

Following a successful independent evaluation, my Department is developing proposals to roll out a mainstream Learner Access and Engagement programme in the immediate future.

A community based access pilot will run concurrently with the mainstream Learner Access and Engagement programme. It aims to create pathways to enable disengaged 16– 18 years to progress to Level 2 Essential Skills provision and into mainstream further education, or other government-funded training programmes. This is one of the new initiatives outlined in the "Pathways to Success" Strategy for those young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

Employment: Information and Opportunities

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he intends to encourage parents and young people to consider subjects and careers which offer the best prospects of employment.
(AQW 14714/11-15)

Dr Farry: I fully recognise the need to ensure that young people are aware of current and future employment opportunities and understand the areas which are likely to offer good employment prospects and address the needs of the economy.

My Department, in conjunction with the Sector Skills Councils, develops and maintain information on employment opportunities and trends. This is presented in Industry Factsheets which are available online at www.nidirect.gov.uk/careers. The factsheets are used by careers advisers and careers teachers to support young people to make informed career decisions.

In 2010, I asked the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills to carry out research to help identify the sectors which will be key to rebuilding and rebalancing our economy. Following publication of the Adviser's report "Identification of Priority Skills Areas for Northern Ireland", the key and emerging sectors have now been agreed and communicated to the further education colleges and universities to inform future provision. Careers advisers also ensure that young people are informed about these priority sectors as part of the guidance process.

"Success Through Skills- Transforming Futures" highlights the importance of labour market information. The Careers Service is leading on a project to provide improved access to clear and up to date information on current and future trends. This includes exploring a range of technologies and communication channels and training for careers advisers.

The Careers Service is currently developing an information guide to assist parents and guardians to support their sons and daughters with career planning. This will include information on the key and emerging sectors which will be the focus of rebuilding and rebalancing our economy. The guide will be available in late autumn.

First4Skills: Job Losses

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the recent announcement of 40 job losses at First Four Skills, to detail what processes are in place to (i) agree redundancy payments; and (ii) facilitate training programmes for the 900 plus participants.
(AQW 14749/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has taken the lead in agreeing, arranging and delivering a support service to the employees that have been made redundant. The Redundancy Advice Service is delivered by this Department in partnership with other Departments and Agencies such as the Social Security Agency, Invest NI, EGSA and HMRC.

The Employment Service has written to each individual employee offering redundancy support to them directly. Redundancy clinics will be organised as a matter of urgency as appropriate.

In addition, my Department's Redundancy Payments Service is working with the Administrator for First4Skills to process, where appropriate, payments in compliance with Employment Rights legislation, to employees who have been made redundant.

With regard to the second part of your question, I can confirm that the Department has been working closely with the Administrator to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by the 989 apprentices. My primary concern is to ensure that the apprentices are able to continue with their training to allow them to complete their apprenticeships. I would stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration.

First4Skills: Job Losses

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had regarding First4Skills entering administration, including (a) the resultant loss of jobs and (b) if the current training contracts held can be passed to a new business.

(AQW 14799/11-15)

Dr Farry: Any discussions regarding a company entering into administration is an employer-focussed matter and not one the Department would be party to. The Department is however very keen to work closely with employers and employees facing job losses.

The Department did not have any advance notice of the impending situation in First4Skills and therefore did not have the opportunity to discuss directly with the company the support available from my Department.

As soon as my Department became aware of the job losses within First4Skills, my officials firstly attempted to make contact with the company directly and subsequently made contact with the administrator, Deloitte. Deloitte has provided the Department with details of those who have been made redundant and my Department, through the Employment Service, has written to each individual offering our Redundancy Advice Service.

The Redundancy Advice Service is organised and delivered by my Department in partnership with other Departments and Agencies such as the Social Security Agency, Invest NI, Educational Guidance Service for Adults and HM Revenue and Customs, and the package of support is tailored to meet the needs of the employees. Employees will be provided with information and professional advice and guidance regarding the options and support available, including employment, training and education opportunities, careers advice, and a range of other issues such as benefits, taxation and money management.

When responses from the First4Skills redundant employees have been collated, redundancy clinics will be organised as soon as possible, in convenient locations. The network of Jobs and Benefits offices and Jobcentres across Northern Ireland has been alerted to the situation.

The Department has been working closely with the Administrator for First4Skills, to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by the 989 apprentices. My primary concern is to ensure that the apprentices are able to continue with their training in order to allow them to complete their apprenticeships. I would like to stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration.

First4Skills: Administration

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the engagement he has had with First4Skills since it entered administration last week, in relation to transferring the business to a new owner.

(AQW 14811/11-15)

Dr Farry: As an Administrator have been appointed to act on behalf of the company, it would not be appropriate for me, or my officials, to engage directly with First4Skills. However, my Department is working closely with the Administrator to ensure an effective resolution to the situation.

My primary concern is to ensure that all 989 apprentices are able to continue with their training without further delay to allow them to complete their apprenticeships. I would stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration. In relation to the employees of First4Skills the Employment Service has written to each individual offering support to them directly and redundancy clinics are being organised as a matter of urgency. The Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits Offices and Job Centres has also been alerted to the situation to enable support and guidance to be offered to the individuals who require this service. In addition, my Department's Redundancy Payments Service is working with the Administrator to process, where appropriate, payments in compliance with Employment Rights legislation, to employees who have been made redundant.

Northern Regional College: Ballymena Campus

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed new Ballymena Campus of the Northern Regional College.

(AQW 14861/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Northern Regional College is currently completing an Outline Business Case which will assess the options for the provision of further education in the Ballymena area. The business case will identify the value for money option and the procurement route, and is expected to be completed by March 2013. The project has been included in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 3, but no funding has yet been identified.

Higher Education: Maximum Student Number

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the Maximum Student Number for full-time higher education places that have been allocated at each further educational college in each year since 2007.

(AQW 14862/11-15)

Dr Farry: The table in Annex A details the Maximum Student Number allocations (MaSN) for full-time higher education places at the six Further Education Regional Colleges for each of the academic years from 2007/08 – 2012/13.

Annex A

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Belfast Metropolitan College	1591	1591	1591	1491	1491	1463
Northern Regional College	249	249	249	249	252	266
North West Regional College	729	729	729	729	679	635
Southern Regional College	465	465	465	465	520	539
South Eastern Regional College	578	578	578	570	533	533
South West College	186	186	221	324	383	420
Total places	3798	3833	3833	3833	3833	3856

Higher Education: Maximum Student Number

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how the Maximum Student Number for full-time places is allocated to further educational colleges and higher education institutes.

(AQW 14863/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department carries out regular reviews of the Maximum Student Number (MaSN) allocations across the Northern Ireland Further Education Regional Colleges to coincide with the College Development Plan cycle. The purpose of these reviews is to ensure that the MaSN allocations represent an equitable and rational distribution of full-time higher education places in order to secure maximum recruitment and uptake of places and that the allocations reflect available evidence of existing demand and potential future demand across Northern Ireland.

A number of metrics are used to calculate the Higher Education in Further Education MASN allocation for each of the six colleges as follows:

Actual performance over the last six years. The Department considers each college's Higher Education in Further Education enrolments, both full-time and part-time, in order to assess the overall historical demand for higher education in each college region;

Estimated Future demand. The Department considers the total potential demand for Higher Education in Further Education as measured by the 18-50 year old population in each of the regional college areas;

There is a 75% weighting for historical demand and a 25% weighting for potential future demand. An additional weighting is also applied to reflect the distance from the college to the nearest permanent University campus.

Account is then taken of the individual college's alignment with DEL strategic priorities as demonstrated in its College Development Plan. This would include the college's commitment to developing and delivering courses in STEM subjects and other priority skills areas; its commitment to the development and delivery of Foundation Degrees, and its support for the Department's Widening Participation goals in the geographical distribution of higher education places across Northern Ireland.

In the case of the universities, each institution's MaSN allocation is initially carried forward from the previous year. The number of places for medical, dental and social work is determined by the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS) and for Initial Teacher Education, by the Department of Education (DE). Where the number of places is changed by either Department, my Department adjusts the institutions' MaSN allocations accordingly. For other subject areas my Department keeps the overall MaSN allocation under review commensurate with available funding resources and recruitment outcomes.

When additional funding has become available over the years, my Department has increased the MaSN allocations for both the universities and the regional colleges. Such increases are normally made conditional on additional student places being made available in economically relevant subject areas, for example, Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

DEL: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to his Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates. (AQW 14869/11-15)

Dr Farry: There are currently 15 bodies classified as NDPBs of the Department for Employment and Learning. On 8 May 2007, there were eight. The increase is accounted for by the change in status of the six colleges of Further Education and the two University Colleges, plus the creation of one additional advisory post. This has been offset by the formal cessation of a statutory employment training organisation, and the abolition of a non-executive advisory body.

The total number serving on these NDPBs, not including support staff, was 301 on 8 May 2007, and 424 on 1 October 2012. Further information may be found in the 'Public Bodies & Public Appointments Annual Reports' published by OFMDFM and available from the Assembly Library.

First4Skills: Apprenticeships

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he will take to ensure that people who recently received training with First4Skills Ltd will be able to complete their necessary qualifications without excessive delay. (AQW 14876/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is working closely with the Administrator for First4Skills, to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by the 989 apprentices. My primary concern is to ensure that the apprentices are able to complete their apprenticeships. I would stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration.

First4Skills: Ministerial Assessment

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the closure of First4Skills Ltd. (AQW 14877/11-15)

Dr Farry: I was extremely disappointed to learn of the closure of First4Skills and its potential impact on the affected individuals. Since the announcement I have ensured that my Department has been working closely with the Administrator for First4Skills to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by the 989 apprentices. My primary concern is to ensure that the apprentices are able to continue with their training without further delay to allow them to complete their apprenticeships. I would stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration.

In relation to the employees of First4Skills the Employment Service has written to each individual offering support to them directly and redundancy clinics are being organised as a matter of urgency. The Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits Offices and Job Centres has also been alerted to the situation to enable support and guidance to be offered to the individuals who require this service. In addition, my Department's Redundancy Payments Service is working with the Administrator to process, where appropriate, payments in compliance with Employment Rights legislation, to employees who have been made redundant.

First4Skills did not have any contractual arrangements with client companies.

First4Skills: Administration

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on efforts to save First4Skills Ltd from closure. (AQW 14878/11-15)

Dr Farry: As Administrators have been appointed to act on behalf of the company, it would not be appropriate for me, or my officials, to engage directly with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment as First4Skills Ltd is already in administration. However, my Department is working closely with the Administrator for First4Skills to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by the 989 apprentices and to ensure that they are able to continue with their training as soon as possible. In relation to the employees of First4Skills the Employment Service has written to each individual offering support to them directly and redundancy clinics are being organised as a matter of urgency. The Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits Offices and Job Centres has also been alerted to the situation to enable support and guidance to be offered to the individuals who require this service. In addition, my Department's Redundancy Payments Service is working with the Administrator to process, where appropriate, payments in compliance with Employment Rights legislation, to employees who have been made redundant.

Northern Regional College: Coleraine

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the timescale for the completion of a new further education college in Coleraine. (AQW 14927/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Northern Regional College is currently completing an Outline Business Case which will assess the options for the provision of further education in the Coleraine area. The business case will identify the value for money option and the procurement route, and is expected to be completed by March 2013. The project has been included in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 3 but no funding has yet been identified. It is therefore not possible to give a timescale for the completion of the project.

First4Skills: Apprenticeships

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to support employees, trainees and client companies of First4Skills which has gone into administration.

(AQW 14965/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is working closely with the Administrator for First4Skills to ensure an effective resolution to the situation.

My primary concern is to ensure that all 989 apprentices are able to continue with their training without further delay to allow them to complete their apprenticeships. I would stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration. In relation to the employees of First4Skills the Employment Service has written to each individual offering support to them directly and redundancy clinics are being organised as a matter of urgency. The Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits Offices and Job Centres has also been alerted to the situation to enable support and guidance to be offered to the individuals who require this

service. In addition, my Department's Redundancy Payments Service is working with the Administrator to process, where appropriate, payments in compliance with Employment Rights legislation, to employees who have been made redundant.

First4Skills did not have any contractual arrangements with client companies.

Further Education: Student Composition

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a religious breakdown of students attending further educational colleges.

(AQW 14977/11-15)

Dr Farry: Professional and Technical enrolments by religious background in the Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges for the 2010/11 academic year are detailed in the table below.

Professional and Technical enrolments by religious background in the Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges for the 2010/11 academic year

Catholic	Protestant	Other Christian	Other Religion	No Religion	Total Known	Not Stated/ Not Known
55,902	44,550	2,194	486	6,550	109,682	45,743

Source: Further Educational Statistical Record

Notes:

1. It should be noted that a sizeable proportion of those enrolling with FE colleges in Northern Ireland do not disclose their religious background, data on which has been used to answer this question.
2. The latest available full-year data are for the 2010/11 academic year.

Stranmillis University College: Ministerial Proposals

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his proposals for Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

(AQW 14979/11-15)

Dr Farry: I commissioned a study of the teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland earlier this year. I await the outcome of that work.

University of Ulster: Magee Campus

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on progress since 2010 on the expansion of the University of Ulster at Magee.

(AQW 15014/11-15)

Dr Farry: I would refer you to my previous answer on AQW 14465/11-15.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Life Science Hub UK

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how much E-Synergy has invested in Life Science Hub UK Limited; and (ii) what benefit it has brought to the technology sector, given the apparent disconnect between the company and local interests.

(AQW 14706/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):

- (i) E-Synergy has invested £104,000 in Life Science Hub UK Limited (LSH).
- (ii) LSH is an FDI start up company which was attracted to Northern Ireland and is based at the Northern Ireland Science Park. The company aims to identify technologies in life sciences which have the potential to be commercialised, thus bringing benefits to the technology sector.

John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has used, or will use, public resources to demonstrate the potential impact that the John Lewis development at Sprucefield would have on Belfast retail plans.

(AQW 14773/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department is working with other departments to ensure a consistent overall approach to the difficulties faced by the retail sector in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Business: Support for Owners

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what her Department is doing to promote businesses in towns such as Bangor.

(AQW 14807/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Between 2008 – 2011, Invest NI has offered support of £6.9 million to almost 330 projects that will generate investment of £33 million in the North Down area.

In addition, the Jobs Fund was established in April 2011 to support business owners across Northern Ireland to create new, sustainable jobs that will help to tackle current levels of unemployment. Since the Fund's launch in 2011, 9 projects have come forward from the North Down Borough. These are at various stages of development and should lead to 40 new jobs, 19 of which have already been created.

The full range of Invest NI's financial support is available to qualifying businesses in the Bangor area as it is across Northern Ireland. This includes loans from the Small Business Loan Fund, launched in July 2012 and designed to assist small independent businesses who may be experiencing difficulty in accessing finance in the current economic climate. All types of business, including retail, are eligible to apply.

DETI officials are also working with other departments to ensure a consistent overall approach to the difficulties faced by the retail sector in Bangor and elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

DETI: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to her Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.

(AQW 14815/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) Four Quangos were sponsored by DETI at 8 May 2007, namely: - Invest NI, Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (GCCNI) and Health & Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI). A total of 46 people were serving on the boards of these bodies at that date.
- (ii) Five Quangos were sponsored by DETI at the date of this question, 26 September 2012 - the four named above and the Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB). This fifth body is jointly sponsored with DARD. A total of 51 people were serving on the boards of these bodies at that date.

Tourism: Accommodation

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 13941/11-15, whether, as a priority, she will write to the councils expressing concern at the low numbers involved.

(AQW 14850/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Global trends advances in technology have resulted in changes in people's booking patterns and preferences with more visitors now booking online.

The service Tourist Information Centres provide extends beyond that of accommodation bookings and as such they will continue to play an important role assisting visitors and local people with their wider informational needs.

Redundancies: Notification Period

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how much advance notice her Department received from each firm which shed jobs in Northern Ireland to relocate them elsewhere, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14906/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Amended 8 October 2006) any business proposing to make 20 or more employees redundant must notify the relevant public authority before redundancy notices are issued to staff. Full details on the notifications periods required are publically available on the DETI website. <http://www.deti-ni.gov.uk/deti-stats-index/stats-surveys/stats-redundancies/stats-employment-rights-order.htm>

These notification provide the basis for published redundancy statistics for Northern Ireland which, from January 2000, are publically available to download from the DETI website at

<http://www.deti-ni.gov.uk/deti-stats-index/stats-surveys/stats-redundancies.htm>

It is important to note that these figures are likely to underestimate total job losses as firms are only legally obliged to inform of impending job losses of 20 or more, and so it is not possible to quantify the extent of the shortfall. In addition statistics are not routinely produced on the company rationale for instigating any redundancies.

Invest NI does not hold specific information on how much notice it receives of companies' intentions to shed jobs or move them elsewhere. However, through maintaining close relationships with its client companies Invest NI will often, but not always, be provided notice of plans to shed jobs or move them elsewhere. In general this will be advised by companies in advance and Invest NI will work closely and intensely with the company and, where appropriate, with its parent company or owner to mitigate the impacts of any such decision.

FG Wilson: Job Losses

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the multiplier effect on suppliers and traders following the recent job losses at FG Wilson.

(AQO 2545/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI is currently working with local management in Caterpillar to determine the potential impact of its recent announcement on local suppliers. I can assure the Member that Invest NI is ready to work with any supply-chain companies impacted by this decision to help them identify other opportunities.

Whilst this announcement is a major blow for those affected, Caterpillar still employs over 2,000 people and has committed to continue manufacturing in Northern Ireland.

I know that local traders will also be concerned at the impact of the job losses across all the areas. Invest NI, through initiatives such as Boosting Business and the Regional Start Initiative, will be doing all it can to revitalize the areas most affected and to minimize the impact on local traders and businesses.

Tourist Board: Funding Support

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much the Tourist Board has invested in each constituency, in each year since devolution.

(AQW 14919/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) provides funding support for tourism capital projects through the Tourism Development Scheme (TDS) and for tourism events through the Tourism Event Funding Programme both of which are open-call and criteria based. Funds are then offered to successful applicants following an assessment and scoring process.

Between 2008 and 2011 NITB supported a wide range of new tourism developments throughout Northern Ireland. Details are contained within the Financial Assisted Projects 2008 – 11 publication, a copy of which you received in November 2011, and which is available online at An overview of financially assisted projects 2008 to 2011 (<http://www.nitb.com/BusinessSupport/FundingOpportunities/CapitalDevelopmentFundingSupport.aspx>)

A list of projects which fall outside this publication are shown at Annex A, for preceding projects in the 2007-08 financial year and at Annex B, for projects in the 2011-12 financial year.

The main support mechanism available for the Events Industry is the Tourism Event Funding Programme, an annual funding programme designed to support International and National Tourism Events.

A full list of the events funded through the National and International Events programme in 2011-2012 is available at Successful Events - Events Funding 2011-12 (<http://www.nitb.com/FileHandler.ashx?id=2176>) and is filterable by constituency.

A full list of the events funded through the National and International Tourism Events programme in 2012-2013 is available at Successful Events - Events Funding 2012-13 (<http://www.nitb.com/FileHandler.ashx?id=1959>) and is filterable by constituency.

All other investment is not disaggregated by Constituency and may only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Business: Funding for Coleraine and Limavady

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total value of financial aid awarded to businesses in the (i) Coleraine; and (ii) Limavady areas in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14970/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Whilst the question asks for the value of financial aid awarded to businesses in Coleraine and Limavady, it should be noted that Invest NI does not determine the level of funding to particular areas. Assistance patterns are based on the location of those businesses which have sought and received support to grow and develop. Table 1 shows the amount of assistance, or funding, that Invest NI has offered to businesses in the (i) Coleraine and (ii) Limavady District Council Areas (DCAs) in each of the last five financial years.

Table 1: Invest NI Assistance Offered in Coleraine & Limavady DCAs (2007-08 to 2011-12)

Financial Year	Coleraine £m	Limavady £m
2007-08	4.32	0.45
2008-09	1.39	0.88
2009-10	1.79	0.35
2010-11	1.07	0.25
2011-12	1.16	0.53
Total	9.72	2.45

Notes:

- (i) Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.
- (ii) The figures in the table may not add due to rounding.

In 2009-10, Invest NI offered an additional £10million to Enterprise Northern Ireland to administer the Enterprise Development Programme. Although Enterprise Northern Ireland is located in the Limavady area, the funding will benefit new local businesses throughout Northern Ireland, and has therefore been excluded from the table above.

Petroleum Licences

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what evidence would be required to enable her to take the decision to withdraw the petroleum licences for unconventional gas.

(AQW 14991/11-15)

Mrs Foster: For my Department to consider withdrawing a Petroleum Licence, it would require evidence that the Licensee was in breach of the terms of that licence.

Tourism: Cruise Ships

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much public money has been invested by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in attracting cruise ship visits to Belfast, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 15037/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has not provided any direct funding to attract cruise ships to Belfast in the last five years.

The Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau works together with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to promote Belfast and Northern Ireland as a cruise destination under the banner of Cruise Belfast.

Tourism: Cruise Ships

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the financial contribution to the local economy made by cruise ship visits, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15039/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A full economic impact assessment has been commissioned by the Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau (BVCB) to evaluate the financial contribution of the 2012 cruise season.

A previous calculation estimated that cruise ship visits have generated between £10-£15 million for the local economy in recent years.

Tourism: Cruise Ships

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many cruise ships has visited Belfast, and how many passengers were on board, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15056/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The following figures have been supplied by the Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau (BVCB) which works together with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to promote Belfast and Northern Ireland as a cruise destination under the banner of Cruise Belfast.

Year:	Cruise Ships:	Passengers & Crew:
2008	39	65,559
2009	36	57,259
2010	35	54,517
2011	32	57,885
2012	44	72,665
Total:	186	307,885

Investment: International Companies

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what provisions are available to encourage international companies to invest in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15112/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI sells Northern Ireland as a location that can meet the needs of international investors. The agency has a successful track record of attracting high quality investment, exceeding its Key Performance Indicators for the most recent Programme for Government period.

The Northern Ireland proposition is based on a combination of quality and cost competitiveness. We have a ready supply of skilled and talented people, excellent university/business linkages, an advanced telecommunications infrastructure and world class companies operating in key knowledge-based sectors. Operating costs are highly competitive and can be significantly lower than many regions of the UK and Europe, including the Republic of Ireland.

We await the outcome of the negotiations with HM Treasury regarding the devolution of powers to lower Corporation Tax. There is no doubt that the ability to compete with the Republic of Ireland in this area would provide us with an additional competitive advantage.

In addition, Invest NI provides a suite of business development services to existing and potential investors. Invest NI's support is designed to enable both indigenous and externally owned companies to grow their business, maximise efficiencies, develop their product and sell in overseas markets. This can include the offer of financial assistance to support capital equipment, employment and training costs, and also to encourage and support new research and development activity.

Invest NI's overseas sales staff, investment managers and Property Solutions Unit work closely with potential investors to demonstrate how Northern Ireland, including support from Invest NI, can help them to grow their business. The feedback that I have personally received from companies that have chosen to locate in Northern Ireland suggests that support from Invest NI is crucial, and often a major factor in the decision.

Tourism: Causeway Coast and Antrim Glens

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that a National Park on the Causeway Coast and Glens could have on the local tourism sector.

(AQO 2551/11-15)

Mrs Foster: From a tourism perspective, National Parks have the potential to deliver positive impacts including improved profile and image, enhanced marketing opportunities, dedicated funding and enhanced opportunities for the branding of local products.

However, I believe that before any introduction of a National Park there must be full consultation with all of the key stakeholders as it is vital that any proposals for a National Park have the support of the local community.

Whilst positive tourism impacts are welcomed, I would not wish to support any proposal that places additional bureaucracy on local residents.

FG Wilson

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the future of FG Wilson.
(AQO 2552/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Whilst the recent announcement by Caterpillar has come as a major blow to the workforce affected, and indeed the local economy in general, it is recognised that shifts in global demand now mean that Caterpillar has had to re-organise its smaller, retail operations in order that the business in Northern Ireland can remain competitive.

However, in making its announcement, Caterpillar stressed that its decision is in no way a reflection on the skills, productivity or flexibility of its workforce.

Despite these redundancies, Caterpillar is still a major employer in the local economy, employing in excess of 2000 people, and Invest NI is working with the company to help ensure future competitiveness.

I met with senior management of the Electric Power Division while in the US last week and explored a number of potential opportunities to bring more work to Northern Ireland. Whilst it is too early to comment on the specific nature of these opportunities, Invest NI is following up in a number of areas.

Air Travel: Direct Flights

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any discussions have been held with Airlines about expanding direct flights to European or North American cities to benefit the tourism and business sectors.
(AQO 2553/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department, through Tourism Ireland, is in dialogue with airlines and Northern Ireland airports on an ongoing basis to identify and develop opportunities for new, extended or re-instated services to key markets, including those in Europe and North America.

For example, Tourism Ireland recently agreed a co-operative marketing programme to promote a new inbound charter flight from Austria to Belfast International Airport. This service, which will be operated by Lauda Air from April to June 2013, will help to boost the number of inbound Austrian visitors to Northern Ireland and will also provide a positive example to other inbound charter carriers that Northern Ireland can be an option for their business.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Fermanagh

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the expert advice that the minimum permissible distance between the shale and a water aquifer at which fracking should occur is 600 metres, what impact this would have on her proposals for Fermanagh where the difference in depth in many areas is only 500 metres.
(AQO 2554/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The licence in Fermanagh is still in the preliminary stages.

Should an application to drill be made, officials in my Department will consider the applicability of any recommendations to proposed operations in Fermanagh.

Full planning permission and an associated Environmental Impact Assessment will be required prior to any drilling taking place.

Tourist Information Centres

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what she is doing to increase the number of bookings for accommodation through Tourist Information Centres.
(AQO 2555/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Tourist Information Centres play an important role assisting visitors with their informational needs at the planning stage of their trip and also in destination. NITB will continue to promote the 31 Tourist Information Centres in the network.

However, advances in technology have resulted in changes to the way visitors access this information and book their accommodation requirements. In line with global trends there has been a year on year decline in the number of bookings made via Tourist Information Centres, as visitors increasingly prefer to book their accommodation over the internet in advance of arriving in their destination.

Economy: Planning Delays

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that delays in the planning process have on our economic development.
(AQO 2556/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The 2009 Independent Review of Economic Policy underlined the importance of planning to regional economic growth and recommended that the Planning Service should have processing time targets which are competitive and comparable with those countries and regions against which we are competing for mobile international investment.

Whilst it is important to have in place an effective and balanced planning system, I continue to have concerns about the number of large projects, with the potential to make significant contributions to the Northern Ireland economy, which are adversely affected by delays in the planning process.

DETI: Collaborative Research

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department has taken to promote and advance EU funded collaborative research.

(AQO 2550/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My department is actively promoting increased engagement in EU R&D funding programmes. As part of this, DETI has appointed a new full time manager for Northern Ireland Horizon 2020.

In addition, I am currently working with the Minister of Employment and Learning on the establishment of a new £1.8 million Higher Education EU Support Fund. This Fund will facilitate the appointment of experts by both Universities in key research areas. They will be tasked with supporting a significant increase in successful applications to the forthcoming Horizon 2020 programme.

Department of the Environment

Cavanacaw: Gold Mine

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment what action he has taken to ensure that the failings at Cavanacaw mine near Omagh are not repeated.

(AQW 14327/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I have been fully briefed on the issues in relation to a number of planning applications relating to the Gold Mine at Cavanacaw near Omagh.

These issues relate to delay in taking enforcement action against a breach of condition on the original approval and to the adequacy of determinations made under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations for two subsequent planning applications relating to the reinstatement of the site and the provision of passing bays on local roads. These latter permissions have now been quashed by the courts.

I do not consider the history of events in relation to this case to be acceptable, however, the Department has acknowledged its mistakes and I am determined to ensure that lessons are learnt and there is no repeat of the failings noted above.

I have therefore instructed officials in Strategic Planning Division to undertake the following:

- Urgently review the staff resources available to the Enforcement Team within Strategic Projects Division and to make greater use of Area Office Enforcement Staff to carry out initial site visits in relation to complaints received;
- Move to a pro-active regime where in terms of specialist applications such as mineral extraction compliance with planning conditions is monitored to identify any breaches at an early stage, this will include engaging with applicants and the relevant industry bodies where appropriate;
- Ensure all staff have access to the most up to date technology to monitor sites – for example Strategic Planning Division Compliance Teams are now able to access real time high quality aerial photographs to deliver accurate mapping and analysis of topography, boundaries, levels which is ideal for monitoring quarries and landfill sites.
- Immediately review all current and recently approved minerals applications as well as a range of enforcement cases (minerals and unauthorised waste) to ensure compliance with the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations;
- Organise refresher training for staff on the requirements of the new Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations;
- Provide updated guidance to staff on the processing of Enforcement Cases.

I have asked to be regularly updated on progress in respect of the above actions.

Goods Vehicles Operator's Licence: Temporary Permit

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment how many temporary permits have been issued out of the expected 8000 applications for restricted operators licences, under the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 2010 'Own Accent' Operators – Temporary Permit.

(AQW 14458/11-15)

Mr Attwood: To date (as of 4 October 2012) the Department has received 3784 applications for temporary permits and issued 2000 permits. Applications are continuing to arrive on a daily basis.

The Department continues to pursue a range of measures to encourage applications for permits from organisations using goods vehicles that are not exempted from the provisions of the Act, highlighting the benefits that accrue to an operator who makes use of the permit process. Officials are also preparing further education and compliance measures to ensure that the benefits of the Goods Vehicles Act are delivered.

Councils: Bonfire Sites

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the cost of clearing up bonfire sites after the Eleventh and Twelfth of July events in each of the 26 councils; and (ii) the cost of clearing up bonfire sites after Nationalist-related events in each of the 26 councils, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14540/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The table below sets out the costs incurred by some District Councils in clearing up bonfire sites – the figures do not include any expenditure by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which is responsible for clearing up bonfire residue on its own land.

Where the figures have not been split according to the origin of the bonfire, one total is quoted.

I will write to you with an update should the other Councils provide us with further details.

AQW 14540 – Clean up costs for a) 12 July and b) Nationalist bonfires in each of the last 5 years

	2008 a	2008 b	2009 a	2009 b	2010 a	2010 b	2011 a	2011 b	2012 a		2012 b
Antrim	Figures not provided								£1567.35		nil
Ards	£10130		£7549		£9238		£4049		£38315		
Armagh											
Ballymena	£5,617	£4,640	£3,701	nil	£11,084	nil	£7,619	nil	£6,274		nil
Ballymoney	£5098.32	£1653.12	£5057.70	£1247.40	£5804.04	£1340.64	£4257.92	£1696.00	£7836.80		not available
Banbridge	£1000 - £1200	nil	£1000 - £1200	nil	£1000 - £1200	nil	£1000 - £1200	nil	£1282		nil
Belfast	£15400	£3700	£16100	nil	£17300	nil	£20200	nil	£14400		nil
Carrickfergus	£576.90	nil	£592.67	nil	£598.59	nil	£598.59	nil	£587.35		nil
Castlereagh	See note 2 below	nil	See note 2 below	nil	See note 2 below	nil	See note 2 below	nil	See note 2 below		nil
Cookstown	£380	nil	£460	nil	£478	nil	£367	nil	£730		nil
Coleraine	£300	nil	£300	nil	£300	nil	£300	nil	£300	nil	
Craigavon	£19,923.74		£13695.01		£21737		£16513.98		£11993.88		nil
	2008 a	2008 b	2009 a	2009 b	2010 a	2010 b	2011 a	2011 b	2012 a		2012 b
Derry											
Down	No figures available								£2,000		
Dungannon											
Fermanagh	Nil										
Larne	£9,151		£12,126		£9,201		£7,985		£4,055		
Limavady	£248.60		£225.80		£265		£396		£251.80		
Lisburn	£9,270.19		£1,826.75		£2,306.84		£4,326.39		£2,298.12		
Magherafelt	£3,000	£900	£930	£1,270	£2,160	£1,080	£2,800	£1,400	£2,956.00		nil
Moyle	No figures available				£211.91		£1473.46		£990.22		
Newry and Mourne	See note 1 below										
Newtownabbey	£2816.20	nil	£5304.86	nil	£1760.60	nil	£6380.90	nil	£1780.00		nil
North Down											
Omagh	£0		£400		£1358		£0		£350		
Strabane	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil		nil

1 12th July bonfire clear-ups for past 5 years - £3102.81; Nationalist related bonfire clear-ups for past 5 years - £14750.00; Halloween bonfire clear-ups for past 5 years - £119705.00 (22 No. sites)

2 £29,001.23 over past 5 years

Councils: Management Structures

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment whether he is aware of the development of agreed management structures for each council under the reform of local government.

(AQW 14545/11-15)

Mr Attwood: New council management structures will be a matter for the transition committees and new councils to develop. Local Government is likely to consider recommendations for harmonising management structures across the Sector as part of the Human Resources workstream of the Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency programme.

Local Government Reform: Rates Convergence

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment what is the expected level of rates convergence across each new proposed council under the reform of local government

(AQW 14546/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am fully aware of the concerns which have been expressed by elected representatives, the business sector, and others, about rates convergence and debt issues arising from the implementation of local government reform.

The Regional Transition Committee, which I chair, has commissioned the senior local and central government officers in the Finance Working Group to examine the financial implications of rates and legacy debt convergence, develop plans and procedures for minimising any negative impact of change, and ensure that those affected are treated as fairly and equitably as possible.

The group is currently developing detailed financial models to quantify the impact on rate levels, arising from local government reform, across each of the councils.

In parallel with this the group is also examining a wide range of options for minimising the impact of these rate changes, I have, of course, raised the issue of rates convergence with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. A paper is being developed in relation to the issue. In my view, there will be a requirement to provide transitional rates assistance.

Local Government Reform: Redundancies

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) how many redundancies are expected in local councils as a consequence of the reform of local government, (ii) if funds have been set aside for redundancy packages, (iii) the appeals process and (iv) whether, in light of the existing levels of remuneration across local councils, redundancy packages and new starting salaries will be harmonised.

(AQW 14547/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Executive's decision to reduce the number of councils to 11 will mean a need for fewer staff than are employed by the existing 26 councils. Further work is ongoing to quantify this and to determine costs for the councils, which as the employing authorities will be responsible for the costs of officer redundancy packages and will be required to make funds available for this purpose.

I am conscious of and wish to minimise the potential impacts on those likely to be affected, and this is being taken fully on board as preparations progress. Central to this is the Local Government Reform Joint Forum which was set up to ensure that the impacts upon affected staff are thoroughly considered and negotiated between staff representative organisations and employing authorities. The work of the Joint Forum and its negotiations are underpinned by the commitment to act in the best interests of the affected staff, according to guiding principles agreed by the Executive.

A fundamental aspect of these principles is to make every effort to avoid compulsory redundancies, and a severance scheme for common application across councils is being developed by the Joint Forum. Similarly a model transfer scheme is being developed to set out the terms and conditions, including dispute resolution, pension and salary, under which staff will move from existing councils to new councils.

The harmonisation of terms and conditions, including salaries for staff in councils, is also being considered as part of the HR Implementation timetable for reform of local government in the long term.

Local Government Reform: Chief Executives and Senior Posts

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment whether new Chief Executives and senior staff will be in post in advance of the next election to shadow councils.

(AQW 14548/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I believe that it is important to create certainty as soon as possible and that the reform change process must be driven by a senior manager – be that an interim Chief Executive or a Chief Executive Designate. For this reason, the Statutory Transition Committees, which I intend to establish early next year, will have the power to appoint staff. Discussions regarding the underlying principles and timings for competitions for senior posts are being taken forward within the implementation structures I have established; I expect to receive recommendations shortly and will settle the issue as soon as possible thereafter. I believe that the earlier, not later, appointment of staff is the best way to go.

Cyclists: Road Fatalities

Mr Weir asked Minister of the Environment to detail, in each of the last five years, (i) the number of cyclist road deaths and (ii) the percentage that cyclist road deaths represents in overall road deaths.

(AQW 14561/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The requested information is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Pedal cyclist road fatalities as a percentage of all road fatalities, 2007 - 2011

Year	Pedal cyclists killed	All road users killed	Cyclist deaths as proportion of all road deaths
2007	2	113	1.8%
2008	2	107	1.9%
2009	0	115	0.0%
2010	0	55	0.0%
2011	2	59	3.4%

Source: PSNI

Sea Fishing Defence

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the legal and policy reasons for not removing the sea fishing defence between nought and six nautical miles.

(AQW 14599/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There are no overarching legal requirements for retaining the sea fishing defence between the nought to six nautical miles limit. Fishing activity should be treated equally within our territorial waters; irrespective of whether it is two nautical miles out or eight nautical miles out.

I have thus far taken the policy decision to retain the scope of the sea fishing defence, but appreciate there is a contrary view.

This position mirrors the provisions included in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and Marine (Scotland) Act 2010. To remove the defence may lead to a fragmented approach among fishing interests in our waters and other marine areas. It would also not be reasonable to penalise or disadvantage our inshore fishing fleet while those fishing offshore can remain unaffected.

I would point out that the defence relates only to authorised fishing activity. It also only applies when it can be demonstrated that such activity could not have been reasonably avoided and as such fishermen must abide by the rules of their licence. In addition, the licencing authority would be under a duty to ensure that any activity, for which they may be responsible, would not be detrimental to an MCZ.

Killard Point ASSI: Intertidal Survey

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the findings of the most recent intertidal survey of the Killard Point Area of Special Scientific Interest.

(AQW 14602/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The intertidal area of Killard Point Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)

was originally surveyed in the 1980s by Herriot Watt University under contract to the Department and found to consist of a good diversity of fauna and flora associated with bedrock. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency intertidal survey team repeated the survey within Killard Point ASSI in July 2012 following the same methodology and transects used in by Herriot Watt. There were no signs of nutrient enrichment, direct pollution or sewage related debris. The species encountered were similar in all respects to those reported in the 1980s and NIEA has determined that the site remains in favourable condition.

Sea Squirts: Strangford Lough

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether it has been confirmed that the invasive sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum* has spread throughout Strangford Lough; and (ii) whether his Department has finalised plans to manage the situation.

(AQW 14603/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Following the discovery of the probable invasive sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum* in Strangford Lough samples were sent to an expert in Britain to verify the species identity. I can confirm that these samples were verified as being *Didemnum vexillum* on 26th September 2012.

The survey in which *Didemnum vexillum* was discovered examined over ten other sites in Strangford Lough and the species was not detected at any of these sites. Samples of what are believed to be native sea squirts were taken and verification of these is awaited. Following the initial find, further dive surveys were undertaken by staff from the NIEA on 25th September 2012 in the vicinity of the original discovery to assess the distribution of the species in the immediate area. Further dive surveys will be undertaken to confirm whether it has spread beyond the area of the initial find.

I have requested that a group is set up to co-ordinate action to address this new threat. This group will use existing information and the finds of further surveys to determine what control options, if any, should be used and develop an action

plan for delivery. The plan is expected to include a monitoring programme to assess distribution of the species and the effects of any control actions. In the meantime NIEA is commissioning a feasibility study to assess potential management options. To help advise the Department on its options, NIEA has sought advice from marine scientists in the Countryside Council for Wales who have extensive experience in managing this species in Holyhead Harbour in Wales.

Invasive Species

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the content of the recent discussions at the British/Irish Council regarding invasive species; and what plans are in place to tackle invasive species on an all-Ireland basis.
(AQW 14604/11-15)

Mr Attwood: At the British-Irish Council Environment workstream meeting held in Vogrie Country Park, Edinburgh, on 7 September 2012, Ministers discussed the development of biodiversity policy and delivery mechanisms for dealing with invasive species across Member Administrations. Ministers also recognised the threat that invasive species pose to the island ecosystems which make up the British-Irish Council membership. Following the presentation by GB's Non-Native Species Secretariat, Ministers discussed existing awareness campaigns, how to improve monitoring, warning systems and risk assessment across British-Irish Council Member Administrations and the potential for an expert meeting in the run-up to the anticipated EU Directive. A report of the meeting was made in my Statement to the Assembly on 25 September 2012.

Since 2006, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has jointly funded the Invasive Species Ireland Project with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). This all-Ireland project is overseen by a Steering Group which is made up of representatives from a wide range of departments, state bodies, agencies and academia. It provides a mechanism to help co-ordinate action for invasive species on an all-Ireland basis.

The Department recognises the need for partnership working with our colleagues in the South to achieve long term success in tackling invasive species. This is particularly of importance for our cross border river catchments and our shared sea loughs. In 2011, the Department and our counterparts in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) provided part funding to a large scale £2.6 million InterReg IVA funded project, led by the Queens University Belfast, known the CIRB Project (Controlling priority Invasive species and Restoring native Biodiversity). This project aims to eradicate riparian invasive species, such as Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed, from river catchments in both the North and South of Ireland. In addition in the past year both departments have again worked together to develop a European LIFE+ funding bid which will focus on marine invasive species.

Vehicle Licensing: Online Payment

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department is taking to introduce a facility for taxing cars online.
(AQW 14622/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea, which has responsibility for the collection of vehicle excise duty across the UK, on behalf of the Department for Transport, are currently developing a fully integrated IT system that would bring vehicle licensing services in Northern Ireland into line with those in Britain and improve services to customers by facilitating online applications and more services from Post Offices.

A separate study is also examining options for the future delivery of vehicle licensing services following systems integration.

DVLA plan to have the integrated IT system ready by June 2013 but its implementation is tied into the proposals for the future of vehicle licensing services here. Following the recent ministerial changes at Westminster I have again written to the Secretary of State for Transport acknowledging the proposed expansion of improved services for customers here but emphasising my opposition to any reduction in jobs in NI as a consequence. I have had meetings with the previous Secretary of State for NI and the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Transport and further meetings are planned with the new Ministers. I have been assured that no decision will be made without further consultation with me.

Vehicle Licensing: Post Offices

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to seek an increase in the number of Post Office branches that are eligible to tax cars using the V10(NI) form.
(AQW 14623/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Under a UK wide contract managed by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, 155 Post Offices in Northern Ireland currently provide motor tax licensing facilities for customers who can produce motor tax reminder notices before their tax discs expire. Of these, 19 also offer an additional service of processing V10 tax renewal applications for customers who do not have reminder notices or who want to notify changes of keeper or address, or submit statutory off road notifications.

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, which has responsibility for the collection of vehicle excise duty across the UK, on behalf of the Department for Transport (DfT), are currently examining how they can deliver a fully integrated IT system that would bring vehicle licensing services in Northern Ireland into line with those in Britain and improve services to customers by facilitating online applications and introducing more services from Post Offices, including the extension of the V10 relicensing service.

I am currently involved in discussions and negotiations with Ministers at DfT on these proposals, with a view both to enhancing the availability of services for customers in Northern Ireland and also to protecting the economy and jobs, and the question of expanding Post Office services will be dealt with in that context.

Unauthorised Quarrying: Environmental Impact

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment whether he is aware of any incidents over the last five years in which unauthorised quarrying has had an environmental impact on local rivers.

(AQW 14640/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My Department takes all incidents of unauthorised quarrying very seriously and I am aware of a number of such developments that are operating without planning permission or in contravention of an existing planning permission. All of these identified developments have been, or are currently subject to DOE Planning's enforcement procedures.

Uncontrolled quarrying and related activities have the potential to impact upon both groundwater and surface water. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has recorded 123 pollution incidents taking place in the last 5 years where the source of the pollution has been identified as a quarrying operation.

In relation to these 123 identified pollution incidents, 87 were classified as low severity, 35 as medium severity and one incident was classified as high severity. A total of 7 of these incidents resulted in a prosecution being taken against the offender.

Where a quarrying operation is impacting upon groundwater or surface waters, regardless of the development's status in relation to the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, NIEA will take enforcement action with a view to stopping the identified impact and to act as a deterrent against further actions that may result in an impact on the water environment.

I can assure you that my officials take breaches of planning or environmental legislation very seriously and have established policies and procedures, as well as statutory powers, for taking action when such breaches are identified.

Aspergillosis

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the problem of Aspergillosis that may result from composting kitchen and garden waste.

(AQW 14651/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Aspergillosis is a respiratory disorder that is one of the hazards associated with a fungus that is commonly found in decaying vegetation such as green and kitchen wastes.

The fungus, *Aspergillus fumigatus*, is present in the Bioaerosols produced by the composting process and is an Occupational Health and Safety issue, primarily for those working in the industry. The Health and Safety Executive of Northern Ireland (HSENI) has guidance for those carrying out such activities. The HSENI believes that the occupational risk of workers contracting Aspergillosis from working with composted kitchen and garden waste is low. Employers adhering to the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (NI) 2003 can easily control the risk through good systems of work that minimise the amount of dust becoming airborne and working practices that minimise dust and bioaerosols being breathed in.

Further information on the health risks of working with green waste can be found in "Green Waste Collection: Health Issues" published by the Health and Safety Executive (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/waste02.pdf>)

The majority of regulated composting facilities are in vessels where the air within is properly managed thus mitigating the risk for both operatives and those living adjacent

Used Tyres: Disposal

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to deal with the issue of the disposal of used tyres.

(AQW 14659/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has developed a Tyres Action Plan which includes various proposals, a number of which are completed or being actively pursued:

- Consultants are currently working on the Used Tyres Survey looking at used tyre arisings and flows. A draft report is scheduled to be completed in October 2012.
- Periodic in-depth audits and enforcement of waste licensed sites is ongoing and has resulted in a number of warning letters, Enforcement Notices, Licence Revocations, a major financial asset confiscation case and case files being prepared for the Public Prosecution Service (PPS).
- Discussions are taking place with other regulators and the Waste Resource Action Program (WRAP) regarding quality standards for crumbed and baled tyres and a Quality Protocol for crumbed tyres.
- Implementation of a Flytipping Pilot Project with 11 District Councils is ongoing.
- Contact has been made with the Chief Environmental Health Officers Group regarding the establishment of a joint strategy for bonfires, which would include the use of tyres as bonfire material and the widespread environmental and social implications of bonfires.

- A comprehensive Duty of Care audit of tyre retailers, waste tyre collectors and recyclers has been completed.
- A good working relationship has been established with the District Councils in relation to part worn tyres and joint audit and enforcement visits are planned.

The purpose of all of these actions is to bring about a long term resolution to the tyre problem and at the same time provide sustainable solutions for the reuse, recycling and recovery of tyres.

The Environment Committee has completed an Interim Inquiry Report into Used Tyre Disposal. The Report includes 20 recommendations to which the Department has provided an initial response and which it will consider in the context of the Committee's final report, in conjunction with the Tyres Action Plan.

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to supplier invoices paid by councils during the period 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012, to detail (i) the number of invoices paid; and (ii) how many invoices were paid (a) within 30 days; and (b) later than 30 days following receipt of the supplier's invoice; and (iii) which councils impose a payment term other than 30 days.

(AQW 14667/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Responses to these questions have already been provided. I would refer Mr Campbell to the following replies:

- (i) AQW 14452/11-15
- (ii)(a) AQW 14452/11-15 (ii) (a)
- (ii)(b) AQW 14452/11-15 (ii) (b)
- (iii) AQW 14450/11-15 (i) and (ii)

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to supplier invoices paid by councils during the period 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012, (i) to detail the number of invoices paid within 10 working days of receipt of the supplier's invoice; (ii) to list the councils that paid 90 percent, or more, of supplier's invoices within 10 working days of receipt; and (iii) to list the councils which failed to achieve the 90 percent payment performance target set out in Section 3.1.5 of the Central Procurement Directorate's Procurement Guidance Note 06/12 of 11 July 2012.

(AQW 14668/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Responses to these questions have already been provided. I would refer Mr Campbell to the reply to AQW 14451/11-15.

Beaches

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the timescale for a new contract for the maintenance and cleaning of beaches.

(AQW 14672/11-15)

Mr Attwood: NIEA is utilising a combination of its own staff and an existing contract, procured through the Department of Finance and Personnel, to clean and maintain its properties.

NIEA will review the performance of its existing arrangements, including costs, before coming to a decision on how to service its properties; this will be done after the close of the high visitor season in October.

Should the analysis be in favour of retendering NIEA will work towards having a new contract in place by 1 April 2013.

Glenavy: Waste Incinerator

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the time that has passed since the original application for a Chicken Waste Incinerator at Glenavy and given the fact that European attitudes to incineration and the economic climate have changed substantially in the intervening years, whether he will request an independent economic appraisal, with particular focus on the impact of the plant on the South Antrim economy, in light of the concerns raised by Randox and the local community; and, given that the EU Commission is now urging member states to adopt approaches other than incineration, citing the fact that incineration is a waste of precious nutrients and not a sustainable solution, whether he plans to inform the applicants that their proposals are unacceptable.

(AQW 14696/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am fully aware of the arguments being presented for and against the proposed Waste Incinerator at Glenavy and I have instructed officials to carefully consider a range of issues.

There is already a large volume of information both in support and in objection to this proposal, including objections from Randox. The economic impacts will form part of the determination of the planning application along with all other material planning matters which includes the grounds for objection and the comments of consultees. At this time there is no need for a

further economic appraisal at this stage which will only delay the decision making process further. I also note the position of the EU in relation to incineration of chicken waste which will be taken into account in the final analysis.

Public Transport: Audio-visual Information

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether he intends to introduce legislation that would require all public transport vehicles to provide onboard audio-visual information; and what is the timescale for the introduction of any such legislation.

(AQW 14718/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am aware that the Department for Regional Development recently undertook a successful pilot study using audio visual equipment on buses and at stops on a single bus route. The study report, in concluding that there were clear benefits for all bus passengers, indicated that the total cost of roll out across the Translink fleet alone would be in the region of £6.8 million. Given the limited scope of the pilot study and the significant financial impact on the bus industry of bringing forward legislation requiring the mandatory fitting of such equipment, I have asked officials to undertake further scoping and evaluation of audio visual technology to further inform my decision making on this matter.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 provides DOE with the powers to set the accessibility requirements for public service vehicles, including buses. The current requirements are contained in the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (NI) 2003 and these could be amended to introduce requirements for the fitting of audio visual equipment on buses.

My Department is also in the process of bringing forward regulations which place certain duties on bus drivers to assist passengers with impairments. Currently the legislation focuses on the deployment of steps and improving accessibility for wheelchair users and those with mobility impairments. I have asked that these regulations include requirements that the driver provide passengers with information about the route they are on and let them know, on request, when they have reached their required stop. I anticipate that this may alleviate some of the difficulties people with impairments face when accessing public transport. The draft regulations are being scrutinised by the Departmental Solicitor's Office and I anticipate that consultation on proposals will take place in 2013.

Taxi Operators Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department has taken to assist public hire and individual private hire taxis in adapting to the Taxi Operating Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

(AQW 14719/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In designing the taxi operator licensing regime my Department took account of the needs of the small operator by making provision for them to obtain a small operator licence which incorporates a reduced grant fee. During my consideration of the licensing regime I identified that the requirement to pay, in advance, for a five year operator licence could have a disproportionately adverse impact on an individual or small operator which is why the licensing regime that I approved allows operators to choose to be licensed for one, three or five years. In addition I have reduced the application fee by £100, during the transition into the licensing regime, and the individual or small operator will, proportionately, benefit most from this.

Since announcing the introduction of Taxi Operator Licensing from 1 September 2012, my Department has engaged with the industry in a variety of ways to assist all taxi operators in adapting to the new regulations.

In July my Department wrote to all taxi drivers and taxi vehicle owners providing information on the licensing regime and inviting them to attend specific workshops events where they could find out what they needed to do to become licensed operators. The workshops, held in Belfast, Omagh, Derry and Newry, were also advertised in the local press. It was anticipated that the workshops would be of particular benefit to individuals and small operators as they were designed as one on one advice sessions offering tailored advice about individual businesses.

In addition a taxi operator manual has been produced which gives detailed information on the application process, the duties of a licensed operator, the records that have to be kept and how the licensing regime will be monitored and enforced. Included with the manual are templates which an operator can use to keep their records. These templates are likely to be of most use to individuals or small operators who, for the first time, will have to keep records in a systematic way.

Since the regulations became law in September officials from the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) and Road Safety and Vehicle Regulation Division have been available to answer questions and give advice. RSVRD alone has answered 80 written queries from individuals within the industry since July, as well as meeting with drivers face to face when requested. NIDirect has assisted by answering over 800 calls on the Taxi Information Line during this time, providing information and issuing application packs where necessary.

To date DVA have received over 300 applications for taxi operator licenses many of which are from individuals. I am therefore content that my Department is providing effective support to the small operator to help them comply with the new rules.

DVA has also been proactive in raising the industry's awareness of the new legal requirements associated with taxi operator licensing by engaging with drivers at the roadside. This has included the distribution of educational material, including information leaflets and a new taxi operator handbook that provides guidance on how to obtain a licence and details the standards the Department expects from licence holders in the course of running their businesses.

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment how the plastic bag levy will be implemented over the course of the next financial year.

(AQW 14738/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations will come into operation on 8 April 2013. The Regulations will require sellers to charge their customers a 5 pence levy for a broad range of single use carrier bags, not just those made of plastic. The Regulations will also require sellers to pay the proceeds of the levy to the Department.

An in house Carrier Bag Levy Team (CBLT), based in Derry, has been established to administer collection of the levy and ensure that sellers implement the charging arrangements effectively. In advance of 8 April 2013, retailers will be required to register as sellers of carrier bags. After that date, collection of proceeds of the levy will be undertaken on a quarterly basis.

Sellers will be able to make payments on line, with first payments due in July 2013. The CBLT will administer the process. A variety of payment methods will be available, and sellers will be able to choose the method that best suits their personal circumstances.

Dedicated Customer Relations Managers from the CBLT will provide on the ground advice and guidance to sellers identified as being liable for the levy. They will also undertake compliance and enforcement activities, and help ensure that sellers are prepared for Phase 2 of charging proposals; the extension to low cost reusable bags from April 2014 and an increase in the levy from 5 pence to 10 pence.

MOT Test: Failure Rates

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment what has been the change in the percentage of vehicles failing an initial test at each of the Vehicle Test Centres between 2001 and 2011.

(AQW 14739/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The first full year of implementation for the Driver & Vehicle Agency's computerised booking system was 2004-05, and records for failure rates by test centre for periods before that are not available.

DVA does not hold information in a format which would enable initial tests to be identified separately, so the figures below relate only to full tests. However, this would affect only a small number of tests, and the effect on the statistics provided should not be significant.

It should be noted that fail rates can change over time for a variety of reasons. For example, there may be changes in the composition of the stock of vehicles being presented for tests eg a test centre where the proportion of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) being presented for testing has increased is likely to see a reduction in the overall pass rate.

The fail rates for vehicle tests in 2004/05 and 2011/12, and the percentage change at each test centre, are shown below.

Vehicle Test Fail Rates for Full Tests by Test Centre for 2004/05 and 2011/12

Test Centre	Fail Rate 2004/05 (%)	Fail Rate 2011/12 (%)	Percentage Point Change (%)
Armagh	25.53	23.46	-2.07
Ballymena	21.00	21.45	0.45
Balmoral	22.20	18.30	-3.90
Coleraine	20.60	21.52	0.92
Cookstown	28.40	27.54	-0.86
Craigavon	30.13	22.47	-7.66
Downpatrick	22.64	21.02	-1.62
Enniskillen	19.39	24.98	5.59
Larne	14.07	21.49	7.43
Lisburn	23.70	18.93	-4.76
New Buildings	23.91	25.03	1.12
Mallusk	22.78	22.31	-0.48
Newry	22.47	22.26	-0.21
Newtownards	21.88	20.79	-1.09
Omagh	25.24	23.08	-2.16
Total	22.76	22.03	-0.73

Agricultural and Equestrian Animal Carcasses: Illegal Dumping

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many cases of illegal dumping of agricultural and equestrian animal carcasses have been (i) reported; and (ii) dealt with, in each council area in each of the last three years; and how many individual carcasses were dumped.

(AQW 14741/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The figures in the attached table are a combined total from local Councils and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

I will write to you with a further update following receipt of any additional data.

AQW 14741 – cases of illegal dumping of agricultural and equestrian animal carcasses (i) reported and dealt with, in each council area in each of the last three years and ii) how many individual carcasses were dumped.

	2010 i)	2010 ii)	2011 i)	2011 ii)	2012 i)	2012 ii)
Antrim	2	3	1	1	1	2
Ards**						
Armagh**						
Ballymena	11	not recorded	8	not recorded	4	not recorded
Ballymoney	5	7	4	6	3	6
Banbridge**						
Belfast**						
Carrickfergus	0	0	2	5	0	0
Castlereagh	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown**						
Coleraine	3	3	2	2	3	3
Craigavon	1	1	2	1* see note 1 below	0	0
Derry**						
Down	4	6	1	1	1	1
Dungannon**						
Fermanagh	39	48	50	61	35	39
Larne	5	6	1	2	4	7
Limavady	4	6	10	13	9	11
Lisburn	2	3	2	2	0	0
Magherafelt	10	10	9	9	6	6
Moyle	9	24	12	39	13	28
Newry and Mourne	Total of 158 carcasses dumped in the last three years					
Newtownabbey	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Down	0	0	0	0	0	0
Omagh**						
Strabane**						

1 Craigavon – 1 animal lifted, 1 animal left in water – no further action taken

** No data supplied.

Planning: Roadside Advertising

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration has been given to reviewing the policy in relation to roadside advertising signage for businesses, particularly given the current economic situation.

(AQW 14767/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The statutory requirement for advertisements is set out in the Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992.

The regulations allow for a level of advertisement to be “deemed” as granted if it complies with certain conditions such as size, height, illumination and number of advertisements relating to the profession, business or trade at the premises where it is displayed. The full details of the Regulations are available to view on the Planning website www.planningni.gov.uk

If an advertisement is not granted deemed consent, then the Departments express consent will be required before it can be displayed. Where the Department receives an application for express consent it will assess the effect of the display of the advertisement on amenity and public safety (particularly road safety). In this respect, the Department will normally consult Roads Service if the advertisement is alongside a major road.

The Department is presently focused on a significant legislative change programme to bring forward planning reform and help to address some of the difficulties being experienced by businesses in the current economic climate. These proposals, staff returning to planning, strong management of article 31 applications, new senior management team, new PPS policies, ensuring prompt and full NIEA responses working with the economic sectors (etc) are all interventions to reconfigure planning.

A small number of signage cases have been referred to me, but I have not received particular representation on roadside advertising.

Social Housing: New Schemes

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he and his officials have had with their counterparts in the Department for Social Development over the last twelve months on the delays in new social housing schemes. (AQW 14785/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning officials meet on a bi-annual basis with representatives from NIHE in relation to new social housing schemes and planning applications currently in the planning system. General planning advice is provided in relation to proposed schemes and, on occasion, issues with particular applications may also be highlighted.

In addition, regular monitoring meetings are conducted by Area Planning Offices in relation to the social housing programmes for that area.

There are occasions when the Department is requested to give priority to certain individual applications such as those on which grant-aid may depend or those with a clear strategic, employment, community or public interest dimension. In this respect, applications for social housing would be given priority.

The Department will continue to work with key stakeholders to ensure that planning delivers benefits to all in an efficient and timely manner.

Planning Applications: Major Retail Developments

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the difference in the number of planning applications for major retail outlets in out of town locations between 2001 and 2011. (AQW 14794/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Applications for major retail developments have been identified and manual checks have enabled proposals in excess of 1,000 sq m gross retail floorspace, which are located outside defined town centres to be highlighted.

Based on historic records, 23 applications (2 of which were subject to Article 31 procedures) were received within the 2001 calendar year.

For the 2011 calendar year, records show that 18 applications (7 of which were subject to Article 31 procedures) were received.

The trend shows a decrease in terms of overall major retail applications, but a significant increase in the number of Article 31 proposals. Some time back I instructed officials to bring forward a new PPS 5, to better manage retail applications, particularly the requirement for “in town” over “out of town”.

Councils: Adverse Weather

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment whether councils are prepared for heavy snow falls in the coming winter. (AQW 14804/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Councils have Emergency Plans in place and Emergency Planning Officers to assist lead agencies in their response and any recovery aspect of an emergency situation, including those caused by adverse weather conditions. In addition, following the experience of severe winter conditions in 2010 / 2011 councils have engaged with Roads Service (Department for Regional Development) in agreeing a protocol and Memorandum of Understanding, ‘Clearing Busy Town Centre Footways and Pedestrian Areas of Snow and Ice’ in respect of salting and clearing of footways.

Review of Public Administration: Costs

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the amount spent on the local government reform aspect of the Review of Public Administration at the end of August 2012; (ii) the projected ongoing cost of local government reform under

the Review of Public Administration to the end of April 2015; and (iii) the total cost to his Department and local councils of managing the reform of local government.

(AQW 14823/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Up to 31 August 2012, the Department's Local Government Policy Division's expenditure in respect of local government reform is £12.6m. This includes staff and support costs, grant funding for NILGA and the Transition Committees, costs of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and consultants' fees. These figures are from the initiation of this project back in 2005 and are detailed in the table below.

Costs to 31 August 2012

Year	£
2005/2006	193,951
2006/2007	1,646,421
2007/2008	1,324,461
2008/2009	2,610,990
2009/2010	3,321,871
2010/2011	2,341,286
2011/2012	852,258
2012/2013 to date	316,057
Totals	12,607,295

The economic appraisal of local government service delivery, published by PricewaterhouseCoopers in October 2009, indicated that under the preferred option (i.e. Transformation with Regional Collaboration) implementation of the local government reform programme could involve expenditure of up to £118 million over five years and achieve savings of £438 million over twenty five years.

The Regional Transition Committee, which I chair, has commissioned the senior local and central government officers in the Finance Working Group, to re-examine the costs and benefits of reform taking account a range of key factors. These include the 2015 timescale for reform set out in the Programme for Government (2011-15), the sector's Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency proposals and the changed economic climate in which reform is now being taken forward.

The group will be working closely with the Transition Committees in developing the costs and benefits of reform in their constituent councils. The appraisal will include the ongoing projected costs of reform to the end of April 2015 along with the total costs to the Department and councils in managing the reform process.

Councils: Retired Staff Re-employed

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 13833/11-15, whether the job title for this member of staff remained the same when they returned after retirement, albeit in a part time capacity, or whether another post and job title was created.

(AQW 14840/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I would refer the Member to the answer to AQW 13833/11-15, when I previously stated that the job description for the new post had no similarities to the previous post. Similarly the Job title had no similarities with the previous post.

Marine Bill: Sellafeld

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment (i) why Sellafeld Nuclear Plant has not been included in the proposed Marine Bill; (ii) whether he will include the plant in the Bill; and (iii) whether a report on the plant will be produced, including the effects on the eco-system and public health.

(AQW 14845/11-15)

Mr Attwood:

- (i) Nuclear energy and nuclear installations are excepted matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and, as such, are not within the Department's remit. Moreover, the Marine Bill covers the marine area 0-14 nautical miles, with Sellafeld outside that limit; (ii) Consequently the Sellafeld site will not be included in the Marine Bill – to do so would be beyond the competence of the NI Assembly and will be until such times as the power is transferred. The Department will continue its programme of monitoring the effect of radioactive discharges from nuclear installations on the Northern Ireland coastline; and (iii) A joint report, Radioactivity in Food and the Environment (RIFE), is published annually by Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Environment Agency, Food Standards Agency, and Northern Ireland Environment Agency. This report gathers the results of radiological monitoring and demonstrates that, in Northern Ireland, food is safe and the public's exposure to ionising radiation from discharges is insignificant.

Drivers: New Driver Provisions

Ms Brown asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on when new driver initiatives will be introduced.
(AQO 2534/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I plan to seek the introduction of a Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly in December 2012 that will include provisions to tackle drink driving in Northern Ireland, the reform of the Learner and Restricted Driver schemes and introduction of a system of Graduated Driver Licensing, together with proposals concerning the wearing of helmets on quadricycles.

I will do everything possible to have this Bill passed before summer 2013. I am aware, however, that it will form part of an extensive legislative programme placed before the Assembly and Environment Committee. I do not, therefore, expect that any of the new driver provisions will be able to be implemented before early 2014.

I also plan to develop a second Road Traffic Amendment Bill that will include provisions for the mutual recognition of penalty points for certain offences between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and measure to tackle drug driving.

The latter Bill will compete with others for a slot in the legislative programme but is expected to be ready for introduction in the 2013/2014 session.

Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what is the projected cost of the proposed political reference group for the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 14893/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In driving the Local Government Reform Programme, I have been careful to ensure that everyone is fully engaged in the process. On 18th September 2012, I wrote to the leader of each of the seven parties represented in the Assembly to invite them to nominate members to a Political Reference Group that I intend to establish in order to ensure that the views of the political parties are represented in the reform process. The leader of each of the five parties represented in the Executive was invited to nominate two representatives to the Group – one from local government and one from the Assembly. The leaders of the Green Party and the Traditional Unionist Voice were invited to nominate one member each.

I will establish the Group shortly, once I have received nominations from all parties. The Group will meet on an ad hoc basis – the frequency of meetings will depend on when input would be useful. I envisage that the costs associated with the Group will be minimal as it will meet at Parliament Buildings or at other government buildings and there will be no further allowance payable to members.

Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the political composition of the proposed political reference group for the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 14894/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In driving the Local Government Reform Programme, I have been careful to ensure that everyone is fully engaged in the process. On 18th September 2012, I wrote to the leader of each of the seven parties represented in the Assembly to invite them to nominate members to a Political Reference Group that I intend to establish in order to ensure that the views of the political parties are represented in the reform process. The leader of each of the five parties represented in the Executive was invited to nominate two representatives to the Group – one from local government and one from the Assembly. The leaders of the Green Party and the Traditional Unionist Voice were invited to nominate one member each.

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Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what is the timescale for the establishment of the proposed political reference group for the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 14896/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In driving the Local Government Reform Programme, I have been careful to ensure that everyone is fully engaged in the process. On 18th September 2012, I wrote to the leader of each of the seven parties represented in the Assembly to invite them to nominate members to a Political Reference Group that I intend to establish in order to ensure that the views of the political parties are represented in the reform process. The leader of each of the five parties represented in the Executive was invited to nominate two representatives to the Group – one from local government and one from the Assembly. The leaders of the Green Party and the Traditional Unionist Voice were invited to nominate one member each.

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will be minimal as it will meet at Parliament Buildings or at other government buildings and there will be no further allowance payable to members.

Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how often the proposed political reference group for the Review of Public Administration will meet.

(AQW 14897/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In driving the Local Government Reform Programme, I have been careful to ensure that everyone is fully engaged in the process. On 18th September 2012, I wrote to the leader of each of the seven parties represented in the Assembly to invite them to nominate members to a Political Reference Group that I intend to establish in order to ensure that the views of the political parties are represented in the reform process. The leader of each of the five parties represented in the Executive was invited to nominate two representatives to the Group – one from local government and one from the Assembly. The leaders of the Green Party and the Traditional Unionist Voice were invited to nominate one member each.

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Planning Policy Statement 5

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment at what stage is the revision of PPS5; and what is the timetable for introducing the draft as policy.

(AQW 14901/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Work to bring forward new planning policy for town centres and retailing is underway.

The Department will soon be engaging consultants to update the evidential context in relation to town centres and retailing and to undertake engagement with stakeholders. This necessary research will inform the development of new retail and town centre policy to be included within a Single Planning Policy Statement (SPPS).

It is intended that a draft Single Planning Policy Statement will issue for public consultation towards the end of next year and be finalised as soon as practicable in 2014.

Existing draft PPS 5 'Retailing, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure Developments' (published 2006) remains the subject of ongoing legal challenge with the case due to come before the Supreme Court in February 2013.

Water Pollution: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment how many incidents of river pollution have been recorded in the North Down area, for each of the last two years; and which rivers were affected.

(AQW 14905/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Tables 1 and 2 below detail the number of substantiated water pollution incidents recorded by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in the North Down area in each of the last 2 years. The table also details the rivers affected and the severity of the incident.

Table 1: Water Pollution Incidents and Affected Rivers North Down – 2010.

2010	Incident Severity			
River Affected	High	Medium	Low	Total
Belfast Lough	0	1	11	12
Crawfordsburn River	0	1	4	5
Tributary of the Crawfordsburn River	0	0	1	1
Croft River	0	0	1	1
Irish Sea	0	0	1	1
Tributary of Belfast Lough	0	0	8	8
Tributary of the Cuningburn River	0	0	1	1
Tributary of the Enler River	0	1	0	1
Tributary of the Irish sea	0	0	3	3
Ward Park River	0	1	4	5

2010	Incident Severity			
River Affected	High	Medium	Low	Total
			Total	38

Table 2: Water Pollution Incidents and Affected Rivers North Down – 2011.

2011	Incident Severity			
River Affected	High	Medium	Low	Total
Belfast Lough	0	0	2	2
Tributary of Belfast Lough	0	1	8	9
Crawfordsburn River	0	0	1	1
Ballyholme River	1	5	4	10
Tributary of the Ballyholme River	0	0	3	3
Tributary of the Croft River	0	0	1	1
Irish Sea	0	1	0	1
Mill Burn	0	2	0	2
Twissel Burn	0	0	2	2
Tributary of the Enler River	0	0	1	1
Ward Park River	0	3	5	8
			Total	40

Table 3 below details the number of substantiated water pollution incidents recorded by NIEA in 2012, to 30 June, in the North Down area. The table also details the rivers affected and the severity of the incident.

Table 3: Water Pollution Incidents and Affected Rivers North Down – 2012 (to 30 June 2012).

2012 to 30 June 2012	Incident Severity			
River Affected	High	Medium	Low	Total
Belfast Lough	0	0	8	8
Tributary of Belfast Lough	0	0	3	3
Crawfordsburn River	0	1	1	2
Croft River	0	0	2	2
Irish Sea	0	1	0	1
Tributary of the Crawfordsburn River	0	0	2	2
Tributary of the Irish Sea	0	0	1	1
Ward Park River	0	2	3	5
			Total	24

The environmental impacts of water pollution incidents are classified by their 'Severity' i.e. High, Medium or Low Severity. The definition of each severity class is detailed in Appendix A.

Appendix A: Water Pollution Incident - Severity Criteria.

High Severity

A major incident involving one or more of the following:

- potential or actual persistent effect on water quality or aquatic life;
- closure of potable water, industrial or agricultural abstraction if necessary;
- extensive fish kill;
- excessive breaches of consent conditions;
- extensive remedial measures necessary;
- major effect on amenity value.

Medium Severity

A significant pollution incident involving one or more of the following:

- a. notification to abstractors necessary;
- b. significant fish kill;
- c. measurable effect on invertebrate life;
- d. water unfit for stock;
- e. bed of watercourse contaminated;
- f. amenity value to the public, owners or users reduced by odour or appearance.

Low Severity

A minor incident resulting in localised environmental impact only. Some of the following may apply:

- a. notification to abstractors not necessary;
- b. fish kill of fewer than 10 fish (species of no particular importance to the affected water);
- c. no readily observable effect on invertebrate life;
- d. water unfit for stock;
- e. bed of watercourse only locally contaminated;
- f. minimal environmental impact and amenity only marginally affected.

Planning: Bovally, Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment why planners have made no provision for open spaces in the Bovally area of Limavady, despite the high number of new houses being built in the area.
(AQW 14969/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department published in January 1990 a Local Plan, known as the South East Lands Local Plan 1989-1999, to cover this extensive area and ensure its proper planning. This Plan identified lands for housing, commercial and recreational use, and the development of the area is still ongoing.

The Draft Northern Area Plan, which was published in May 2005 and will replace the South East Lands Local Plan when adopted, retained as zonings those areas of Bovally not yet completed, and this included the Proposed Open Space Zoning LY001. In essence the Department had identified lands suitable for public open space in this area over a number of years. However, objections were received to the zoning propose in the Draft Northern Area Plan, including one from Limavady Borough Council.

A planning application (B/2005/0399/O) was submitted for housing on this open space area. The Department refused the application as being contrary to the Adopted Plan, being prejudicial to the Draft Plan and its process, and contrary to Policy OS 1 of Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation. This decision was appealed and, following an informal hearing in July 2010, the Commissioner's decision issued in August 2010. The appeal was allowed and outline planning permission was granted by the Commission.

Notwithstanding the zoning provision, the Planning Appeals Commission determined that in the light of the record of Limavady Borough Council in not bringing this provision forward, formal open space provision was not supported and the PAC granted outline approval for housing on the larger part of the site.

The three key deliberations of the Commissioner in allowing the appeal were the fact that the site had been zoned for over 20 years in the Adopted Plan but that Limavady Borough Council had never put firm proposals to provide playing fields in place; Limavady Borough Council had objected to the proposed Open Space zoning in the Draft Plan on the basis that part of it should be developed for housing as per the planning application; and that the technical supplement that accompanied the Draft Plan indicated that there was an overprovision of playing fields in the Town of Limavady.

Conditions attached to the approval indicated that the development should be carried out broadly in accordance with the concept plan, with the exception of the provision of the playing field. The concept plan that accompanied the outline application had indicated a playing field, pavilion, children's play area and kick about area, and riverside walk. However, the conditions did not set out any timeframe for the provision of the open space and facilities nor was there any requirement that these be developed concurrently with other elements of the concept plan such as the housing.

I am aware that an application for Approval of Reserved Matters has recently been submitted in relation to approximately one quarter of the area identified as suitable for development in the outline concept. The principle of this development has been established by the PAC decision and any submission of reserved matters which is consistent with the conditions of an approval carries a legal expectation of approval. While I am aware that there has been a substantial level of public objection to the proposal, the Department is constrained by the statutory process and the granting of outline approval by the PAC.

Local Government Reform: Costs

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of the Environment whether any individual councils have yet provided ratepayers with estimates of the costs of local government reform.

(AQO 2539/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The economic appraisal of local government service delivery, published by PricewaterhouseCoopers in October 2009, indicated that the preferred option (i.e. Transformation with Regional Collaboration) could involve expenditure of up to £118 million over five years and achieve savings of £438 million over twenty-five years. These costs and savings were not, however, broken down on a council or cluster basis.

However, the Regional Transition Committee, which I chair, has tasked the senior local and central government officers in the Finance Working Group with re-examining the costs and benefits of reform, taking account of a range of key factors. These include the 2015 timescale for reform set out in the Programme for Government (2011-15), the sector's Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency proposals and the changed economic climate in which reform is now being taken forward. The group will be working closely with the Transition Committees in developing the costs and benefits of reform in their constituent councils.

Developers: Planning Conditions

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department takes to ensure that developers comply with planning conditions which are set when an application is approved.

(AQO 2540/11-15)

Mr Attwood: DOE Planning is responsible for planning control in Northern Ireland. This responsibility includes the determination of planning applications and taking whatever appropriate action for the enforcement of planning control.

As part of the assessment of an application advice may be sought from a number of agencies and organisations, such as DRD Roads Service, NI Water, and Environmental Health Departments within local councils, to inform the decision on an application.

Following the grant of planning permission, planning officers will identify particular developments which require proactive monitoring to ensure that development is carried out as approved and conditions complied with. In cases involving restrictive conditions the Department will take reasonable steps through effective monitoring and liaison with other Departments and agencies to ensure that conditions are complied with.

In addition to planning staff identifying breaches of planning control, other Departments such as Roads Service regularly alert the Department of concerns in relation to the implementation of a permission granted, including compliance with conditions stipulated as part of the planning permission.

Where planning permission has been granted subject to conditions, and one or more of these conditions has not been complied with, DoE Planning may serve a breach of condition notice. Failure to secure compliance with the notice is an offence and anyone found guilty of such an offence may be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £1000.

NIEA: Planning Applications

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of the Environment what are his Department's targets for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to respond to consultations on planning applications.

(AQO 2541/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am fully aware of the importance in providing timely responses and I have set the NIEA a key target to deliver a consultation response for 75% of routine applications within 15 working days to DOE Planning. NIEA is currently meeting this challenging target, achieving 77% in the first five months of this financial year.

Response times to planning consultations are monitored monthly by the NIEA Board. Its aim is to deliver the highest possible standard of service in terms of both quality and response time.

That said, responding does not equate to responding in full or exhaustively or on all issues raised. I believe that consultees should be measured against this standard and that includes NIEA. I have instructed officials to identify a further range of measures to upgrade response times and the quality of responses received.

Sea Squirts

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline progress on discussion with his counterparts in the Irish Republic about managing invasive species of sea squirts.

(AQO 2542/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has had ongoing discussions with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland with respect to the management of invasive species of sea squirts for several years.

In 2007, as part of the Invasive Species Ireland Project which the Department jointly funds with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, a best practice management plan was specifically developed for the carpet sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum* which has recently been found in Strangford Lough.

The Department, and our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, have been involved in the development of a UK and Ireland wide LIFE+ European funding bid, to manage marine invasive species such as the carpet sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum*.

At the recent British Irish Council meeting the importance of sharing information and co-operation to prevent the spread of invasive species was discussed. To build upon linkages and opportunities for shared working it is planned to hold an expert workshop in the near future.

On Friday 14 September 2012 a press release was issued advising of the suspected finding of the carpet sea squirt *Didemnum vexillum* in Strangford Lough. This finding has now been confirmed and initial dive surveys have taken place.

Samples which were sent to experts in Britain were confirmed as being *Didemnum vexillum* on 26th September 2012. I have requested officials to bring forward urgent proposals on how to eradicate this threat.

Climate Change Bill

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of the Environment whether a Climate Change Bill is likely to be introduced earlier than 2014.
(AQO 2543/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There are 3 major issues affecting the timescale for introducing a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill:

Firstly, DOE currently has a considerable volume of legislation in the Executive programme and it is necessary to manage the Department's available resources efficiently and effectively to ensure that all of these are completed within the current Assembly term. Legislation includes Marine, Planning, Road Traffic, Better Regulation and Local Government Sectors.

Secondly, while all of the parties represented in the Assembly agree on the need to address the issue of the North's greenhouse gas emissions, there are differences of opinion on the best way to achieve this. There is considerable political support for a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill with robust targets but it is not universal. Given the cross-cutting nature of climate change policy, it is essential that the case for a Bill is properly made and that the relevant Executive Ministers are convinced by that case.

Finally, I believe it is essential when developing any policy and legislation that we follow best practice, engaging fully and at an early stage with relevant stakeholders. Following best practice necessitates effective consultation and this clearly takes time.

I have asked officials to avail of any and all opportunities to expedite matters, I can reassure you that with Executive approval I will introduce the Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill to the Assembly as soon as I can. I believe a NI Climate Bill is a key element of enhanced ambitions, to be a world leader in carbon reduction, profile for our clean and green environment and of a sustainable economy and a growing agri-food industry.

Planning Service: Paramilitary Memorials

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment on how many occasions Planning Service has taken enforcement action in relation to paramilitary memorials erected without planning permission.
(AQO 2537/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning permission is generally required for the erection of such memorials, as they fall within the definition of development as contained in the Planning (NI) Order 1991. Therefore, if they are erected without planning permission being sought, they can be subject to enforcement action.

Since 1999 DOE Planning has assessed 18 cases in relation to unapproved memorials. No formal enforcement action was taken. Since 1999, there have been approximately 50 planning applications for various memorials, 42 were approved. I have asked for a schedule of the 50, 42 and 18 and will consider the issue further.

Environment: EU Funding

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the scope to draw down greater amounts of EU funding in the Environmental sector, particularly in relation to research and development.
(AQO 2538/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There is a real opportunity to increase the amount of EU funding drawn down in the environmental sector. The Task Force established by the President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, has given the North of Ireland dedicated access to the European institutions in Brussels.

DOE leads the Climate Change and Energy Thematic Group established under the Executive's Barroso Task Force Working Group and officials are liaising with a range of organisations, in the public and private sectors, to build networks and provide the necessary support to ensure that the PFG target of increasing the drawdown of competitive EU funds by 20% during this Assembly term is met.

There are also clear opportunities to learn from the experience of others who have already developed the mechanisms required to successfully compete for EU funds. I am developing closer links with the institutions in the South that have had particular success drawing down EU funds over the last number of years.

However, I do not find the current drawdown satisfactory. I convened a meeting in September of a senior Dublin official leading their FP7 strategy, the new Head of the EU Commission Office in Belfast, Pat McColgan Chief Executive of the Special EU Programmes Body and senior officials to identify how to better access funds now and prepare for Horizon 2020. For example, the Republic drawdown pro rata is 4 times that of NI. Opportunities do exist, following a commitment by me of direct financial support of £350k, 3 Interreg IVB projects have been successful.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Vacant Posts

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current (i) location; and (ii) number of vacant posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service at (a) Administrative Assistant; (b) Administrative Officer; (c) Executive Officer II; (d) Executive Officer I; (e) Staff Officer; and (f) Deputy Principal grades in each Department.

(AQW 13743/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The information requested is set out in the following table.

AQW 13743/11 - LOCATION & NUMBER OF VACANT POSTS IN THE NICS AT AA, AO, EO2, EO1, SO & DP - 4/9/12

	AA	Location	AO	Location	EO11	Location	EO1	Location	SO	Location	DP	Location
DARD	7	1 Ballymena	9	1 Ballymena	6	1 Enniskillen	6.5	1 Ballymena	10	2 Londonderry	3	Stormont
		1 Loughry		1 Greenmount		5 Stormont		1 Hydebank		8 Stormont		
		2 Newry		1 Londonderry				1 Londonderry				
		3 Stormont		1 Mallusk				0.5 Newry				
				5 Stormont				3 Stormont				
DCAL	0		0		0		0		1	Belfast	1	Belfast
DE	0		2	1 Bangor	1	Londonderry	0		0		5	4 Bangor
				1 Londonderry								1 Londonderry
*DEL	1	Belfast	27.29	1 Armagh	19.9	1 Armagh	17	1 Antrim	13	12 Belfast	6	5 Belfast
				1 Ballymena		11.9 Belfast		1 Ballymena		1 Newry		1 Londonderry
				13.49 Belfast		1 Carrickfergus		12 Belfast				
				1 Coleraine		1 Coleraine		1 Londonderry				
				1 Cookstown		1 Cookstown		2 Southern Region				
				1 Enniskillen		1 Foyle						
				2 Foyle		1 Lisnagelvin						
				0.8 Limavady		1 Lurgan						
				1 Lisnagelvin		1 Omagh						
				1 Lurgan								
				1 Newry								
				2 Newtownabbey								
				1 Omagh								
DETI	0		0		3	Belfast	1	Belfast	5	Belfast	4	Belfast
DFP	3	2 Belfast	18	Belfast	11	Belfast	13	1 Bangor	16	1 Bangor	4	Belfast
		1 Londonderry						12 Belfast		15 Belfast		

	AA	Location	AO	Location	EOII	Location	EOI	Location	SO	Location	DP	Location
DHSSPS	1	Stormont	0		1	Stormont	1	Stormont	5	Stormont	2	Stormont
DOE	1	Belfast	27.7	1 Armagh	13.64	6.64 Belfast	1	Belfast	17	16 Belfast	6	1 Ballymena
				14.5 Belfast		7 Coleraine				1 Coleraine		3 Belfast
				1 Coleraine								1 Coleraine
				1 Cookstown								1 Londonderry
				0.5 Craigavon								
				2.7 Downpatrick								
				2 Lisburn								
				2 Londonderry								
				1 Newry								
				2 Omagh								
DOJ	4	2 Belfast	18	1 Ballymena	46	29 Belfast	11	5 Belfast	19	6 Belfast	12	1 Antrim
		1 Maghaberry		8 Belfast		1 Hydebank		1 Londonderry		2 Maghaberry		1 Belfast
		1 Magilligan		3 Londonderry		7 Maghaberry		1 Newry		11 Stormont		1 Carrickfergus
				2 Maghaberry		3 Magilligan		3 Newtownards				1 Maghaberry
				3 Magilligan		1 Millisle		1 Omagh				8 Stormont
				1 Stormont		5 Stormont						

AQW 13743/11 - LOCATION & NUMBER OF VACANT POSTS IN THE NICS AT AA, AO, EO2, EO1, SO & DP - 4/9/12 (continued)

DRD	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	Belfast	0	
DSD	10	9 Belfast 1 Londonderry	58	2 Antrim 2 Armagh 4 Ballymena 43 Belfast 1 Lurgan 3 Newry 2 Omagh 1 Portadown	29	22 Belfast 1 Lisburn 4 Londonderry 1 Newcastle 1 Portadown	17	15 Belfast 2 Londonderry	19	17 Belfast 1 Carrickfergus 1 Omagh	6	Belfast
OFMDFM	0		0		1	Stormont	0		9	Stormont	8	Stormont
PPS	0		0		3	2 Belfast 1 Londonderry	0		0		0	
TOTAL	27		159.99		134.54		67.5		117		56	
TOTAL VACANCIES						562.03						

Notes

*DEL Southern Region comprises: Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, Omagh, Enniskillen, Armagh, Portadown, Newry, Lurgan, Ballynahinch, Downpatrick, Banbridge, Newcastle, Kilkeel

Civil Service: Surplus Posts

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current (i) location; and (ii) number of surplus posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service at (a) Administrative Assistant; (b) Administrative Officer; (c) Executive Officer II; (d) Executive Officer I; (e) Staff Officer; and (f) Deputy Principal grades in each Department.
(AQW 13744/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The location and number of surplus posts in the Civil Service at (a) Administrative Assistant (AA); (b) Administrative Officer (AO); (c) Executive Officer II (EOII); (d) Executive Officer I (EOI); (e) Staff Officer (SO); and (f) Deputy Principal (DP) grades, in each Department at 4 September 2012 are set out in the table overleaf.

AQW 13744/11 - LOCATION & NUMBER OF SURPLUS POSTS IN THE NICS AT AO, EO2, EO1, SO & DP as at 4/09/12

	AA	Location	AO	Location	EOII	Location	EO1	Location	SO	Location	DP	Location
DARD	1	Enniskillen	0		0		0		0		0	
DCAL											1	Belfast
DE	0		0		0		0		0		0	
DEL	2	Belfast	1	Belfast	2	Belfast	0		0		0	
DETI	0		0		0		2	1 Belfast	0		0	
								1 Stormont				
DFP	0		2	Ballymena	0		0		1	Belfast	2	Belfast
DHSSPS	1	Stormont	0		0		0		0		0	
DOE	0		1	Belfast	0		0		0		0	
DOJ	0		0		3	2 Stormont	0		0		0	
						1 Omagh						
DRD	0		0		0		1	Belfast	0		0	
DSD	5	2 Belfast	3	Enniskillen	0		0		0		0	
		1 Ballymena										
		1 Cookstown										
		1 Newcastle										
OFMDFM	0		0		0		0		0		0	
PPS	0		0		0		0		0		0	
Total	9		7		5		3		1		3	

Registered Companies: VAT/PAYE

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 14039/11-15, to detail the figures for 1 April (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; (iii) 2009; (iv) 2010; (v) 2011; and (vi) 2012.

(AQW 14663/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of VAT and/or PAYE registered businesses can be obtained from the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR). Businesses are classified by their legal status and Companies (including Building Societies) are grouped together with Limited Liability Partnerships (LLPs) and Joint Ventures. Figures are available for March of each year.

Table 1 shows the number of VAT and/or PAYE registered businesses that were operational in Northern Ireland in March 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 and how many of these businesses were Companies, LLPs or Joint Ventures.

Table 1: Number of VAT and/or PAYE registered businesses operational in Northern Ireland

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
All Businesses	71,445	72,515	71,650	69,665	69,175	68,475
Company, LLP or Joint Venture	18,360	19,355	19,860	19,100	19,315	19,795

Source: Inter Departmental Business Register, March 2007-2012

Table 2 shows the number of VAT and/or PAYE registered Companies, LLPs or Joint Ventures which had their headquarters (a) outside Britain or the island of Ireland; (b) in Britain or Northern Ireland; and (c) in the Republic of Ireland based on their country of ultimate ownership. Information on the registered address of the parent company (used to split companies between Britain and Northern Ireland) is not available on IDBR extracts prior to August 2012.

Table 2: VAT and/or PAYE registered Companies, LLPs or Joint Ventures by country of ownership

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Outside Britain or the island of Ireland	385	425	465	475	520	555
Britain or Northern Ireland	17,765	18,685	19,135	18,380	18,550	18,965
Republic of Ireland	205	245	255	245	245	275

Source: Inter Departmental Business Register, March 2007-2012

Table 3 shows the number of VAT and/or PAYE registered Companies, LLPs or Joint Ventures that were (a) banks; and (b) small and medium sized enterprises. Please note that these figures do not include banks in any years when they were classified as a 'Public corporation/nationalised body'.

As the IDBR does not hold information on corporation tax, it is not possible to determine how many of these small and medium sized businesses do not pay corporation tax.

Table 3: Number of banks and small and medium sized VAT and/or PAYE registered Companies, LLPs or Joint Ventures

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Banks	15	15	10	10	10	10
Small and medium sized	18,170	19,190	19,670	18,905	19,115	19,600

Source: Inter Departmental Business Register, March 2007-2012

Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and thus may not add to totals.

Flood Alleviation: East Belfast

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 14114/11-15, for an update on his discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to how much of the £10 million, allocated by the Executive to the Rivers Agency for flood alleviation schemes, has been allocated for use on the East Belfast/Connswater Community Greenway Integrated Flood Alleviation Scheme; and whether this amount can be ring-fenced to permit planning and tendering of the scheme without further delay.

(AQW 14756/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I would like to clarify that the Executive statement of 5 July referred to the acceleration of existing flood alleviation works and not the allocation of additional funds. That said, my officials are currently liaising with their DARD counterparts on the funding requirements for the East Belfast Flood Alleviation Scheme.

Regarding the proposal to ring-fence scheme funding, it is the responsibility of the Agriculture Minister to manage the funding for the East Belfast Flood Alleviation Scheme and ensure there is no unnecessary delay in planning or tendering.

DFP: Disposals through Auctions

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much money has been returned to each Department, and their arm's-length bodies, from the disposal of items through auction over the past three years.

(AQW 14832/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The following amounts have been returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel, and its arm's-length bodies, from the disposal of items through auction over the past three years:

Financial Year	£
2009/10	1,800
2010/11	13,314
2011/12	65,055

This response is provided for the Department of Finance and Personnel only as the information for all departments is not held centrally. The Member should contact individual departments for their information.

Taxation: Film and Television Industry

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what impact a reduction in tax on the local television and film industry, similar to the reductions imposed by the Irish Government, would have on the Block Grant.

(AQW 14866/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Only HMRC would have access to the necessary taxpayers' data to make any estimate of the cost of such reductions which would only occur if the power to introduce such reliefs were first devolved to and then subsequently introduced by the Assembly.

Such reliefs would be against corporation tax. Our ongoing work to consider the devolution of the power to set the corporation tax rate locally has not separately considered the implications with respect to specific industries such as the television and film industry.

Companies that produce films in Northern Ireland are subject to UK special tax rules, which are a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine. They can also avail of a range of tax reliefs, subject to certain conditions. These do not apply to television. A recent UK consultation on creative sector tax reliefs closed on 10 September 2012. I look forward to the Government's response to this consultation.

DFP: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to his Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.

(AQW 14868/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department currently has 5 small arm's length bodies (ALBs): the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC), the Statistics Advisory Committee (SAC), the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Lay Observer and the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI) (PCSPS (NI)) Governance Group. Many of the posts are unpaid and total cost to the Department for all bodies is approximately £90k per annum.

On 8 May 2007 my Department was responsible for all these bodies except the PCSPS(NI) Governance Group which was set up with effect from February 2010.

At 8 May 2007 my Department was also responsible for the Lands Tribunal and the NI Valuation Tribunal which transferred to the Department of Justice with effect from April 2011. I have provided the information relating to May 2007 however the member should contact the DoJ for information on the number of staff currently serving on these tribunals.

The following table lists the number of members in each of the ALBs at the requested dates.

ALB	8 May 2007	1 October 2012
NIBRAC	16	18
SAC	16	8
PSC	7	7
Lay Observer	1	1
PCSPS (NI) Governance Group	N/A	7

ALB	8 May 2007	1 October 2012
Lands Tribunal	2	N/K
NI Valuation Tribunal	116*	N/K

* Of the 116 people in NIVT there was 1 president, 21 people with legal background, 8 with valuation background and 86 lay people. Each panel consisted of the president and one individual from each of the different backgrounds.

Stormont Estate: Sale of Goods

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what rules and regulations are in place relating to the sale of goods at events held in the Stormont Estate.

(AQW 14880/11-15)

Mr Wilson: All organisations requesting use of the Stormont Estate to hold events must produce a management plan outlining proposals for the event, including proposals for the sale of food or other items.

Stormont Estate: Sale of Goods

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether permission was given for the sale of UDA and UVF music CDs at the Ulster Covenant event in the Stormont Estate; and what steps he will take to prevent this happening in future.

(AQW 14881/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Permission was given for the sale of historic and commemorative goods associated with the Ulster Covenant.

The Department will continue to seek assurances from all event organisers in relation to managing events appropriately.

Civil Service: Community Background Profile

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why there has been an 18.2 percent drop in the employment of Protestants in Grades 6 and 7 in the Northern Ireland Civil Service since 2000.

(AQW 14892/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are a number of factors which, over a number of years, will have affected the community background profile of staff in Grades 6 and 7 of the General Service discipline and analogous grades. These will include an overall decrease in the Protestant proportion of the Northern Ireland workforce, a higher proportion of Protestant retirees and lower than expected number of applications from Protestants for General Service posts.

The last NICS Article 55 Review found fair representation at Grades 6 and 7 of the General Service discipline. A further Article 55 Review will be carried out in 2013 using data from the 2011 Census.

Unemployment: Numbers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of unemployed people in each constituency in each of the last two years, broken down by age group.

(AQW 14925/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The official measure of unemployment is sourced to the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS). However, the LFS is a sample survey and the current numbers of unemployment by age group in each parliamentary constituency area are not sourced to the LFS because of the relatively large confidence intervals around the estimates. This is due to sample size constraints in the LFS.

The following table is sourced to the claimant count measure of unemployment. This shows the number of persons claiming unemployment related benefits at August 2012, August 2011 and August 2010 in each parliamentary constituency area broken down by age group.

Table 1 - Claimant Count for Parliamentary Constituency Area by Age Group Over Two Years

Parliamentary Constituency Area	Current Month Aug-12					One Year Ago Aug-11					Two Years Ago Aug-10							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total*	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total*	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total*
Belfast East	875	785	550	545	235	3,008	865	740	515	455	185	2,794	835	670	505	420	155	2,608
Belfast North	1,535	1,545	1,035	945	415	5,494	1,545	1,400	980	805	300	5,040	1,445	1,180	875	730	245	4,505
Belfast South	1,020	1,110	650	540	240	3,573	1,115	1,045	640	485	200	3,494	1,160	1,010	575	425	180	3,355
Belfast West	1,730	1,560	905	1,025	390	5,641	1,705	1,430	900	850	280	5,184	1,680	1,350	915	875	255	5,092
East Antrim	810	630	445	450	225	2,576	815	550	430	415	185	2,405	805	525	415	395	170	2,332
East Londonderry	1,030	930	740	595	280	3,573	1,100	925	745	515	215	3,502	1,145	910	745	535	210	3,552
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	895	840	625	540	295	3,234	845	885	625	485	230	3,117	900	790	590	465	215	3,021
Foyle	1,840	1,755	1,065	975	325	6,011	1,835	1,635	1,085	835	240	5,679	1,680	1,490	990	815	225	5,250
Lagan Valley	725	625	425	445	200	2,428	700	530	410	385	150	2,184	660	475	400	355	140	2,036
Mid Ulster	850	735	580	440	220	2,850	925	755	565	415	185	2,872	960	780	565	400	185	2,916
Newry & Armagh	1,255	1,150	840	780	355	4,405	1,395	1,250	875	740	315	4,600	1,335	1,250	795	645	260	4,312
North Antrim	920	805	650	580	260	3,226	1,005	740	605	535	215	3,120	935	695	625	490	200	2,952
North Down	665	515	415	395	215	2,224	660	515	420	380	170	2,165	635	485	390	355	145	2,035
South Antrim	715	625	450	385	190	2,375	720	580	445	360	160	2,273	725	560	455	330	145	2,248
South Down	1,060	925	660	645	310	3,623	1,110	940	670	560	250	3,559	1,135	915	675	500	205	3,456
Strangford	790	630	455	455	220	2,568	775	605	430	400	170	2,400	725	485	410	350	155	2,175
Upper Bann	1,335	1,055	795	660	315	4,196	1,280	1,040	730	555	235	3,884	1,220	950	715	510	225	3,672
West Tyrone	1,040	1,030	750	610	250	3,709	1,055	980	740	510	230	3,533	1,130	925	710	485	220	3,498
Northern Ireland	19,090	17,245	12,040	11,005	4,945	64,714	19,445	16,540	11,820	9,685	3,915	61,805	19,105	15,445	11,350	9,085	3,530	59,015

* Includes clerical claimants which are not included in age breakdown therefore will not sum to total.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Upper Bann

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the businesses in the Upper Bann constituency which benefit from the small business rates relief scheme; and to detail the projected total annual value of the financial relief.

(AQW 14937/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of businesses in the Upper Bann constituency which benefit from the small business rate relief scheme and the projected total annual value of the financial relief is not available as data is collated at district council and ward level only. A list of individual businesses cannot be provided as it may breach the confidentiality of individual ratepayers. A total of 1,801 properties in the Craigavon and Banbridge District Council Areas have benefited (received a Small Business Rate Relief after other awards have been taken into account) from the scheme this financial year to date, with a total value of almost £922,000.

The attached tables provide this information for each ward within the Craigavon and Banbridge District Council Areas.

Amount of SBRR Awarded to Properties in each Ward in the Banbridge DC area in 2012/13 (as at 30th September 2012) and Number of Properties Benefiting

Wards in Banbridge DC	Amount of SBRR in 2012/13	No of Properties
Ballydown	£6,327	10
Ballyward	£6,476	19
Banbridge West	£6,612	15
Bannside	£9,576	24
Dromore North	£41,477	76
Dromore South	£9,733	21
Edenderry	£19,547	42
Fort	£39,130	61
Gilford	£20,804	41
Gransha	£7,286	16
Katesbridge	£4,883	10
Lawrencetown	£9,990	25
Loughbrickland	£10,403	26
Quilly	£8,549	22
Rathfriland	£37,782	79
Seapatrick	£3,482	10
The Cut	£92,044	146
Banbridge DC	£334,099	643

Totals may not add due to roundings

Amount of SBRR Awarded to Properties in each Ward in the Craigavon DC area in 2012/13 (as at 30th September 2012) and Number of Properties Benefiting

Wards in Craigavon DC	Amount of SBRR in 2012/13	No of Properties
Aghagallon	£13,191	33
Annagh	£148,592	258
Ballybay	£7,983	17
Ballyoran	£7,374	13
Bleary	£8,833	22
Brownstown	£11,752	25
Church	£32,936	59
Corcrain	£10,124	23
Court	£73,389	134

Wards in Craigavon DC	Amount of SBRR in 2012/13	No of Properties
Derrytrasna	£10,567	26
Donaghcloney	£9,261	28
Drumanoe	*	*
Drumgask	£8,735	26
Drumgor	£8,415	16
Edenderry	£33,882	58
Kernan	£42,706	101
Killycomain	*	*
Knocknashane	£3,530	9
Magheralin	£5,285	15
Mourneview	£4,067	7
Parklake	£67,258	110
Taghnevan	£3,502	9
Tavanagh	£7,306	13
The Birches	£18,125	44
Waringstown	£9,154	26
Woodville	£40,502	83
Craigavon DC	£587,670	1,158

* 5 Properties or less

Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Moyle

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of vacant domestic properties, based on rating records, in the (i) Ballymena Borough Council; (ii) Ballymoney Borough Council; and (iii) Moyle District Council areas.

(AQW 14957/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The numbers of vacant domestic properties, as at 30th September 2012, are given in the table below.

District Council Area	Number of Vacant Domestic Properties as at 30th September 2012
Ballymena Borough Council	820
Ballymoney Borough Council	480
Moyle District Council	522

Vacant Business Premises: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Ballycastle

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many business premises are currently vacant in (i) Ballymena; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Ballycastle; and how many premises in each of these towns are occupied by charities with rates exemption.

(AQW 14958/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of business premises that are currently vacant in Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle is not available as data is collated at district council and ward level only. Also, the information available cannot easily or consistently identify those properties which are charities with rates exemption.

The number of vacant non-domestic properties in the Ballymena Borough Council; Ballymoney Borough Council and Moyle District Council areas, as at 30th September 2012, is given in the table overleaf.

District Council Area	Number of Vacant Non-Domestic Properties as at 30th September 2012
Ballymena Borough Council	490
Ballymoney Borough Council	194

District Council Area	Number of Vacant Non-Domestic Properties as at 30th September 2012
Moyle District Council	104

Pensions: Public Sector

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the cost to the Executive of failing to comply with changes to public sector pensions.

(AQW 14963/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The estimate is in the region of £260m per year of savings which will be forgone to the main public sector pension schemes. These are Health, Teachers, Civil Service, Fire and Police. This estimate is based on the formula used by the Government Actuary of 7% of the pensionable pay bill; when determining that for the Health Scheme the savings forgone would be £100m. These costs will arise for the financial year 2015/16 (should the April 2015 deadline set by HM Treasury not be met) and each subsequent year of delay.

These figures, although not "cash" but rather represent the costs of scheme liabilities, are likely to be used by HM Treasury to recoup monies in cash terms from Northern Ireland public expenditure.

Peace III

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the PEACE III Programme is overcommitted, and, if so, by how much; and to outline the reasons for the overcommitment.

(AQW 15015/11-15)

Mr Wilson: To date the Special EU Programmes Body has allocated £296.7 million, approximately 103% of the funding available under the PEACE III Programme. The programme is therefore over-committed by £7.2 million. No funding remains to be allocated.

In order to maximise the amount of funding in receipt from the European Commission under the programme, and taking into account factors such as de-commitment, slippage, efficiency savings and the exchange variation, it is deemed as a prudent practice for SEUPB as Managing Authority to over-commit the programme.

Welfare Reform Bill

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what would be the estimated impact on the block grant if the Welfare Reform Bill was not passed in sequence with similar changes in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 15131/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The financial impact of not implementing the Welfare Reform Bill is likely to be very significant. The estimated direct costs amount to some £207 million over the three remaining years of this Spending Review period. In addition there are also further potential costs associated with running different systems etc, which it is not yet possible to quantify.

What is really alarming is that these costs are set to escalate over time. The latest estimate suggests that the cost to the Northern Ireland Executive could be nearly £400 million in the 2018-19 financial year alone, with a cumulative cost from 2011-12 in excess of £1.2 billion.

Given the very high costs associated with a failure to implement the welfare reform agenda within Northern Ireland there is now an urgent need to move this issue forward.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the impact of the devolution of Air Passenger Duty on the Block Grant.

(AQO 2577/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The overall revenue cost associated with devolving and eliminating Air Passenger Duty on direct long haul flight has yet to be finalised. Some of the methodological issues involved here are relevant to our ongoing discussions with the Government on the devolution of corporation tax and we don't want to set any precedents at this stage. That said, Treasury have indicated that they expect that the initial block grant adjustment will be around five million pounds per annum.

Corporation Tax

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what proposals he has developed to calculate the value of Corporation Tax liabilities, to be offset against the Block Grant, of companies which have local branches and head offices in Britain.

(AQO 2578/11-15)

Mr Wilson: A devolved rate of corporation tax will not only benefit locally owned firms, but will also apply to companies registered in the rest of the United Kingdom for that part of their taxable income that relates to activities within Northern Ireland.

As corporation tax returns do not currently identify the amount of taxable income in respect of Northern Ireland based activities separately, it has been necessary for HM Revenue and Customs to estimate the loss to the Exchequer of a devolved rate by using the local share of total employment for these companies as an indicator of the proportion of taxable income attributable to Northern Ireland.

Although there are a number of possible alternative indicators such as turnover, wage bill and value added it is not evident that these would result in a significantly different result for the types of company that would be registered in the rest of the United Kingdom, but with local operations.

In addition, the required data is only readily available at the current time in respect of employment, through the Inter-Departmental Business Register.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Lagan Valley

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses in the Lagan Valley area have taken up the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme.

(AQO 2579/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There is no application procedure for Small Business Rate Relief as relief is applied automatically by Land & Property Services and as such is taken up by all businesses that qualify.

Information on the number of businesses in the Lagan Valley area that have been awarded the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme is not available as data is collated at District Council and Ward level only.

The latest figures available, as at 23rd September 2012, show that 1,421 non-domestic premises in the Lisburn District Council Area and 708 non-domestic premises in the Banbridge District Council Area have benefited from the scheme since its introduction. That is, they have received Small Business Rate Relief after other awards have been taken into account.

Rates: Empty Homes

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many property owners have failed to comply with a request for information regarding their properties since the implementation of the Rating of Empty Homes in October 2011.

(AQO 2582/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Prior to the implementation of Rating of Empty Homes (REH), my Department, through Land & Property Services (LPS) commenced a systematic exercise to gather ownership information on known vacant homes in the rating database. LPS issued a mail shot, including a factsheet, to just under 49,000 vacant domestic properties. In addition, searches were undertaken on the Land Registry database to identify ownership details for the vacant domestic properties. Ownership details on approximately 10,000 have still to be obtained.

Executive: Capital Funding

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the possibility that further capital funding may become available to the Executive.

(AQO 2583/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Additional capital investment funding may become available through the Barnett mechanism, if further capital allocations are made to the Whitehall departments in England. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Autumn Statement in early December, which represents the next available opportunity for the UK Government to confirm any additional capital allocations.

The Executive's Budget Review Group continues to monitor delivery of capital receipts planned for this Budget period and it will consider other options that may deliver additional capital receipts to boost expenditure.

Business Bank

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the potential for the proposed 'business bank' to benefit the local economy.

(AQO 2584/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The detail on the design of the new business bank announced by the Business Secretary Vince Cable MP and the types of interventions it will support have yet to be finalised. This is not expected until later in the Autumn and therefore it is too early for me to come to any firm view on how beneficial it will be locally.

Clearly, any intervention that will increase the availability of finance for businesses is to be welcomed, however, I have been concerned that measures taken by the Government in this regard in the past have not been effective here in Northern Ireland. This is a point I have made repeatedly and forcibly to Treasury Ministers.

My officials are already liaising with their counterparts in Whitehall on how the new Funding for Lending Scheme will be implemented in Northern Ireland and they have now also indicated that we wish to explore how this new business bank might operate in Northern Ireland.

DFP: Press Releases

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has issued a directive to his departmental staff banning them from issuing press releases to the Press Association; and on what grounds is he implementing this ban.

(AQW 15397/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Yes and the matter was resolved last week.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

DHSSPS: Voluntary Early Retirement Schemes

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what voluntary early retirement schemes have been agreed in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts; and how many staff in each Trust have been offered the package, broken down by grade.

(AQW 14670/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Details of the number of staff by grade who have left the HSC under Voluntary Early Retirement/Voluntary Redundancy Schemes in the last twelve months are set out in the following table:

HSC Trust	1 October 2011 to 30 September 2012													
	Agenda for Change Banding													Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	8a	8b	8c	8d	9	
Belfast	2	19	1	10	1	4	1	0	1	2	1	1	1	44
South Eastern	1	2	7	5	5	5	1	0	4	1	0	0	0	31
Northern	5	6	6	20	4	4	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	49
Southern	0	2	12	10	7	6	6	0	2	7	0	2	0	54
Western	0	3	4	6	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	18
N I Ambulance Service	None													

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to Paediatric Congenital Cardiac services, why Northern Ireland was given no notice and five working days to complete the documentation, while England and Wales were given one year's notice through a consultation process, with three months to complete the relevant documentation.

(AQW 14715/11-15)

Mr Poots: Following concerns expressed regarding the long term sustainability of the Paediatric Cardiac Surgical Service in Belfast I announced on 29 March 2012 that the HSC Board would carry out a review of PCCS in NI. In doing so, the Board commissioned an Expert Panel from England to carry out an independent review of the service in Belfast using standards that were used to assess centres elsewhere in the UK.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust was formally advised of this intention and agreed to the proposed timescales. It was agreed with the Trust that whilst timescales for the review were challenging, they were deliverable and it was the view of both the HSC Board/Public Health Agency and the Belfast Trust that every effort should be made to complete the work within this timeframe.

In recognition of this, adjustments were able to be made to the programme including extension of the visit by a further day to support the Trust in more fully presenting its data.

Following receipt of the Expert Panel's report, I asked the HSCB to develop a draft service specification, clear criteria for decision making and proposed options for the delivery of this service for the population of Northern Ireland, taking account of the Expert Panel's report. I announced on 25 September 2012 the commencement of a 12 week period of consultation on the draft service specification and the standards that are proposed for the future commissioning of this service, as well as a

number of options for the delivery of this service in the future. The consultation will run until 21st December 2012, following which I will take a decision on the future provision of this service for Northern Ireland.

Accident and Emergency: Advanced Nurse Practitioners

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to employ Advanced Nurse Practitioners within hospital Accident and Emergency departments.

(AQW 14763/11-15)

Mr Poots: Employment of hospital staff is a matter for individual Health and Social Care Trusts. Emergency departments employ a variety of health professionals to see and treat patients and it is up to the individual Trust to consider the range of skills and roles needed.

It is assumed that the term "Advanced Nurse Practitioner" encompasses all nurses employed and working at an advanced level to support the delivery of emergency care services; in emergency departments such nurses may also be known as Enhanced Nurse Practitioners or Emergency Nurse Practitioners, and such nurses are currently employed in emergency departments and minor injuries units.

Doctors: Locums

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many locum doctors are currently employed in each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) for what reason are they employed; and (iii) on what scale of pay.

(AQW 14766/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested follows and has been obtained directly from HSC Trusts. This data has not been validated by the Department. Some similar grades within Trusts have been grouped together to prevent disclosure of confidential information about individuals or very small identifiable groups of people.

Belfast HSC Trust

Locums directly employed			
Grade	Scale of pay (p/a)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£74,504-£100,446	17	10.7
Locum Appointment for Training	£29,705-£39,300	9	8.7
Locum Appointment for Service	£29,705-£39,300	6	6.0
Locums agency employed			
Grade	Scale of pay (hourly)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant (including out of hours)	£50.00-£130.00	23	23.0
Specialty Doctor	£48.00-£65.00	12	12.0
Locum Appointment for Service (StR 3 level and above)	£40.00-£58.60	10	10.0

Notes: The main reasons for Belfast Trust's employment of locums are to cover vacancies, sick leave and maternity leave, to relieve backlogs of work, to maintain services and to protect patient safety.

The hourly rates quoted above are from contracted agencies however the Trust may from time to time engage non-contracted agencies to maintain service delivery.

The Consultant scale of Pay also includes elements of accommodation costs, relocation from England/Scotland and travel arrangements within the hourly rate.

Northern HSC Trust

Locums directly employed			
Grade	Scale of Pay (p/a)	Headcount	WTE
GP sessions	£88.34 per session	1	0.2
Consultant	£74,504-£100,446	8	6.35
Hospital Practitioner (Sessions)	£4,508-£6,074 per annum per session	4	1.3
Specialty Doctors	£36,807-£68,638	8	6.3

Locums directly employed			
Grade	Scale of Pay (p/a)	Headcount	WTE
Fixed Term Locum Specialty Registrars/ Core Trainee CT/Senior House Officer	£27,798-£39,300	5	5.0
Associate Specialist	£51,606-£84,948	1	0.4

Locums agency employed			
Grade	Scale of Pay	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£92.00-£102.95 per hour	4	4.0
Specialty Registrar SpR/Senior House Officer	£52.43-£64.72 per hour	2	2.0
Core Trainee CT	£76.00 per hour	2	2.0

Notes: The Northern Trust employs locums to cover vacant posts, for maternity cover, to cover gaps in rotas and to cover sickness absence.

South-Eastern Trust

Locums directly employed			
Grade	Scale of Pay (p/a)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£74,504-£100,446	15	10.71
Hospital Practitioner (sessions)	£4,508-£6,074	5	2.02
Specialty Doctors	£51,606-£77,235	5	3.20
Fixed Term Locum Specialty Registrar	£29,705-£39,300	9	9.00

Locums agency employed			
Grade	Scale of Pay (hourly)	Headcount	WTE
Foundation Doctor Year 1-Senior House Officer	£32.00-£57.08	11	11.00
Specialty Doctor-Specialist Registrar	£62.53-£73.02	5	5.00
Consultant	£90.76	3	3.00

Notes: Locums are employed by the SE Trust as short-term cover for 'hard to fill' posts, for maternity and sickness cover, and to relieve additional pressures.

Agency locums are used to cover vacancies (including NIMDTA), for maternity cover, for adoption leave, for sickness cover, to support opening of new wards, to comply with new rotas, and to cope with additional pressures.

Southern Trust

Locums directly employed			
Grade	Scale of pay (p/a)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£74,504-£100,446	9	5.77
Specialty Doctor	£36,807-£68,638	3	1.7
Locum Appointment for Training (LAT)	£29,705-£39,300	3	3.0
Locum Appointment for Service (LAS)	£29,705-£39,300	8	8.0
Clinical Fellow inc Research	£29,705-£39,300	6	6.0

Notes: Southern Trust directly employs locums to fill vacant posts for various reasons such as permanent employees on career break; pending recurrent funding for permanent post; service requirements.

LATs, LASs and Clinical Fellows are employed on temporary contracts with the same terms and conditions as substantive posts, in order to fill vacancies on the junior doctor rotations.

Locums agency employed			
Grade	Scale of pay (hourly)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£90.00	6	6.0
Staff Grade	£46.00-£54.00	6	6.0
Junior Doctor	£61.99-£66.00	6	6.0

Notes: Agency locums are engaged by the Southern Trust for a variety of reasons, including covering vacant posts which they have been unable to fill through advertisement, and to fill gaps in the rotational junior doctor rotas where they have been unsuccessful in recruiting a LAT or LAS.

Western Trust

Locums directly employed			
Grade	Scale of pay (p/a)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£74,504 - £100,446	17	13.4
Specialty Doctor	£36,807 - £68,638	6	3.8
Locum Appointment for Service/Trust Doctor (Senior House Officer and above)	£27,798 - £39,300	10	10.0

Notes: Western Trust directly employs locums to cover vacancies, sick leave, maternity leave, and to relieve backlogs of work or additional workload.

Locums agency employed			
Grade	Scale of pay (hourly)	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	£71.37-£109.52	10	10.0
Specialty Doctor	£49.52-£77.50	16	16.0
Locum Appointment for Service (StR1 - StR3 level)	£38.38-£77.50	9	9.0
Foundation Doctor Year 1/2	£27.55-£60.64	3	3.0

Notes: The hourly rates quoted are the contracted agency rates- however, the Trust may, on occasion, need to engage from non-contracted agencies to maintain service delivery. On these occasions, the Trust will negotiate as low a rate as possible.

The Department is taking forward the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee report into the use of locum doctors by NI Hospitals as a priority. One of the main actions is the establishment of a Regionally Managed Medical Locum Service (RMMLS). Regional rates have been agreed and communicated to medical staff and registration for the service has taken place with a pilot of the service beginning shortly. This service will allow increased use of substantive staff to cover vacancies thus enabling Trusts to have a better control of the costs of locum cover.

Belfast City Hospital: Sleep Clinic

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether new patients admitted to the Belfast City Hospital sleep clinic, who may have been using advanced or newer models of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure machines in other clinics, can continue to use these machines in their current treatment.

(AQW 14769/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast Trust has advised me that patients who have commenced Continuous Positive Airway Pressure treatment in other Trust areas prior to their admission to the City Hospital sleep clinic can continue to use their machine if they own it or if the initiating Trust has not asked for it to be returned. Patients are advised in these circumstances that the Belfast Trust is unable to provide accessories such as masks and tubing filters for this equipment as these are not part of the Trust's contract for the provision of machines.

It should be noted that differing software requirements mean that compliance data cannot be extracted and this may affect clinicians' ability to advise patients appropriately about driving in accordance with Driver and Vehicle Agency guidelines. Patients are offered a new machine from the Belfast Trust's contracted supplier if they wish to change.

DHSSPS: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to his Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.

(AQW 14817/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of QUANGOs linked to my Department on the dates requested and the number of non-executive members is as follows:

	8 May 2007	28 September 2012
No of Quangos	29	21
No serving	293	158

Outpatient Appointments: Community Transport

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the findings outlined in the Department for Regional Development's research paper 'Achieving Efficiencies in Public Transport', what action he is taking to reduce the £17 million which is lost due to missed appointments.

(AQW 14818/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has no direct contact with community transport organisations as community transport is a matter for the Department of Regional Development (DRD).

My Department's 2007 Transport Strategy for Health and Social Care Services in Northern Ireland recommended that there should be a mixed economy of provision to provide the necessary flexibility in transport services for patients throughout Northern Ireland. In relation to healthcare transport provision the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) Patient Care Service (PCS) provides pre-booked non-emergency transport for patients attending outpatient appointments who have been assessed by a medical practitioner as needing it.

Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts are at liberty to co-operate locally with the Community Transport Association to provide transport. In addition, my officials have met with DRD officials during the past year to explore the potential for a collaborative approach between Northern Ireland's health and public transport sectors and for the Community Transport Association (CTA) to work with HSC Trusts to transport some patients and clients to specific HSC services. This dialogue is ongoing, with another meeting planned in October.

I understand the document "Achieving Efficiencies in Public Transport: The role of Local Integrated Transport Services (LITS)" presents the findings of a review of the Local Integrated Transport Services Pilot Scheme which took place in a selection of rural communities in Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly Research paper refers to £17m loss due to missed appointments.

While it is not possible to say what impact lack of transport has on patients' ability to attend outpatient appointments as HSC Trusts do not routinely collect this data, NISRA's Continuous Household Survey data show that the most common reasons for not attending were, in fact, forgetting the appointment, being too ill to attend, an inconvenient time, or no longer needed. The Integrated Elective Access Protocol developed in 2008 by the HSC Board, sets out protocols and best practice to assist staff in effectively managing outpatient, diagnostic and inpatient waiting lists. Trusts are required to ensure that booking systems enable patients to choose and agree hospital appointments that are convenient for them, thus minimising the number of appointments missed.

Outpatient Appointments: Community Transport

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to what extent he has engaged with the Community Transport Association and Community Transport operators to establish the best way to support community assist services to help address the access needs of patients and reduce the number of missed appointments.

(AQW 14819/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has no direct contact with community transport organisations as community transport is a matter for the Department of Regional Development (DRD).

My Department's 2007 Transport Strategy for Health and Social Care Services in Northern Ireland recommended that there should be a mixed economy of provision to provide the necessary flexibility in transport services for patients throughout Northern Ireland. In relation to healthcare transport provision the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) Patient Care Service (PCS) provides pre-booked non-emergency transport for patients attending outpatient appointments who have been assessed by a medical practitioner as needing it.

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Fragility Fractures Working Group: Report

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when implementation of the Fragility Fracture Working Group report will be completed.

(AQW 14831/11-15)

Mr Poots: Good progress has been made by the Board and the Public Health Agency in taking forward the recommendations of the Fragility Fractures Working Group report, "The Prevention and Management of Fragility Fractures in Northern Ireland". It is important to note that there are a number of important developments that have taken place since the report was issued in 2009 that have a direct impact on the recommendations. These include the inclusion of osteoporosis in the Quality and Outcomes Framework and the resulting increased role of primary care in the management of fragility fractures.

In January 2012 the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and Public Health Agency (PHA) established a group to consider the recommendations contained in the report and work towards their implementation. The implementation group is chaired by a Consultant in Public Health Medicine with the Public Health Agency on behalf of the HSCB and PHA. The group has representation from all five Trusts and the National Osteoporosis Society. HSCB and Local Commissioning Group (LCG) representatives are invited as required.

The Group has reviewed the recommendations and have agreed steps to take them forward.

The attached Annex sets out the latest position on all the recommendations.

Annex

Recommendation 1: A Regional Public Awareness campaign to promote good bone health should be undertaken by the Northern Ireland Public Health Agency.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has a number of campaigns which contribute to good bone health. These include healthy eating, physical activity and smoking campaigns. The PHA works to ensure that campaigns are directed at the areas where the need is greatest and there is evidence to support the use of resources on campaigns. Smoking and obesity are examples of priority areas.

Recommendation 2: A Fracture liaison service for secondary prevention of fragility fractures should be established in all Trusts that have A&E and Minor Injury Services to ensure secondary prevention is offered to all patients who have suffered a fragility fracture.

The Southern, South Eastern and Belfast Trusts have secondary care based fracture liaison services in place. The Western Trust is recruiting specialist nurses to re-establish their service as soon as possible. A fracture liaison service has been funded in the Northern Trust and the Local Commissioning Group is working with the Trust to develop the best service model for patients in the Northern area.

The role of primary care in the management of fragility fractures has increased with the inclusion of the osteoporosis management in the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) since April 2012. This gives GP practices financial incentives for diagnosing and treating osteoporosis in their patients. These are the same patients who would be seen in secondary care services.

The Implementation Group has recognised that to ensure the best service for patients, the roles and responsibilities of the primary and secondary services need to be established. Updated guidance on Fragility Fracture Services is expected later this year. This will provide clarity on roles and responsibilities and inform future service design.

Recommendation 3: All fracture units should be supported by an acute in-patient orthogeriatric service followed by an orthogeriatric rehabilitation service.

This is available in some units and where further development is required this will be considered as part of the commissioning process.

Recommendation 4: An Information infrastructure to support the monitoring of care and quality of fragility fracture services should be mandatory for all fracture units. This should be achieved by enhancement of the existing IT infrastructure in fracture units. There is a need to include all fragility fractures in this, especially those treated on an out-patient basis.

The Implementation Group is due to consider IT requirements at a future meeting.

Recommendation 5: The prevention of falls is an important part of reducing fragility fractures. There is a need to ensure effective population approaches to preventing falls and care pathways for older people needing further investigation and intervention.

Local Commissioning Groups and Trusts are considering the need to develop falls services in their locality. For example, the South Eastern Trust has developed a Falls and Osteoporosis Strategy. The South Eastern Local Commissioning Group has agreed to fund a falls co-ordinator to further develop and enhance services in the South Eastern Area.

Recommendation 6: The Directly Enhanced Service in Primary Care to promote early detection and treatment of osteoporosis provides a major opportunity to address the impact of fragility fractures. GPs should be supported in achieving the DES requirements. It is important that this is done in partnership with secondary care.

This Directly Enhanced Service has been replaced by the inclusion of the identification and management of fragility fractures in the Quality and Outcomes Framework as outlined under recommendation 2 above.

Recommendation 7: The Long Term Condition Monies identified in the 2008-2011 funding cycle should be used to implement these recommendations.

This recommendation is no longer relevant. The need for investment in osteoporosis prevention, fragility fracture management and falls prevention is being considered as part of the commissioning process.

Recommendation 8: An implementation schedule for NICE TA 160 and 161 should be developed which would include regional prescribing guidelines on initiation and maintenance of bisphosphonate therapy particularly in primary care together with medicines management support arrangements to promote patient adherence to prescribed medicines.

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) Technology Appraisal (TA) 160 and 161 set out recommendations about when certain bone strengthening medicines should be prescribed. A sub group of the implementation group, led by a pharmacist, has been established to take this recommendation forward.

The group will also look at prescribing guidelines and shared care arrangements for the implementation of NICE TA 204 which was issued after the June 2009 report.

Recommendation 9: A regional implementation group should be established to oversee the implementation of these recommendations.

The Group was established in January 2012

Inflammatory Bowel Disease: Designated Clinical Lead

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health and Social Care Trusts have a designated clinical lead for Inflammatory Bowel Disease.

(AQW 14879/11-15)

Mr Poots: I can confirm that all five hospital trusts have a designated clinical lead for Inflammatory Bowel Disease.

Physical Activity Referral Programmes

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how exercise regimes have been developed and promoted as an option for GPs to use in dealing with cases of stress, anxiety and mental health, as an adjunct or alternative to medication.

(AQW 14936/11-15)

Mr Poots: Physical activity referral programmes, involving partnerships between primary care and local leisure services, have been established across Northern Ireland. Anxiety, stress and depression are some of the most common reasons for referral to these programmes.

GP practices have been made aware of physical activity referral programmes by a range of sources including local commissioning organisations, physical activity coordinators, leisure staff, other health care professionals or patients. According to a recent survey, the vast majority of practices (93%) promote the physical activity referral programmes during consultations with their patients.

The Public Health Agency recently reviewed the provision of physical activity referral programmes in primary care settings. The recommendations from this review include an assessment of programmes against the National Quality Assurance Framework (NQAF) standards and development of an action plan against identified gaps; local training needs assessment; standardised monitoring and evaluation of programmes; and development of plans for promotion of programmes.

Acute Hospitals: Car Parking

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to possible car park charging for staff at acute hospitals, what consideration will be given to the location of the hospitals, such as the Causeway Hospital, where there are no other car parking facilities within close proximity.

(AQW 14947/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department's Policy document "Car Parking Provision and Management in the HSC" was published in July 2012 following full public consultation. The policy provides for charging for both staff and visitors and makes particular reference to the consideration of staff charging where charges are already in place for visitors. It also puts an onus on Trusts to engage in local consultation and equality screening in relation to the specific proposals for a particular site. When setting staff charges, consideration should be given to working patterns and pay bands. The policy also requires consideration of environmental and sustainability considerations and the promotion of suitable public transport, in line with the Regional Strategic Transport – Network Transport Plan 2012.

Car park charging for patients and visitors was introduced at Causeway Hospital site on 18th April 2011. The Northern Trust is currently consulting locally on the introduction of staff charges

Prisons: Healthcare

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify whether the Northern Ireland Prison Service or the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust was responsible for the clinical governance of prisoners who were vulnerable or at risk of suicide between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2012; and whether the Trust is now fully responsible.

(AQW 14950/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust took over responsibility for Prison Healthcare on 1st April 2008. The South Eastern HSC Trust have been assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating care delivery in relation to the mental health needs of their clients in the prison setting. These arrangements fall within the South Eastern HSC Trust's normal clinical and social care governance arrangements.

Overall responsibility and safety of prisoners who are vulnerable and / or at risk of suicide is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Prison Service except where there is an identified healthcare need.

Health Service: Vacancies

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of vacant consultant posts in each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) the specialism of each vacant post; and (iii) and the length of time each post has been vacant.

(AQW 14992/11-15)

Mr Poots: Current and long-term vacancies (actively being recruited to) are routinely collected from Health and Social Care organisations on a six-monthly basis. The last data published were those at 31st March 2012, released in September 2012. This report can be found on the Department's website at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/vacancy_survey_march_2012_web_report.pdf

The next survey report, detailing active vacancies at 30th September 2012, will be published in January 2013.

Safeguarding: Adult Referrals

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the increase in adult safeguarding referrals across the Health and Social Care Trust areas.

(AQW 15012/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is difficult to explain with absolute certainty why the numbers in adult safeguarding referrals have increased across all Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust areas. However, there has been increased investment in adult safeguarding in the last number of years, which has enabled the establishment of a Health and Social Care Board-led Northern Ireland Adult Safeguarding Partnership and five Local Adult Safeguarding Partnerships centred on each of the five HSC Trusts. Also over that period, we have engaged in awareness-raising activity aimed at making the public and individuals working with adults who are vulnerable more aware of the signs of adult abuse and how to report it when it occurs or is suspected. My department also funded the development of adult safeguarding guidance for voluntary, community and private sectors, which is being supported by a training programme delivered by Volunteer Now.

It is reasonable to conclude that there is a correlation between the increase in the number of adult safeguarding referrals and recent investment and awareness-raising activity.

Finally, we now have a Programme for Government commitment relating to child and adult safeguarding. As part of that commitment, we aim to achieve an increase in the numbers of adult safeguarding referrals and have set targets accordingly.

Health: Care and Protection Plans

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are adult protection plans that have yet to be implemented in any Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 15013/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board has indicated that it is not aware of any Care and Protection Plan, once agreed, that has not been implemented.

The immediate care and protection needs of individuals are always addressed at the point of referral as part of interim protection arrangements. The substance of a Care and Protection Plan is agreed by way of strategy meetings and/or case conferences and will be amended as necessary as an individual's needs change. Each Care and Protection plan has an identified person or persons responsible for overseeing delivery of the plan.

Bangor Hospital: X-ray Services

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the future plans for Bangor Hospital's X-ray department.

(AQW 15023/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised me that there are no plans to change the provision of x-ray services at the Bangor Hospital.

Pressure Ulcers

Ms Brown asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reduce the percentage of older people who suffer pressure ulcers following a hip fracture.

(AQW 15059/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has identified Indicators within the Commissioning Directions for the reduction of pressure ulcers in hospital settings and there is an ongoing improvement programme for the prevention of pressure ulcers led by the Public Health Agency using the Institute of Healthcare Improvement Methodology.

Fire and Rescue Service: Equipment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the current standards of uniforms, appliances and mobilisation systems available to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the attendant risks resulting from the current provision.

(AQW 15060/11-15)

Mr Poots: Responsibility for assessing the need to replace or upgrade equipment is a matter for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS).

My Department has this year approved business cases for the replacement of all structural fire kit and the current communications and mobilising system. The NIFRS already has a rolling fleet replacement programme which ensures that the average life of appliances, which is 6.2 years, is maintained.

Fire and Rescue Service: Standards

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the rationale for the differences in standards between Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the rest of the UK's Fire and Rescue Services' uniforms, appliances and mobilisation systems.

(AQW 15062/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service adheres to the same standards in terms of uniforms, appliances and mobilisation systems as fire and rescue services in the rest of the UK.

Fire and Rescue Service: Standards

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking, in conjunction with the Fire and Rescue Service, to ensure that Northern Ireland has the highest standards in terms of uniforms, appliances and mobilisation systems.

(AQW 15063/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has approved business cases which will ensure that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) will be able to replace all structural fire kit over the next 7 years and that procurement of a replacement mobilisation system in 2013 can proceed. The NIFRS already has a Fleet Replacement Programme in place to manage its vehicles.

Fracture Liaison Service

Ms Brown asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has to rollout the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust model of Fracture Liaison Service across the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 15064/11-15)

Mr Poots: One of the recommendations arising from "The Prevention and Management of Fragility Fractures in Northern Ireland" is the establishment of a Fracture Liaison Service for secondary prevention of fragility fractures in all Trusts that have A&E and Minor Injury Services to ensure secondary prevention is offered to all patients who have suffered a fragility fracture.

The Northern Local Commissioning Group is working with the Northern Trust to develop the best service model for patients in the Northern Trust area.

Bone Health: Promotion

Ms Brown asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department is taking to promote education and public awareness on bone health.

(AQW 15066/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department supports good bone health through the promotion of healthy lifestyles, including the need for regular exercise, a balanced diet, smoking prevention or cessation, and encouraging a responsible approach to alcohol consumption. These activities contribute not only to bone health, but to overall health and wellbeing.

The CMO Physical Activity Guidelines include information and recommendations to improve muscle and bone health, particularly for older adults.

In addition, the Health and Social Care system has, or is in the process of, appointing falls co-ordinators in several areas across Northern Ireland. Part of their work is to ensure that those most at risk of a fragility fracture can access a range of preventative services, including: assessments of osteoporosis risk; falls assessment; falls prevention programmes; etc. They also undertake preventative work and awareness raising through the development and dissemination of information leaflets, accident prevention work, and home safety checks.

Prisons: Healthcare

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the Northern Ireland Prison Service's policy regarding the clinical governance and health needs of prisoners who carry out acts of self harm; and whether routine investigations are being conducted by appropriately qualified Prison Service staff.

(AQW 15081/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust took over responsibility for Prison Healthcare on 1st April 2008. The Trust have been assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating care delivery in relation to the needs of prisoners who self harm. These arrangements fall within the Trust's normal clinical and social care governance remit.

Overall responsibility and safety of prisoners who are vulnerable and / or at risk of self harm is the responsibility of NIPS except where there is an identified healthcare need.

Prisons: Vulnerable Prisoners

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the published external inspection reports that acknowledge that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has made significant changes and improvements in the provision of safer custody and the management and care of vulnerable prisoners, insofar as they relate to healthcare facilities in prison establishments, with particular emphasis on HMP Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood.

(AQW 15084/11-15)

Mr Poots: Prison establishments in Northern Ireland are inspected by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate. The Regulation, Quality and Improvement Authority have become involved in the inspection of healthcare services in the NI Prison Service. The following CJINI inspection reports have covered healthcare issues:

- Report of an unannounced follow up inspection of Maghaberry Prison 2009;
- Vulnerable Prisoners – An inspection of the treatment of vulnerable prisoners by the Northern Ireland Prison Service 2009;
- Report of an announced inspection of Magilligan Prison 2010;
- Reports on unannounced short follow up inspections of Ash House and the Young Offenders Centre, Hydebank Wood 2011.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust worked with the NI Prison Service to create and open the Donard facility in HMP Maghaberry in 2011. This centre was specifically set up to provide a therapeutic environment within Maghaberry for the most vulnerable prisoners and those with mental health needs and challenging behaviours. The South Eastern HSC Trust is exploring whether a similar centre could be opened in Hydebank Wood.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Clinical Consultation of the UK Safe and Sustainable Review of Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services allowed one year's notice to complete documentation and make preparations for England and Wales, but only five working days were given in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15094/11-15)

Mr Poots: I refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 14715/11-15.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should the proposed changes to Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services be implemented, how Northern Ireland will retain or attract the best paediatric cardiologists, nurses or specialist staff if we cannot offer them the same training and career opportunities that are available in other centres in the UK.

(AQW 15096/11-15)

Mr Poots: I refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 14716/11-15.

Autism: Adults

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what facilities and assistance are available for adults on the autistic spectrum in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 15101/11-15)

Mr Poots: Health and social care services, including those for people with autism, are provided on the basis of assessed need and are not based on a diagnosed condition. People with assessed needs, including adults with autism, have their needs met through access to a wide range of services and facilities including occupational therapy, day care, respite and other social support services.

Specifically in relation to autism, as required by the ASD Action Plan, all Trusts now have Autism Co-ordinators in post to provide a central point for access and advice and help to ensure that service provision across the region is consistent.

In addition, in June 2012 I launched the regional Adult Autism Care Pathway, which provides guidance to adults, professionals and families on autism. Trusts are currently in the process of developing and actioning their implementation plans for the Adult Care Pathway. The Northern Health & Social Care Trust is implementing the element of the Care Pathway which relates to Adult Diagnosis, within the resources currently available. The Trust also provides an Adult ASD Link Service which offers support, advice and signposting for adults aged 18 years and over with a diagnosis of autism.

My Department is also leading on the development of a cross-departmental whole-of-life strategy for autism services, and I expect to publish that strategy for consultation later this year, with the approval of Executive colleagues.

Antrim Area and Causeway Hospitals: Staff Parking Charges

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce parking charges for staff at the Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital.

(AQW 15105/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern HSC Trust is currently consulting locally, including HSC staff and Trade Union Side, on the terms of proposals for staff charging at Antrim Area Hospital and Causeway Hospital.

Public Health Agency: Small Grant Scheme

Mrs Dobson asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 14812-11/15, to detail the application opening and closing dates relating to the Public Health Agency Small Grant programme.

(AQW 15136/11-15)

Mr Poots: I understand that the Public Health Agency (PHA) Small Grant Scheme for the Southern Area opened on 05 September 2012 and that the closing date for the scheme was 12:00 Noon on 03 October 2012.

Applications were invited from community/voluntary groups based and working within the five District Council areas of Armagh; Banbridge; Craigavon; Dungannon & South Tyrone; Newry & Mourne. The aim of the Public Health Agency is to improve the health and social wellbeing of the population and to reduce inequalities in health. Two separate grant schemes were available, all of which will be targeted to address health and social wellbeing among the population living locally.

I have been informed that this scheme was brought to the attention of Goal Line Youth Trust by the Community Development worker in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area but the group did not submit an application. Further information and contacts in respect of the PHA Small Grant funding is available online at:

<http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/pha-southern-area-health-improvement-small-grants-now-open>.

Fluoridation

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 14558/11-15, whether environmental impact assessments are carried out on fully fluoridated areas.

(AQW 15159/11-15)

Mr Poots: The water supplies in Northern Ireland are not fluoridated.

Older People: Social Isolation

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans for reducing social isolation in older people, including those with dementia.

(AQO 2585/11-15)

Mr Poots: Given the wide range of circumstances which can lead to social isolation, the solutions require involvement and input across a range of services designed to help people remain active and involved in their communities.

My Department published a Service Framework for the Health and Wellbeing of Older People for consultation on Wednesday 3rd October. The overall aim of the Framework is to improve the health and wellbeing of older people in Northern Ireland, promote social inclusion, reduce inequalities in health and improve HSC quality of care for all older people, including those who suffer from dementia.

Within the South Eastern locality the Public Health Agency are currently funding a 'Safe and Well' service targeting older people at risk of social isolation. This service has been developed with a range of local partners and offers a co-ordinated response from local statutory, voluntary and community partners to assess and address the needs of at risk older people. There are similar schemes in all LCG localities, funded from various sources. The PHA is currently working to develop a regional service model and to support the implementation of the model with LCGs as part of the future development of older people's services.

Health: Direct Payments

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, in each Health and Social Care Trust area, receive direct payments for providing care.

(AQW 15194/11-15)

Mr Poots: Direct payments can be made to an individual to pay for their own care or directly to a carer for providing care.

Table 1 details the number of direct payments made directly to carers for providing care, in each Health and Social Care Trust, for the last four quarters.

Table 1: Number of direct payments paid to carers.

HSC Trust	Quarter ending			
	September '11	December '11	March '12	June '12
Belfast	0	0	0	0
Northern	0	0	0	0
South Eastern	133	91	50	105
Southern	0	0	0	0
Western	15	11	11	5
All Trusts	148	102	61	110

Source: DHSSPS CC8 Returns provided quarterly by HSC Trusts

Banbridge: Health and Care and Day Care Centres

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the construction of the Health Care and Day Care Centres in Banbridge, including the completion date of construction and the commencement of services.

(AQW 15198/11-15)

Mr Poots: Enabling works for Banbridge Health & Care Centre and Day Care Centre were completed at the end of August 2012. The site has been secured in preparation for the appointment of the main contractor.

The design team continues to develop the tender package which is due to be issued in December 2012. Following successful appointment of a Contractor, it is anticipated that they will be on site by May 2013 with completion of the building by December 2014 and the commencement of services from this date.

Health: North/South Shared Services

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the actions he is taking to develop shared health services on a north-south basis.

(AQO 2594/11-15)

Mr Poots: In regards to the issue of North South collaboration Transforming Your Care (TYC) recognises that we can all benefit from North South collaboration, especially in those areas where we do not have sufficient volume to support specialist

services. The consultation process for TYC is imminent and I hope to update members in detail when that consultation has concluded. In the interim mutual areas of interest are being discussed. These will focus particularly in the short term on secondary care services.

I meet regularly with Health Minister James Reilly from the Republic of Ireland and officials in both jurisdictions are working together to develop projects which have the potential to deliver real benefits for patients on both sides of the border. I would refer members to my Statement of 17th September when I provided an update regarding the fourteenth North South Ministerial Council in the Health and Food Safety Sectors, which was followed by a debate. The update included items of collaboration relating to: the considerable programme of activity being taken forward by Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT), health promotion on alcohol misuse, radiotherapy services, research projects, suicide issues, Child Protection and Safefood.

In addition, I would remind members of the recent (25th September) debate on the future service model for paediatric congenital cardiac services (PCCS). The consultation document on PCCS includes an option for an all-Ireland model and in this regard my officials and HSC Board officials are working closely with colleagues in the South. Consultation has commenced and I would hope to be in a position to announce a decision on the future approach early in 2013.

In addition the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ambulance Service in the Republic.

Causeway Hospital: Consultants

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there are in the nine person consultant medical team at the Causeway Hospital.

(AQO 2595/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are currently 5 vacancies in the 9 person consultant medical team covering all of the medical specialties at the Causeway Hospital. This is made up of 2 vacancies in respiratory medicine and 1 vacancy in each of the following specialties - cardiology, geriatric medicine and gastroenterology. It is very unusual to experience this level of vacancy in a small team. The vacancies have all occurred recently and have come about through a mixture of retirements and staff moving to other hospitals. Northern Health and Social Care Trust is actively seeking to fill these vacancies and in the short term the situation is being managed through the use of locums.

Eating Disorders

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what specialised services are available for adolescents with eating disorders.

(AQO 2596/11-15)

Mr Poots: I refer the member to my response to AQW 13815/11-15.

Department of Justice

DOJ: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many departmental staff are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

(AQW 14560/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Suspension from duty is governed by the NICS Staff Handbook and careful consideration is given on a case by case basis. Within the Department of Justice, there are six members of staff currently facing internal investigations. A split between those suspended and not suspended has been withheld. This is to protect the identity of the individuals concerned as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Amnesty International: Marian Price

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the dates of any representations Amnesty International has made to his Department in relation to Marian Price.

(AQW 14564/11-15)

Mr Ford: Amnesty International wrote to my Department on 13 February 2012. It asked me to clarify the basis upon which a decision regarding the continued detention of Mrs Marian McGlinchey (Price) would be taken. It also raised concerns in relation to claims that Mrs McGlinchey had been subjected to prolonged solitary confinement while in Maghaberry Prison and that she had been unable to access the necessary healthcare provision.

I responded to Amnesty International on 24 March and addressed the issues raised.

Sex Offenders: Disclosure of Information

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice how communities can access information on sex offenders living in their areas.
(AQW 14572/11-15)

Mr Ford: Disclosure of information on sex offenders takes place, as a child protection measure, under normal police operating practices. Parents and others who have immediate concerns about any individual who they fear is posing a risk to the safety of a child can, and should, go to the police at any time about their concerns. The PSNI have in place public protection teams to deal with these issues.

Legal Aid

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total amount paid from the Legal Aid budget to the top thirty recipient QCs during each year financial year from 2000/01 to 2005/6.
(AQW 14607/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information sought is not currently in the public domain and the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has to comply with the provisions of the Data Protection Act (the DPA), when considering whether to publish personal information. This requires the Commission to consult the individuals whose personal information is the subject of a request for publication.

As the process required by the DPA could not be completed within the required timeframe for answering Assembly Questions, it is not possible to answer the Question at this time but I will provide the information as soon as it is available.

Prostitution: Paying for Services

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to upgrade the offence of paying for the services of a prostitute, who has been coerced or subjected to force, from a summary offence.
(AQW 14612/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have no plans to alter the sentencing arrangements for this offence, which is an offence of strict liability with no defence for those who claim not to know the prostitute had been coerced. This sets the parameters for appropriate levels of sanction.

However, I have asked my officials to look at the existing offence to see if any changes are required.

DOJ: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study'

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Justice what consideration his Department has given to the Belfast City Council commissioned 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study' published in March 2012; and (ii) what action has been taken to implement the recommendations relevant to his Department.
(AQW 14649/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department is represented on the Holyland Interagency Group and has, in conjunction with other representatives of this group, considered the 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study' and is committed to delivering on the relevant recommendations.

This Strategic study has identified two specific supporting actions for my Department to deliver, namely, the implementation of Fixed Penalty Notices for disorder offences and the exploring of commencement of additional legislative proposals in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, to address the consumption of alcohol in public.

My Department has already implemented, through the provisions in the Justice Act 2011, Fixed Penalty Notices. These notices came into force in June 2012 and have given police additional powers to deal with a range of incidents including being drunk in a public place, disorderly behaviour and behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace. My officials are also currently in discussions with the Police Service of Northern Ireland to explore options to implement additional legislative proposals in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 to address the consumption of alcohol in public.

My Department is currently developing actions to improve community safety, not only in the Holyland area, but in all communities across Northern Ireland on foot of the publication of a new Community Safety Strategy.

The establishment of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, which will play a vital role in ensuring the objectives of the Community Safety Strategy become reality on the ground, is another commitment designed to improve safety within local communities.

Criminal Justice: Diminished Responsibility

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will review legislation in relation to violent crime, whereby alcoholism or substance addiction leads to diminished responsibility being used in defence mitigation.
(AQW 14675/11-15)

Mr Ford: The law on diminished responsibility applies only to charges of murder and not to violent crime more generally. It was revised by way of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and at this stage I have no plans for a specific review in this area.

Public Office: Misconduct

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many cases of people charged with misconduct in public office are currently in the court system, broken down by court division.

(AQW 14677/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are currently six cases involving six defendants before the Crown Court charged with misconduct in public office, two cases in Downpatrick and four in Belfast.

Amnesty International: Gerry McGeough

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the dates of any representations that Amnesty International has made to his Department in relation to Gerry McGeough.

(AQW 14679/11-15)

Mr Ford: Northern Ireland Prison Service has no record of any representations from Amnesty International on behalf of Mr Gerry McGeough.

Prison Service: Appeals against Dismissal

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13387/11-15, whether the £44,281.74 aligns with the figures held by the Civil Service Appeal Board for the same period of time.

(AQW 14680/11-15)

Mr Ford: The figure provided by the Northern Ireland Prison Service reflects the amount of compensation decided by the Civil Service Appeal Board (CSAB) to date. This figure reflects the year (during the five year period 01 July 2007 – 30 June 2012) in which the individuals were dismissed on grounds of discipline and whose appeals to CSAB were successful.

The CSAB reports in financial years and their figures reflect the year in which compensatory awards are decided. The most recent published annual report of the CSAB is for the year ending 31 March 2011.

Edward Paul Murphy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13723/11-15, (i) on how many other occasions this has occurred; and (ii) whether he decided that it was unnecessary to issue a public announcement.

(AQW 14681/11-15)

Mr Ford: Further to my answer in AQW 14505/11-15, I can confirm that there are no other cases that match the specific circumstances of this case and that Edward Paul Murphy is the only defendant to have been released in error as a result of this particular circumstance. Given that there are no other cases the issue of a public announcement is not applicable.

Prison Service: Officer Numbers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many prison officers are currently in post.

(AQW 14689/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prison Officer and Prison Support Grades in post at 31 August 2012 are as follows:-

■ Principal Officer -	41
■ Senior Officer -	125
■ Main Grade Officer -	831
■ Custody Prison Officer -	119
■ Operational Support Grade -	13
■ Night Custody Officer -	162.5

Prison Service: Grade Structures

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to outline the different ranks within the Prison Service.

(AQW 14690/11-15)

Mr Ford: The current grade structure of staff appointed to the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) is set out in the tables below:-

NIPS Grade Structures

- Governors - Grades 1-5
- Principal Officer
- Senior Officer
- Main Grade Officer

- Custody Prison Officer
- Night Custody Officer *
- Operational Support Grade *
- Principal Prisoner Custody Officer
- Senior Prisoner Custody Officer
- Prisoner Custody Officer
- * Night Custody Officer (This is a closed grade from 15 October 2012)
- * Operational Support Grade (This is a closed grade from 1 July 2012)

A Target Operating Model is due to be implemented from 15 October 2012 and this will change some areas of the current grading structure.

NIPS also employ staff appointed under the NICS conditions of service in the following grades:-

NICS Staff

- Administration Assistants to Grade 3 (including specialisms such as psychologists, accountants, teachers)
- Boiler man
- Contractor Escorts
- Cleaners
- Female Searchers
- Kitchen Porter Drivers
- Drivers
- Labourers
- Kennel Assistants
- Cook/Assistant Cook
- Storeperson

Human Trafficking: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what measures his Department is taking to prevent human trafficking in the North Down area; and what steps are being taken to raise local awareness of the problem.

(AQW 14727/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice is taking forward a raft of work to address the issue of human trafficking, in partnership with colleagues in other departments, statutory agencies, law enforcement agencies and many others. The Organised Crime Task Force's Immigration and Human Trafficking Sub-group is playing a major role in tackling the issue. It is important to recognise that the steps to tackle human trafficking - prevention, prosecution and protection - apply across Northern Ireland and have an international dimension.

Specific measures being taken to tackle trafficking include -

- Training for staff from the Public Prosecution Service, Health and Social Care Trusts, PSNI and others. For example, some 2800 PSNI officers and staff have successfully completed an online training package, to assist in the recognition of signs of trafficking.
- Raising awareness of human trafficking by the Blue Blindfold campaign which was re-launched last year. This reinforced the message that human trafficking happens across Northern Ireland; sought to make people aware of the signs to look out for; and encouraged members of the public to report their suspicions to Crimestoppers.
- The development by the OCTF of a multi-lingual "Visitor or Victim?" leaflet and poster targeted at potential victims. These are displayed at key places where victims might be, including ports, main railway stations, health centres and doctors' surgeries.
- The Department's commitment to developing a multi-lingual leaflet for victims, in conjunction with Amnesty International.
- The work being taken forward on a project to change mindsets to drive down demand for all forms of organised crime.
- The proposals on engagement with Non-Governmental Organisations which are being drawn up and will be announced at an event on 'Tackling Trafficking Together' on Anti-Trafficking/Anti-Slavery Day on 18 October.

Criminal Justice: Mandatory Drug Tests

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what consideration he has given to introducing mandatory drug tests for people arrested and charged with disorderly incidents who are in an intoxicated state through alcohol and have become violent, and who may use their intoxication as a defence in court.

(AQW 14744/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are currently no plans to introduce mandatory drug tests for those offenders who are in an intoxicated state when arrested for a disorderly incident.

The Public Prosecution Service has advised that there is case law to indicate that the courts would generally not accept alcohol intoxication as a defence and, in many cases, it is considered to be an aggravating factor.

Prisons: Non-natural Deaths

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) to provide a copy of the recommendations in the report by Professor Roy McClelland into non-natural deaths in prisons; and (ii) on what date all 30 recommendations were implemented by the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQW 14745/11-15)

Mr Ford: Professor Roy McClelland's report into non-natural deaths in Northern Ireland Prisons, made 30 recommendations to the Northern Ireland Prison Service, detailed at Annex A.

The Prison Service does not have a record of the date each recommendation was implemented. The McClelland report was overtaken by a number of external reports and further changes in the management of vulnerable prisoners and changes to delivery of healthcare have subsumed many of the recommendations.

Although the McClelland report predates the transfer of healthcare to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, requests for information on healthcare related matters should be directed to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Annex A

- 1 A review of prisoner involvement in the PAR 1 process should be considered including consideration of prisoners' initial awareness that a form is being opened supply of information to prisoners about the PAR 1 process and prisoners being present at case conferences.
- 2 As part of the case conference procedures under the PAR 1 process each prison should develop policies and practices for prisoners which encompass the necessary practical measures to reduce risk informed by individual risk assessment.
- 3 There should be clear information for all frontline staff about features of suicide risk including past illness behaviour and social circumstances.
- 4 The PAR 1 document should be adapted to identify triggers.
- 5 There should be safer custody arrangements in each establishment and in each segregation unit. Better safety requires improved observation arrangements as well as attention to removal of ligature points.
- 6 There is a need to develop processes that assess monitor intervene and plan the improved transfer of information relevant for risk assessment between disciplines within prison including use of the PAR 1 form.
- 7 The vehicle by which this information should be passed on is the care plan. Guidance and training should be provided by the prison service highlighting appropriate ways of sharing and transferring information regarding high "at risk" prisoners.
- 8 A 'family hotline' should be established within each prison to enable family members to obtain and pass on information regarding prisoners that may be relevant to suicide risk reduction.
- 9 Each prison should introduce; listener /buddy systems to support people with mental health problems.
- 10 There is an urgent need to improve necessary transfer of clinical and other relevant background information from the community into prisons within the prison and from the prison back into the community.
- 11 The quality and utility of reception and health screening in particular for mental health problems and suicidal ideation urgently requires to be improved.
- 12 Clear protocols for action should be in place to address problems identified at the reception health screen.
- 13 A multidisciplinary mental health team approach to the management of offenders suffering from mental health problems should be established as a priority.
- 14 Improving activity levels work placements education for vulnerable prisoners and therapeutic day care regimes should be established as components of care for this group. More attention to detail should go into the way that vulnerable prisoners spend their day.
- 15 There should be strengthening of the multidisciplinary mental health care team with triage of cases suitable for referral to individual key workers.
- 16 Further study of the pathways to care for prisoner - patients would be useful to highlight gaps between prisoner needs and service provision.
- 17 Headquarters must raise the profile of prisoner care issues including suicide and self-harm. They should plan now to replace the PAR 1 form once the limitations of this system have been reached.

- 18 A Head of Healthcare senior management post should be created on the board of each establishment management team or a nurse manager appointed to sit as Head of Healthcare as a matter of urgency.
- 19 Governors and their management teams must display more leadership on suicide and risk management procedures in order to protect the vulnerable.
- 20 Robust self-audit and national audit procedures on all standards should be introduced as a high priority in order to drive up care standards at a local level.
- 21 Prisoner health and care issues should be moved out of industrial relations procedures.
- 22 A review should be conducted aimed at reducing the level of control in establishments wherever possible especially in Ash House where the levels of control are unnecessarily high for the management of female offenders.
- 23 Ash House should operate as a separate establishment with a clear therapeutic ethos and new residential facilities to allow progression of female prisoners.
- 24 There is an urgent need for training in the use of the PAR 1 process and in particular the importance of the care plan and for multidisciplinary involvement in the care of people at risk of suicide and self harm.
- 25 Prison staff need to have access to a programme of training on matters relating to mental health and specifically in the recognition assessment and management of prisoners "fit risk".
- 26 Personality Disorder services should be established for women with security needs outside the prison setting or jointly by prison and Health and Personal Social Services.
- 27 In-reach mental health support for each establishment should be initiated with priorities for the female site and adolescents at Hydebank Wood.
- 28 Health and Personal Social Services should become responsible for the delivery and development of all clinical services within NIPS establishments.
- 29 An Implementation Plan must be developed as a priority for the recommendations of all recent reports informed by the present recommendations. This is essential for a much needed reform of the prisons' duty of care and modernisation of mental health services in Northern Ireland prisons.
- 30 The Implementation Strategy should be monitored regularly and subject to a review at 3 years taking full account of the recommendations of this Review and the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI).

Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13783/11-15, in the absence of the actual submission can he confirm if any record of the content exists, and if so, to provide it.

(AQW 14787/11-15)

Mr Ford: I confirm that, as with the actual submission, no other record of its content exists. The documents were the property of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). Officials from the NIO have confirmed that these have been destroyed in accordance with guidance for the Disposal and Retention of Documents.

Prison Service: Deaths in Custody

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) who investigated the deaths in custody on 7 September 2002 and 3 March 2004, (ii) what recommendations did the investigator make to the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and (iii) how many recommendations were successfully implemented.

(AQW 14788/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prior to the establishment of the Prisoner Ombudsman's remit to investigate deaths in custody, internal investigations following a death in custody were carried out by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS).

A Governor from Magilligan Prison conducted an inquiry into the circumstances of the 7 September 2002 death in custody. The recommendations made following this inquiry are attached at Annex A.

A Governor from Prison Service Headquarters was appointed to conduct a review into the circumstances of the 3 March 2004 death in custody. The recommendations made following this inquiry are attached at Annex B.

Given the lapse in time since these reports were published, officials have been unable to locate any paperwork to confirm what recommendations were completed at the time. The NIPS disposal schedule allows for death in custody documents in Headquarters to be destroyed after five years and therefore related documents may no longer be available. However, recent changes in the management of vulnerable prisoners and changes to delivery of Healthcare have subsumed the recommendations outlined above.

Annex A

- 1 The Inquiry Team recognises and endorses the general concern and in particular that an adult institution is an inappropriate place to commit a juvenile female.

- 2 Prison Service Headquarters should consult with all relevant bodies to consider the provision of a secure community based facility for juveniles with personality based disorders within Northern Ireland.
- 3 The Terms of Reference for the Suicide Working Group be extended to include the management of juveniles with personality disorders.
- 4 Staff training in relation to identifying the signs and symptoms of personality disorders was not sufficient to meet the demanding situations and the consistent needs of such individuals and should take place as a matter of priority.
- 5 This training should be extended to key staff at YOC Hydebank Wood.

Annex B

- 1 A separate healthcare facility should be made available for female prisoners, especially for those with personality disorders, or behavioural problems, which would be more 'patient friendly' than the Close Supervision Unit in C1 landing.
- 2 The current male ratio in Mourne House should be reviewed, with the current 80:20 Male to Female ideally being reversed.
- 3 A review needs to take place of the number of staff needed to ensure that the Healthcare facility in HMP Maghaberry operates in an effective and efficient manner.
- 4 A review needs to be undertaken as to the deployment of Psychiatric nursing staff.
- 5 Healthcare staff must be made aware of the importance of correctly completing the Initial Reception Health Screen documentation. The staff member should actively enquire as to whether or not there is any documentation, such as PACE 16 form, which could contain valuable and pertinent information about the inmate and help to give a more accurate indication of risk indicators. They should have available, not only the medical file but also the prisoner's general file.
- 6 All staff must be aware of the necessity to fully complete documentation relating to 'At Risk' prisoners, especially in their medical files and in the PAR1 document.
- 7 Consideration should be given to developing the Listener scheme such as operates in HMP Magilligan.
- 8 That were practicable, case conference following deaths in custody should take place after the Coroner's inquest, in order that any pertinent comments made by the Coroner may be taken into consideration.
- 9 Permission for 'At Risk' prisoners, especially when the subject of a live PAR1 and especially when locked on their own, to have possession of clothing with draw-string adjusters, or footwear with laces, needs to be reviewed.

Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13781/11-15, to clarify if this document, or its contents, have been requested in relation to any court or tribunal proceedings.

(AQW 14790/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no record of the document or its contents being requested in relation to any court or tribunal proceedings.

Victims and Witnesses of Crime: Justice Committee Report

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the measures being taken by his Department to implement the recommendations in the Justice Committee's Report on its Inquiry into the Criminal Justice Services available to Victims and Witnesses of Crime in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14829/11-15)

Mr Ford: I was very pleased to welcome the Justice Committee's report of its inquiry into services for victims and witnesses of crime. As I said in the Chamber on 3 July, I commend the Committee on what is clearly an extremely important piece of work and the Committee's thorough approach to it. I have accepted, or accepted in principle, each of the Committee's thirty recommendations, and my Department has written to the Committee to confirm how these will be taken forward.

I can assure the Member that work is already underway to give effect to those recommendations. Within the next few weeks, I plan to publish for consultation a new five-year strategy, aimed at improving access to justice for all victims and witnesses of crime. The content of the draft strategy has been substantially influenced by the Committee's recommendations.

It is my hope that slightly over half of the Committee's recommendations will be implemented over the next two financial years. The draft strategy will, of course, be shared with the Committee prior to publication for public consultation. I look forward to continued collaborative engagement with the Committee in this important area.

Crime: Reasonable Force

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice, in light of comments made by Judge Michael Pert QC about the right of legally held firearms to be discharged to defend life and property, whether he intends to review the law.

(AQW 14875/11-15)

Mr Ford: The law already provides that people are entitled to use reasonable force in resisting crime, the reasonableness of the level of force in any individual case being a matter for the courts. My view is that existing law in Northern Ireland already provides sufficient protection for householders. I am considering nevertheless the value of issuing public guidance on the use of reasonable force and my officials have been working with both the Public and Crown Prosecution Services. I will be consulting with the Justice Committee.

Wheel Clamping: Private Land

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to review the law permitting clamping on private land.

(AQW 14909/11-15)

Mr Ford: The issue of wheel clamping on private land was included as part of a wider consultation run by the Department of Justice on the future regulation of the private security industry in Northern Ireland. This consultation closed on 24 August. The next step will be for me to consider the consultation responses, together with other evidence and research.

The reply I gave on 5 October 2012 sets out the current legal position on the private clamping of cars. (Official Report Col WA246)

Muckamore: Sex Offenders

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Justice why sex offenders have been given accommodation in Muckamore; and what level of consultation was undertaken with residents in the locality prior to this decision.

(AQW 15028/11-15)

Mr Ford: Any offender with mental disorder who is being prosecuted for an imprisonable offence or who is serving a prison sentence can be remanded, committed or transferred to a hospital for assessment or treatment of their mental condition. Under the provisions of the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986, the identification of any particular hospital is a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety through the relevant Health and Social Care Trust.

Any offender serving a community based sentence and in need of similar assessment or treatment could be placed in hospital in a similar way. Any consultation that might be required would be a matter for the relevant Trust.

Policing: Funding

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice what discussions his Department has had, and is planning to have, with the PSNI and HM Treasury about additional funding for policing.

(AQO 2604/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice funding allocation was agreed by the Executive for the years 2011-15. This included £45m of additional security funding from the Executive for the PSNI.

In addition, working with DFP, access to a further £199.5m was secured from the Treasury to meet PSNI security pressures.

Discussions have not begun with the PSNI and Policing Board about a future spending review period.

Any future discussions with the Treasury about additional funding for policing in the next spending review period would be led by DFP on behalf of the Executive.

Animal Welfare: Sentencing

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice to outline his plans for having discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development about increasing sentences for acts of deliberate and severe animal cruelty.

(AQO 2605/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is responsible for policy in this area, and during the debate on the issue on 24 September, she indicated that she had no plans to increase the penalties introduced in the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Sentencing within this legislative framework is a matter for the Judiciary, and the Lord Chief Justice, in his Programme of Action, is enhancing the structures by which the judiciary ensure consistent and appropriate sentences. Under this Programme, sentencing guidelines for offences of animal cruelty, heard in the Magistrates' Courts, will be developed in the near future.

Should there be any proposals for change to the existing legislative framework, my role is to ensure that these fit proportionately within the overall system of penalties available in Northern Ireland.

As yet, I have not been approached by the Agriculture Minister about a meeting, but would be very happy to discuss these issues with her.

PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Justice to outline his Department's role in developing the business case to re-tender the contract for temporary workers or associate staff engaged by the PSNI.

(AQO 2606/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI is responsible for developing business cases. My Department's role is to approve those which fall outside the PSNI's delegated limits.

My Department considers business cases for approval on the same basis and Value for Money criteria, regardless of the classification.

In addition, an Economist from my Department provides advice and support to improve the PSNI's business case and economic appraisal capability.

Firearms Licensing

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice what action he intends to take to review the cost of firearms licensing, including potential efficiency savings.

(AQO 2607/11-15)

Mr Ford: At PSNI's request, the processes in Firearms Licensing Branch were reviewed by consultants from the Delivery and Innovation Division in the Department of Finance and Personnel. Following this work to assist in reviewing fees, the DOJ commissioned the Delivery and Innovation Division to carry out a review of the actual cost of providing a firearms licensing system based on how the service will operate in future, as opposed to how it presently functions. This latter review naturally took account of the earlier work.

In June I launched a public consultation on firearms licensing fees (and other issues). It was based on the conclusions in the report for the Department. The 12 week public consultation period ended on 20 September 2012. The responses have now to be considered.

The proposed new fees in it are designed to achieve full cost recovery as the DFP guidance expects.

PSNI: Business Cases

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice to outline the involvement of his Department in the development of business cases by the PSNI which are classified as Top Secret.

(AQO 2608/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI is responsible for developing business cases, regardless of the security classification. My Department's role is to approve those which fall outside the PSNI's delegated limits.

My Department considers business cases for approval on the same basis and Value for Money criteria, regardless of the classification. The numbers of cases which are highly classified is very small.

In addition, an Economist from my Department provides advice and support to improve the PSNI's business case and economic appraisal capability.

PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff

Ms McCorley asked the Minister of Justice why he has declined to meet with the trade unions representing police support staff about their concerns on the use of agency and associate staff by the PSNI.

(AQO 2609/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I previously informed the House on 25 June, the awarding and management of contracts by the Police Service is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, for which he is accountable to the Policing Board.

I take assurance from the effectiveness of the accountability arrangements through which the Board have given this particular attention.

I explained this to NIPSA by letter and declined a meeting as I had no role in this issue.

PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Justice what steps have been taken by his Department in response to increasing public concern about the use of associate and agency staff by the PSNI.

(AQO 2610/11-15)

Mr Ford: The use of associate and agency staff by the PSNI has been the subject of considerable attention by the Policing Board and will be before PAC on Wednesday. I look forward to the outcome of that scrutiny.

Whilst the award and management of contracts by PSNI is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, I shall be seeking assurance as to the overall governance of police resources.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Justice what steps he intends to take to remove members of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships and District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships who have links to, or are members of, proscribed organisations.

(AQO 2611/11-15)

Mr Ford: Members of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, and District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships in Belfast, undertake an important role in improving their communities. As such, they must operate in a transparent and accountable manner.

The Northern Ireland Policing Board has responsibility for appointing independent members to PCSPs and DPCSPs. On application, individuals are required to sign a declaration against terrorism and, if successful at interview, will undergo a criminal records check.

The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 disqualifies individuals who have been convicted and imprisoned or detained during the five years prior to their application from holding membership.

Members can be removed if:

- in the case of independent members, they fail to disclose a conviction or have demonstrably acted in breach of the terms of a declaration against terrorism; and/or
- they are convicted of a criminal offence after appointment.

It would not be the role of my Department to remove these members – rather it is the responsibility of the Policing Board or the relevant Council, with the approval of the Board, as set out in the Justice Act.

I will be reviewing the Code of Practice for the appointment of independent members to PCSPs and DPCSPs and will further consider this issue.

Magilligan Prison

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the contribution that the staff and facilities at HMP Magilligan make in the delivery of prison services.

(AQO 2612/11-15)

Mr Ford: Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland last carried out an inspection of Magilligan Prison in 2010, giving it a positive report on an improving prison. At that time, CJINI assessed that the outcomes for prisoners at Magilligan were reasonably good, based on the four tests of a healthy prison – safety, respect, purposeful activity and resettlement. However the inspection team raised concerns about the physical environment and the standard of some of the accommodation in the prison.

In its report of October last year the Prison Review Team also endorsed the contribution made at Magilligan, highlighting some examples of effective working partnerships which had been forged between the prison and education and training providers in the local community. However the Team also observed that much of the prison's current accommodation is "wholly unsuitable".

On my visits to the prison I have been impressed by the attitudes and work of the staff I have seen there. I share the assessments made by both CJINI and the Prison Review Team and I welcome the positive contribution to public safety through reducing the risk of reoffending which is being made at Magilligan Prison.

Department for Regional Development

Flags and Emblems

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to areas where there are illegal republican sectarian symbols, flags, emblems or graffiti on lamp posts, and other property owned by his Department, which have been in place for sometime, to detail (i) whether these areas are 'no go areas' for departmental and arm's-length body staff; and (ii) how many areas are presently classed as such.

(AQW 14562/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has signed up to the multi-agency Joint Protocol in Relation to the Display of Flags in Public Areas. Under the Protocol, Roads Service will, when called upon by the lead Agency, provide the access equipment and resources to remove unwanted flags and emblems, once agreement has been reached for their removal and where they are not easily accessible for the local community.

My Department does not regard any locations where there are illegal symbols, flags, emblems or graffiti on lamp posts or other Departmental property to be 'no go areas' for staff. Consequently, there are no areas currently classed as 'no go areas'.

DRD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study'

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration his Department has given to the Belfast City Council commissioned 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study' published in March 2012; and (ii) what action has been taken to implement the recommendations relevant to his Department.

(AQW 14648/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service and Translink have been represented at inter-agency working group meetings relating to the 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study'. I understand that the draft report and action points were discussed at the most recent meeting of this group.

As the Member may be aware, one of the recommendations contained within the report concerns an integrated plan for transport and traffic management. To this end, my Department's Roads Service has introduced a number of corner waiting restrictions within the Holylands area in order to facilitate traffic movements. In addition, Roads Service officials are currently involved in a consultation process with residents from the area, regarding a number of issues relating to traffic management, resident parking arrangements and public transport.

Belfast Harbour Commissioners: Transfer of Funds

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department intends to compel a transfer of funds from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to the Executive, or whether it is now accepted that such is not legally possible.

(AQW 14707/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is investigating with Belfast Harbour Commissioners collaborative means to secure a transfer of funds. No conclusions have yet been reached whether any legislation is necessary.

NI Water: Water and Sewerage Charges

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the rebate available to people who pay water and sewerage charges to NI Water and are billed for rates by Land and Property Services; and (ii) how any rebate is calculated.

(AQW 14752/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that (i) there are two methods of charging non-domestic customers for water - namely measured or unmeasured. Measured charges are based on meter readings and unmeasured charges are calculated using the net annual valuation of the property determined by Land & Property Services. For measured water charges a domestic allowance is granted to reflect the payment of rates on the property and where a measured sewage charge is applicable an allowance is also available. For unmeasured customers a reduction of the full rate is granted which is regarded as a 'proxy' for a domestic allowance.

- (ii) The domestic allowance has been calculated at 200 cubic metres per year for measured water charges and where a measured sewage charge is applicable customers will not be charged for the first 190 cubic metres of sewage discharged. The allowances are automatically deducted from the gross water and sewage volume to determine the billable water and sewage volumes for every bill issued. The reduction in the full rate for unmeasured customers is 50%.

Flooding: Newcastle

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions his Department has had with its arm's-length bodies to ensure that a cross-sectoral anti-flood project is developed for the Newcastle area, so that events of 5 July are not repeated.

(AQW 14754/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I sympathise with all those who have suffered from flooding in recent months. My Department has ongoing discussions with Northern Ireland Water (NIW) about a range of flood mitigation issues including in the Newcastle area. It and NIW also have discussions with The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency which is the statutory drainage and flood defence authority for Northern Ireland.

I have been advised by NIW that the flooding in Newcastle on 5 July was caused by the level and intensity of rainfall exceeding the design capacity of the sewer system. Since 2007, NIW has invested over £14 million on infrastructure in the Newcastle area. £4.4 million has recently been invested on improvements to the sewerage network in order to address capacity and quality issues. My Department's Roads Service routinely cleans all road gullies in urban areas twice a year, including those in areas which were affected by flooding on 5 July (these gullies were cleaned between 3 and 6 weeks before the flooding occurred).

I will continue to make the case for additional investment in our water and roads drainage infrastructure. However, I can give no guarantee that additional investment, beyond that outlined above, will be made in the Newcastle area in the immediate future.

Unfortunately the topography, geology and historical pattern of development of the Newcastle area mean that no sewerage system could completely eliminate the risk of flooding. Extreme rainfall events will always have the potential to overwhelm sewers and drainage systems.

Fair Employment Tribunal: Chairperson of NI Water

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 13421/11-15, to detail the costs incurred by his Department in relation to the Fair Employment Tribunal case on the appointment of the Chairperson of NI Water, including a breakdown of legal fees, travel costs and all the other expenses.

(AQW 14755/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I refer to the previous answers I gave to AQW 13171/11-15 on 6 July and AQW 13421/11-15 on 10 July.

This case will not be concluded until the outcome of the Remedies Hearing is known. I will not therefore be in a position to provide a breakdown of legal fees and all other expenses in advance of this.

Traffic Calming: Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce road calming measures for the Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee.

(AQW 14758/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no immediate plans to introduce traffic calming measures in the Beechfield Drive area of Donaghadee. This location has been assessed/reviewed annually since 2007. When compared against all competing traffic calming requests within the Ards Borough Council Area, this location remains at a low of priority and therefore is unlikely to merit inclusion in Roads Service Southern Division's traffic calming programme for the foreseeable future.

Donaghadee Bypass

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to create a by-pass in the Donaghadee area to alleviate traffic congestion.

(AQW 14761/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that all the resources currently available for strategic road improvements are focused on the trunk road network, and are committed up to 2014-15, primarily on the A5, A8 and A2 projects. Funding beyond this timeframe is dependent upon future budget settlements. However, in the present economic climate it would appear that future funding will not be sufficient to deliver the current Strategic Road Improvement Programme within the timescale envisaged in my Department's Investment Delivery Plan for Roads.

The Strategic Road Improvement Programme reflects the Executive's current policy for development and transportation as set out in the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS), the Regional Development Strategy, which the RTS supports, and the three transport plans through which the RTS is being implemented.

In these circumstances, while I can appreciate the benefits a bypass in the Donaghadee area may provide to alleviate traffic congestion, I regret to advise that since it would not attract a high priority, when compared to other schemes, there are currently no plans for such a bypass.

Roads: Roadside Advertising

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to reviewing the policy in relation to roadside advertising signage for businesses, particularly given the current economic situation.

(AQW 14762/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: While I appreciate and understand the difficult trading conditions being experienced by many retailers across Northern Ireland, the illegal erection of advertising signs along the public road is an offence under The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993. Furthermore, such signage can be a distraction to motorists and as such, can have significant road safety implications. An increase in the number of signs would likely increase the risk of accidents and injuries. Given that this is an issue of road safety, which must take precedence over commercial considerations, my Department currently has no plans to review or amend the current policy.

DRD: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development how many members of staff in his Department are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations, and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

(AQW 14789/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There are currently no staff in my Department who are suspended due to internal disciplinary investigations.

Seven staff in the Department are facing internal disciplinary investigations and are not currently suspended from work.

Travelwise

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (i) how the Travelwise initiative can be advanced in rural areas, and (ii) how it has been promoted in South Down.

(AQW 14798/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department through its Travelwise initiative is promoting a range of sustainable travel options for the journey to work or education by promoting more walking, cycling, greater use of public transport and car sharing. These alternative modes are just as appropriate for journeys in rural areas as elsewhere.

Officials from my Department have made visits to schools, colleges and workplaces in the South Down area and have promoted the sustainable travel options to staff and pupils alike. More visits are programmed.

Footpaths: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are plans to resurface the footpath in High Street, Millisle.

(AQW 14805/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I assume that the Member is referring to Main Street, Millisle. Should this be the location, then I can advise the Member that my Department's Roads Service has no plans, at present, to carry out resurfacing on this footway.

Should this not be at this location, I would advise the Member to contact Mr Stanley Lamb, Section Engineer for the Ards area, who can be contacted at the Ards Section Office, 2 Jubilee Road, Newtownards, BT23 4YH (Tel: 02891819328) and he will arrange to meet with you to discuss the issue.

Dropped Kerbs: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what dropped kerb schemes are planned for the Missile area.

(AQW 14806/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has no immediate plans to install any dropped kerb measures in Millisle. I am advised that dropped kerbs were recently installed on Ballymacrui Drive, close to its junction with Main Street. Further measures will be considered upon receipt of individual requests, and assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Water Infrastructure: Belfast

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the areas in Belfast which have been identified for capital works to improve water infrastructure following the recent flooding.

(AQW 14808/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that drainage area plans designed to improve drainage and reduce the risk of out of sewer flooding have been established for many areas across the Province.

Within the Belfast area, the recently completed Belfast Sewers Project has proven very successful in reducing the risk of out of sewer flooding to central Belfast, and parts of the Ormeau and Ravenhill Roads. Two further studies are on-going in the east and south Belfast areas. The Sydenham Strategic Study Project will recommend drainage improvements to the eastern areas of the city, and the Glenmachan Street Strategic Study will recommend drainage improvements to the southern areas of the city. Both studies are planned to be completed early next year following which approval will be sought to implement any recommendations suggested.

In order to help address flood mitigation and pollution, NIW has identified a number of measures with a total cost of approximately £10 million which could be completed within 2012/13, including some in the Belfast area. I have sought funding for this work through the June monitoring round and 'Invest to Save' initiatives. Unfortunately these bids have been unsuccessful. I will continue to explore options for securing funding which will allow these measures to be accelerated.

Flooding: Resources

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development what practical measures or resources his Department has considered providing to those residents living in areas susceptible to further flooding.

(AQW 14809/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I sympathise with all those who have suffered the inconvenience and expense of flooding over the summer.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is the statutory drainage and flood defence authority in Northern Ireland. I have been advised by DARD that its Rivers Agency is currently working with Belfast City Council and the Consumer Council to scope the options for individual property protection.

My Department's Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water (NIW), along with, DARD's Rivers Agency and a number of local Councils, have recently agreed a sandbag protocol. This will enable Councils that have signed up to the protocol to access additional stocks of sandbags for distribution to the public when there is an imminent danger of flooding to properties.

However, it must be recognised that there are limitations to the effectiveness of any such measures.

The most important contribution that my Department and NIW can make to flood mitigation is to continue to ensure our road drainage and sewer infrastructure performs to its maximum capacity when we experience heavy rainfall.

Rural Transport Fund

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development why the current Rural Transport Fund is being paid annually to the community transport suppliers delivering Dial a Lift services.

(AQW 14820/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Funding from the Rural Transport Fund to all rural community transport providers is agreed annually and the level of funding is determined on the business plans and the annual financial plans provided by each organisation. Grants are generally paid to the providers on a quarterly basis.

Rural Transport Fund

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development why the Rural Transport Fund cannot be awarded to community transport suppliers until the end of the current budget term in March 2015.

(AQW 14821/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Community transport suppliers continue to be awarded grant from the Rural Transport Fund. Funding from the Rural Transport Fund to all rural community transport providers is agreed annually and the level of funding is determined on the basis of the annual financial plans provided by each organisation.

Rural Transport Fund

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department accepts that the Rural Transport Fund will continue until March 2015 and to outline the reasons for not providing longer term funding to community transport providers.

(AQW 14822/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is my intention, based on current budgets, that the Rural Transport Fund continues until 2015. Currently annual grant settlements are agreed with the rural community transport providers. It is likely that this will continue up to the end of 2014/15 but we have to be mindful of potential procurement guidance in committing to longer term funding at this time.

In addition work is continuing in a number of areas towards the merger of the organisations with the ultimate aim of having seven partnerships who will receive funding to provide services across all of Northern Ireland. When this process has been completed the options for long term funding mechanisms can be considered.

Water Charges

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development how many domestic properties in 2011 were disconnected from the water supply as a result of non-payment of water charges.

(AQW 14847/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that since water charges for domestic properties have not been introduced, no domestic properties have been disconnected from the water supply.

Road Safety: Coleraine Schools

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development how many rural primary schools in the Coleraine area have requested that Roads Service provide additional traffic safety precautions in the vicinity of the school, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14848/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of rural primary schools, in the Coleraine Borough Council area, which have requested that my Department's Roads Service provides additional traffic safety precautions in the vicinity of the school, in each of the last five years, are set out in the table below:

Year	Number of rural primary schools requesting additional traffic safety measures
2007	1
2008	1
2009	1
2010	2
2011	1
Total	6

A6 Dual Carriageway

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development what preparatory work, in relation to the dualling of the A6 will, be carried out in the 2012/13 financial year.

(AQW 14849/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that the Public Inquiry into the proposals for the dualling of the A6 from Londonderry to Dungiven, including a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven, finished on 2 October 2012. My Department's Roads Service will now follow up on undertakings given during the Inquiry process and will continue to progress the detailed design, in consultation with affected landowners and other stakeholders. The Department expects to receive the Inspector's Report by March 2013.

I should also advise that a Public Inquiry into an alternative junction provision at Castledawson to connect to the proposed A6 dualling between Randalstown and Castledawson was held in February 2012. The Department has received the Inspector's Report and is currently considering the recommendations with a view to responding before the end of 2012. Further design work arising out of any recommendations made by the Inspector, that are accepted by the Department, will be carried out during the 2012/13 financial year.

Roads: Adoption

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria used to select a road for adoption.

(AQW 14851/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the adoption of roads is addressed through the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980. The following articles specifically relate to the adoption process:

Articles 3 and 7 - provide for the adoption of a road where it has been determined as part of planning application for a residential development.

Article 9 - allows Roads Service to consider a private road for adoption where:

- the majority of the owners and/or frontagers so request it;
- the Department is of the opinion that the street, or part of the street, should become a public road; and
- the road is first brought up to the required standard at the expense of the owners and/or frontagers.

Translink: 60+ SmartPass

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost to Translink for using 60 Plus SmartPasses on journeys from Belfast Central Station to Bangor in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14856/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There is no cost to Translink in relation to usage of 60+ Smartpasses on its services as the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme is funded by my Department. Translink is reimbursed on 'a no better no worse off' principle.

North Down: Gully Inspection

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many inspections of gulleys were carried out in the North Down area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14857/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year and gullies in rural areas once each year. This is in line with road maintenance guidelines. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

Roads Service further advises that there are approximately 17,300 gullies in the North Down area which are subject to a passing visual inspection, as part of its routine cyclic road maintenance inspections. The frequency of these inspections is dependent on the classification of the road on which the gullies are located, however, this equates to the inspection of approximately 102,500 gullies annually.

Street Lighting: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for the Millisle area in the next 12 months.

(AQW 14858/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that no new street lighting schemes are currently planned for the Millisle area in the next 12 months.

DRD: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of QUANGOS linked to his Department (a) at 8 May 2007; and (b) at 1 October 2012; and (ii) how many people served on them on these respective dates.

(AQW 14908/11-15)

Mr Kennedy:

- a At 8 May 2007 there were two Arm's Length Bodies linked to my Department, 15 people served on these bodies on this date.
- b At 1 October 2012 there were two Arm's Length Bodies linked to my Department, 18 people served on these bodies on this date.

Penalty Charge Notices: Kilrea/Garvagh

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking fines issued in (i) Kilrea; and (ii) Garvagh in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 14926/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued on behalf of my Department's Roads Service in Kilrea in each of the last 12 months are set out in the table below:

Month	PCNs issued in Kilrea
October 2011	7
November 2011	13
December 2011	10
January 2012	9
February 2012	4
March 2012	9
April 2012	2
May 2012	6
June 2012	1
July 2012	9
August 2012	3
September 2012	6

I can confirm that no PCN's were issued in Garvagh during the same period. There are very few parking restrictions in Garvagh and enforcement is not provided on a scheduled basis.

Water Charges

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development how water charges are formulated for the business community.

(AQW 15020/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that as a regulated utility company, its customer tariffs are regulated by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR). NIAUR carries out a regular review, called a 'price control', in which they determine how much funding NIW will require. This allows NIAUR to set price limits which they use to regulate annual water and sewerage tariffs. To ensure tariff increases are within determined price limits, NIW must submit draft tariffs to NIAUR in advance of each charging year (April to March). NIAUR must approve tariffs before they can be used to bill customers.

Details of all NIW's tariffs for the current charging year can be found in the Scheme of Charges located on its website at <http://www.niwater.com/waterandtradeeffluentcharges.asp>

Railways: Freight

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how much freight has been carried by NI Railways over the last three years.

(AQW 15078/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that there has been no freight transported on the NI Railways network in the last 3 years.

A2: Update

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A2 road scheme between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus, including the proposed timeline for the work.

(AQW 15085/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the procurement process for the proposed A2 scheme is currently underway. Tender documents are due for return in November 2012 and following assessment and successful completion of the process, an award of tender is expected in February/March 2013. Roads Service anticipates that the construction stage of this scheme will then commence following a short contract mobilisation period and will take approximately two years to complete.

It is anticipated that publication of the Vesting Order to complete the acquisition of the land required for the scheme will take place later this year.

Bike Hire: Belfast

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Regional Development whether agreement has been reached on the mechanism by which members of the public can hire bicycles in the proposed Belfast Public Bike Hire Scheme.

(AQO 2618/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Earlier this year, I announced funding totalling £4.3m over 3 years for four council-led projects which aim to demonstrate how active travel can benefit both individuals and their communities. Belfast City Council were awarded capital funding of around £700,000 over a 3 year development and implementation period to put a third generation bike hire scheme in place for Belfast.

Tenders will be sought to procure a modern, attractive and technologically sound scheme most suited to the City. Once these tenders have been evaluated the Council will be in a position to consider how the public will gain access to the bicycles.

During the preparation and implementation stages of the project my officials will work closely with Belfast City Council to assist in taking the scheme forward.

Railways: Ballymena–Belfast

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the provision of an hourly train service from Ballymena to Belfast.

(AQO 2619/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that they are currently undertaking a passenger consultation exercise to gauge views on its planned new rail timetable. It is hoped this is complete by end of October 2012.

One of the key changes involves an increase by almost a half in the frequency of services between Belfast and Coleraine, delivering an hourly service for passengers.

I am optimistic that Translink will have implemented the new timetable before Christmas and it is expected, subject to all funding issues being resolved, to introduce major improvements on the Larne line as well. Improvements on the Newry/Portadown service and on the Bangor line are also planned. Translink have also committed to ensure that extra rail capacity will be available on the Coleraine line to facilitate those wishing to visit shops in Belfast coming up to Christmas.

Translink have just taken delivery of 20 new 'class 4000' trains. It is worth saying that we have moved from a position of potential closure of NI Railways to one of a successful, growing and industry leading rail operation. Growth in passenger numbers in the last 10 years have exceeded the target set in the Regional Transport Strategy target by over a third. We consider there to be potential for substantial on-going growth and these developments make this more likely.

Water Charges: SMEs

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development if any investigation has been carried out into the impact of water charges on small and medium sized businesses, in light of the current economic situation.

(AQO 2620/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Since the Executive unanimously agreed to the extension of water and sewerage charging to all non-domestic consumers from April 2008 charges for water and sewerage services have been reviewed annually. Any revisions must be determined in accordance with a process overseen by the Utility Regulator which protects customer interests.

The Executive continues to subsidise non-domestic customers' charges by providing a domestic allowance for measured consumers while unmeasured customers pay half the full amount.

Kilkeel Bus Station

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to upgrade Kilkeel Bus Station.

(AQO 2621/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I met with Newry and Mourne council in May this year to discuss the possible upgrade of Kilkeel Bus Upgrade. I subsequently wrote to the Chief Executive of the council in September.

The location currently proposed, the old Mourne hospital site, is probably not suited to such a development. Historically it has proven difficult to obtain planning permission for such facilities adjacent to existing housing. Access to the proposed site is too narrow and, given the on-street parking there, would not be a suitable location for bus movements or access. I am not aware that there is any reference to a new bus terminal/depot at the suggested location in the draft Area Plan. Any new bus facility must be in a suitable location and meet value for money and affordability tests including future overhead costs.

Flooding: Clonduff Estate

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to alleviate the flooding problems in the Clonduff Estate, east Belfast.

(AQO 2622/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has received reports of flooding on four occasions at this location and two reports of blocked gullies during the last three years.

In addition, Northern Ireland Water officials advise that they have investigated flooding at Clonduff Estate in East Belfast on a number of occasions and were satisfied that the sewerage infrastructure in the area was operating normally during the flooding incidents.

The flooding which occurred in June 2012 was caused by the extreme level of very heavy and persistent rainfall which fell over a short period of time. Rainfall of this magnitude, falling on already saturated ground, is likely to overwhelm drainage systems and in some places lead to flooding.

Concerns have been expressed regarding the ownership and condition of the culvert which passes under Clonduff Drive. Roads Service has checked this culvert and its capacity is not restricted by debris. Another check on its condition is programmed and officials are continuing their enquiries to ascertain who is responsible for its ownership and maintenance.

A22: Flooding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to addressing the persistent flooding on the A22 Comber to Dundonald road.

(AQO 2623/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: While the Member has not specified a particular location on the A22 Comber to Dundonald Road where there is persistent flooding, my Department's Roads Service has assumed that the location may be close to the junction with Hillhead Road.

Should this be the location, then I can advise the Member that the problem is caused by material from a private laneway that is being washed onto the road during prolonged periods of heavy rain, causing the gullies on the road to become blocked.

Roads Service has advised that it will pursue the owner of the laneway to carry out remedial works to alleviate this problem.

Should the flooding not be at this location, I would advise the Member to contact Mr Stanley Lamb, Section Engineer for the Ards area, who can be contacted at the Ards Section Office, 2 Jubilee Road, Newtownards, BT23 4YH (Tel: 02891819328) and he will arrange to meet with you to discuss the issue.

Flood Alleviation: Funding

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has sought additional funding from the Executive in the last year for flood alleviation and flood prevention measures.

(AQO 2624/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been pursuing all funding avenues to prioritise investment in our water and sewerage infrastructure, including flood alleviation measures.

In the June Monitoring round I made a £7 million capital bid for 4 water supply resilience schemes (additional water mains to ensure security of customer supplies during extreme weather like Winter 2010/11). The bid was unsuccessful.

As part of the "Invest to Save" scheme, in July 2012 I made a £17 million capital bid. £7 million for the 4 water supply resilience schemes and £10 million to accelerate a number of sewer projects designed to reduce the impact of severe weather conditions. The bid was unsuccessful.

I will continue making the case for this investment (i.e. the £17m) including options for reprioritising current DRD resources, so I am not just demanding extra funding.

Ultimately, allocation and prioritisation of resources is a matter for the Executive.

Rathlin Island: Roads

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what road improvements are scheduled for Rathlin Island between now and 2015.

(AQO 2625/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, other than general road maintenance, Roads Service currently has no plans for road improvement schemes on Rathlin Island over the next three years.

However, the Member may already be aware that in June 2009, approximately two kilometres of Rathlin Island's unbound stone roads were surfaced with a bituminous surface at a cost of £150,000 and in 2010, Roads Service also surface dressed 27,000 square metres of the island's existing bitumen macadam roads at a cost of £100,000.

Active Travel Demonstration Projects

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any plans to roll out active travel demonstration projects across more council areas.

(AQO 2626/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Earlier this year, I announced funding totalling £4.3m over 3 years for four council-led projects which aim to demonstrate how active travel can benefit both individuals and their communities.

Subject to meeting the conditions in their bid applications, the 4 successful bidders are Derry City Council, Belfast City Council, Strabane District Council and Craigavon District Council.

During the preparation and implementation stages of the projects my officials will work closely with the successful Councils and the results will be used to inform any decisions on the potential roll out of demonstration projects in the future.

I can however confirm that no provision has been made in the current spending round for a further extension of the demonstration projects across other council areas.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: Private Landlords

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development for a list of the top ten private landlords, in terms of (i) value; and (ii) quantity of payments, who receive housing benefit payments from the Housing Executive; and what is the sum of the payments to each landlord.

(AQW 14436/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Housing Executive advises that the information cannot be provided in the format requested as information about payment of Housing Benefit is only held for landlords/companies and cannot be disaggregated. The Housing Executive further advise that in order not to contravene Data Protection legislation, details of the names of the landlords/ companies cannot be released.

However, the list below details the top ten amounts of Housing Benefit paid to landlords/companies during 2011/12: -

■ £545,942	■ £419,552	■ £351,108
■ £521,399	■ £369,421	■ £336,767
■ £521,344	■ £359,760	
■ £483,647	■ £357,791	

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority

Coleraine: Town Centre Development

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the proposals for town centre parking and retail development in Coleraine.

(AQW 14511/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department continues to work with the developers of the proposed 'Lanes' and 'Ramparts' development schemes in Coleraine to ensure that both schemes can commence as soon as they are economically viable. In the case of the Lanes scheme the developer is considering some changes including redesigning the amount of retail space. In the Ramparts scheme the potential relocation of educational and training services to the development has not yet been decided. Developers for both schemes are examining the potential funding options available to them to bring the proposals to fruition.

Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has instructed counsel for the upcoming John Lewis Inquiry and, if so, why and at what anticipated cost.

(AQW 14551/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In 2010 my Department was asked by the Planning Appeals Commission to attend the public inquiry into the planning application for the proposed expansion of Sprucefield to respond to questions about regeneration issues in relation to Belfast City Centre. The Department has instructed legal counsel. This is the standard process followed by Departments in preparing for such an inquiry. The Department does not have a final anticipated cost for counsel's fees as the inquiry has been adjourned.

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the selection criteria and process used for each themed bid in the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme.

(AQW 14647/11-15)

Mr McCausland: For each of the themes the Department adopted a two stage process in terms of putting the new arrangements in place; (a) expressions of interest/applications from interested parties with those deemed best placed to deliver the new arrangements progressing to (b) the normal economic appraisal and decision making process. As is the norm with all the Departments funding arrangements, no commitment to provide funding is made until the decision making process is complete and a formal contract for funding has issued.

The selection criteria for each of the themes are detailed at Annex A.

Annex A

Selection Criteria - Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Communities

- Demonstrate that they have expertise to deliver the identified specialist functions on a regional basis, rural and urban across the whole of Northern Ireland
- Demonstrate that they can provide services that are value for money for the support of women in disadvantaged areas and rural areas
- Demonstrate they have the flexibility to provide services outside office hours and at weekends for the benefit of women
- A proven ability to work in partnership/collaboration with other Northern Ireland organisations to avoid duplication and address any gaps in provision
- A proven ability to engage across the voluntary and community sector and with marginalised and isolated Northern Ireland communities
- Demonstrate experience in targeting activities to tackle disadvantage towards women and demonstrate that you meet section 75 obligations
- Demonstrate how they identify and target unmet need and potential for services for women in target areas
- Demonstrate that they can specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact
- Demonstrate administrative efficiency and ability to plan for continuous improvement in quality and reach
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the need for the range of services required to support the needs of women living and working in disadvantaged communities and rural communities across Northern Ireland
- A proven track record of working with local councils and central Government in Northern Ireland to support the delivery of local services for women living in disadvantaged areas and rural areas
- A proven track record of engaging and working with women's groups from all sections of the Northern Ireland community

Selection Criteria - Regional Support for Faith Sector Engagement

- Demonstrate that they have the capacity and expertise to deliver the identified functions across the whole of Northern Ireland.
- Demonstrate that they can provide services that are value for money.
- Demonstrate they have the flexibility to provide services outside normal office hours and at weekends.
- A proven ability to engage with the faith-based sector in Northern Ireland and with local communities and people groups.
- A proven ability to target activities to tackle disadvantage regardless of personal values, beliefs, creed or ethnicity.
- Demonstrate that they meet section 75 obligations.
- A proven ability to specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact.
- Demonstrate administrative efficiency.
- Demonstrate planning for continuous improvement in quality and reach.

- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the need for faith-based activities to address greatest social needs in our communities.
- A proven track record of working with central and local Government to support the delivery of services.

Selection Criteria - Regional Support for Voluntary Advice Services

- A proven ability to provide support for voluntary advice services at a regional level which are inclusive of all communities across Northern Ireland.
- A proven ability to provide leadership, representation and support to the Advice Sector.
- A proven ability to lead, plan and manage change within the Advice Sector.
- A proven ability to provide support coverage across Northern Ireland (in both urban and rural areas).
- A proven ability to provide expert advice on a regional basis on legal advice issues.
- A proven track record in providing value for money services.
- A proven track record in working in partnership/collaboration with others to avoid duplication.
- A proven ability to engage with key stakeholders including the community, front-line advice providers, councils and government in supporting the implementation of 'Opening Doors'.
- A proven ability to demonstrate that they meet section 75 obligations.
- A proven ability to specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact.
- A proven ability to demonstrate administrative efficiency.
- A proven ability to plan and manage continuous improvement in quality and reach e.g. geographical, technical, media outlets.
- A proven ability to provide infrastructure support on IT, advice specific training and development and management information systems for advice service delivery.

Selection Criteria - Regional Volunteering Infrastructure

- Please state the estimated total cost of the project, including VAT.
- Please demonstrate that your organisation has the capacity, capability, experience and expertise to deliver the actions identified within the Action Plan.
- Please provide evidence of working collaboratively with regional authorities / organisations involved in volunteering. Please also provide contact names and numbers of regional and local authority officials who may be asked for references.
- Please provide evidence of partnership working with public and private sector organisations.
- Please provide a breakdown of how the programme will be managed, including accountability, financial controls and monitoring arrangements.
- Please provide evidence of how your organisation [consortium] can ensure the successful implementation of the regional actions of the volunteering strategy including section 75 groupings.
- As policy lead for volunteering in Northern Ireland DSD will require its strategic partner for Regional Activity to assist in monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the volunteer strategy and determining any changes required. Does this present any significant issues for your organisation?
- If successful your organisation may have to work in close partnership with other local or regional volunteering strategic partners in implementing the volunteering strategy. Does this present any significant issues for your organisation?

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department completed an economic appraisal for the women's consortium bid which had been given preferred bidder status in the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme; and to outline the main conclusions of this appraisal.

(AQW 14650/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In terms of putting the new arrangements in place, the Department adopted a two stage process; (a) expressions of interest/applications followed by (b) the normal appraisal and decision making process. As part of the second stage of the process, the Department prepared an economic appraisal for the Women's consortium, however the full decision making process was not complete and, as is the norm, no commitment to provide funding is made until the process is complete and a formal contract for funding has issued.

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the (i) processes for expressions of interest; and (ii) criteria applied in the selection process for the Regional Infrastructural programme, including the timescales involved.

(AQW 14732/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department adopted a two stage process in terms of putting the new regional support arrangements in place; (a) expressions of interest/applications from interested parties with those deemed best placed to deliver the new arrangements progressing to (b) the normal economic appraisal and decision making process. As is the norm with all the Departments funding arrangements, no commitment to provide funding is made until the decision making process is complete and a formal contract for funding has issued.

The Expression of Interest stage completed in March 2012, to facilitate contracts for funding being in place by 1 October 2012.

The selection criteria for each of the funding strands are detailed at Annex A.

Annex A

Selection Criteria – Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Risp)

- Demonstrate that they have the capacity and expertise to deliver the identified functions across the whole of Northern Ireland
- Demonstrate that they provide services that are value for money
- Demonstrate they have the flexibility to provide services outside office hours and at weekends
- A proven capacity for working in partnership/collaboration with others to avoid duplication
- A proven ability to engage across the voluntary and community sector and with communities across NI
- Target activities to tackle disadvantage
- Demonstrate that they meet Section 75 obligations
- Identify and target unmet need and potential
- Specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact
- Demonstrate administrative efficiency
- Show planning for continuous improvement in quality and reach
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the need for the wide range of services required by the VCS
- A proven track record of working with local councils, and central government in NI to support the delivery of local services

Selection Criteria - Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Communities

- Demonstrate that they have expertise to deliver the identified specialist functions on a regional basis, rural and urban across the whole of Northern Ireland
- Demonstrate that they can provide services that are value for money for the support of women in disadvantaged areas and rural areas
- Demonstrate they have the flexibility to provide services outside office hours and at weekends for the benefit of women
- A proven ability to work in partnership/collaboration with other Northern Ireland organisations to avoid duplication and address any gaps in provision
- A proven ability to engage across the voluntary and community sector and with marginalised and isolated Northern Ireland communities
- Demonstrate experience in targeting activities to tackle disadvantage towards women and demonstrate that you meet section 75 obligations
- Demonstrate how they identify and target unmet need and potential for services for women in target areas
- Demonstrate that they can specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact
- Demonstrate administrative efficiency and ability to plan for continuous improvement in quality and reach
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the need for the range of services required to support the needs of women living and working in disadvantaged communities and rural communities across Northern Ireland
- A proven track record of working with local councils and central Government in Northern Ireland to support the delivery of local services for women living in disadvantaged areas and rural areas
- A proven track record of engaging and working with women's groups from all sections of the Northern Ireland community

Selection Criteria - Regional Support for Faith Sector Engagement

- Demonstrate that they have the capacity and expertise to deliver the identified functions across the whole of Northern Ireland.
- Demonstrate that they can provide services that are value for money.
- Demonstrate they have the flexibility to provide services outside normal office hours and at weekends.
- A proven ability to engage with the faith-based sector in Northern Ireland and with local communities and people groups.
- A proven ability to target activities to tackle disadvantage regardless of personal values, beliefs, creed or ethnicity.

- Demonstrate that they meet section 75 obligations.
- A proven ability to specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact.
- Demonstrate administrative efficiency.
- Demonstrate planning for continuous improvement in quality and reach.
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the need for faith-based activities to address greatest social needs in our communities.
- A proven track record of working with central and local Government to support the delivery of services.

Selection Criteria - Regional Support for Voluntary Advice Services

- A proven ability to provide support for voluntary advice services at a regional level which are inclusive of all communities across Northern Ireland.
- A proven ability to provide leadership, representation and support to the Advice Sector.
- A proven ability to lead, plan and manage change within the Advice Sector.
- A proven ability to provide support coverage across Northern Ireland (in both urban and rural areas).
- A proven ability to provide expert advice on a regional basis on legal advice issues.
- A proven track record in providing value for money services.
- A proven track record in working in partnership/collaboration with others to avoid duplication.
- A proven ability to engage with key stakeholders including the community, front-line advice providers, councils and government in supporting the implementation of 'Opening Doors'.
- A proven ability to demonstrate that they meet section 75 obligations.
- A proven ability to specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact.
- A proven ability to demonstrate administrative efficiency.
- A proven ability to plan and manage continuous improvement in quality and reach e.g. geographical, technical, media outlets.
- A proven ability to provide infrastructure support on IT, advice specific training and development and management information systems for advice service delivery.

Selection Criteria - Regional Volunteering Infrastructure

- Please state the estimated total cost of the project, including VAT.
- Please demonstrate that your organisation has the capacity, capability, experience and expertise to deliver the actions identified within the Action Plan.
- Please provide evidence of working collaboratively with regional authorities / organisations involved in volunteering. Please also provide contact names and numbers of regional and local authority officials who may be asked for references.
- Please provide evidence of partnership working with public and private sector organisations.
- Please provide a breakdown of how the programme will be managed, including accountability, financial controls and monitoring arrangements.
- Please provide evidence of how your organisation [consortium] can ensure the successful implementation of the regional actions of the volunteering strategy including section 75 groupings.
- As policy lead for volunteering in Northern Ireland DSD will require its strategic partner for Regional Activity to assist in monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the volunteer strategy and determining any changes required.

Does this present any significant issues for your organisation?

If successful your organisation may have to work in close partnership with other local or regional volunteering strategic partners in implementing the volunteering strategy.

Does this present any significant issues for your organisation?

Housing Executive: Audit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale for completion of the process and the publication of the audit of the Housing Executive.

(AQW 14736/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I assume the Member is referring to the ASM report. The Housing Executive is currently considering the draft findings in the report and I am awaiting their response. However, in relation to the future publication of the report, much of the information in the report relates to contractors and would be classed as commercial in confidence. I have advised the Housing Executive that any issues in relation to individual contractors will be a matter for the Housing Executive to take forward in line with their contract management arrangements.

Housing Executive: Underspend

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of underspend by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the last financial year.

(AQW 14783/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) is a Public Corporation in budgeting terms and the Department's budget outturn reflects the total cash payments made against the approved budget allocations. On this basis the final budget reflects an underspend of £50,000 revenue funding. On the basis of the 2011/12 final NIHE annual accounts, which are accounted for as a Public Corporation, there was a capital underspend of £5 million relating to the Social Housing Development Programme in the 2011/12 financial year. However as the Department's budget outturn is presented on a cash basis this underspend is not reflected in the final comparison between outturn and approved allocations.

Social Housing Development Programme

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the level of underspend in the Social Housing Development Programme; and how this has impacted on construction targets.

(AQW 14784/11-15)

Mr McCausland: An £8 million underspend in the Social Housing Development Programme has been identified in the current financial year; I am seeking, through the October Monitoring Round, to reallocate this funding to the Co-Ownership Scheme.

Current Programme for Government plans are to deliver 8,000 new social and affordable homes over the four year period 2011-2015. Progress is ahead of target with 2,053 new properties provided in 2011/12. For the current year, the target has always been to provide a further 1,825 new social and affordable homes. While I have had concerns about the risks attached to some aspects of programme delivery, I have met with the Housing Executive and Housing Associations to put in place measures to ensure targets and budgets are met.

Employment and Support Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 13836/11-15, to provide (i) the number of overall appeals to which these figures relate; and (ii) the number of appeals declined at mandatory reconsideration but subsequently won on full appeal hearing,

(AQW 14786/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is set out in the table below:

Year	(i) Total Appeals Received	Decisions reconsidered in customer favour upon receipt of an appeal	Appeals declined at reconsideration	(ii) Appeals subsequently heard in customer favour
April 10 to March 11	6498	635	5863	1492
April 11 to March 12	10460	685	9775	2067
April 12 to August 12	8699	341	8358	920
Total	25657	1661	23996	4479

Children: Income Poverty

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the difference in the number of children living in poverty in 2002 compared to 2012.

(AQW 14795/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total number of children who live in a household which is considered to be in relative income poverty in 2002/03 was 108,300 or 25% of the child population in Northern Ireland. The figure is presented on a Before Housing Costs basis.

The total number of children who live in a household which is considered to be in relative income poverty in 2010/11 was 93,000 or 21% of the child population in Northern Ireland. The figure is presented on a Before Housing Costs basis.

The results are produced using the Family Resources Survey and Households Below Average Income datasets for Northern Ireland. In April 2002 the Family Resources Survey was extended to include households in Northern Ireland, resulting in 2002/03 analysis being the earliest available for Northern Ireland. Analysis of poverty previous to this was only available at the Great Britain level. The latest available information is from the 2010/11 survey year. Results for 2011/12 are expected in June of 2013.

Goal Line Youth Centre

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for his assessment of the contribution of Goal Line Youth, Portadown; (ii) whether he is aware of its present urgent funding needs which, if unmet, will lead to the organisation closing its doors on 31 October 2012; and (iii) what assistance his Department can provide to the organisation as it seeks to continue to meet the needs of over two hundred children, almost 50 percent of whom have special educational and disability needs.

(AQW 14839/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Whilst my Department has had no involvement with Goal Line Youth in Portadown, I do believe that this organisation makes a valuable contribution in delivering important services in the Portadown area. I have, just recently, received correspondence highlighting the financial crisis this group is facing. I also understand that my Ministerial colleagues with responsibility for matters relating to Health and Education have also been approached. In terms of potential funding opportunities, my Department provides funding to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) to help support the voluntary and community sector. NICVA operate a 'grant tracker' software package that many organisations have used effectively to identify potential funding opportunities. This can be accessed directly through <http://www.grant-tracker.org/>

Housing Executive: Reversible Windows

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what are the long term benefits of installing reversible windows instead of casement windows.

(AQW 14886/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive had installed reversible windows universally across all its stock from 2006. However, from 2010, flush casement style windows have been installed in Housing Executive ground floor properties; reversible windows will only be installed in medium and high rise blocks. Casement style windows look identical to fully reversible windows externally, use the same quality hinges, and to date there have been no recorded maintenance costs or replacements undertaken. While reversible hinges have a guarantee of 25 years, the Housing Executive will, in the new/ revised specification, require that a casement friction stay hinge provides a 10 year mechanical guarantee, and the suppliers of same will be required to demonstrate compliance with this performance standard.

In relation to costs and health and safety requirements, reversible hinges have three key features: integral child restriction, fire egress and easy clean. A casement hinge is available which reflects all three key features, and it has been confirmed to the Housing Executive as costing approximately 60% that of a reversible hinge.

Housing: Negative Equity

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the situation home owners are facing through negative equity as a result of the downturn in the housing market, detailing any relevant statistical information his Department holds; and what steps he plans to take to support people affected by negative equity.

(AQW 15046/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Unfortunately details of the exact number of properties with negative equity are not available for Northern Ireland. Research undertaken by the Council of Mortgage Lenders in August 2011 made reference to 827,000 households in the UK, which is fewer than 8% of those with a mortgage, who had some negative equity in the first quarter of 2011.

It is important to note that negative equity does not create an immediate problem for the majority of persons in such a position. However, two main groups appear to be affected; firstly, those who are experiencing difficulties making mortgage payments; and secondly those who need to move house to take up permanent employment.

Anyone who thinks they are in danger of losing their home due to debt secured on it should seek advice immediately. My Department funds the Mortgage Debt Advice Service, operated by Housing Rights Service, to help those experiencing difficulty making mortgage payments; it can be contacted on 0300 323 0310. My Department also continues to provide help to those receiving certain social security benefits through Support for Mortgage Interest.

Mortgages: Arrears

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to detail the number of home owners who are more than three months behind with their mortgage repayments; (ii) how this compares with the total number of active mortgages; and (iii) what steps his Department is taking to help people who are unable to meet their mortgage repayments.

(AQW 15047/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Details of the exact number of home owners who are more than three months in arrears on their mortgage payments is not available for Northern Ireland. However, the latest figures issued by the Council of Mortgage Lenders indicates that, in June 2012 157,400 households in the UK have mortgage arrears of 2.5% or more of their outstanding balance. As there are approximately 11.2 million mortgages in the UK, this represents 1.4% of all active residential mortgages.

Anyone who thinks they are in danger of losing their home due to debt secured on it should seek advice immediately. I am aware that a large number of people here experience difficulty meeting mortgage payments. For those people receiving certain social security benefits my Department continues to provide help through Support for Mortgage Interest. My Department also funds the Mortgage Debt Advice Service to help those experiencing difficulty making mortgage payments to

avoid the distressing prospect of court action and possible repossession. This free advice service, operated by the Housing Rights Service, has received funding until March 2015. The service operates during office working hours and now includes an online advisor and evening opening hours to 8.00pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays and can be contacted directly on 0300 323 0310.

Fort George: Decontamination

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 10588/11-15, whether the Fort George decontamination project is due for completion by the end of 2013.

(AQW 15162/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Ilex Urban Regeneration Company is currently responsible for the Fort George decontamination project. Ilex has advised that the current timeframe for completing the entire Fort George decontamination project is April 2014.

It should be noted that the timeframe for this project is not fixed as the necessary tests have not yet been completed and the remediation strategy has not been produced and agreed with the Northern Ireland Environmental Agency and City Council's Environmental Health department.

Welfare Reform Bill

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development whether he, or any of his senior officials, have received correspondence from their counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions over the last six months expressing concern about the delay in the introduction of the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill.

(AQW 15250/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I received a letter from the Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions) dated the 24th May 2012, in which he highlighted potential impacts arising from any delay in the Welfare Reform Bill being passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Civil Service Pension Centre

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 14770/11-15, when staff from Carlisle House, who are not permitted to apply for a transfer, will be able to make transfer applications.

(AQW 15324/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Staff in the Northern Ireland Pension Centre in Carlisle House can express their interest in transfer opportunities as they arise, however it may not always be possible for the manager to give approval for an application to be made. Each opportunity as it arises is considered on a case by case basis and in the context of ensuring that sufficient resources are in place at all times to deliver a quality service to 300,000 pensioners in Northern Ireland. This approach is in accordance with the Northern Ireland Civil Service Terms and Conditions of Employment as set out in the Northern Ireland Staff Handbook which states that "it should be recognised that for business needs it is not always possible to release staff for transfer".

Red Sky

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development whether any conflict of interest existed between himself and former staff and directors of Red Sky in relation to the review of its handling of maintenance contracts for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

(AQO 2632/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There was no conflict of interest between myself and former staff and directors of Red Sky in relation to the review of the company's handling of maintenance contracts for the Housing Executive.

DSD: Collaborative Working

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made with delivering on his Department's commitment to develop and test new ways of collaborative working between Government and the Community and Voluntary sectors and promote more effective partnerships within the sectors.

(AQO 2636/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since the signing of the Concordat for relationships between government and the voluntary and community sector significant progress has taken place in developing partnership and collaborative working. Joint Action Teams are taking forward work looking at areas such as involving voluntary and community sector involvement in government policy formulation, the elimination of excessive bureaucracy and the development of a more outcome focussed approach to funding.

Each Concordat Action Team has representatives from the public service and the Voluntary and Community Sector. Each Action Team reports regularly to joint Forum on progress against the commitments. The Joint Forum report yearly is presented through the DSD Minister to the Executive and Assembly.

The welfare reform process being taken forward by my department also clearly recognises the role of the voluntary and community sectors in providing support in areas such as Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payments, family separation and maintenance issues and has held various information sessions with the sector to keep them updated on developments.

The Child Maintenance Choices team provides help, guidance and support with a particular emphasis on early intervention. This includes engaging with Surestart centres, Community organisations, Advice centres etc in order to ensure there is awareness of the information and support available at the earliest opportunity – particularly for those going through family breakdown.

The SSA Business Plan has as a target - "Foster and promote positive engagement with voluntary and community organisations by working in partnership with NICVA to deliver communications around Welfare Reform.

All Welfare Reform project teams (Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment and Social Fund) have held various information sessions with the sector to keep them updated with changes to the welfare system that may affect the public.

Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment

Ms Ruane asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been awarded zero points following an examination for Employment and Support Allowance at a medical centre.

(AQO 2637/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance in October 2008, 102,782 customers have participated in the Work Capability Assessment process. It is not possible, due to system limitations, to detail how many of these customers scored zero points.

However it is possible, following implementation of the Medical Services Referral System (MSRS), to provide this information from June 2011 to August 2012. During this period 23,843 customers were awarded zero points following an examination for Employment and Support Allowance.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the Work Capability Assessment.

(AQO 2638/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Work Capability Assessment process has an important role in informing decisions as to whether individuals have an entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance. It has been developed with the support of healthcare professionals and the involvement of a number of different charities. In agreeing to the introduction of the Work Capability Assessment, the Northern Ireland Assembly recognised that it would be need to be kept under review and provision was made in Section 10 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007. I asked for a series of independent reviews to be carried out during the first year of its organisation. Professor Malcolm Harrington, an occupational health specialist, was commissioned to undertake this review and his first two reports were laid before the Assembly in September 2011 and November 2011 respectively.

Professor Harrington's third and final review is already underway. To assist this review my Department launched a "call for evidence" on 14 August 2012. A total of 279 responses were received by the closing date of 14 September from individuals and organisations throughout Northern Ireland, which is a significant increase to the 3 responses received in 2011 to the Year 2 call for evidence. The majority of responses, 243, were from individuals with the remaining 36 from professional and voluntary organisations.

The responses received were forwarded to the Department for Work and Pensions on 17 September. They will inform Professor Harrington's third, and final, review with the report of his findings expected before the end of the year.

Whilst I am encouraged that Professor Harrington has not yet recommended a radical re-design of the Work Capability Assessment process, I also have personal concerns about the Work Capability Assessment based on representations made to me by constituents and I have asked my officials to consider if further improvements can be made to specific aspects of the process, including how customers with mental health issues are treated.

Welfare Reform Bill

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has received correspondence since May 2012 from the Department for Work and Pensions which expressed concern about the delay in introducing the Welfare Reform Bill Northern Ireland.

(AQO 2639/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I received a letter from The Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions) dated the 24th May 2012, in which he highlighted potential impacts arising from any delay in the Welfare Reform Bill being passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Social Housing: New Mossley, Newtownabbey

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the schemes that are planned for the New Mossley estate.

(AQO 2640/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With regards to the Social Housing Development Programme, Connswater Housing Association has been nominated to deliver 15 new dwellings on Housing Executive owned land at Milewater Road, New Mossley during 2013/14.

The following Improvement/Maintenance schemes are also programmed for the New Mossley area: -

- External Cyclical Maintenance scheme covering Carn Green, Carn Rise and Carn Way: to start in October/November 2012 for 21 dwellings;
- Kitchen Replacement Scheme for Milewater Terrace, New Mossley: to start in January 2013, for 3 dwellings; and
- Window Replacement Scheme for Monkstown/New Mossley: to start in August 2013 for 224 dwellings.

Melvin Bridge, Strabane

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on his discussions with the Minister for Regional Development in relation to the Melvin Bridge project in Strabane.

(AQO 2641/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Melvin Bridge project is being promoted by Strabane District Council and neither my Department nor the Department for Regional Development is in the lead on it. I have not had any direct contact with the Minister for Regional Development in relation to the project. However, officials from my Department and from the Department for Regional Development have met with Strabane District Council to discuss how best it might be taken forward. Both Departments will be involved in a project steering group being set up by the Council to take the project forward.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 19 October 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the recruitment and appointment of the Maze Regeneration Board, to detail (i) the number of applicants for appointment; (ii) the number who were interviewed; and (iii) the community background figures for applicants, interviewees and those appointed.

(AQW 14129/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The number of applicants deemed appointable by the Maze/Long Kesh Chair and Board member selection panel was 26.

There were 60 applicants interviewed for the Chair and Board member positions.

The community background figures are detailed in the table below.

MLK Board Community Background	Catholic	Protestant	Other
Applicants	54	66	18
At Interview	21	29	10
Those appointed	5	6	0

Contested Space/Interface Programme

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the outcomes of the projects that were supported through the Contested Spaces Programme.

(AQW 14453/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We launched the Contested Space/Interface Programme in March 2011. It is a three-year Programme representing a total investment of £4m aimed at socially disadvantaged communities where there are interfaces or issues around contested space.

The following outcomes have been identified through the rolling programme of evaluation undertaken thus far across the five operational projects.

Project	Outcomes
Achieving Personal Potential (APP)	Improved numeracy & literacy skills and personal development amongst young people who could easily be drawn into anti-social behaviour. Increased confidence in young people who may have low self-esteem and building of respect for themselves and for others from a different community background. Increased capacity amongst local community groups Increased cross-community trust between the organisations involved.

Project	Outcomes
Active Respectful Communities (ARC) Aspire	<p>Direct engagement in confronting difference through community relations programmes which are embedded in the curriculum.</p> <p>Increased capacity in teachers to deal safely with controversial issues.</p> <p>Better ability amongst parents to deal with issues which affect their communities (symbols and emblems, sectarianism, racism, homophobia and conflict).</p> <p>Support for parents living in interface communities which suffer significant disadvantage to engage in positive parenting and become partners with teachers in educating their children (co-educators).</p> <p>Social, educational and personal development support for parents which builds cross-community trust and lasting friendships.</p> <p>Parental involvement in the schools and their children's learning conducted through a cross-community approach</p> <p>Improved behaviour amongst children and, through early intervention better educational outcomes.</p> <p>An increase in confidence and self-esteem amongst parents and pupils</p>
Faces and Spaces	<p>Positive impact on respecting difference and promoting good relations amongst pre-school and primary school children.</p> <p>Promotion of an intergenerational approach to good relations.</p>
Foyle Contested Space	<p>Shared education outcomes based on core curriculum areas at both primary and post primary levels.</p> <p>Increased teacher capacity and stronger institutional links between schools, and between the community and schools.</p> <p>Children are better equipped to make informed lifestyle choices living in a contested space city.</p> <p>Stakeholders (children, teachers, parents, education managers, governors) travel through contested space, engaging in areas that previously would have been seen as hostile.</p> <p>Contested space becomes shared space.</p>

A more definitive analysis of outcomes achieved across the projects will be available on completion of the overall evaluation at the end of the Programme lifetime.

Executive: Economic Subgroup

Mr McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the decision was taken to hold a Mini Economic Forum of Executive Ministers on 13 September 2012, and when Ministers and Departments involved were informed of the forum.
(AQW 14578/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A meeting of the Economic Sub-Group was called in response to the news of recent job losses.

The decision to hold the meeting on 13 September was made on 12 September and relevant Ministers and Departments were informed that day.

Gender Equality Review

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will review the Gender Equality Strategy; and to outline the terms of reference for the review.
(AQW 14931/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We aim to initiate the Gender Equality Review before the end of the year. Officials are currently reviewing the options for taking forward the Review and will shortly draw up draft terms of reference for our approval.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Rogers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the unspent funding handed back and the potential for more to be handed back, whether the £80 million earmarked for the Social Investment Fund for the next four years will be spent.
(AQW 14980/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The delivery of the Social Investment Fund is a priority and we remain committed to ring fencing the £80 million to be spent during the first phase of the SIF.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any member of the selection panel convened to appoint the Maze Regeneration Board held membership of a political party.

(AQW 15113/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments does not require panel members to declare membership of a political party.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any member of the selection panel convened to appoint the Maze Regeneration Board declared an interest, or otherwise declared any knowledge of, or association with, any of the applicants.

(AQW 15114/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Members of the selection panel convened to appoint the Maze Regeneration Board did declare if they had an interest, knowledge of, or association with applicants for the Chair and Board Members positions, in line with the guidance from the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many applicants there were for appointment to the Maze Regeneration Board (i) in the first interview process; and (ii) in the second interview process; and how many were interviewed on each occasion.

(AQW 15115/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There were 70 applications received for the Chair and Board Member positions in the first interview process; 24 applicants went forward to the interview stage.

In the second interview process, 75 applications were received with 36 called to interview.

Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many applicants for appointment to the Maze Regeneration Board declared political activity at the first interview process.

(AQW 15116/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments states that the form recording political activity must only be issued by the Department to successful applicants once the Ministerial decision to appoint applicants is made.

We did not appoint any applicants at the time of the first interview process.

Strategic Support Fund

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of funded posts for each group that is in receipt of Strategic Support Fund monies for 2012/2013, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 15117/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A total of 112 full-time and 55 part-time posts are funded through the Strategic Support Fund across 48 groups for 2012/13. In addition to this, 6 full-time and 4 part-time posts which were unsuccessful in their applications for 2012/13 but had previously been funded were funded on a three-month exit basis.

A breakdown by constituency is not available; however, a breakdown by District Council area is set out in Annex A.

ANNEX A

Successful Groups

Council /Group	F/T Posts	P/T posts
Antrim Borough Council		
Antrim Youth Information & Counselling centre	0	2
Armagh City & District Council		
Crossfire Trust	2	1
Restorative Action Following on The Troubles	1	2
REACT	1	1

Council /Group	F/T Posts	P/T posts
WAVE Trauma Centre Armagh	5	0
Ballymoney Borough Council		
WAVE Trauma Centre Ballymoney	3	3
Belfast City Council		
Haven Victim Support Group	1	1
Springhill Community House	1	2
Families Beyond Conflict	1	1
Survivors of Trauma	3	0
New Life Counselling Service	4	0
Holy Trinity Centre	2	2
Victims and Survivors Trust (VAST)	2	0
Corpus Christi Services	2	6
Ashton Community Trust	7	0
Relatives for Justice	9	0
Lenadoon Community Counselling Network	1	3
Colin Community Counselling Project	1	2
WAVE Trauma Centre Belfast	12	1
Centre for Health and Wellbeing	1	1
Coleraine Borough Council		
Regimental Association of UDR	1	0
Craigavon Borough Council		
HURT	3	0
Derry/Londonderry City Council		
Aurora Counselling Services	1	2
C.A.L.M.S	2	0
Columba Celtic Heritage Support Services	2	0
Cunamh	3	3
Derry Well Woman	2	0
Have Your Tomorrows	0	2
WAVE Trauma Centre Derry	2	3
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council		
Peace Factory	2	1
Relatives for Justice	1	0
West Tyrone Voice	2	0
Fermanagh District Council		
Aisling Centre	2	1
Ely Centre	5	0
Firinne	2	0
South East Fermanagh Foundation	2	2
Newry and Mourne District Council		
Mourne Action for Survivors of Terrorism	1	1

Council /Group	F/T Posts	P/T posts
Omagh District Council		
Families Moving On	1	1
Omagh Support & Self Help Group	2	0
Tara Centre	1	3
WAVE Trauma Centre Omagh	3	3
Strabane District Council		
The Koram Centre	2	1
Groups covering more than one Council area		
Contact	0	2
Forum for Action Against Substance Abuse	2	0
NI Music Therapy Trust	2	0
NOVA	4	1
South Armagh Rural Women's Network	1	1
This group covers all Council districts		
Ex Services Mental Welfare Society	2	0
Total	112	55

Three Month Exit Posts (Unsuccessful Posts Previously Funded)

Council /Group	F/T Posts	P/T posts
Banbridge District Council		
South Down Action for Healing Wounds	1	1
Belfast City Council		
Wider Circle	2	0
Derry/Londonderry City Council		
Cunamh	1	0
Groups covering more than one Council area		
HELP NI	1	1
Total	5	2

Strategic Support Fund

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the level of funding allocated to groups working with victims and survivors under the 2012/2013 Strategic Support Fund, (a) in total; (b) broken down by each group; and (c) broken down by individual service category for each recipient group.

(AQW 15118/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A total of £6,853,354.71 was allocated under the Strategic Support Fund in 2012/13 across 50 Victims and Survivors Groups and 5 service categories; Mental Health and Well Being, Social Support, Personal and Professional Development, Truth Justice and Acknowledgement and Transgenerational and Young People.

Please see Table 1 attached for a breakdown of the level of funding allocated to each individual group by service category as requested.

Table 1

Name of SSF Applicant	Total SSF Awards	Workplans				
		Mental Health & Well Being (MHAWB)	Social Support	Personal & Professional Development (PPD)	Truth Justice & Acknowledgement (TJA)	Transgenerational & Young People (TYP)
Aising Centre	£69,994.42	£8,320.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Antrim Youth Information & Counselling Centre	£33,559.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Ashton Community Trust	£424,311.44	£84,000.00	£0.00	£74,858.00	£11,925.00	£0.00
Aurora Counselling	£91,947.73	£33,600.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
CALMS	£194,581.08	£34,320.00	£11,600.00	£8,600.00	£0.00	£33,800.00
Centre for Health and Well Being	£42,848.32	£12,000.00	£0.00	£3,862.00	£0.00	£0.00
Colin Community Counselling	£60,290.33	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Columba Celtic Heritage Support Services	£62,927.00	£1,080.00	£0.00	£2,460.00	£0.00	£920.00
Contact	£23,714.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Corpus Christi	£175,677.26	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Crossfire Trust	£122,471.66	£0.00	£24,724.00	£0.00	£4,398.00	£10,526.00
Cunamh	£172,490.39	£6,900.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Derry Well Woman	£94,039.22	£30,780.00	£0.00	£9,890.00	£0.00	£0.00
Ely Centre	£259,902.36	£22,500.00	£37,522.00	£6,660.00	£23,675.00	£28,268.00
Ex-Services Mental Welfare Society	£81,642.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Families Beyond Conflict	£70,252.93	£6,000.00	£4,348.00	£7,472.00	£0.00	£7,140.00
Families Moving On	£126,887.98	£9,000.00	£16,836.00	£3,740.00	£9,490.00	£16,080.00
Firinne	£161,815.07	£12,000.00	£34,844.00	£22,460.00	£13,236.07	£0.00
Forum For Action on Substance Abuse (FASA)	£84,073.00	£12,000.00	£5,568.00	£0.00	£0.00	£12,000.00
HAVEN	£76,446.00	£3,960.00	£13,567.00	£6,484.00	£0.00	£0.00

Name of SSF Applicant	Total SSF Awards	Workplans					Transgenerational & Young People (TYP)
		Mental Health & Well Being (MHAWB)	Social Support	Personal & Professional Development (PPD)	Truth Justice & Acknowledgement (TJA)		
Have Your Tomorrows	£43,916.40	£20,650.00	£0.00	£790.00	£0.00	£10,700.00	
HELP NI	£14,074.61	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
Holy Trinity Centre	£92,475.01	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
HURT	£197,530.00	£26,640.00	£25,788.00	£0.00	£8,820.00	£40,632.00	
Koram Centre	£131,640.40	£37,200.00	£0.00	£3,443.20	£0.00	£0.00	
Lenadoon Counselling Project	£78,739.89	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
Mourne Action for Survivors of Terrorism (MAST)	£82,186.00	£2,000.00	£19,523.00	£6,304.00	£0.00	£11,748.00	
New Life Counselling	£150,422.63	£2,400.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
NI Music Therapy Ttrust	£76,891.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
NOVA	£120,293.00	£1,300.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
Omagh Support & Self Help Group	£139,953.38	£12,000.00	£23,798.00	£0.00	£15,400.00	£0.00	
Peace Factory	£156,168.80	£19,860.00	£22,728.00	£5,385.00	£1,650.00	£20,772.00	
RAFT	£152,274.16	£72,386.00	£0.00	£1,446.00	£0.00	£0.00	
REACT	£99,989.00	£16,300.00	£27,890.00	£2,610.00	£4,170.00	£0.00	
Regimental Association of UDR	£57,916.31	£0.00	£5,998.00	£1,120.00	£7,600.00	£0.00	
Relatives for Justice	£545,715.26	£72,540.00	£46,148.00	£23,960.00	£5,845.00	£31,534.00	
South Armagh Rural Women's Network	£80,930.30	£1,500.00	£17,059.00	£7,925.00	£700.00	£0.00	
South Down Action for Healing Wounds	£13,893.49	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	
South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF)	£271,679.48	£26,495.00	£46,719.00	£25,129.00	£14,270.00	£26,124.00	
Springhill Community House	£103,662.72	£23,130.00	£0.00	£20,598.00	£7,200.00	£0.00	
Survivors of Trauma	£145,970.92	£21,500.00	£8,700.00	£18,285.68	£3,862.50	£0.00	

Name of SSF Applicant	Total SSF Awards	Workplans				
		Mental Health & Well Being (MHAWB)	Social Support	Personal & Professional Development (PPD)	Truth Justice & Acknowledgement (TJA)	Transgenerational & Young People (TYP)
Tara Centre	£112,437.14	£19,000.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Victims and Survivors Trust (VAST)	£142,181.86	£18,414.00	£15,612.00	£2,676.00	£4,240.00	£6,510.00
WAVE Armagh	£195,993.00	£26,390.00	£8,055.00	£5,604.00	£0.00	£0.00
WAVE Ballymoney	£172,221.00	£33,757.00	£2,660.00	£4,500.00	£0.00	£0.00
WAVE Belfast	£496,793.50	£52,580.00	£13,890.00	£8,094.00	£17,792.50	£1,680.00
WAVE Derry	£174,589.00	£43,247.00	£6,298.00	£2,385.00	£0.00	£0.00
WAVE Omagh	£243,288.00	£88,420.00	£2,848.00	£2,510.00	£785.00	£0.00
West Tyrone Voice	£113,045.36	£7,500.00	£28,552.00	£5,760.00	£4,750.00	£0.00
Wider Circle	£16,611.90	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
	£6,853,354.71	£921,669.00	£471,275.00	£295,010.88	£159,809.07	£258,434.00

Strategic Support Fund

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the groups which applied to the Strategic Support Fund but were unsuccessful in 2012/13; and to identify which of these groups had been in receipt of Strategic Support Fund monies in 2011/12.

(AQW 15119/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The following groups were unsuccessful in their applications to the Strategic Support Fund in 2012/13:

Cromac Regeneration Initiative;

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| ■ FAIR; | ■ Streetbeat; |
| ■ Help NI; | ■ Teach na Failte; |
| ■ Kilcooley Women's Centre; | ■ Westwinds; |
| ■ Lifeways; | ■ Wider Circle; and |
| ■ South Down Action for Healing Wounds; | ■ Youth Action NI. |

Of these groups, three were funded under the Strategic Support Fund in 2011/12:

- Help NI;
- South Down Action for Healing Wounds; and
- Wider Circle.

Strategic Support Fund

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the groups which received Strategic Support Fund support under the 2012/2013 programme which had previously not availed of either the Strategic Support Fund in 2011/12, or the previous CORE funding scheme which was administered by the Community Relations Council.

(AQW 15120/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The following groups received funding under the Strategic Support Fund in 2012/13 and had not previously availed of either the Strategic Support Fund in 2011/12, or the previous CORE funding scheme administered by the Community Relations Council:

- Centre for Health and Well Being;
- Crossfire Trust;
- FASA;
- Have Your Tomorrows; and
- South Armagh Rural Women's Network.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Farmers: Income

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department intends to take to increase the income of farmers.

(AQW 14914/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department will continue to do what it can to support producers and is involved in a range of initiatives to help farmers produce and market high quality produce and to maximise their income.

Under the competitiveness measures of the Rural Development Programme, my Department provides funding of £45m for a number of measures aimed at supporting restructuring, development and innovation in farming. Measures include the Focus Farm Programme, Benchmarking, Farm Family Options, Farm Modernisation and the Supply Chain Development Programme – all of which are designed to inform farmers and support them in the business decisions they make to maximise incomes.

In the area of animal health, I am pleased with the progress being made that will help to reduce costs for producers and increase trading opportunities. Our active work on tackling animal health issues, in partnership with the industry, is an example of where we can start to make a real impact on the profitability and competitiveness of our farms – crucial in these difficult economic times.

Farmers can also benefit from the ongoing programme of research undertaken by the Agri Food Biosciences Institute and obtain advice on farm management and planning through CAFRE.

In addition to the actions that my Department is already taking I also recently announced a new measure to support the farming sector.

I have decided not to apply a further year of voluntary modulation for the 2013 Single Farm Payment year. This will have the effect of adding an additional €19m - about £15m at today's exchange rate - to the total funding available for the 2013 Single Farm Payment. This is money directly into farming pockets through next year's SFP. This will provide some much needed additional income for farmers in their 2013 SFP payments and will help stimulate the rural communities in which farmers live and spend their money.

Unfortunately, a lot of the issues affecting farming incomes, such as pricing and global markets, are beyond our control. My Department will however continue to offer advice and assistance to the sector in these difficult times to ensure they are operating in the most efficient and cost-effective way they can.

Glenariff Forest Park

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans the Forest Service has to involve the community in the Glens in helping to design the Glenariffe Forest for local benefit and for the purposes of tourism.
(AQW 14939/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Key to the continued development of community involvement in forest-based tourism is the establishment and maintenance of working partnerships with local government. These partnerships will aim to ensure that forests play as full a role as possible in supporting regional and local recreational and tourism agendas.

Senior Forest Service officials recently met Moyle District Council officers to discuss the importance of forests in the Moyle area for tourism development and invited the officers to consider whether a formal relationship between Forest Service and the Council would be of help to them. If that is the preferred way forward then Forest Service would naturally look to the Council to take the lead role in developing plans to improve the tourism contribution from Glenariffe and other forests for the benefit of the local community.

Sandbags: Rivers Agency/Council Protocol

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development which councils did not take up Rivers Agency's recent offer to supply sandbags free of charge.
(AQW 14966/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency has been working closely with those councils in the Greater Belfast Area most affected by the June flooding. The sandbag protocol being developed between these councils and the drainage authorities has not yet been fully rolled out across all council areas, and it is therefore not appropriate to list councils at this stage of the process as having not taken up the offer. However I can confirm that Belfast City Council has agreed to hold a stockpile of sandbags on its premises and either Belfast City Council or Rivers Agency can deliver/deploy these during flood emergencies as required. As well as Belfast City Council 5 other councils affected by the June flooding have indicated they may be willing to deploy sandbags to members of the public, or community collection points as directed by Rivers Agency. Namely Castlereagh Borough Council, North Down Borough Council, Lisburn City Council, Down District Council and Ards Borough Council. Rivers Agency will continue to work with the remaining councils, some of which have provided storage facilities for the Rivers Agency.

Animal Welfare: Sentencing

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the Assembly's support for increased sentences for animal cruelty, what action her Department intends to take.
(AQW 14972/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Until the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 has been fully tested in the Courts and has been given the opportunity to be fully implemented by DARD in relation to farmed animals and by Councils in relation to other animals, I remain firmly of the view that the penalties contained within the Act should not be amended at this time.

During the Debate I made my position very clear and stated that I strongly support tough penalties for animal welfare offences and the full use of the newly extended sentences introduced by the Welfare of Animals Act 2011.

As I said during the Debate, I want the new Welfare of Animals Act to be given sufficient time to bed down before any modifications are made to it. I believe that this is important not only for DARD but also for Councils and the PSNI who also have enforcement powers under the Act. The Courts must also be afforded the opportunity to apply the Act as it is a matter for the Judiciary to decide the penalties applicable in each case.

I would point out that I am seeking meetings with the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Education on a number of matters which were raised during the Debate.

For the reasons that I have outlined above I therefore do not propose to implement the Assembly's Resolution to extend the sentences under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 at this time.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many payments, under the Countryside Management Scheme, have been made before the 1 October 2012; and how many payments remain outstanding.
(AQW 14982/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department makes Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) payments on an on-going basis. CMS is claimed throughout the year around the anniversary date of the agreement and funding of approximately £20 million is paid annually to participants in this Scheme.

The new Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) is claimed annually on the Single Application Form. Table 1 summarises NICMS payments at 1 October 2012.

Table 1 NICMS payments at 1 October 2012

Claim year	Payments	Payments Outstanding
2009	937	0
2010	901	15
2011	54	853

It is an EU requirement that all scheme inspections must be complete before payments can begin. NICMS inspections were completed in late August and the first batch of 54 payments for 2011 NICMS claims were approved for processing on 27 September. By 8 October 2012 there were 106 payments sent to the Bankers' Automated Clearing Services (BACS) system for payment. Once a payment has been entered into BACS it takes up to 10 working days for the claimant to receive the money.

DARD Headquarters: Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the cost to her Department of relocating to Ballykelly. (AQW 15007/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The estimated cost of providing modern office accommodation for headquarters staff is £26m. It follows that by using the Executive-owned site, and utilising the buildings on the site, there is potential to reduce that cost significantly.

I have directed my officials to produce a business case detailing the options available at Ballykelly. The final cost of the project will be dependent upon the agreed configuration.

DARD Headquarters: Staff

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of the number of staff in her Department who do not wish to relocate to the new departmental headquarters in Ballykelly. (AQW 15008/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department has currently around 800 permanent posts in its offices at Dundonald House and Hydebank, which will be affected by the relocation of the new headquarters at Ballykelly. The Department has not yet assessed the number of staff who do not wish to relocate to the new headquarters in Ballykelly.

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how her Department will assess whether the new welfare of animals legislation will lead to more convictions and will prove successful, given that the data sets on the number of convictions in the past are not comparable. (AQW 15050/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Welfare of Animals Act 2011 is enforced by my Department in relation to farmed animals and by Councils in relation to other animals.

My Department's Veterinary Service maintains records of the cases that it prosecutes regarding farmed animals.

Regarding data relating to other animals, I have sought input from the Department of Justice who have informed me that whilst work is ongoing on the datasets that they maintain, convictions data from 27 November 2009 onwards will be coming from a single comparable source, which will facilitate the evaluation of the introduction of the new Welfare of Animals Act 2011.

The Department of Justice encountered technical difficulties in translating files from legacy systems in producing sentencing and convictions data beyond 2006. An alternative source for convictions data was used from 1

January 2007 to 26 November 2009. Whilst this data is subject to rigorous quality checks, caution must always be used in making direct comparisons using data from different management information systems.

Slurry Tanks: Breathing Apparatus

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is considering the provision of grants for breathing apparatus for farmers with slurry tanks. (AQW 15232/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Current HSENI advice is any person who enters a slurry tank must wear breathing apparatus with its own air supply. Such work is a specialist operation and is best left to fully trained competent contractors. They must be properly trained to use the equipment. The equipment must be regularly maintained, and the person entering the tank must be connected by harness and lifeline to two people outside the tank.

I will give serious consideration to any recommendations from the Farm Safety Partnership in the short and medium term to fund or resource any proposals that will improve health and safety on our farms. If there is a further tranche of the FMP we will consult with stakeholders on safety items which could be included specifically in relation to slurry tank mixing and will consider if they can be financed under this Programme.

The recent tragic events only confirm my belief that Health and Safety awareness must be incorporated into the day to day activities of the entire farm family. My Department is working through the Farm Safety Partnership to deliver a health and safety message at the start of each Focus Farm meeting as well as distributing advisory leaflets prepared by HSENI and allocating space for HSENI display at the large scale Greenmount open days. My Department is also working closely with HSENI to develop a new health and safety short course directed towards the farming family and I am keen for this to progress as quickly as possible.

DARD: Headquarters

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the St Patrick's Barracks site was not considered as a potential site for the new DARD headquarters, given the comparisons to the Ballykelly site, and the fact that Ballymena is described as a hub in the Bain Report.

(AQW 15238/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In relation to the decision to relocate to Ballykelly, there were a number of steps taken before reaching my final decision. The first stage in the process was to develop a long list of potential locations. The list was taken from the new Regional Development Strategy. Using the 23 local government districts my officials scored each against a defined set of criteria. This included 9 different socio-economic factors considering such things as unemployment levels, deprivation and earnings levels, as well as practical considerations such as the number of public sector and civil service jobs already sited in the area.

While Ballymena was included in the longlist, the top two areas following the analysis were both in the North West. Flowing from that analysis it was the availability of the Executive-owned site at Shackleton Barracks at one of those top two areas and the availability of buildings on that site which could potentially be converted to office accommodation that led to my decision that Ballykelly should be the site for the relocation. Using this site and the buildings available has the potential to reduce the cost of this relocation from the £26m that is the estimated cost of a new build.

In my view the relocation of the DARD headquarters represents an important first step to relocate a significant share of public sector jobs and could pave the way for a much larger programme of relocation in the public sector. It would naturally greatly enhance the economic and social development of rural communities and bring a greater realisation of the outcomes envisaged by Bain.

Farmers: Financial Assistance

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) when farmers will receive the additional £15 million, made available by reducing the amount of modulation money; and (ii) to what scheme/programme the £15 million was allocated before this decision was taken.

(AQW 15394/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The additional €19m (roughly £15m at current exchange rates) that I have made available to farmers as a result of my decision not to apply voluntary modulation in 2013 relates to the 2013 Single Farm Payment scheme year. These payments are due to commence in December 2013.

The €19m is part of the overall budget available for Single Farm Payment in 2013. Before this decision was taken it was not allocated to any scheme or programme within either the current or next Rural Development Programme. The funds available through the application of voluntary modulation in 2013 would only have been available to the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme for which the budget is not yet known.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why Orchard House, Londonderry, has been instructed to stop the payment of NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) monies by her Department, after it was stated that all NICMS inspections were complete and payments had commenced in September and would be completed by early November.

(AQW 15522/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Staff in Orchard House have not been instructed to stop making NICMS payments. Following the completion of inspections, payment processing for 2011 claims has been on-going since September 2012. At 8 October 2012, 106 payments had been processed out of 903 claims. The speed at which payments progress depends on a number of issues including the number of queries that arise during claim validation and the possible need to carry out additional inspections to meet EU requirements. The on-going payment of claims will continue into November and the timescale for completion of payment may

be affected by the requirement to complete additional inspections. Claims cannot be paid until my Department is satisfied that all work claimed has been completed to the required standard.

Farm Safety

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department, in conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive, is taking to raise awareness of farm safety issues.

(AQO 2665/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has joined with the Health & Safety Executive NI and the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) to form the Farm Safety Partnership which I launched with Minister Foster in May of this year.

Since it was formed the Partnership has been working to improve farm safety. This work has included:-

DARD

- The training of 58 Focus Farmers to deliver a short health and safety message as part of their on farm training session to the 3,500 farmers that visit Focus Farms each year;
- The delivery of a short health and safety message at all CAFRE training events. CAFRE, is also distributing advisory leaflets prepared by HSENI, at large scale Greenmount open days.

Health and Safety Executive NI

- HSENI continues to carry out farm safety inspections, and has organised practical health and safety demonstrations at a number of major regional agricultural shows. HSENI is also planning to undertake an intensive four week programme of visits during November to deliver key health and safety messages directly to farms.

Ulster Farmers' Union

- The UFU 2012/2013 Winter Programme will focus heavily on farm safety with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of sensible and practical health and safety to its 12,000 members. The first event was held on the 1 October with others scheduled between now and March next year.

I am acutely aware that 41 farmers, farm workers, or members of farm families have died on our farms since April 2007 and I want to take this opportunity to extend my sincere condolences to all of the families that have lost loved ones. This stark statistic only serves to reinforce the need for my Department to work with the Health and Safety Executive and the Ulster Farmers' Union to reduce and ultimately bring a halt to work related fatalities on our farms.

All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on progress with the All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy.

(AQO 2666/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Full co-operation on animal health issues on the island of Ireland has the potential to help reduce and prevent animal disease spread, to facilitate trade and to improve the sustainability of farming in the north.

The All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy was agreed by Ministers at the North South Ministerial Council in March 2010 as part of a commitment to closer co-operation. The ultimate objective of the Strategy is to facilitate trade through the free movement of animals on the island. This will be done by optimising the animal health status of the island through alignment of policies to control animal disease.

The practical outworkings of the Strategy have included taking a joint approach to protecting the island from the threat of animal diseases through liaison on policies to prevent the introduction of animal disease, and co-operation on contingency planning in the event of disease outbreaks.

Agreement of the Strategy signalled the start of formally working with Dublin, London and Brussels towards the objective of free movement of animals. The European Commission is developing proposals for a new Animal Health Law which is intended to simplify legislation and provide for a more animal disease prevention-driven approach. Within the new Animal Health Law, which we expect to be published early in 2013, The Commission is considering some relaxation of conditions for movement of animals between Member States, in accordance with the assessment of risk. On-going co-operation on this issue therefore seeks to shape the Animal Health Law as this could help to secure and deliver the All-Island Strategy's key objective.

Progress on the actions to deliver the Strategy is reported at NSMC Agriculture meetings. At the meeting in July, Ministers welcomed the submission to the EU by both Departments of the applications for Aujeszky's Disease free status, a successful joint cross-border contingency plan mapping exercise and the continued liaison on the Commission's proposed new EU Animal Health Law.

Young People: Rural Areas

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to assist young people in rural areas.

(AQO 2667/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Young people are vital to the long-term growth and sustainability of our Rural Areas and I am supporting rural young people through a variety of programmes and measures being delivered by my Department.

Under Axis 3 of the RDP 2007-13 the Department is committed to spend at least 5% of the Axis 3 budget on projects which benefit children and young people and to date 13.8% of grant paid to all completed projects is to those recorded as benefiting children and young people. The Farm Family Options programme under Axis 1 of the RDP is providing business mentoring and skills training to farmers and farm family members aged 17 and over to assist them identify and consider opportunities for both their own future and that of the farm business. Through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework, my department is supporting two rural youth initiatives aimed at increasing employability and promoting entrepreneurship - the Youth Employability Programme and the Rural Youth Entrepreneurship (RYE) Programme. The Rural Challenge Programme 2012 has Children and Young People as a target beneficiary group and will provide grants up to £10,000 to address localised poverty or social isolation issues.

My Department is also providing a 3 year grant support to the Young Farmers' Clubs to engagement with other organisations. Through CAFRE we continue to provide education and training for young people entering the Agri-Food Industry.

I am confident that, through the variety of actions and initiatives being undertaken by my Department, we will continue to develop our young people so as to contribute positively to the economic, social and environmental growth and sustainability of our rural areas.

Agriculture: Renewable Energy

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she intends to take to help the agriculture sector to contribute to the government target of producing 40 percent of electric and 10 percent of heat from renewable sources by 2020.

(AQO 2668/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am keen to see the agriculture sector make a significant contribution to the targets of 40% of electricity and 10% of heat should come from renewable sources. My department contributed to the Strategic Energy Framework document which defined these targets. In 2010, my department published its Renewable Energy Action Plan (REAP) which outlined our priorities in this area and defined how DARD intends to encourage the growth of renewable energy technologies on-farm. The actions outlined in this plan include:-

- increasing awareness of the benefits of renewable energy amongst the agricultural sector;
- providing renewable energy training to increase the skills base amongst the local farming industry;
- supporting a programme of scientific research at AFBI to inform business decisions amongst the farming industry and to add to the local knowledge base;
- supporting the construction of renewable energy technologies through the Biomass Processing Challenge Fund.

The REAP is encompassed within OFMDFM's Sustainable Development Strategy, as well as DETI's Strategic Energy Framework and Sustainable Energy Action Plan. I want to ensure the Action Plan is as effective as possible and is updated regularly to react to change. I have asked an external group of stakeholders to review my department's progress and to make further recommendations to add value to the process. I have also supported other renewable energy technologies such as wind turbines and solar panels through the Rural Development Programme.

National Ploughing Championships

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the total cost to her Department for attendance at the 2012 National Ploughing Championships in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 2669/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At this stage the costs for attendance at the 2012 National Ploughing Championships at New Ross, County Wexford, have not been finalised.

The estimated cost including staff costs will be around £30,000.

I will write to you when all costs have been finalised.

Fishing: Strangford Lough

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in extending the restriction zone for fishing in Strangford Lough.

(AQO 2670/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I approved the introduction of "The Strangford Lough (Sea Fishing Exclusion Zones) Regulations on 2 of October. The ARD committee considered the Regulations on 9 October and agreed that they should proceed to the next legislative stage.

As the regulations are cross cutting, Executive approval is required under the Ministerial Code. My intention is that this will be obtained during November 2012 with the Regulations coming into operation as soon as possible thereafter.

The regulations will prohibit all sea fishing from fishing boats, with the exception of fishing by rod and line, within two zones at a depth marked as deeper than 10 metres on Charts. The first covers the area identified as containing horse mussel reef in the Modiolus Restoration Group Report. The second smaller area covers Green Island Passage.

National Ploughing Championships

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the benefits of the National Ploughing Championships in Co Wexford for local businesses.

(AQO 2671/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The National Ploughing Championships is the largest outdoor agricultural show in Europe with an attendance of around 200,000 visitors. It provides huge opportunities for promoting goods and services and developing new markets and sales across the island of Ireland and further afield. This year saw a 20% increase in the number of exhibitors from last year to over 1,200. Over 90 of these businesses and organisations were from the North and most of these are regular exhibitors. This, I believe demonstrates the commercial benefits of attending this event.

While it is not possible to put a figure on the commercial benefits to businesses from the North, from exhibiting at the championships, I have visited a number of them over the past two years while attending the championships and they are very clear that this is a good place to do business.

I am also delighted that through my Department's attendance at the event I can support a number of small rural businesses to access new markets.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Líofa: Custom House Square Event

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of the event in Custom House Square to mark the first year since the launch of the Líofa initiative; and from where in her departmental budget it was funded.

(AQW 13899/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The Líofa Birthday event at Custom House Square cost £17,972. This funding will be met from within the Department's Líofa budget.

Irish Football Association: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on funding for Irish League football clubs.

(AQW 14410/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The IFA, with the help of SportNI, are developing a draft Strategic Outline Case (SOC) outlining the areas where sub-regional funding might be required. I understand that this draft SOC will be considered by the IFA at its next board meeting at the end of October 2012. Subject to IFA Board approval the draft will then be taken to the SportNI Board, scheduled for 13 November 2012, for their consideration.

Subject to SportNI Board approval the SOC will then formally be submitted to DCAL for consideration.

Protestant Band Culture

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department intends to take to promote the Protestant band culture.

(AQW 14616/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not recognise the term/designation 'Protestant Band culture'.

City of Culture 2013

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in relation to the Derry-Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013, why no sporting, cultural or artistic events will be held outside the Derry City Council area and no such events will be included in the Programme of Events, given that the Culture Company, and others, consulted with local authorities across the North West on the benefits for the region.

(AQW 14693/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Culture Company 2013 Ltd have developed a Cultural Programme of activities and events which are designed to achieve specific benefits in 2013 and contribute to a legacy for the City and region.

Target outcomes have been set to 2020 including increase in number of jobs, skills building, changing perceptions of the City, increasing attendance at cultural events and attracting more visitors.

While, Cultural Programme events will be concentrated in Derry, opportunities to develop complementary events and derive economic benefits have been discussed with neighbouring Councils.

For example Culture Company is engaged with a community project in Bready, with Strabane Ethnic Community, a number of events in a cross-border partnership with Donegal and an event called "On Home Ground" which will take place in South Derry and will be featured in the Cultural Programme. Culture Company has also been working with the Rural Development Fund which has a consortium of representatives from Limavady, Omagh, Strabane and Derry Council areas.

Councils should develop their own projects and encourage local arts organisations, accommodation providers and so on to maximise the opportunities presented by the City of Culture year.

Opportunities to avail of funding include schemes run by the Culture Company, for example the Music Promise Small Grants awards for music projects based in and around the Derry area: [http://www.cityofculture2013.com/Get-Involved/be-part-of-it/Music-Promise-Small-Grants--\(MPSG\)-Award.aspx](http://www.cityofculture2013.com/Get-Involved/be-part-of-it/Music-Promise-Small-Grants--(MPSG)-Award.aspx)

NITB and Big Lottery Fund, in partnership with Arts Council also offer small grants which target projects whose objectives complement the City of Culture plans and outcomes. Further information can be found on their websites.

Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Great Escape

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial, or other, support The Great Escape event at the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin centre in Londonderry received from her Department or its arm's-length bodies.
(AQW 15018/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and its arm's length bodies did not provide financial, or other, support for the Great Escape event at the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin Centre.

Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin centre in Londonderry has received in public money in each year since opening.

(AQW 15019/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since its opening in September 2009 Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin has received the following funding through my department:

Arts Council

Year	Amount
2009/2010	113,500.00
2010/2011	137,000.00
2011/2012	137,000.00
2012/2013	143,850.00
Total	£531,350

Foras na Gaeilge

Year*	Amount
2009	£134,700
2010	£135,817
2011	£147,469
2012	£156,642
Total	£574,628

* Year runs January - December

Limavady Council through the Community Festivals Fund provided a small sum of funding of approximately £500 or below in each of the years 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12. This sum included the Council's match funding.

Rugby Road, Belfast: Film Location

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the success of the film and television industry, whether she would consider meeting with the Minister for Regional Development to discuss and ensure that areas that are used as filming

locations, which are also of considerable character or heritage, such as Rugby Road in South Belfast, are preserved so that film crews will want to use them in the future.

(AQW 15130/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have been informed that the Minister of Regional Development is aware of concerns raised by residents over his Department's proposal to resurface the carriageway and footways of Rugby Road.

I have also been informed that, in light of this, the scheme has been postponed and his Department's Roads Service is engaging further with the residents and their representatives in an effort to address the concerns raised.

A meeting at this stage would be premature.

City of Culture 2013

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when and how she became aware of the decision by the City Council in Londonderry to assume control of the marketing function of the Culture Company.

(AQW 15219/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I became aware of this decision on 4 October 2012 through a media enquiry submitted to my Department.

Northern Ireland Screen: Funding

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding her Department has provided to Northern Ireland Screen in each of the last five years; and how has the funding been distributed by Northern Ireland Screen.

(AQW 15236/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has provided the following funding to NI Screen in each of the last five years:

	£
07/08	1,850,997
08/09	1,470,987
09/10	1,449,960
10/11	1,375,702
11/12	1,779,179

This funding has been distributed as follows:

Distribution of Income	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12
NI Screen direct resource spend	291,445	488,628	469,960	291,684	513,941
Amma Centre	117,667	93,750	93,750	93,750	101,160
Belfast Film Festival	54,000	54,000	54,000	63,950	120,000
Cinemagic	150,000	110,000	110,000	140,000	161,556
Cinemobile	10,000	10,000	10,000	29,795	9,800
Nerve Centre	367,992	268,750	266,250	304,800	288,444
Northern Visions	344,000	105,000	105,000	105,000	50,000
QFT	81,000	81,000	81,000	90,800	81,000
Studio On	434,893	238,846	240,000	245,923	445,278
Early Years					8,000
University Ulster		21,013	20,000	10,000	
Total	1,850,997	1,470,988	1,449,960	1,375,702	1,779,179

Northern Ireland Screen: Funding Programmes

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there is an entry level for film makers funded by Northern Ireland Screen.

(AQW 15241/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Screen has a number of funding programmes open to all applicants who meet the criteria attached to each; its Individual Production Scheme is open to entry level filmmakers.

Northern Ireland Screen: Individual Development Programme

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the recipients of Northern Ireland Screen's Individual Development Programme in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15246/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Details of the recipients of Screen's Individual Development Programme Awards are as follows:

2009/10

Project Title	Applicant Name	Award (£)
Arcade	Peter Curran	2,250
Gaia	Tom Johnstone	2,250
Here Before	Stacey Gregg	2,250
Land of Ire	Quentin Devine	2,250
Mis-understood Appearances	Cecilia McAllister	2,250
Sympathy for the Devil	Kieran Doherty	2,250
Taking Stock	Maeve Murphy	2,250
The Amazing Donna	Dave Kinghan	2,250
The Book of Daniel	Paula Clamp	2,250
The Cyclist	Steven Benson	2,250
The Night Before	Terence McKenna	2,250
Two Nice Girls	Verity Peet	2,250
Wee Buns - Individual	Christine Murphy	2,250
Wolves in the City	Jonathan Haren	2,250
Women on the Verge of HRT	Marie Jones	2,250
	Total	33,750

2010/11

Project Title	Applicant Name	Award (£)
Ring Theory	Joseph Campo	2,250
Pilgrimage	Chris Boyle	2,250
Interface	Marcus Corkerell	2,250
Titanic 3D Model	George Herron	2,250
The Countdown	Stuart Drennan	2,250
Blood Moon	Paul Kennedy	2,250
	Total	13,500

2011/12

Project Title	Applicant Name	Award (£)
Priests And Robbers	Terence Barry	2,250
Knights In Shining Armour	Niraj Kapur	2,250
The Wrath	Richard O'Rawe	2,250
Tout	Emer Catherine Gillespie	2,250
Havanna Blades	Pearse Elliot	2,250
Sent by an Angel	Lee Dunne	2,250
Gentle Rise and Fall	Ewen Glass	2,250
Minds Eye	Andrew Parkhill	2,250

Project Title	Applicant Name	Award (£)
She Sells Her Love	Malachy Campbell	2,250
High Lows	Alessio Zanin	2,250
SCALP	Gavin Patton	2,250
Two Dogs Caged	Jonathan Waite	2,250
6.2	Robert James	2,250
Happy Birthday Dad	Caoimhe McLaughlin McIvor	2,250
We were Here	Paula McFetridge	2,250
Hearth	Laura Graham	2,250
Don Eugenio	Martin McCann	2,250
Vampire Dawn	Philip Henry	2,250
Stroke City	Len Collin	2,250
Even	Richard McMahon	2,250
The Long Way Home	Stephen Don	2,250
The Emigrant's Farewell	Liam Browne	2,250
Beyond The Ropes	Sean Duncan	2,250
	Total	51,750

Brandywell Stadium: Business Case

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made on the business case for Brandywell Stadium.

(AQW 15350/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware that Derry City Council have produced a Business Case to examine options for the development of the Brandywell Stadium, Brandywell Showgrounds and the Daisyfield.

I have written to Derry City Council to explain that Government funding is not currently available to support stadium development at sub regional level.

By way of background, a process has been put in place to take forward sub-regional stadium development should funding become available at that time. The IFA, with the help of SportNI, are developing a draft Strategic Outline Case (SOC) outlining the areas where sub-regional funding might be required. This will provide initial statements of strategic aims, business needs and project objectives. Once completed the SOC will be considered by the Department and DFP who assess if the proposals merit the production of Outline Business Cases (OBC) for the various projects within the sub-regional development programme. These OBCs will be used to inform possible bids for funding in the next CSR period.

Nevertheless, I have suggested that Derry City Council meet with DCAL Sports Branch officials and SportNI representatives to discuss the Showgrounds and Daisyfield aspects of the planned development which have specific socio-economic and equality implications beyond sub regional stadium considerations.

Sport: Nation of Choice

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department is taking to ensure that athletes from Northern Ireland can compete for the nation of their choice.

(AQW 15430/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is fully supportive of the principle that athletes from the north of Ireland can compete for the nation of their choice. Partly for that reason, the Department, through Sport NI, provides support to local athletes to enable them to meet the performance standards necessary to qualify for international competition.

However, athletes must also meet the required eligibility and selection criteria of the sports concerned. This will vary across the sports and will be dependant on the affiliation structures within the sport, the rules and processes of their governing organisations, and the rules, eligibility and selection criteria applied by the competition organising committees.

City of Culture 2013

Mr Ó hÓisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how the initial programme, as envisaged by Culture Company 2013 Ltd, will best serve the North West region.

(AQO 2678/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: City of Culture 2013 is shaping up to be an exciting year with opportunities for the Derry and the North West region of Ireland to benefit both in the short and longer term.

Not only will local people have the opportunity to attend international events like the Turner Prize and All Ireland Fleadh on their doorstep, but the City of Culture will bring a huge increase in overseas visitors to the area, build capacity in local organisations and it will boost local skills and job opportunities for people in and around Derry.

The Culture Company are engaged with partners in neighbouring council areas to make sure that the opportunities presented are fully exploited.

2013 provides an opportunity for community and arts organisations across the North West to arrange events which will persuade visitors to stay longer and explore the North West. Local businesses are also being encouraged to gear up to provide accommodation and tourism services for visitors during 2013.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of corporate governance at the Ulster-Scots Agency.

(AQO 2679/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The 2010 annual assurance statement given by the Ulster-Scots Agency's Internal Auditors was a rating of satisfactory. The internal audit review for 2011 will be completed shortly and the outcome is expected to be consistent with the 2010 rating.

Throughout the year monitoring meetings are held between the Agency and Sponsor Departments enabling the Chief Executive and his senior officials to report on progress against performance in relation to corporate governance issues. This also affords the sponsor departments the opportunity to seek the CEO's personal assurances and allow any issue to be challenged in respect of corporate governance.

Lough Neagh: Fish Stocks

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the fish stocks in Lough Neagh.

(AQO 2680/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Currently DCAL has information on stock levels of eels in Lough Neagh and salmon migrating to some rivers off the Lough in line with commitments to the EU Eel Management Plans and the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO).

Records conclude that salmon populations in the Rivers Maine and Blackwater, which both flow into Lough Neagh, are failing to consistently achieve conservation limits and are outside safe biological limits.

Scientific advice received from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) concerning the European eel, concludes that the European eel stock as a whole is outside safe biological limits. Robust estimates of what represents 40% of pristine eel escapement for Lough Neagh have been developed as required by the EC eel regulation.

The status of the population of migratory trout in Lough Neagh is unknown at present. My Department has commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to produce a trout stock status report for the DCAL area, including Lough Neagh and its catchment. This is currently in draft form and will be published in due course.

There is currently no data on populations of pollan, roach, rudd, bream, rudd/roach/bream hybrids, pike, perch, tench, stone loach, gudgeon, minnow and stickleback which make up coarse fish present in Lough Neagh.

AFBI has also engaged a PhD student to carry out other research on Lough Neagh that, when completed, will provide information on the location and population levels of fish species in the Lough. The results of this will be published in due course.

Sport: Youth Participation

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the recent figures relating to youth participation in sport.

(AQO 2681/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The figures published by my Department in March 2012, which are based on the findings of NISRA's 2010 Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS), are the most up to date and reliable figures relating to youth participation in sport. YPBAS is a school based survey carried out among 11-16 year olds. It found that nearly all the young people surveyed (99.5%) reported that they had participated in sport or physical activity in the previous 12 months and 97% had participated in the previous 7 days. These figures would suggest that good progress is being made on the implementation of my Department's strategy for sport, Sport Matters, in terms of those actions and targets aimed at young people.

Líofa 2015

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's Líofa campaign.
(AQO 2682/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: So far, over 2,900 people have signed up to the Líofa challenge, this is a tremendous achievement.

When Líofa was launched on 5th September 2011 the initial target was to encourage 1000 people from all walks of life across the north to sign up to becoming fluent in Irish by 2015. Since then we have exceeded our second target of signing up 2015 people by 2015 and we have now set our sights even higher and aim to have 5000 people fluent in Irish by the year 2015.

Recently my Department organised a Líofa Birthday event at Custom House Square to celebrate Líofa's first birthday and the success of the initiative as a whole. It is estimated that over 2000 people attended the event which reflects the interest and awareness of the Líofa campaign.

The Líofa initiative has been successful in breaking down the barriers and preconceptions which have surrounded the Irish Language, and opening Irish up to everyone.

Ulster Scots: Reserved Matters

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what engagement she has had with Ministers in Westminster on reserved matters, such as broadcasting, in relation to Ulster Scots culture and heritage.
(AQO 2683/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have had no specific discussions with Ministers in Westminster about Ulster Scots culture and heritage but I wrote to Ed Vaizey Broadcasting Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries in May and reiterated that I believe that culture has a significant role to play in helping communities in the North to understand each other and to understand how we move forward as a more cohesive and integrated society.

At the moment my focus is on local consultation for indigenous language. I am looking forward to what the two strategy consultations will yield once they close on 27 November. I will then need to consider the way forward and broadcasting is likely to be an element.

Boxing: Sectarianism

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the report compiled by Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club detailing sectarian abuse within the sport.
(AQO 2684/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the report compiled by Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club (SRABC) and of the allegations detailing sectarian abuse contained within the document. I deplore any form of sectarianism or racism in sport which is entirely contrary to Government's wider commitment to promote community cohesion in sport within the context of a Shared Future. For that reason, I have asked, on several occasions, to meet with SRABC to discuss their concerns. To date the club has not taken up this offer, which remains open to them. Until that happens it is not possible to offer a full assessment of the report. I would say, however, that I believe this matter can ultimately only be resolved through direct engagement between the club and the governing body. DCAL, with support from Sport NI, stands ready to assist in this process.

Archery

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to fund the sport of archery over the next three years, given the upsurge in interest since the London Olympics.
(AQO 2685/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport in the north of Ireland. Sport NI is currently in discussion with the governing body of archery, the NI Archery Society (NIAS), regarding funding under the Performance Focus investment programme for 2013-2017. This process is still ongoing and no decision has yet been made. I am aware, however, that the NIAS claims that there has been 50% increase in interest in archery in the north of Ireland since the London Olympics through attendance at 'beginners' courses at archery clubs. This is most welcome and is a positive indication of the legacy of the Games which I would like to see replicated across all sports.

DCAL: Procurement

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her Department's approach to enhancing and promoting social clauses, and wider socio-economic benefits, through public procurement.
(AQO 2686/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is currently compiling its strategy to ensure delivery against the PfG target to "...include Social Clauses in all public procurement contracts for suppliers, services and construction" and to maximise the socio-economic impacts achievable. It will include the use of social clauses as an award criteria for capital projects, services and supplies across DCAL and its Arms Length Bodies.

Specifically in relation to the stadia development, action has been taken to embed social clauses and strategies into all elements of the project delivery and procurement processes to ensure returns are maximised. Relevant clauses and measures have been factored into both contracts for those professional services and construction works / contracts put out to tender and will be included as an important element within the contract award criteria going forward.

In regard to other areas of Departmental procurement my officials are engaging with the Chief Executive and the 2013 World Police and Fire Games Company to maximise social impacts from the World Police and Fire Games not only in procurement but across the range of the Company work streams.

My Department is also providing resource funding to Derry City Council to support the Derry~Londonderry City of Culture 2013 Cultural Programme and will require Derry City Council to seek best value for money by maximising opportunities for local economic, environmental and social benefits when allocating funds to execute the City of Culture Cultural Programme.

LibrariesNI have included the requirement for social clauses to be included in the contract for the procurement of their new IT system which is to be awarded in March 2013. The requirement for social returns has been incorporated into the scoring matrix which will ultimately be used to select the successful bidder.

I hope the above provides an assurance that social clauses and strategies for maximising social returns are being, and will continue to be, firmly embedded by my Department and its Arms Length Bodies (ALBs) in all procurement and delivery processes for capital projects, services and supplies.

Department of Education

Schools: Irish Medium

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils at each Irish Medium (i) primary and (ii) post-primary school. (AQW 14565/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Enrolments at Irish medium primary schools – 2011/12

School name	Total enrolment
Bunscoil an Luir	92
Bunscoil an Traonaigh	31
Bunscoil An Tsleibhe Dhuibh	176
Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain	114
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche	75
Bunscoil Cholmcille	126
Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain	61
Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	280
Gaelscoil an Chaistil	80
Gaelscoil an Lonnain	41
Gaelscoil an tSeanchaí	29
Gaelscoil Aodha Rua	12
Gaelscoil Eadain Mhoir	146
Gaelscoil Eanna	70
Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach	66
Gaelscoil Leim an Mhadaidh	18
Gaelscoil Na Bhfal	184
Gaelscoil na Daroige	54
Gaelscoil na gCrann	110
Gaelscoil na Mona	83
Gaelscoil na Spéiríní	27
Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh	152

School name	Total enrolment
Gaelscoil Uí Neill	172
Scoil An Droichid	143
Scoil na Faiseoige	107

Enrolments at the Irish medium post-primary school – 2011/12

School name	Total enrolment
Colaiste Feirste	550

Source: school census

Note:

- 1 Figures for primary schools relate to pupils in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.
- 2 In addition, there were 708 pupils enrolled in Irish medium units at English medium primary schools and 212 pupils enrolled in Irish medium units at English medium post-primary schools.

Bangor Central Integrated Primary School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education why Bangor Central Integrated Primary School was not included in his recent announcement on new builds.

(AQW 14676/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A major capital works project for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School is one of a large number of proposals with the Department placed on hold.

SEELB has identified Bangor Central IPS as a core school with a sustainable enrolment. The Board has been seeking to secure additional land needed for a new build by acquiring an adjacent site, by means of a land swap, from a private developer. The extended site option has been the subject of regular correspondence from political representatives, the school, parents and pupils.

The new school build projects I announced in June were advanced in planning and approvals and could draw down capital expenditure within the current budget period.

While Bangor Central Integrated Primary School was not included in my announcement to the Assembly, this in no way implies that it will not be considered for funding at a later stage within the area planning process.

Area plans for schools will require scrutiny and public consultation. In the interim I will continue to examine the case for capital investment and expect to make a further announcement before the end of the calendar year.

Proposals for the Bangor Central Integrated Primary scheme will be considered alongside other new build propositions as part of any future announcement.

GCSE: Grading Issues

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education whether he has established if pupils in different schools were disadvantaged to different degrees as a result of the GCSE examinations grading issue this year.

(AQW 14737/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Following the publication of GCSE results on 23 August, there were a significant number of schools and colleges in England and Wales that expressed concerns that their English results were not in line with performance last year or with predicted outcomes. Similar concerns were expressed by some schools here. However, I should make the point that the overall grade outcomes for GCSE English here were in line with last year's results.

I asked the CCEA regulator to look into these matters and report to me on any issues. I appreciate the complexity of the issues with GCSE English this year. There were new specifications being taught for the first time, and significant changes had been made to assessment, moving from linear to modular assessment. The changes are aimed at promoting alignment with English/literacy skills within the 4-16 curriculum here. This is important as I want to ensure that 14-19 Education builds on the aims of our revised curriculum.

I have read and accepted the regulator's final report. He has made a number of recommendations which I have asked him to take forward. This work will be carried out by the CCEA Regulator in conjunction with the other fellow regulators to ensure that the recommendations are implemented across all Awarding Organisations operating here.

Furthermore, as there will now be an early re-sit opportunity for many pupils if they wish, I have asked CCEA to work with my officials to consider what additional measures can be put in place to support schools as they prepare pupils for these exams. Details will be communicated directly to schools in the coming weeks.

I will ensure that no pupils are disadvantaged by this issue.

Schools: Amalgamation of St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel, and Glenravel Primary School

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what work has been done by his Department and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to prepare for a possible amalgamation of St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel and Glenravel Primary School. (AQW 14887/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Any significant change to a school, such as a school amalgamation, requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal to support that intent.

It is the responsibility of the relevant school managing authority, in the first instance, to bring forward proposals to the Department.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is continuing to investigate the potential amalgamation of these two schools. No Development Proposal has been received by the Department.

Ofqual: CCEA Examinations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the reports which have been published, over the last 5 years, by Ofqual in relation to GCSE and A level examinations provided by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. (AQW 14918/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Ofqual was established in April 2010. Ofqual works with the regulators here and in Wales to produce a range of reports relating to awarding organisations that offer GCSEs and A levels i.e. AQA, CCEA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC. These reports include:

- Standards Reviews – these are produced by the regulators to ensure that standards and demand are maintained over time and across awarding organisations;
- Scrutiny Reports – these aim to ensure that awarding organisations' processes and procedures are in line with the regulatory code of practice; and statistical bulletins; and
- Statistical Reports – these cover issues of malpractice, access arrangements, special considerations, and Enquiries about results (EARs).

Following issues with the results for CCEA A level Chemistry in summer 2010, the Department commissioned Ofqual to undertake an investigation. Two reports were produced subsequently by Ofqual.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations in England

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many children have been impacted by the unilateral decision of Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in February 2012 to stop providing examinations to schools in England and Wales. (AQW 14920/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No students have been impacted. GCSE students who started a course in September 2011 will be allowed to finish their course with CCEA in summer 2013. At GCE, centres in England who are already registered with CCEA, will still be able to start CCEA courses up until September 2013, with final examinations taking place in summer 2015, with a re-sit opportunity in January 2016.

CCEA is still offering qualifications in Wales.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations in England

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last five years, to list the examination centres in England and Wales where the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment provided GCSE and A level examinations, broken down by Local Education Authority. (AQW 14921/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment does not hold Local Education Authority information for centres in England and Wales however I have arranged for information broken down by country to be placed in the Assembly library.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations in England

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what consultation took place with examination centres in England and Wales prior to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's decision to stop providing examinations in England and Wales. (AQW 14922/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The decision to withdraw qualifications from England was taken because of emerging policy differences between England and the north of Ireland. In September 2011, without consultation, the Minister for Education in England, took the decision that GCSEs would become linear in England for all candidates starting their courses of study in September 2012.

I consulted with schools from October to December 2011. Following this consultation, I decided that schools here should have the choice to offer linear and unitised GCSEs to their pupils. CCEA offered a small number of GCSEs in England.

To offer qualifications in England and meet requirements would have meant developing new linear specifications. This was an operational decision approved by the CCEA Council. No consultation with centres in England took place. CCEA qualifications continue to be offered in Wales where unitisation remains.

Education and Library Boards: Temporary Accommodation

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what checks are in place to ensure that Education and Library Boards comply with defined procurement procedures when purchasing temporary classrooms; and whether the procurement procedures are being complied with in the Southern Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 14929/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Education and Library Boards are responsible for the procurement of temporary accommodation in schools in the controlled sector, special schools and controlled youth club in their Board area.

The procurement of temporary classrooms by the Boards is in accordance with the relevant EU Public Procurement Directives, The Public Contracts Regulations 2006 and the Utilities Contracts Regulations 2006 as amended, as well as the Public Procurement Policy and Procurement Guidance Notes issued on behalf of the Procurement board by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD).

Based on the operation of the Standing Orders and the Board governance, the Boards monitor and control procurement from the tendering stage through the use of electronic procurement portals that encourage competition and provide transparency of data through to the review and approval of all procurement tenders prior to the award of contracts. Boards have established systems and processes in place to oversee all procurement expenditure. Procurement is also subject to ongoing compliance reports to the Department of Education (DE) and CPD through well-established channels. Audit reviews are conducted by the Internal Audit, DE Audit and subject to Audit Office (NIAO) audits as well as the Departmental Healthcheck and Gateway reviews providing independent and objective assessments and evidence compliance.

As with all Board areas, the above procedures apply to the Southern Education and Library Board area.

School Maintenance Backlog: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail the current maintenance backlog for each school in Upper Bann **(AQW 14933/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: The current maintenance backlog in schools in the Upper Bann constituency is as follows:

Site Name	School Type Description	Maintenance Backlog
Abercorn Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 491,318.00
Ballydown Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 29,091.00
Ballydown Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 1,000.00
Ballyoran Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 254,980.00
Ballyoran Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 21,360.00
Banbridge Academy*	Grammar School Controlled	£ 844,292.00
Banbridge Academy	Nursery School Controlled	£ 27,335.00
Banbridge Academy	School Meals Accommodation	£ 61,670.00
Banbridge High School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 105.00
Banbridge High School	Secondary School Controlled	£ 55,330.00
Birches Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 97,705.00
Birches Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 43,000.00
Bleary Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 12,395.00
Bleary Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 3,500.00
Bocombra Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 70,840.00
Bocombra Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 11,125.00
Bridge Integrated Primary School	Primary School Integrated	£ 46,315.00
Brownlow College	School Meals Accommodation	£ 226,770.00
Brownlow College	Secondary School Integrated	£ 196,285.00
Carrick Primary School (Lurgan)	Primary School Controlled	£ 396,485.00

Site Name	School Type Description	Maintenance Backlog
Carrick Primary School (Lurgan)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 21,900.00
Ceara School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 1,100.00
Ceara School	Special School Controlled	£ 32,410.00
Ceara Special School	Special School Controlled	£ 18,825.00
Clounagh Junior High School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 336,230.00
Clounagh Junior High School	Secondary School Controlled	£ 1,214,735.00
Craigavon Senior High School	Secondary School Controlled	£ 722,631.00
Dickson Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 175,555.00
Dickson Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 16,000.00
Donacloney Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 100,920.00
Donacloney Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 10,450.00
Donard Special School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 100.00
Donard Special School	Special School Controlled	£ 14,725.00
Downshire Nursery School	Nursery School Controlled	£ 38,790.00
Drumcree College	School Meals Accommodation	£ 45,380.00
Drumcree College	Secondary School Maintained	£ 658,210.00
Drumgor Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 276,225.00
Drumgor Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 11,470.00
Drumnamoe Nursery School	Nursery School Maintained	£ 230.00
Edenderry Primary School (Portadown)	Nursery School Controlled	£ 35,220.00
Edenderry Primary School (Portadown)	Primary School Controlled	£ 336,665.00
Edenderry Primary School (Portadown)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 1,550.00
Edenderry Primary School Banbridge	Primary School Controlled	£ 199,861.00
Edenderry Primary School Banbridge	School Meals Accommodation	£ 4,740.00
Hart Memorial Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 343,070.00
Hart Memorial Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 88,123.00
Killicomaine Junior High School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 48,900.00
Killicomaine Junior High School	Secondary School Controlled	£ 734,725.00
King's Park Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 837,940.00
King's Park Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 3,650.00
Lismore Comprehensive	School Meals Accommodation	£ 26,950.00
Lismore Comprehensive	School Meals Accommodation (no.2)	£ 35,210.00
Lismore Comprehensive	Secondary School Maintained	£ 1,818,980.00
Lurgan College	Grammar School Controlled	£ 927,975.00
Lurgan College	School Meals Accommodation	£ 34,290.00
Lurgan Junior High School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 55,500.00
Lurgan Junior High School	Secondary School Controlled	£ 1,146,450.00
Lurgan Model Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 163,285.00
Lurgan Model Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 22,400.00
Maralin Village Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 2,425.00
Maralin Village Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 2,290.00

Site Name	School Type Description	Maintenance Backlog
Millington Primary School	Nursery School Controlled	£ 6,610.00
Millington Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 232,661.00
Millington Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 75.00
Millington Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 13,050.00
Milltown Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 20,100.00
Moyallon Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 3,050.00
Moyallon Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 1,220.00
New-Bridge Integrated College	Secondary School Integrated	£ 83,530.00
Portadown College	Grammar School Controlled	£ 1,376,565.00
Portadown College	School Meals Accommodation	£ 7,420.00
Portadown Integrated P.S.	Primary School Integrated	£ 89,600.00
Presentation Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 133,320.00
Presentation Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 8,150.00
Richmount Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 54,600.00
Richmount Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 5,000.00
Scarva Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 26,700.00
Scarva Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 3,315.00
Seagoe Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 78,920.00
Seagoe Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 300.00
St Anthony's Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 99,130.00
St Anthony's Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 16,875.00
St Brendan's Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 248,025.00
St Brendan's Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 2,800.00
St Colman's Primary School (Bann)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 19,500.00
St Colman's Primary School (Bann)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 1,225.00
St Francis Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 1,085,265.00
St Francis Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 5,485.00
St Francis Primary School (Aghaderg)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 17,655.00
St Francis Primary School (Aghaderg)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 4,880.00
St John the Baptist Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 135,270.00
St John the Baptist Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 15,900.00
St John's Primary School (Gilford)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 87,150.00
St John's Primary School (Gilford)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 210.00
St Mary's Girls' Junior High School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 74,500.00
St Mary's Girls' Junior High School	Secondary School Maintained	£ 517,052.00
St Mary's Primary School (Banbridge)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 565,925.00
St Mary's Primary School (Banbridge)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 20,685.00
St Mary's Primary School (Derrymore)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 132,320.00
St Mary's Primary School (Derrymore)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 5,000.00
St Mary's Primary School (Derrytrasna)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 110,650.00
St Mary's Primary School (Derrytrasna)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 19,560.00

Site Name	School Type Description	Maintenance Backlog
St Mary's Primary School (Maghery)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 106,775.00
St Mary's Primary School (Maghery)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 2,000.00
St Michael's Grammar School	Grammar School Voluntary	£ 1,907,165.00
St Patrick's College (Banbridge)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 3,895.00
St Patrick's College (Banbridge)	Secondary School Maintained	£ 461,871.00
St Patrick's Primary School (Aghacommon)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 141,650.00
St Patrick's Primary School (Aghacommon)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 2,700.00
St Patrick's Primary School (Derrynaseer)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 56,310.00
St Patrick's Primary School (Derrynaseer)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 3,180.00
St Patrick's Primary School (Magheralin)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 171,635.00
St Paul's Junior High School (Lurgan)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 27,050.00
St Paul's Junior High School (Lurgan)	Secondary School Maintained	£ 436,450.00
St Teresa's Primary School (Lurgan)	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 203,940.00
St Teresa's Primary School (Lurgan)	School Meals Accommodation	£ 6,250.00
Tandragee Junior High School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 11,600.00
Tandragee Junior High School	Secondary School Controlled	£ 388,080.00
Tannaghmore Primary School	Primary Schools Maintained	£ 702,205.00
Tannaghmore Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 4,910.00
Tullygally Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 158,540.00
Tullygally Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 18,450.00
Waringstown Primary School	Primary School Controlled	£ 22,105.00
Waringstown Primary School	School Meals Accommodation	£ 1,300.00

* The maintenance backlog at Banbridge Academy relates to items that were not addressed by recent capital works involving a new build extension and refurbishment at the school.

Integrated Services for Children and Young People

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the role of Integrated Services in contributing to the raising of educational standards in disadvantaged areas of North and West Belfast.

(AQW 14944/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: An independent evaluation of the Integrated Services for Children and Young People (ISCYP) project undertaken by Quaesitum has concluded that there is significant evidence to show that the model of working has been effective in tackling disadvantage, improving educational attainment and enhancing health and emotional wellbeing.

A copy of the Final Evaluation Report on the ISCYP project can be found on the Belfast Education and Library Board's website: <http://www.belb.org.uk/Documents/578.pdf>.

Transport: School Buses

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education how many school buses does each Education and Library Board own (i) that are not currently in use and (ii) are currently in use, broken down by the age of the bus.

(AQW 15029/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am advised by the Education and Library Boards that their combined fleet is comprised of 850 buses of which 739 are in daily use on scheduled school transport routes, and 97 are used regularly to provide cover for vehicles undergoing maintenance or safety checks, repairs, PSV testing, etc. Of the remaining 14 vehicles, 6 are used to provide spare parts and 8 are awaiting sale.

The number of buses owned by each Board, broken down by age, (i) that are currently not in use on scheduled school transport routes (but provide cover for these) is:

Education and Library Board	0-3 Years	4-6 Years	7-10 Years	Over 10 Years	Total
Belfast	0	9	2	0	11
North Eastern	0	8	2	9	19
South Eastern	0	5	7	1	13
Southern	0	0	0	25	25
Western	2	3	11	13	29
Total	2	25	22	48	97

and (ii) that are currently in regular use on scheduled school transport routes is:

Education and Library Board	0-3 Years	4-6 Years	7-10 Years	Over 10 Years	Total
Belfast	44	28	0	0	72
North Eastern	40	49	20	2	111
South Eastern	80	49	15	0	144
Southern	32	53	69	27	181
Western	46	111	71	3	231
Total	242	290	175	32	739

Sectoral Support Bodies: Working Group

Mr Kinahan asked Minister of Education, in relation to his announcement on 27 September 2012, (i) to detail the terms of reference for the working group; (ii) why the working group is only focusing on controlled schools; and (iii) for how long he envisages the working group functioning.

(AQW 15030/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Sectoral Support Bodies (SSBs) shall be independent organisations created by their sectors for their sectors, receiving funding from DE. On 9 October, 2012 the Department wrote to those parties it intends to assist as they establish the relevant SSB for their sector. This included the Working Group for the establishment of the SSB for Controlled Schools alongside CnaG, NICIE and NICCE for the establishment of the SSBs for Irish-medium, Integrated and Catholic schools respectively. The Department enclosed a paper entitled Sectoral Support Post-RPA (September 2012), which can be found in the Assembly Library. The paper broadly defines the role and functions of an SSB. This paper describes the overarching basis for Departmental funding of sectoral support.

The Working Group's focus is on the establishment of a Sectoral Support Body for Controlled Schools because, due to this sector's size, diversity and history, it singularly lacks and needs the defined capacity or lead-organisation to establish its Sectoral Support Body.

I envisage the Working Group functioning until the SSB is established which should, of course, be for the operational deadline for the ESA.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Curriculum/Examinations Roles

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered making a distinction between the curriculum authority role and the examinations body delivery role of the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, given the separation of these roles in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 15040/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There is value in these two functions being linked. We want to ensure that the aims set out for the statutory curriculum for 4 to 16 year olds are reflected in the qualifications available within 14-19 Education. This is particularly true of GCSE qualifications which are taken by over 90% of 14 to 16 year olds. Within the statutory curriculum we have placed a great deal of emphasis on skills development and I would want to ensure that GCSEs build on this focus.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Qualifications Equivalence

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education, given that Northern Ireland qualifications have to possess the equivalence of English qualifications so that students are not disadvantaged in seeking places at UK universities, what formal liaison arrangements he has put in place between the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and the English curriculum authorities.

(AQW 15041/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In England the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was responsible for both the curriculum and qualifications development. With the establishment of Ofqual (April 2010) there is no longer a statutory body responsible for curriculum or qualifications development.

In the context of qualifications regulation, CCEA works closely with Ofqual (and with the Welsh Government) to ensure that there is comparability in demand and standards across qualifications whether these are awarded in England, Wales or here.

The Government at Westminster has made proposals for changes to GCEs in England. I have asked my officials to work with CCEA to monitor these reforms and their implications for us. In due course I will announce how we will respond to any changes made to GCEs in England (or Wales). In doing this I will want to ensure continued comparability.

Higher Education: Working-class Protestants

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education how he plans to increase the number of working class Protestants who can go on to participate in higher education in the (i) short-term; and (ii) long-term.

(AQW 15108/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of Protestants from deprived backgrounds that leave school and go on to higher education is very low: in 2011 there were 25 boys and 39 girls who were entitled to free school meals and left non-grammar schools to go to university. There were an additional 23 boys and 33 girls entitled to free school meals that left grammar schools to go to university. This gives a total of 120 out of the 1109 Protestant school leavers entitled to free school meals that progressed to higher education, which is 10.8%. This compares with 544 of the 2474 Catholic school leavers entitled to free school meals that progress to higher education, which is 22.0%.

I am determined to take action to break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement. I have in place a coherent set of policies designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and to address the root causes when pupils are not achieving to their full potential.

My Department engaged with the Department for Employment and Learning in the development of the 'Access to Success', the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education, which was published on 11 September 2012. My Department will continue to work in conjunction with DEL and the HE Institutions in reviewing and improving mechanisms to gather data on access to, and participation in, higher education and as well as identifying mechanisms to identify a wider group for participation in HE. One group that is specifically targeted by the strategy is young protestant males from areas of high social deprivation.

My focus is on every young person achieving to their full potential from every sector and every background. My policies are about putting the pupil first and this is why I am introducing the Entitlement Framework. The Entitlement Framework is about ensuring that pupils have access to a range of relevant, engaging and economically relevant courses, with clear progression pathways. It is about ensuring that young people have timely access to high quality careers education, information, advice and guidance so that they can make informed choices leading to the most appropriate route for them. It is about schools, as well as young people and their parents, having high aspirations and then achieving them.

When a young person is engaged in their own learning, can see the relevance of what they are doing in school and the progression pathways it can lead to for their future, they are more likely to achieve; more likely to focus in both the short term and the long term and more likely to progress into higher education, or training, or employment.

It is also important that parents are encouraged to aspire to a better education and future for their children. Parental involvement and encouragement, no matter how small, can have a direct and long-lasting effect on a child's educational achievements. It must be made clear to parents that no matter who you are; no matter what your background; your child can achieve educationally and improve their large chances. That is why I launched the Education Works advertising campaign which aims to inform and engage all parents, but in particular those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to become more engaged in their child's education. It will achieve this by providing parents with consistent, authoritative information on schooling and the steps they can take to support their child in achieving good educational outcomes.

There is also an important role to be played by Unionist political leaders in raising educational awareness and aspiration in socially deprived communities. Continued academic selection in the interests of selective schools does not benefit the education or the needs of Protestant pupils from deprived backgrounds.

Education Works: Advertising Campaign

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education what is the total cost of his Department's television advert on the Get Involved initiative, some of which will be broadcast in Irish, including the cost of the advertising slots on each television channel.

(AQW 15129/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I launched the "Education Works" advertising campaign on 17 September 2012. The campaign is of vital importance to our society and aims to raise the value, we as a society, place on education. The campaign aims to inform and engage all parents, in particular those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to become more involved in their child's education. It is intended to impact upon home/family and attitudinal factors by providing parents with consistent, authoritative information on the importance of education and the steps they can take to support their child in achieving good educational outcomes.

Research has shown that children provided with good opportunities to learn in the home before they started school were over five times more likely to score well in English by the time they left primary school than those who were not and that those who had a bedtime story read to them in Primary 1 did much better at school than those who had not.

Parental involvement and encouragement, no matter how small, can have a direct and long-lasting effect on a child's educational achievements. It must be clear to parents that no matter who you are; no matter what your background; your child can achieve educationally and improve their life chances.

We know that parents want the best for their children. This campaign helps to give them ideas for simple steps they can take to make a difference. The campaign is supported by a dedicated website on NIDirect to give parents advice and guidance on how to develop their child's talking, reading and counting skills.

The campaign will run on television, radio, outdoor posters and online and will be taken forward in English and in Irish.

The projected total cost of the television advert for the "Education Works" campaign in 2012/13 is £91,113.

The projected costs of advertising on each television channel is as follows:

Television Channel	Cost (£)
UTV	36,957
Channel 4	14,684
Channel 5	7,529
Daybreak	1,105
Total	60,275

The television advert was screened from 17th September to 7th October and will be repeated from 1st – 31st January 2013.

Early Years Fund

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 14335/11-15, for a breakdown of the £3.14 million allocated to the Early Years Fund; and to outline the mechanism used for allocating of this money.
(AQW 15137/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The breakdown of the £3.14 million allocated to the Early Years Fund is as follows:

Funding allocated to:	2012-13 £k
DE Early Years Fund:- allocated by a panel to 155 groups which offer early childhood services. The fund is administered to groups by Early Years – the organisation for young children.	£2,479k
Administration Grant for DE Early Years Fund:- Early Years – the organisation for young children.	£310k
Toybox:- supports a project for pre-school traveller children which is administered by Early Years – the organisation for young children.	£356k
Total	£3,145k

Service Level Agreements are in place between the Department of Education and Early Years – the organisation for young children, which administers the Early Years Fund and Toybox.

Sentinus: STEM

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 14241/11-15, (i) what type of organisation is Sentinus; (ii) what is its remit; and (iii) how it helps 50,000 pupils per annum to develop skills for the work place.
(AQW 15164/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Sentinus is an educational charity and a private company limited by guarantee. The organisation operates on a non profit making basis to provide STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) support, enrichment and enhancement to supplement the delivery of the Revised Curriculum through discrete timetabled lessons.

Sentinus delivers a portfolio of STEM programmes to both primary and post-primary schools across all Key Stages, to promote innovation and creativity in STEM and support the development of scientific, technological, employability and life skills through challenging and exciting experiences linked to the world of work.

These programmes are managed by STEM professionals and delivered with the support of STEM Ambassadors and advisers from a wide range of sectors. Through partnership with business, industry, academia and the public sector, Sentinus provides opportunities to pupils to develop skills for the workplace and discover the exciting range of careers available to them in STEM disciplines.

Sentinus: STEM

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 14241/11-15, how many other organisations like Sentinus are in existence.

(AQW 15165/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department is not aware of any other organisations, across the north, like Sentinus which has the capacity, capability and expertise in delivering high quality STEM programmes to over 50,000 pupil engagements annually involving experienced STEM professionals.

Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last two years, to detail and provide a breakdown on the number of teaching and non-teaching posts for each school in North Down that were (i) suppressed; (ii) unfilled; and (iii) filled on a temporary basis.

(AQW 15172/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

2010/2011 (TEACHING POSTS)

School	Number of Redundancies	Temporary Appointments
Bloomfield Primary School (MLD Unit)	1	
Towerview Primary School (MLD Unit)	1	
St Columbanus College Bangor		1
St Comgalls PS Bangor		1
Total	2	2

2011/2012 (TEACHING POSTS)

School	Number of Redundancies	Temporary Appointments
Towerview Primary School	2	
Priory College	1	
Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College	3	
Redburn Primary School (School closure)	4	
Glenlola Collegiate School	4	
St Columbanus College	3	
St Columba's College, Portaferry	2	
St Annes PS Donaghadee		1
Total	19	1

2011/2012 (NON-TEACHING POSTS)

School	Number of Redundancies
Towerview Primary School	1
Priory College	1
Movilla HS	2
Redburn Primary School (School closure)	8
St Columbanus College	2
Total	14

The Education and Library Board are unable to provide any figures regarding posts that have been unfilled within the last 2 academic years (2010/11 2011/12). They also do not have records to identify the number of posts filled on a temporary basis within the last 2 academic years.

School Maintenance Backlog: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the current maintenance backlog for each school in North Down.
(AQW 15173/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: According to the Education and Library Boards' estate management system, the current maintenance backlog in schools in the North Down area is as follows:

School	Maintenance Backlog (£)
Bangor Nursery	53,545
Hollywood Nursery	1,500
Trinity Nursery	63,920
Ballymagee Primary	3,290
Ballyvester Primary	28,550
Bloomfield Road Primary	313,680
Clandeboy Primary	274,395
Crawfordsburn Primary	20,450
Donaghadee Primary	139,580
Grange Park Primary	154,940
Hollywood Primary	138,769
Kilcooley Primary	219,047
Millisle Primary	125,235
Rathmore Primary	367,230
Redburn Primary	604,405
Saint Anne's Primary	29,615
Saint Comgall's Primary	5,190
Saint Malachy's Primary	210,958
Saint Patrick's Primary	298,945
Bangor Central Integrated Primary	53,850
Glencraig Integrated Primary	62,775
Saint Columbanus College	527,685
Priory College	561,685
Bangor Grammar School	4,791,098
Clifton Special	5,100
Killard Special	8,355
Total	9,063,792

There is a programme of planned maintenance across the schools' estate that influences the overall maintenance backlog (currently £310m for the estate). In addition reactive maintenance is required to address unexpected emergency issues such as a heating system failure. The cost of emergency work is not reflected in the maintenance backlog.

Youth Service Provision: South Belfast

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of the (i) capital; and (ii) revenue funding provided by his Department to each of the youth clubs in South Belfast, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 15178/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Revenue funding for local youth service provision and capital funding for statutory youth service provision in the South Belfast constituency area are allocated by the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Capital funding for voluntary youth service provision is allocated by the Department of Education.

i) The BELB and SEELB have advised that the capital funding provided to youth clubs in the South Belfast constituency area in the last 5 years was as set out in the table below.

Youth Centre	Spend 07/08 £'000s	Spend 08/09 £'000s	Spend 09/10 £'000s	Spend 10/11 £'000s	Spend 11/12 £'000s
Charter YC	19	1	0	0	9
Donegall Pass YC	0	0	112	0	206
Finaghy YC	127	0	4	41	380
Nubia YC	0	49	352	12	10
Suffolk YC	0	0	12	4	3
Taughmonagh YC	104	0	20	3	127
Ballybeen	0	64	539	14	5
Belvoir	0	20	0	0	0
Castlereagh	0	0	0	27	0

The Department has also allocated capital funding to some voluntary youth sector organisations in South Belfast constituency area during this period. However, this information is not held in the format required by this request and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

ii) The BELB and SEELB have advised that the recurrent funding, including maintenance and earmarked funding, provided to youth clubs in the South Belfast constituency area in the last 5 years was as set out in the table below.

Youth Centre	Spend 07/08 £'000s	Spend 08/09 £'000s	Spend 09/10 £'000s	Spend 10/11 £'000s	Spend 11/12 £'000s
Charter YC	72	112	68	56	83
Donegall Pass YC	4	18	17	14	39
Finaghy YC	142	123	135	84	118
Nubia YC	56	79	71	78	87
Suffolk YC	12	40	33	29	46
Taughmonagh YC	42	63	36	22	35
City of Belfast YMCA Vol YC	8	10	8	7	0
PHAB Fleming Fulton YC	3	7	8	5	14
Rosario Vol YC	52	79	56	73	75
St Brigid's Vol YC	2	5	5	4	7
St John Vianney VYC	65	48	79	89	80
St Malachy's Vol YC	12	28	19	30	21
St Bernadettes Youth Club	4	4	4	5	8
Ballybeen Youth Club	11	11	9	7	11
Cairnshill Methodist Church YC	2	3	3	4	7
St Joseph's Youth Club	3	4	3	5	6
Moneyrea PS YC	11	10	16	6	7
Cregagh YC	15	78	101	18	55
Belvoir Youth Centre	20	18	18	22	15
Ardcarnet Youth Centre	39	47	60	48	51
Brooklands Youth Centre	3	3	34	38	45

Primary Schools: Mid Ulster

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education to outline the plans to review and consult on the future of primary schools in the Mid-Ulster constituency.

(AQW 15179/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: You will be aware that the area planning work I commissioned includes primary provision.

The five Education and Library Boards are currently consulting on the area plans for post-primary provision and are working to finalise the area plans for primary provision.

The Area Plans for primary provision will also be published for public consultation. The publication date has not as yet, been finalised and will be dependent on a number of factors including the level of response to the post-primary plans and the extent of refinement needed for those plans. When the post-primary consultation is over and the responses are assessed I will be in a better position to determine the exact timing and duration of the primary area plans consultation process.

Any proposal to make a significant change to a school requires the publication of a Development Proposal, a key aspect of this process is consultation. It is important that the area planning process is not used to delay necessary decisions and I will continue to make decisions on development proposals in advance of agreed area plans.

Primary Schools: Admissions

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the definition of exceptional circumstances, in instances where a pupil is granted admission to a primary school after initially being refused admission to that school.

(AQW 15181/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There is no specific definition of exceptional circumstances in the context of consideration of admission of pupils to a primary school. Admissions criteria are drawn up by schools' Boards of Governors and the Department does not have a role in this other than to provide general guidance on what must or must not be included to comply with statutory requirements. Where a school does include special circumstances (e.g. medical or social factors) in its criteria, it is recommended that they should be specific about the grounds against which these would be considered, and that supporting evidence should be provided to the school by the parents.

Primary Schools: Admission Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many appeals against refusal of admission to primary schools have been made in each of the last five years; and how many were successful.

(AQW 15182/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of appeals against refusal of admission to primary schools in each of the last five years and the number which were successful were as follows:

Year	Appeals Heard	Appeals Upheld
2008/09	24	2
2009/10	25	7
2010/11	24	4
2011/12	55	10
2012/13	105	26

Primary Schools: Enrolment Numbers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last five years, (i) the number of applications for primary 1 admission to; (ii) the number of pupils enrolled in; and (iii) the maximum allowable enrolment number for (a) Ballyholme Primary School; (b) Towerview Primary School; (c) Kilmaine Primary School; (d) Ballymagee Primary School; (e) Bangor Central Integrated Primary School; and (f) Bloomfield Primary School.

(AQW 15183/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The data requested is set out in the tables below

2008/09 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	94	90	683	592
Towerview PS	42	42	405	310

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Kilmaine PS	96	90	610	602
Ballymagee PS	62	60	406	397
Bangor Central IPS	91	80	551	551
Bloomfield PS	30	30	408	253
Kilcooley PS	22	22	567	105
Clandeboyne PS	20	20	544	165
Grange Park PS	61	51	361	357
Rathmore PS	62	62	631	427

2009/10 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	78	78	630	580
Towerview PS	41	41	319	299
Kilmaine PS	89	89	610	606
Ballymagee PS	63	58	406	401
Bangor Central IPS	83	83	555	557
Bloomfield PS	41	41	408	249
Kilcooley PS	17	17	567	104
Clandeboyne PS	14	14	544	133
Grange Park PS	52	52	361	354
Rathmore PS	79	79	631	463

2010/11 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	84	84	630	588
Towerview PS	50	50	319	295
Kilmaine PS	93	88	610	614
Ballymagee PS	58	58	406	398
Bangor Central IPS	91	87	580	569
Bloomfield PS	44	44	408	261
Kilcooley PS	21	21	567	116
Clandeboyne PS	21	21	544	132
Grange Park PS	42	42	361	360
Rathmore PS	77	77	631	493

2011/12 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	128	90	630	615
Towerview PS	77	49	319	319
Kilmaine PS	122	87	610	611

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballymagee PS	81	60	406	395
Bangor Central IPS	98	87	588	575
Bloomfield PS	65	60	408	301
Kilcooley PS	15	15	567	118
Clandeboyne PS	23	23	544	146
Grange Park PS	79	52	361	360
Rathmore PS	101	85	552	519

2012/13 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	105	91	630	N/A
Towerview PS	77	54	319	N/A
Kilmaine PS	114	90	610	N/A
Ballymagee PS	75	60	406	N/A
Bangor Central IPS	115	87	618	N/A
Bloomfield PS	75	59	408	N/A
Kilcooley PS	22	22	567	N/A
Clandeboyne PS	44	44	544	N/A
Grange Park PS	86	60	402	N/A
Rathmore PS	105	84	552	N/A

Notes:

- Figures on applications and admissions were provided by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board and represent the position at the end of the Open Enrolment process.
- Application numbers are for the total number of preferences considered by each school so can include 2nd/ 3rd/other preferences passed to them in respect of applicants who were unsuccessful in obtaining a place in their 1st preference school.
- The enrolment number is the number approved by the Department for overall enrolment in the school. This can be exceeded where a temporary variation has been approved by the Department.
- Actual enrolments are taken from the annual school census as at the Friday of the first full week in October of each year. Figures for 2012/13 enrolments are not available as this years' data has not yet been received/verified.
- All figures exclude pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational need

Primary Schools: Enrolment Numbers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last five years, (i) the number of applications for primary 1 admission to; (ii) the number of pupils enrolled in; and (iii) the maximum allowable enrolment number for (a) Kilcooley Primary School; (b) Clandeboyne Primary School; (c) Grange Park Primary School; and (d) Rathmore Primary School.

(AQW 15184/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The data requested is set out in the tables below

2008/09 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	94	90	683	592
Towerview PS	42	42	405	310
Kilmaine PS	96	90	610	602

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballymagee PS	62	60	406	397
Bangor Central IPS	91	80	551	551
Bloomfield PS	30	30	408	253
Kilcooley PS	22	22	567	105
Clandeboy PS	20	20	544	165
Grange Park PS	61	51	361	357
Rathmore PS	62	62	631	427

2009/10 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	78	78	630	580
Towerview PS	41	41	319	299
Kilmaine PS	89	89	610	606
Ballymagee PS	63	58	406	401
Bangor Central IPS	83	83	555	557
Bloomfield PS	41	41	408	249
Kilcooley PS	17	17	567	104
Clandeboy PS	14	14	544	133
Grange Park PS	52	52	361	354
Rathmore PS	79	79	631	463

2010/11 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	84	84	630	588
Towerview PS	50	50	319	295
Kilmaine PS	93	88	610	614
Ballymagee PS	58	58	406	398
Bangor Central IPS	91	87	580	569
Bloomfield PS	44	44	408	261
Kilcooley PS	21	21	567	116
Clandeboy PS	21	21	544	132
Grange Park PS	42	42	361	360
Rathmore PS	77	77	631	493

2011/12 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	128	90	630	615
Towerview PS	77	49	319	319
Kilmaine PS	122	87	610	611
Ballymagee PS	81	60	406	395
Bangor Central IPS	98	87	588	575

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Bloomfield PS	65	60	408	301
Kilcooley PS	15	15	567	118
Clandeboyne PS	23	23	544	146
Grange Park PS	79	52	361	360
Rathmore PS	101	85	552	519

2012/13 School Year

School	Applications for Admission	Numbers Admitted to P1	Enrolment No.	Actual Enrolment
Ballyholme PS	105	91	630	N/A
Towerview PS	77	54	319	N/A
Kilmaine PS	114	90	610	N/A
Ballymagee PS	75	60	406	N/A
Bangor Central IPS	115	87	618	N/A
Bloomfield PS	75	59	408	N/A
Kilcooley PS	22	22	567	N/A
Clandeboyne PS	44	44	544	N/A
Grange Park PS	86	60	402	N/A
Rathmore PS	105	84	552	N/A

Notes:

- 6 Figures on applications and admissions were provided by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board and represent the position at the end of the Open Enrolment process.
- 7 Application numbers are for the total number of preferences considered by each school so can include 2nd/ 3rd/other preferences passed to them in respect of applicants who were unsuccessful in obtaining a place in their 1st preference school.
- 8 The enrolment number is the number approved by the Department for overall enrolment in the school. This can be exceeded where a temporary variation has been approved by the Department.
- 9 Actual enrolments are taken from the annual school census as at the Friday of the first full week in October of each year. Figures for 2012/13 enrolments are not available as this years' data has not yet been received/verified.
10. All figures exclude pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational need

Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessment

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to assist primary schools in dealing with the problems arising from the new computer based assessment system.

(AQW 15217/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is important to emphasise that these assessments are not "high stakes" and are not collected or collated centrally. Nonetheless, I recognise the pressures that the current technical issues have placed on some schools and, importantly, pupils. This is why as soon as I became aware of the difficulties I wrote to schools advising them to cease the assessments where necessary and reassuring them that they will not be required to report results to parents if the technical problems persist.

A dedicated CCEA Helpdesk for computer-based assessment is available to schools and CCEA and C2K have jointly provided a technical checklist for schools to follow before they begin the assessments. Schools still experiencing issues have also been informed in the first instance to contact the C2k helpdesk urgently and notify them of the precise technical difficulties experienced. In addition, Northgate have undertaken courtesy calls to schools that initially experienced issues, to ascertain if tests have been completed and to offer further assistance and support if issues remain.

C2k are embarking on more detailed analysis of the system-based issues in conjunction with all of the involved parties for those schools still reporting intermittent problems with the operation of the assessments. I met with Northgate, CCEA and the assessment suppliers on 16 October and instructed that this work is taken forward as a matter of urgency and that schools are informed as and when the assessments can be accessed without these difficulties.

I will be monitoring progress closely until a satisfactory resolution is found and I will be requesting a full report on the difficulties experienced by schools, including an analysis of why these were not apparent during the extensive trials run earlier this year.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education, in light of the consultation underway on Education Maintenance Allowance, whether he will consider increasing the maximum income threshold for the £30 band for students whose household has more than one dependent child.

(AQW 15234/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A public consultation on the future of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme was launched by the Minister for Employment and Learning and I on 30 July. The consultation period will end on 2 November 2012 and I would encourage everyone who has views on the matter to respond by that date.

The consultation document outlines five options for the future structure of EMAs in light of the need to better target the scheme. Whilst increasing the income threshold for families with more than one dependent child was not one of the five options put forward both Departments will, of course, consider carefully all responses received and alternative approaches suggested as part of the consultation process when deciding on the way forward.

Schools: First Language other than English or Irish

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary pupils have (a) a language other than English or Irish as their first language; or (b) English as an additional language, in each of the last three years; and what percentage of the total school population this represents.

(AQW 15242/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Pupils at primary schools¹ whose first language is not English or Irish 2009/10 – 2011/12

Year	Pupils who have a first language other than English or Irish ²	Total school population	%
2009/10	6,218	163,771	3.8
2010/11	6,793	163,451	4.2
2011/12	7,476	164,812	4.5

Pupils at post-primary schools whose first language is not English or Irish 2009/10 – 2011/12

Year	Pupils who have a first language other than English or Irish ²	Total school population	%
2009/10	3,204	147,759	2.2
2010/11	3,585	147,902	2.4
2011/12	4,097	146,747	2.8

Source: school census

Note:

- Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
- Pupils classified as Newcomer are a subset of this group.

Schools: First Language other than English or Irish

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary pupils in South Belfast have had (a) a language other than English or Irish as their first language; or (b) English as an additional language, in each of the last three years; and what are the ten other languages most frequently used.

(AQW 15244/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Pupils whose first language was not English or Irish², resident in the South Belfast constituency, 2009/10 – 2011/12

Year	Primary school ¹	Post-primary school	Total
2009/10	772	364	1,136

Year	Primary school ¹	Post-primary school	Total
2010/11	857	388	1,245
2011/12	917	436	1,353

The 10 most frequently recorded languages, for those primary school¹ pupils resident in the South Belfast constituency, whose first language was not English or Irish², 2009/10 – 2011/12

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Polish	Polish	Polish
Arabic	Arabic	Arabic
Chinese (Cantonese)	Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua)	Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua)
Chinese (Mandarin)	Chinese (Cantonese)	Malayalam
Hindi	Hindi	Chinese (Cantonese)
Filipino	Tagalog/Filipino	Hindi
Chinese (other)	Romany	Tagalog/Filipino
Malayalam	Malayalam	Romanian
Urdu	Bengali/Bangla/Sylheti	Bengali/Bangla/Sylheti
Bengali	Romanian	Chinese (any other)

The 10 most frequently recorded languages, for those post-primary school pupils resident in the South Belfast constituency, whose first language was not English or Irish², 2009/10 – 2011/12

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Polish	Polish	Polish
Chinese (Cantonese)	Chinese (Cantonese)	Chinese (Cantonese)
Arabic	Arabic	Arabic
Chinese (other)	Tagalog/Filipino	Tagalog/Filipino
Romanian	Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua)	Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua)
Filipino	Romanian	Romanian
Bengali	Bengali/Bangla/Sylheti	Bengali/Bangla/Sylheti
Spanish	Hindi	Malayalam
Indian (not specified)	French	Hindi
= Chinese (Mandarin) / Malayalam / Russian / Tagalog	Malayalam	Urdu

Source: school census

Note:

- 3 Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
- 4 Pupils classified as Newcomers are a subset of this group.
- 5 Figures relate to pupils resident in the South Belfast constituency.
- 6 Language codes were revised from 2010/11 onwards. Additional languages, previously recorded as 'other' were added to the list of languages that schools could record.

Schools: First Language other than English or Irish

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education how much additional funding is available to schools to meet the needs of pupils who do not have English or Irish as their first language.

(AQW 15245/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All grant-aided schools are funded under the Common Funding Formula, a mechanism to distribute funding in a consistent and equitable way to schools using common measures of identified needs. Under the Newcomer Pupil Factor,

funding is provided to meet the needs of pupils who do not have English or Irish as their first language. In the 2012-13 financial year £8.4 million was allocated directly to schools to support Newcomer Pupils.

In addition my Department provides an additional £0.84 million earmarked funding to the Education and Library Boards to fund the regional Inclusion and Diversity Service to provide advice and support to all schools.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department prepared, or commissioned, a business case on the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority; and to detail (i) whether this commissioning process was based on a competitive tender action; (ii) when the competition took place; (iii) when the business case was provided; and (iv) when would it have been regarded necessary to re-commission a new business case to account for passage of time.

(AQW 15251/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In 2007, and following an Invitation to Tender published by DE on 30 August, 2007, DE commissioned external consultants to produce the Outline Business Case (OBC) for ESA. Work on the OBC completed in May, 2008. On 3 September, 2012, DE commissioned the same consultants to build on and validate their work on the OBC in the completion of a Full Business Case (FBC) for ESA. The need for an FBC, in order to complete the process begun by the OBC, and conducted at the appropriate stage in the legislative progress towards the establishment of ESA, has been understood since completion of the OBC.

DE: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15259/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently no apprenticeship programmes available within the Department of Education.

Shared Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes; and how many schools currently share facilities.

(AQW 15261/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not hold the information requested.

The Programme for Government includes a range of commitments on advancing shared education including to:

- ensure all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015; and
- substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015;

During the current financial year I will set objectives for these commitments.

Free School Meals

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary pupils are currently in receipt of free school meals, broken down by (a) school type; and (b) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 15268/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of children taking school meals varies from week to week. However, information collected annually from the School Meals Census provides a snapshot of the numbers present and taking meals on the day on which census information is gathered. The most recent figures available on pupils taking free school meals, taken from the 2011 School Meals Census, are contained in the table:

Number of pupils present and taking free school meals on Census Day (7th October 2011) by Education and Library Board and school type – 2011/12

School Type	Management Type	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Primary1 and Preparatory Department	Controlled	3020	1997	4025	2719	2245	14006
	Voluntary	#	-	0	*	0	12
	Catholic Maintained	4561	5709	1775	2303	4995	19343
	Other Maintained	#	195	69	#	146	915

School Type	Management Type	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Primary ¹ and Preparatory Department (<i>cont.</i>)	Controlled Integrated	137	12	253	260	22	684
	Grant Maintained Integrated	216	298	241	104	198	1057
	Total	8378	8211	6363	5459	7606	36017
Post-Primary	Controlled	820	902	1535	1055	911	5223
	Voluntary	807	923	370	186	704	2990
	Catholic Maintained	2271	3126	1188	942	2599	10126
	Other Maintained	144	-	-	-	-	144
	Controlled Integrated	-	-	92	144	125	361
	Grant Maintained Integrated	555	458	310	308	136	1767
	Total	4597	5409	3495	2635	4475	20611

Source: NI School Meals Census 2011/12

Note:

- 1 Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes in grant-aided primary schools.
- 2 Some Nursery units of Primary schools have not introduced all pupils to school by the Census date so the numbers taking a school meal may be lower than if collected later in the year.
- 3 Some Nursery unit pupils only attend a half day session which may not include time for a midday meal.
- 4 Reception pupils and primary 1 pupils in some schools attend for only a half-day session until the end of October which may not include time for a midday meal.
- 5 * denotes fewer than 5 pupils.
- 6 # denotes figure greater than or equal to 5 suppressed due to potential identification of individual pupils
- 7 - indicates no schools in this category

DE: Capital Spend

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the projected capital spend for (i) 2012/13; (ii) 2013/14; and (iii) 2014/15; and how much of this spend will be allocated in each year to progress the 18 projects that were announced on 25 June 2012. (AQW 15269/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The gross capital budget for Education over the remaining 3 years of the budget period is 2012/13 - £104 million, 2013/14 - £108 million, stepping up to £183 million in 2014-15. This budget is required to cover investment in youth, transport, ICT, early years, School Enhancement Fund, minor works and committed major works, as well as a number of other capital requirements. The department is currently on course to spend the 2012/13 budget in full.

On 25 June 2012 the Minister announced capital investment plans of £133m across 18 major capital build projects, including 5 Special Schools.

On the assumption that all of the 18 newly announced build projects successfully commence as planned there will be contractual commitments for these projects of 2012/13 - £1.5m, 2013/14 - £21.1m and 2014/15 - £63.9m. The balance of the investment on these 18 projects will fall into the next budget period and will be factored into budgetary planning for 2015-16 and beyond.

These projects will be progressed with the relevant managing authority and the timescales for doing so will be subject to the necessary planning and building processes being completed. It should be noted that due to the nature and the degree of uncertainty associated with timings of capital projects these allocations are subject to fluctuation and will be continually reviewed.

Schools: Enrolment Numbers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the methodology used by his Department to calculate the enrolment and admissions number of a (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary school.

(AQW 15271/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Enrolment and admissions numbers are determined by the Department in line with its statutory duties under Articles 11 and 12 respectively of the Education (NI) Order 1997, having regard to a number of factors and in particular to the teaching accommodation available at a school.

Paragraphs 13 to 22 of DE Circular 2012/12 "Open Enrolment in Primary Schools" which is available on the Department's website at

http://www.deni.gov.uk/circular_201212_-_open_enrolment_in_primary_schools_pdf_593_kb.pdf explain how the admissions and enrolment numbers are determined for primary schools.

For post-primary schools, admissions and enrolment numbers are set taking into account a number of additional factors including; the availability of places in an area; the Long Term Enrolment number and Pupil Teacher Ratios.

The actual number of pupils in a school can exceed the enrolment or admissions number for a number of reasons. Pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational need and pupils admitted on appeal, or by direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body (post-primary schools only) are supernumerary and do not count against the enrolment number. In addition, schools can apply to the Department for a temporary increase of their numbers which, if approved, would apply for one academic year only.

Curriculum Advisory and Support Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many staff are currently employed in the Curriculum and Advisory Support Service, in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 15272/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

	Number of officers employed in CASS
BELB	36
WELB	53
NEELB	37
SEELB	32
SELB	36

Schools: Enrolment Numbers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what flexibility his Department has in adjusting the cap on the enrolment numbers of individual schools.

(AQW 15279/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The role of the Department of Education in setting enrolment numbers for schools is set out in article 11 of the Education (NI) Order 1997. The Department determines the enrolment number of a school having regard to directions under Article 18 of the Education (NI) Order 1986 (the conditions of the school premises) and the accommodation available for use by the pupils at the school. The Department may also vary the enrolment number of the school at any time. Before either setting the numbers or varying them the Department must consult with the Board of Governors of the school, the relevant Education and Library Board, and, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools where appropriate. Where a request to vary the numbers has come from the school itself this constitutes consultation and therefore the Department is not required to consult with the school a second time. Ultimately, after any such consultation has taken place, it is the Department's legal duty to set the school's numbers as it deems to be appropriate.

In considering a request from a school for a temporary increase of their enrolment number, the Department considers each case on its own merits taking account of factors such as the statutory requirement upon a school to admit up to its admissions number, the availability of places at other schools in the same educational sector within reasonable travelling distance, and (for post-primary schools with sixth forms) re-admission of pupils to Year 13.

Any permanent increase to a school's enrolment number which fundamentally changes the character of a school e.g. from a 5 class base school to 6, can only be considered through the area planning process and after publication and approval of a Development Proposal.

DE Capital Projects: East Derry

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and value of the capital projects completed in the last three years in (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools in East Derry.

(AQW 15290/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There have been no major capital projects undertaken by my Department in the last three years, in either the primary or post-primary sector, in the East Derry constituency area.

Educational Underachievement: Belfast

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on his proposal for a new initiative to tackle educational underachievement in Belfast.

(AQW 15328/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have made available £250k in 2012/13, with a further £500k in 2013/14 and 2014/15 to develop a project in the Greater Belfast area, covering West Belfast, Shankill, Collin Glen, Twinbrook and Poleglass. This initiative will be tightly focused, aimed at raising educational standards and tackling disadvantage and linked to my raising standards priorities and PfG commitments.

Whilst there have been improvements in educational standards in Belfast over recent years, particular challenges remain. Belfast displays:

- much higher levels of deprivation among primary school children than the NI average;
- the lowest proportion across all the ELBs of pupils at the expected level at the end of primary school in English and maths; and
- the lowest proportion across all the ELBs of Year 12 pupils getting at least 5 GCSEs at A* - C (or equivalent) including GCSEs in English and maths in both grammar and non-grammar schools.

The Belfast Education and Library Board will have responsibility for the delivery of the project and discussions are currently ongoing between the Belfast and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and my Department on how best to take this initiative forward and the arrangements to be put in place to distribute funding.

Schools: Rent

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW10780/11-15, for an update on progress in determining how much each school has been paid for rent in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15330/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department has been working with the Education and Library Boards (ELB's) to gather details of any rent that had already paid in order to cross-reference with new claims to avoid duplication. This verified information together with supporting documentation has been forwarded to the appropriate ELB, as funding authority, to make payments directly to landlords on behalf of schools.

AQW 11685/11-15 and AQW 12331/11-15 provided detail on the amount of rent paid by ELB's over the last 10 years.

Schools: Area Planning

Mrs Dobson asked Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 14834/11-15, what legal advice he has received, with particular reference to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, in relation to the timescale given to schools to respond to the Area Planning process, given that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools engaged in a similar Area Planning exercise in 2010 which did not have imposed time constraints.

(AQW 15343/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have neither sought nor received any specific legal advice in relation to the timescale given to schools to respond to the Area Planning Process.

All DE policies are screened to ensure that there is no adverse differential impact on Section 75 groups or if there are opportunities to promote equality of opportunity or better community relations. As advised in my earlier answer, the Area Planning process does not therefore require a separate Section 75 screening as it is the delivery of policies that have already been subject to separate individual screening exercises.

The timescale for the consultation process currently underway lasts 16 weeks which exceeds the minimum consultation period of 12 weeks as set out in the Equality Commission Good Practice Guidelines for Public Authorities.

The "Area Planning exercise carried out in 2010", to which you refer, was a sector specific strategic planning process carried out by the Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE) to inform the future development of the Catholic Maintained sector in line with Departmental policies. This is an independent body and the timeframe for this exercise and any consultation was therefore a matter entirely for NICCE to determine.

Primary Schools: Admissions

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, in each of the last five years, how many times pupils, who were initially refused admission to a primary school, have subsequently been admitted to that primary school on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.

(AQW 15180/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education does not collect data on individual pupils and the circumstances of their admission to primary school. This information should be sought from the primary schools in question.

Education Bill: Public Consultation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what was the consultation process followed in respect of the Education Bill (NIA 14/11-15); and how this process complies with departmental guidance on consultations.

(AQW 15376/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As there was extensive public consultation on the underlying policy proposals, it was not considered necessary to consult on the draft Bill, and there is no formal requirement to do so.

Voluntary Grammar Schools

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education when he will set up a sectoral working group on voluntary grammar schools.

(AQW 15386/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to set up a sectoral working group in regards to Voluntary Grammar schools.

Educational Psychologists: Referrals

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number children who were awaiting a special needs assessment at 1 October 2012, broken down by Education and Library Board; and how this compares to the same period of each of the last five years.

(AQW 15387/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The initial referral of a child to an educational psychologist will, in almost all cases, take place at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

The Chief Executives of the education and library boards have informed me that the number of children awaiting a Stage 3 assessment by an educational psychologist is as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
1 October 2008	66	280	214	298	136
1 October 2009	43	228	180	304	132
1 October 2010	65	236	225	320	172
1 October 2011	52	235	300	377	195
1 October 2012	66	246	263	397	203

Educational Psychologists: Referrals

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education how his Department ensures that all schools adequately submit returns detailing the current numbers of pupils awaiting special needs assessment.

(AQW 15389/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is the Education and Library Boards which are responsible under special educational legislation for assessing the special educational needs of children in their areas. This legislation does not give the Department of Education any role in the process which is intended to be conducted between parents, schools and boards.

The Education and Library Boards have confirmed that a time allocation model for educational psychology services is used across all Boards which is based upon the need for commonality, consistency and equity of practice across the five boards.

Under this system schools are given an annual allocation of time from their Board's educational psychology service and the school prioritises potential referrals to the service. It is, therefore, the schools which prioritise the pupils whom they deem to be most in need of assessment, usually through discussion with the Boards' educational psychology services. This model allows schools to appraise the needs of pupils on their waiting lists on an ongoing basis.

Education: Travellers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many children from the traveller community attend schools, broken down by (i) sector; and (ii) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 15408/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Traveller2 pupils broken down by ELB – 2011/12

ELB	Nursery schools	Primary ¹	Post primary	Special	Total
Belfast	0	132	49	10	191
Western	*	138	76	#	224
North Eastern	*	41	21	#	69
South Eastern	*	9	29	*	42
Southern	*	310	140	#	461
Total	5	630	315	37	987

Source: School census

Note:

1 Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

2 Figures include Irish and Roma Travellers.

'*' denotes figures less than 5

'#' denotes figure more than or equal to 5 suppressed to avoid possible identification of individuals.

Traveller Education Support Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what costs are associated with the establishment of a education support service for the traveller community.

(AQW 15410/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards are in the process of establishing a regional Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) to be operational by April 2013. The costs incurred are being met from within the existing earmarked budget for traveller education. The planned budget for the new service for 2013/2014 is £423,000.

School Attendance: Business Travel

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will be reviewing the legislation which allows the children of a parent travelling on business to attend school only 100 days per year.

(AQW 15411/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department will be reviewing the legislation and this is included in the recently published Draft Traveller Child in Education Action Framework. Views are being sought from stakeholders during the consultation on the draft Action Framework and they will inform the way forward.

Traveller Education Support Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what regulations will be required for the introduction of an education support service for the travelling community.

(AQW 15412/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are no regulations required for the introduction of the Traveller Education Support Service. This service is being established by Education and Library Boards within existing lead board arrangements to move towards shared and regionalised services.

Computer-based Assessment: Costs

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what is the past, current and ongoing financial commitment to the companies providing the computer-based assessments in literacy and numeracy; and whether there is any claw-back facility arising from the unsatisfactory performance of these systems

(AQW 15423/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The software licence costs associated with the previously specified InCAS assessments were as follows:

2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12 (note 1)	Totals
£104,160	£160,745	£315,756	£135,016	£334,764	£1,050,441

Note 1: Software Licence - full cost for 2011/12 to end of contract 18 Jan 2012

The contracts for the current computer-based assessment tools are for a 3-year period (with the option to extend for up to 2 further years).

The contract costs for the two new assessment suppliers are as follows:

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Totals
NILA	£446,754	£195,287	£187,741	£829,782
NINA	£404,000	£162,700	£141,500	£708,200

In the event that any part of the services supplied do not meet the requirements of the contract, or differ in any way from those requirements, both contracts contain claw-back clauses.

Hollywood Primary School: Enrolment Numbers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the enrolment figures at Hollywood Primary School for each of the last five years; and what is the enrolment cap at the school.

(AQW 15426/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Year	Total enrolment	Approved enrolment
2007/08	332	523
2008/09	343	523
2009/10	342	523
2010/11	324	523
2011/12	306	523

Note:

- 1 Actual enrolment figures are sourced from the school census.
- 2 Approved enrolment is the maximum number of pupils who can be enrolled at the school. This number is determined by the Department having regard to a number of factors and in particular to the teaching accommodation available at a school.

Teachers: Autism-specific Training

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education what training is provided for teachers to help them work with children with autism.

(AQW 15451/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The education and library boards are responsible for providing autism-specific training in mainstream schools and all boards deliver a range of autism-specific training for school staff.

In addition, the Middletown Centre for Autism has provided a comprehensive range of training opportunities for those supporting children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) across all schools. Each year schools receive a detailed prospectus of training courses available from the Centre.

The training provided by the Centre is tailored to the needs of educational professionals, school staff and parents. A range of sessions are specifically designed to the needs of staff in mainstream schools. In partnership with the inter-board ASD teams, the Centre also provides tailored whole school training for schools upon request.

Drumragh Integrated College

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education, given the comment in his speech of 26 September 2012 on Putting Pupils First—shaping our future, that some successful schools are currently oversubscribed but that guidance from his Department will make it clear that these plans should allow for popular oversubscribed schools to grow further, to explain the reasons behind his recent decision to refuse the development proposal for Drumragh Integrated College.

(AQW 15585/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The reference I made in my speech to allowing popular oversubscribed schools to grow was made within the context of Area Planning the focus of which is to determine the future needs of pupils on an area across all sectors. It was never my intention that any school could simply grow without that growth being contextualised within an area plan.

The area planning process for Omagh is at an early stage of development and it is through this process that the need and pattern of post-primary provision in the area will be identified in a coherent and strategic manner, involving the collaboration and agreement of all sectors. No sector is exempt from this process.

Each published Development Proposal is considered on its individual merits and against the backdrop of Departmental policies and in the local area context. When examining the case for an increase in enrolments for Drumragh Integrated College, I took into consideration a wide range of factors impacting on the local area, including the local demographics, the potential impact on other school providers, the level of unfilled places in the overall Omagh area, the number and nature of objections received, the number and nature of support received and the fact that this school recently benefited from over £22.5m capital investment for its current accommodation and site, which cannot accommodate further expansion to facilitate the proposed 30% increase in enrolment.

It is important to note that I have a statutory obligation, when deciding on a Development Proposal, to consider the impact of a change in any school on other grant-aided schools. It is entirely proper therefore that I consider the impact of the proposed increase in size of Drumragh Integrated College on other schools in the area.

I am fully aware of my Department's statutory duty under Article 64 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 to 'encourage and facilitate' the development of integrated education and my Department's commitment to fulfilling this duty has been clearly demonstrated over many years through the provision of funding and the support given to allow the sector to grow. I also recognise that we have a diverse education system which represents the expressed wishes of all parents. Expression of parental preference is a long established entitlement and is fully articulated in the Education (NI) Order 1997. I must however still be mindful of other statutory requirements, including the need to balance parental preference against the provision of efficient and effective education and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

Drumragh Integrated College

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education, given the commitment contained in the Education Order 1989 to encourage the growth of integrated schools, how the decision to refuse the development proposal for Drumragh Integrated College can be justified on the grounds of its effect on other schools in the area.

(AQW 15588/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The reference I made in my speech to allowing popular oversubscribed schools to grow was made within the context of Area Planning the focus of which is to determine the future needs of pupils on an area across all sectors. It was never my intention that any school could simply grow without that growth being contextualised within an area plan.

The area planning process for Omagh is at an early stage of development and it is through this process that the need and pattern of post-primary provision in the area will be identified in a coherent and strategic manner, involving the collaboration and agreement of all sectors. No sector is exempt from this process.

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Drumragh Integrated College

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education, in the light of the decision to refuse the development proposal for Drumragh Integrated College, whether his Department remains committed to the extension of the Integrated school movement and the principle of parental choice.

(AQW 15590/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The reference I made in my speech to allowing popular oversubscribed schools to grow was made within the context of Area Planning the focus of which is to determine the future needs of pupils on an area across all sectors. It was never my intention that any school could simply grow without that growth being contextualised within an area plan.

The area planning process for Omagh is at an early stage of development and it is through this process that the need and pattern of post-primary provision in the area will be identified in a coherent and strategic manner, involving the collaboration and agreement of all sectors. No sector is exempt from this process.

Each published Development Proposal is considered on its individual merits and against the backdrop of Departmental policies and in the local area context. When examining the case for an increase in enrolments for Drumragh Integrated College, I took into consideration a wide range of factors impacting on the local area, including the local demographics, the potential impact on other school providers, the level of unfilled places in the overall Omagh area, the number and nature of objections received, the number and nature of support received and the fact that this school recently benefited from over £22.5m capital investment for its current accommodation and site, which cannot accommodate further expansion to facilitate the proposed 30% increase in enrolment.

It is important to note that I have a statutory obligation, when deciding on a Development Proposal, to consider the impact of a change in any school on other grant-aided schools. It is entirely proper therefore that I consider the impact of the proposed increase in size of Drumragh Integrated College on other schools in the area.

I am fully aware of my Department's statutory duty under Article 64 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 to 'encourage and facilitate' the development of integrated education and my Department's commitment to fulfilling this duty has been clearly demonstrated over many years through the provision of funding and the support given to allow the sector to grow. I also recognise that we have a diverse education system which represents the expressed wishes of all parents. Expression of parental preference is a long established entitlement and is fully articulated in the Education (NI) Order 1997. I must however still be mindful of other statutory requirements, including the need to balance parental preference against the provision of efficient and effective education and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations in England

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education whether there are budgetary implications resulting from the CCEA's decision to withdraw from offering examinations in England.

(AQO 2687/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The decision by CCEA to withdraw from offering examinations in England was taken in the context of the remit of CCEA as a commercial awarding organisation. This decision was approved by the CCEA Council.

The main reason for this withdrawal was due to the decision taken by Michael Gove that all GCSEs offered in England from September 2012 would revert to linear end-of-course assessment. To continue to offer GCSE qualifications in England, CCEA would have needed to revise its specifications so that a linear form of assessment only is made available.

There are no budgetary implications resulting from this decision other a small reduction in gross profit of approximately £100k p.a. CCEA will continue to receive allocations from my Department to carry out its statutory duties, in the north of Ireland, in relation to the curriculum, examinations and assessment. The income received from its commercial operations is separate to that.

As is standard practice, if any funding gaps are identified, to enable CCEA to carry out its statutory duties here, that organisation will advise my Department as part of the normal financial monitoring process.

Schools: Closures

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools does he expect to close by the end of 2013.

(AQW 15608/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is the responsibility of the relevant school managing authority, in the first instance, to manage provision in the schools estate and to bring forward proposals. Any significant change to a school, such as a school closure, requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal.

Based on published Development Proposals on which I have made a decision, three post-primary schools are expected to close by the end of 2013 as follows:

- St Eugene's High School, Castlederg
- St Peter's High School, Derry
- Garvagh High School

A Development Proposal has been published for the closure of St Gemma's High School, Belfast with effect from 31 August 2013. The statutory 2 month period is due to end 13 November 2012, after which I will make a decision.

GCSE and A Level: Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the proposed timescale of his Department's review of 'A' Levels and GCSEs. (AQW 15638/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As I announced in the Assembly on 1 October 2012, CCEA has been tasked to undertake the review of A Levels and GCSEs and to set-up a Steering Group consisting of key stakeholders from schools, Further Education and Higher Education sectors and employers. CCEA will produce 2 interim reports in January 2013 and March 2013 respectively, with a final report due in June 2013.

DE: Development Proposals

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to list his Department's current development proposals that are awaiting a Ministerial decision. (AQW 15651/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently 11 published Development Proposals – 9 of which are recent publications that are still within the 2-month statutory objection period and these are:

School	ELB Area	Date of Publication	2-month objection period ends	Detail of Proposal
St Malachy's PS, Castlewellan	SEELB	03/09/12	03/11/12	Proposal that the three Moderate Learning Difficulty Units located at St Malachy's Primary School should be changed to Learning Support Units. The modified Units will accommodate 30 P1 to P7 pupils and will be operational from 31 August 2013.
Carryduff PS	SEELB	03/09/12	03/11/12	Proposal that a Learning Support Unit is created at Carryduff Primary School. This unit will accommodate 6 to 8 P1 to P7 pupils and will be operational from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.
St Gemma's HS	BELB	13/09/12	13/11/12	Proposal that St Gemma's High School Belfast will close with effect from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.
Orchard County PS	SELB	14/09/12	14/11/12	To extend the capacity of Orchard County Primary School from a 5 to a 6 class base primary school from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.
Fairhill PS, Dromore, Co Down	SELB	14/09/12	14/11/12	To extend the capacity of Fairhill Primary School from a 10 to an 11 class base primary school from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.
Ballycolman NS, Strabane	WELB	08/10/12	10/12/12	Proposal that Ballycolman Nursery School will close from 31 December 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter. Predicated upon prior Ministerial approval being given to DP232
St Mary's PS Strabane	WELB	08/10/12	10/12/12	Proposal that St Mary's PS establish an additional double nursery unit (52 fulltime places) using the existing site of Ballycolman NS, to increase the enrolment to 104 fulltime places with effect from 1 Jan 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter
New-Bridge Int. College	SELB	18/10/12	18/12/12	To increase the admission and enrolment number at New-Bridge Integrated College from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.
Donacloney PS	SELB	18/10/12	18/12/12	To extend the capacity of Donacloney Primary School from a 9 to an 10 class base primary school from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.

The remaining 2 Development Proposals currently under consideration are for:

- Colaiste Feirste, a Belfast based Irish Medium Post Primary school, to establish a post primary satellite of Colaiste Feirste in Maghera: and
- Dungannon Nursery School to establish a third full-time nursery unit.

Schools: Absenteeism

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education how his Department works in partnership with other Departments and agencies to improve school attendance in the thirty wards with the highest levels of absenteeism.

(AQO 2695/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is committed to tackling school absenteeism particularly in those areas and schools with the highest levels of absenteeism. We have been working collaboratively with Education Welfare Service, DHSSPS, DEL, Health Trusts and third party organisations such as VOYPIC and Fostering Network to develop programmes and guidance to provide targeted support for vulnerable groups of children.

My Department has also commissioned research into improving attendance in schools serving deprived areas and this has identified a range of strategies that can be applied to promote good attendance. These include implementing attendance policies, having designated staff with roles and responsibilities for attendance, providing additional support for poor attendees and creating strong relationships between schools, parents and carers.

My officials are taking forward the findings of this research and are working with the Education Welfare Service, other agencies and schools to target resources and strategies where they are most needed and develop best practice guidance based on these recommendations.

Schools: Key Stage Assessments

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education what the main learning points were from the 'Shadow Year' trial of the proposed processes for the forthcoming end of Key Stage assessments.

(AQO 2690/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Revised assessment arrangements are at the heart of "Count, read; succeed", my policy to raise standards in literacy and numeracy for our young people.

For this to be effective, parents, pupils, teachers and policy makers all need to have confidence in assessment outcomes.

The requirements of moderated teacher assessment will be new to many schools and, for this reason, it was agreed that the introduction of the new arrangements should be deferred for a year while CCEA operated a "shadow year", designed to trial the arrangements with a view to ensuring that they are both robust and manageable.

I have been assured by CCEA that the findings of that shadow year have informed the Council's final advice to me on moderation arrangements for 2012/13 and that the arrangements themselves have been amended in light of lessons learned during the shadow year.

However, I do recognise the ongoing challenges of change and have been conscious of concerns expressed in recent weeks about timescales and workload, particularly in the primary sector. I have therefore asked CCEA to increase its engagement with school principals in order to identify what further practical support might be provided and to ensure that the moderation arrangements operate with minimal bureaucracy.

A full report on the findings from the Shadow Year has been produced by the CCEA Statistics and Research Team and will be available on the CCEA website in the near future.

Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many pupils are enrolled in Kilcooley Primary School in Bangor.

(AQW 15710/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Figures submitted for the 2012/13 census return indicate that there are 165 children enrolled in Kilcooley Primary School in the current school year.

Schools: Travel Passes

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education to outline the process whereby school pupils are able to sell their travel passes back to the Education and Library Boards.

(AQW 15716/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Pupils do not sell their travel passes back to Boards. This erroneous interpretation of the school transport policy arose in the media.

Boards apply the current school transport policy when assessing the eligibility of pupils. Eligible pupils are then legally entitled to receive assistance, and this may take the form of a seat on a bus (Translink, Board, or privately operated) or taxi, or in certain circumstances their parents may receive a monetary allowance in lieu of transport.

Exchanging a Translink ticket for an allowance is permitted only during the period of September to October as Boards have not, at that time, been invoiced by Translink for tickets issued. Therefore, the exchange from ticket to allowance does not result in additional cost to a Board. After the Translink invoice has been received (usually by 31st October) no further ticket exchanges are permitted as this would result in additional expenditure to the Board.

Schools: Entitlement Framework

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Education whether more can be done to ensure that parents and pupils are fully informed of the benefits and choices available under the Entitlement Framework.

(AQO 2696/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is essential that parents and pupils are made aware of the changes to and the opportunities and flexibility offered by the entitlement framework which becomes statutory from September 2013. I have asked my officials to develop a communications strategy and a number of prospective channels to raise awareness amongst parents and pupils are under active consideration. In addition, in year 3 of my "Education Works" campaign, the focus will broaden the target group to include parents and pupils preparing for public examinations at GCSE level and I fully expect that the campaign will provide an additional and very visible vehicle for the entitlement framework message.

GCSE and A Level: Review

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister of Education how experiences of the Scottish and Republic of Ireland examinations systems will be included in the Review of GCSE and A Level qualifications.

(AQO 2697/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have seen details of the Scottish and south of Ireland qualification systems and visited the Scottish Minister, Michael Russell recently. I am also in regular contact with my southern counterpart, Ruairi Quinn.

In Scotland I was impressed by a system which enjoys all the benefits of our qualifications system with seemingly none of the disbenefits. There would be nothing to stop us from recreating a similar system here if we were minded to do so. The same is the case with the current model in the south.

The review of qualifications will look at all local qualifications systems including the south. Nothing is being ruled out.

What we must do, irrespective of the system in place is ensure that a learner can take his or her qualifications and use them anywhere across these islands to apply for a university place or job as is currently the case.

I can assure you that our qualifications system here will continue to be one that is capable of attracting the confidence of young people, parents, teachers, employers and universities.

DE: Budget

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education what engagement he has had with the Executive about securing additional funding for the education budget.

(AQO 2699/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It was clear that the Budget 2011-15 outcome for education presented major challenges and so, since taking up office, I have consistently made it clear that I would lobby Executive colleagues for additional resources to help alleviate pressures on the education budget. In January this year, following discussions with the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and Finance Minister, I was successful in securing an additional £120m for education over the next 3 years. This funding will be allocated straight to schools to help lessen pressures facing the classroom.

More recently the First Minister and Deputy First Minister announced on 10 October additional support to provide 230 young unemployed teachers with an opportunity to get teaching experience while contributing to one of my key priorities of raising educational achievement. This will be achieved by delivering one to one tuition for children in primary and post primary schools who are at risk of under achieving. By focussing on the core skills of literacy and numeracy we will ensure more young people can achieve to their full potential.

In addition, I have sought from the Executive additional funding in monitoring rounds. I submitted two resource bids in the June Monitoring round for the drawdown of schools surpluses and schools maintenance costs, for £5 million and £9.4 million, respectively. The former was met in full and £4.0 million of the £9.4 million maintenance bid was agreed by the Executive.

In the current October monitoring round, my Department submitted three capital bids totalling £7.2 million, including funds to address the recent fire damage to Arvalee Special School and Resource Centre. In addition, my Department submitted one resource bid of £2.0 million for additional schools estate maintenance costs. I await the outcome of the current monitoring round, which will be discussed by the Executive next week.

Any additional funding that I have secured is, of course, welcome but the education sector continues to face significant financial pressures and I will continue at every opportunity to lobby my Executive colleagues in order to secure additional funding.

Special Educational Needs: Statutory Assessment

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education why it takes six months to complete a statutory assessment and statement of special educational needs for children within the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.

(AQO 2700/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (NI) 2005 detail that following a decision to complete a statutory assessment, all education and library boards have 26 weeks to complete the assessment and statementing process, subject to permitted exceptions.

This 26 week period is broken down as follows:

- to issue the decision on whether or not to carry out a statutory assessment - 6 weeks.
- to complete the statutory assessment and decide whether or not to make a statement – 10 weeks
- after completing the assessment the board must either issue a proposed statement or inform the parent that it does not propose to make a statement - 2 weeks
- if the board chooses to make a statement, to issue the completed final statement – 8 weeks

Education and Skills Authority: Membership

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education how members will be appointed to the Education and Skills Authority. (AQO 2701/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is my intention that members will be appointed in accordance with Schedule 1 of the Education Bill that I introduced to the Assembly on 2 October 2012.

Department for Employment and Learning

Higher Education: Essential Skills

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) whether he is aware of the difficulties faced by students who have City and Guilds Level 2 qualifications in Essential Skills who are applying to higher education courses at universities in England, Scotland and Wales that refuse to accept the qualifications' equivalence to GCSE English and Mathematics, and other similar qualifications that are accepted elsewhere; and (ii) how the Essential Skills qualifications compare to similar qualifications elsewhere.

(AQW 14852/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): No specific concerns have been brought to my attention regarding difficulties faced by students applying to higher education courses at universities in England, Scotland and Wales, who have achieved Essential Skills level 2 qualifications, and who are seeking these qualifications to be accepted in lieu of GCSE or other equivalent or alternative level 2 qualifications.

Universities in England, Scotland and Wales, as well as in Northern Ireland, are autonomous bodies and are responsible for setting their own policies and entry criteria. However, a number of these institutions recognise that applicants for courses may have a wealth of different experiences and have followed a variety of educational pathways, with the result that many now accept a range of other level 2 qualifications as alternatives to GCSE, such as Northern Ireland's Essential Skills qualifications, England's Key Skills and Functional Skills, Essential Skills Wales and Scotland's Core Skills.

Our Essential Skills qualifications are based on the same standards as these similar qualifications across the UK. They are also on the Register of Regulated Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the level 2 qualifications being placed at the same level as GCSE's at Grades A*-C. Therefore, there are no reasons for universities not accepting our Essential Skills qualifications in situations where any of these alternative qualifications to GCSE are considered to be appropriate.

However, it is important to note that these types of qualifications will not be acceptable for all courses at universities. Where they are acceptable, it will tend to be in lieu of universities' general entry conditions in respect of English or Mathematics. Therefore, for example, an Essential Skills qualification in numeracy is less likely to be acceptable for a university course in mathematics or engineering. This broad approach would apply to our local universities, as well as to universities in the rest of the UK.

I would like to comment on your use of the term "equivalence". While the alternative qualifications described are broadly similar in terms of the level of demand and are considered comparable to GCSEs, they are not equivalent to GCSEs. This is quite a technical distinction, and arises from the fact that, unlike GCSE, there is no compensatory element within Essential Skills qualifications, with learners having to pass all elements of the qualification; also unlike GCSEs, there is no grading applied to Essential Skills qualifications, other than either pass or fail.

The answer to the second part of your question is answered through the information provided above.

Finally, I would add that our Essential Skills qualifications are continuing to attract significant numbers of learners, and I am pleased that their growing popularity is beginning to provide learners in Northern Ireland with an alternative route into higher and further education.

Universities: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much funding his Department has allocated to each university in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14853/11-15)

Dr Farry: The funding provided by my Department to each university in the last five academic years is set out in the table below:

University	Academic Year (£m)				
	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12
Queen's University	121.0	112.7	132.2	128.7	111.8
University of Ulster	98.3	100.4	104.9	103.8	90.6

First4Skills: Apprenticeships

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many learners have been affected by First4Skills going into administration; and what support his Department has offered those learners to allow them to complete their courses.

(AQW 14923/11-15)

Dr Farry: When First4Skills went into administration there were 989 apprentices in training.

My Department has been working closely with the Administrator for First4Skills to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by these apprentices. My primary concern is to ensure that the apprentices are able to continue with their training in order to allow them to complete their apprenticeships. I would like to stress that none of the apprentices have lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration.

First4Skills: Training Contract

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the training contract, held by First4Skills, with his Department can be passed to a new company if a buyer is found.

(AQW 14924/11-15)

Dr Farry: When First4Skills announced their closure Deloitte were appointed as Administrator for the Company. My Department has been working closely with the Administrator to ensure an effective resolution to the situation and this will include consideration, in conjunction with Central Procurement Directorate and the Departmental Solicitors Office, of the complex issues associated with any proposals related to the training contract.

First4Skills: Job Losses

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what support his Department has offered to staff who have been made redundant as a result of First4Skills entering administration.

(AQW 14935/11-15)

Dr Farry: As soon as my Department became aware of the job losses within First4Skills, my officials firstly attempted to make contact with the company directly and subsequently made contact with the administrator, Deloitte. Deloitte has provided the Department with details of those who have been made redundant and my Department, through the Employment Service, has written to each individual offering our Redundancy Advice Service.

The Redundancy Advice Service is organised and delivered by my Department in partnership with other Departments and Agencies such as the Social Security Agency, Invest NI, Educational Guidance Service for Adults and HM Revenue and Customs, and the package of support is tailored to meet the needs of the employees. Employees will be provided with information and professional advice and guidance regarding the options and support available, including employment, training and education opportunities, careers advice, and a range of other issues such as benefits, taxation and money management.

When responses from the First4Skills redundant employees have been collated, redundancy clinics will be organised as soon as possible, in convenient locations. The Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and Jobcentres across Northern Ireland has been alerted to the situation.

Certificate in Religious Education

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) for his assessment of whether the process of obtaining a Catholic Certificate of Education discriminates against Protestant applicants; and (ii) what action he intends to take in relation to any discrimination.

(AQW 14978/11-15)

Dr Farry: All student teachers in Northern Ireland, who wish to do so, have an opportunity to obtain the required Certificate in Religious Education via a number of routes. Where the Certificate is not delivered or supported in a teacher education institution, I believe that those students may be at a disadvantage. I have made my views known on this on a number of occasions.

Responsibility for the policy in relation to the teachers' exemption with regard to the Certificate rests with the Department of Education. I am advised that the Department of Education is currently undertaking a review of employment opportunities for teachers which will consider the implications of the requirement to possess the certificate. That review is due to be published early in the New Year.

I am currently engaging in a two-stage study of the teacher training infrastructure within Northern Ireland. The first stage, which is examining the financial sustainability of the two teacher training colleges, will report shortly. The second stage will look at options for sharing across the estate and will include issues such as differential access to aspects of teacher training.

DEL: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many members of staff in his Department are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations, and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

(AQW 15080/11-15)

Dr Farry: There are currently two Departmental staff who are suspended due to internal investigations; and two Departmental staff who are not suspended whilst facing an internal investigation.

University of Ulster: Senior Management Restructuring

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning following the announcement that the role of Provost for the University of Ulster's Coleraine and Magee campuses was created as part of a restructuring of senior management portfolios within the University, whether the new post will mean any reduction in commitment to each campus.

(AQW 15103/11-15)

Dr Farry: Staffing, including the structuring of senior management portfolios, is a matter for the University of Ulster as an autonomous body. Departmental officials have contacted the University regarding your question. They have replied with the following:

"The determination of the scale and the scope of the activity at each campus is the responsibility of the University's Council and Senate. The restructuring of senior management portfolios, and in particular the creation of the post of Pro Vice Chancellor (Communication) and Provost (Coleraine and Magee), does not signify any change in the University's commitment to any of its campuses."

I trust that you find this response helpful.

Youth Unemployment

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he plans to reduce unemployment for 16 to 24 year olds in working class areas which have lost their traditional manual labour industries.

(AQW 15109/11-15)

Dr Farry: Addressing youth unemployment, including in working class areas that have lost traditional industries, is an Executive priority. In March we agreed a package of new measures to help young people gain experience, acquire new skills and find employment. The package which I announced to the Assembly on 2 July will invest £31 million in these measures over the next 3 years.

Opportunities range from short 2 to 8 week work experience placements through 6 to 9 month training opportunities to subsidised job opportunities coupled with sector specific skills training. My Department is actively working with employers to secure as many opportunities as possible as quickly as possible. I have been encouraged by the response of employers so far and I expect many more to come forward to offer opportunities for young people in the coming months.

A key aspect of this initiative is to target support at sectors that have future jobs growth potential. This will help to rebuild and rebalance the Northern Ireland economy in line with the Executive's Economic Strategy. We need to recognise that many traditional, low skilled, industries are in decline so we need to re-skill and up-skill the future workforce to take advantage of the job opportunities that will be created when the economy begins to grow again.

You will also be aware of the NEETs Strategy "Pathways to Success", which was endorsed by the Executive on 31 May and launched by means of an oral statement to the Assembly on 11 June.

The strategy also contains an Action Plan with 56 action points across Departments. Work is well under way on the implementation of the strategy.

New initiatives specifically for 16 to 18 year olds to include:

- case management by the Careers Service of young people aged 16 and 17 who drop out of provision or do not have a positive destination when they leave school;
- a new training allowance for 16 and 17 year olds participating on existing programmes funded by the European Social Fund;

- a community based access programme to engage and mentor young people using community and voluntary sector organisations. The organisations will provide continuity of support for young people to engage or re-engage with learning and to progress through mainstream training provision into employment. Individual action plans will be introduced for 16-18 year olds participating in the community based access programme; and
- an innovation fund to test new approaches based on sound evidence aimed at piloting a range of other approaches to re-engaging those young people in the NEET category.

A new Community Family Support Programme pilot is also being introduced which will focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged families, to enable young people to re-engage with education, training or employment. Such a programme will require involvement from a range of Departments. We will invest £10 million in Pathways to Success over the next 3 years.

The aspiration is that by 2020 every young person will not only have an opportunity to access education, training or other preparation for employment but, to the extent that they are able, they also avail of that opportunity.

Higher Education: Working-class Protestants

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he plans to increase the number of working class Protestants who participate in higher education in the (i) short-term; and (ii) long-term.

(AQW 15111/11-15)

Dr Farry: Early interventions to raise aspirations and educational attainment levels while young people are still in school are essential to increasing the participation rate in higher education of individuals from a working class background. While this is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Education and the school sector, my Department currently provides special project funding for programmes such as, Discovering Queen's and the University of Ulster's Step-Up programme. These programmes target post-primary schools in disadvantaged areas to raise awareness of the benefits of higher education and to help pupils, including those from a Protestant working class background, to attain the necessary qualification for entry. My Department allocates around £2.3 million each year to widen participation from groups which are currently under-represented in higher education.

In the longer term my Department will be implementing Access to Success, the new regional strategy for widening participation in higher education. The main aims of the Strategy will be to widen participation among those groups which are currently under-represented in higher education. This will be achieved through a centralised programme to raise awareness of the benefits of higher education and additional "outreach" projects which will expand the range of attainment raising programmes in schools, colleges and the wider community. Additional support measures will also be developed to sustain the continuing participation of students through targeted bursaries, fee waivers and other forms of direct support. The strategy has identified young males from a working-class Protestant background from lower participation neighbourhoods as a clearly defined target group.

Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 14241/11-15, to outline the remit of the Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group.

(AQW 15160/11-15)

Dr Farry: Recently I announced the creation of an Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group and subsequently chaired the first meeting of the Group on 19 September 2012. The purpose of this Group is to agree a coordinated approach to assess the sector's current skills needs and put in place interventions if necessary. The Working Group will focus on developing an Action Plan that will articulate short, medium and long-term actions to address the skills needs of the sector under the themes of skills provision, sector attractiveness and coordination and communication.

The Working Group comprises membership from further and higher education, business leaders, industry representatives and government departments. The following organisations provide representation to the Group:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce; | ■ Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SEMTA); |
| ■ FG Wilson; | ■ Energy and Utility Skills; |
| ■ The Confederation of British Industries (CBI); | ■ the Further Education sector; |
| ■ John Huddleston Engineering; | ■ CollegesNI; |
| ■ Thales UK; | ■ Queens University Belfast; |
| ■ Bombardier; | ■ University of Ulster; |
| ■ Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE); | ■ Aerospace, Defence and Security Industries (ADS); |
| ■ Diageo; | ■ Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; |
| ■ JTI Gallagher; | ■ Invest Northern Ireland; |
| ■ Moyola Engineering; | ■ Department of Education; |
| ■ Michelin; | ■ Department for Employment and Learning. |
| ■ Schrader; | |
| ■ CDE Ireland; | |

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- John Huddleston Engineering;
- Thales UK;
- Bombardier;
- Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE);
- Diageo;
- JTI Gallagher;
- Moyola Engineering;
- Michelin;
- Schrader;
- CDE Ireland;
- Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SEMTA);
- Energy and Utility Skills;
- the Further Education sector;
- CollegesNI;
- Queens University Belfast;
- University of Ulster;
- Aerospace, Defence and Security Industries (ADS);
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment;
- Invest Northern Ireland;
- Department of Education;
- Department for Employment and Learning.

Queen's University Belfast: Funding

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much funding his Department has provided to Queen's University Belfast in the each of the last five years.

(AQW 15176/11-15)

Dr Farry: The funding provided by my Department to Queen's University Belfast in the last five academic years is set out in the table below:

University	Academic Year (£m)				
	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12
Queen's University	121.0	112.7	132.2	128.7	111.8

Queen's University Belfast: Student Accommodation

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, over the last five years, whether he or any of his officials have had discussions with Queen's University Belfast regarding the provision of student accommodation.

(AQW 15177/11-15)

Dr Farry: As my Department does not provide funding to higher education institutions for the provision of student accommodation, I can confirm that there have been no direct discussions, at ministerial or official level, with Queen's University Belfast on this issue over the last five years.

However, my Department has considered the Belfast City Council commissioned 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study' in detail, particularly those recommendations which emphasise the need to ensure a coherent approach to where and how students will live within the city in the medium and long term future.

An official from my Department currently chairs a Student Housing Strategy Working Group, comprising representatives from Queen's University, the University of Ulster, Department for Social Development, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Belfast City Council, to take forward recommendations from the Strategic Study.

DEL: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) whether any departmental staff have been charged with criminal offences; and (ii) what is his Department's position regarding staff employment whilst court proceedings are pending.

(AQW 15286/11-15)

Dr Farry: The NICS Standards of Conduct require civil servants to report, as soon as possible, if they are arrested for, charged with or convicted by a court of any criminal offence (except a traffic offence with a private vehicle for which the penalty has not included imprisonment or disqualification from driving).

The Department is aware of some instances when staff have been charged with criminal offences. Records are retained where disciplinary action is taken as a result of those criminal offences. In the period from 2008 onwards, two members of staff have been subject to disciplinary action for committing criminal offences.

While court proceedings are pending, the Department's position is detailed in the Discipline Policy in the NICS HR Handbook. The policy states that there is no rigid code which automatically assigns specific penalties to particular offences. As such, any action is taken is determined by the specific facts of each individual case.

Stranmillis University College: Chairperson

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the appointment of a chairman to the Board of Governors of Stranmillis University College, Belfast.
(AQW 15567/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have this matter under active consideration.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI: E-Synergy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the management fees that InvestNI has paid to E-Synergy for the management of the Northern Ireland Spin Out Funds; and (ii) what grants and investments InvestNI has paid to E-Synergy, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 14703/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): To date, management fees of £1,991,625 have been paid by Invest NI to E-Synergy for the management of the NISPO suites of funds from its commencement in April 2009 to December 2012.

No grants or investments are paid to E-Synergy for its own use.

Invest NI: E-Synergy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in addition to management fees, whether E-Synergy charges board fees and deal fees on investments made from the Invest Growth Fund start-ups; and whether the fees are monitored by InvestNI to ensure they are justified and reasonable.
(AQW 14704/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In accordance with the legal agreements, E-Synergy can charge monitoring and deal fees on investments made in Invest Growth Fund start-ups. These fees are appraised by Invest NI as part of the project evaluation process to ensure they are justified and reasonable.

E-Synergy: Remuneration

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) why the remuneration of E-Synergy is not linked to the performance of profitable investments, instead of flowing as of right; and (ii) how many of the investments made have (a) been successful; and (b) failed.
(AQW 14705/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) E-synergy earns a fee for the management of the NISPO suite of funds based on the amount submitted in the tender. There is also the potential for E-Synergy to increase their earnings based on pre-determined performance targets.
- (ii) 19 investments have been made
 - (a) 17 of these companies are still trading

Economy: Job Losses

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the strategies her Department deploys when major job losses are announced; and how the strategies have evolved over the last five years.
(AQW 14904/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Given the underlying economic conditions of the last three years, job losses have been inevitable in companies across Northern Ireland. Thankfully, the instances which have involved significant numbers of redundancies have been fairly

small however, when they have been made, such as in the recent Caterpillar case, they have naturally caused significant reverberations across the local economy.

In such circumstances, the nature of the support provided will be determined by the skill sets of the employees involved. However, the key focus is always on helping those workers likely to be affected through the provision of appropriate support mechanisms. This may be in terms of initial practical advice on redundancy through to identifying alternative job opportunities and re-training. As such, both my Department and a number of other agencies will be involved in working together to help ensure that these efforts are effectively co-ordinated to deliver real benefits to those impacted by such announcements. Over the last few years these relationships have strengthened to the extent that there is now a very clear package of measures which can be put in place quickly when necessary.

In particular, my Department works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning to deliver a series of Redundancy Clinics which are aimed at providing impacted employees with one to one advice and support in identifying potential employment, training and business start opportunities. My Department, through Invest NI's regional office teams will also be actively engaged in doing all they can to revitalise the areas most affected and minimise the impact on local traders and businesses.

In addition, as in the case of Caterpillar, we are working with the company to see if there are any opportunities to mitigate the losses by attracting other Group activities into Northern Ireland.

If my own personal involvement is at all helpful then, where possible, I will also be actively engaged at executive level to try and influence the key decision makers within the company in question. In the recent Caterpillar case, for example, I have personally written to and received a reply from the Chairman and CEO of Caterpillar Inc., Doug Oberhelman, in which he confirmed the company's plan to continue manufacturing operations in Northern Ireland. I also had two telephone calls with the Head of Caterpillar's global Electric Power Division which was followed by a face-to-face meeting (along with Invest NI's Chief Executive) in the US at the end of September at which we emphasised the importance of the company to our local economy and offered whatever further support we could to ensure that there were no further large scale job losses in the future.

Social Economy: Co-operative Movement

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to promote the principles of the Co-operative Movement as an alternative to public/private enterprise.

(AQW 14928/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI has led, on behalf of the Executive, on the development of social economy policy for Northern Ireland. The co-operative movement shares many of the principles of a social economy organisation and as such is seen as a leading stakeholder in the sector.

In direct response to the findings of an independent evaluation of the Northern Ireland social economy sector in 2011, DETI has recently appointed Social Enterprise Northern Ireland (SENI) to design, manage and deliver a Social Economy Work Programme (SEWP), for up to a maximum of three years. The main objective of the SEWP is to develop and implement a programme of initiatives to enable the continued growth of a sustainable social economy sector. Delivery of this programme will provide SENI with an opportunity to explore areas of best practice within the sector, such as the co-operative model, and to develop new financial products/services for the benefit of the sector.

DETI and DSD are also currently undertaking a scoping exercise on the size and scale of the Third Sector, including an assessment of the potential of community and voluntary organisations to make the transition to the social enterprise model. The Northern Ireland Co-operative Forum has been surveyed as part of this exercise and their experience will feed into the final report expected by December 2012. The report will be used to help shape future policy developments across relevant Executive departments.

Tourist Board: Online Accommodation Providers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 13939/11-15, for her assessment of the decrease in the number of views of Bed and Breakfasts listed on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's website.

(AQW 14964/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's consumer website discovernorthernireland.com plays an important role in assisting visitors with sourcing tourist information at the planning stage of their trip and also in destination. Over the past five years the total number of visitors using the site has grown.

With changes in consumer purchasing preferences, more visitors are now searching for and booking tourist accommodation via commercial booking channels. Over the past five years the number of page views for tourist accommodation categories on discovernorthernireland.com has decreased.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board offers all B&Bs operators in Northern Ireland the option to promote their properties for free on discovernorthernireland.com. But this is only one of the many commercial channels available to accommodation providers to promote their offering online. Therefore there are an unknown number of views and bookings on other websites which B&B operators use.

NITB actively supports and encourages all tourist accommodation providers to ensure their properties are online and bookable and that they make best use of any commercial booking channels available to them.

Gas Development

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the advice of the European Commissioner Günther Oettinger to the Oireachtas on unconventional gas development.

(AQW 14994/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Officials in my Department continue to consider the full range of evidence and advice which is emerging around the topic of unconventional gas development.

Invest NI: Supply Chains

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what information is held by InvestNI on the supply chain companies of businesses it supports.

(AQW 15032/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In the normal course of its monitoring, Invest NI would not hold a detailed record of a company's supply chain as this information is deemed to be commercially sensitive and subject to regular change as suppliers are retendered and replaced by other companies.

However, in monitoring the companies it supports, Invest NI executives regularly review information on both cost of sales as well as destination of sales. This allows Invest NI to see to what extent a company purchases goods and services from the local market as well as the degree of its reliance on sales to other Northern Ireland companies.

In practice, individual Invest NI Executives will have a good working knowledge of the key suppliers to the larger, more strategic companies and in cases where a decision in one company could potentially impact on local companies in the supply chain, Invest NI will work with all clients affected to assess the impact and mitigate the effects as far as possible.

FG Wilson: Job Losses

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why she has not yet been able to outline the potential impact of the recent job losses at FG Wilson on local suppliers; and when she will be in such a position.

(AQW 15033/11-15)

Mrs Foster: F G Wilson continually monitors actual and forecast customer demand. This information is refreshed monthly and shared with suppliers. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific numbers or their potential impact on the company's supply chain as these are commercially sensitive both to F G Wilson and the companies involved. What I can confirm is that F G Wilson has kept, and continues to keep, in regular contact with those suppliers most affected by the recent announcement. I can also confirm that Invest NI is working closely with its customers who are most affected by this decision.

Invest NI: Supply Chains

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why InvestNI do not have information readily available and accessible on the supply chain companies of businesses it supports; and what action is being taken to rectify this situation.

(AQW 15034/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Information on the supply chain that companies use is commercially sensitive and is not normally held by Invest NI.

However, particularly in respect of larger, more strategic companies, individual Invest NI executives will normally have a good working knowledge of these companies including their key suppliers and customers. Indeed, in many cases, Invest NI will facilitate specific supply chain initiatives involving both the entity concerned and its direct supply chain to maximise the efficiency and competitiveness of the entire Northern Ireland supply offering.

Furthermore, in cases where a decision in one company could potentially impact on local companies in the supply chain, Invest NI will work with all clients affected to assess the impact and mitigate the effects as far as possible.

It is not proposed that more formal supply chain information is sought from companies in the normal course of events.

Tourism: Cruise Ships

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many coach operators from (i) Northern Ireland and (ii) the Republic of Ireland, have provided touring services for cruise ship passengers, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15035/11-15)

Mrs Foster: All cruise ship operators use ground handling companies to assist them during their stay when in Northern Ireland. Touring itineraries with coach operators are contracted directly by the cruise line companies via their ground handlers.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) does not liaise directly with cruise ship operators or ground handlers. This relationship is managed by the Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau (BVCB).

Tourism: Cruise Ships

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the itineraries of the touring services provided by coach operators (i) from Northern Ireland and (ii) the Republic of Ireland, to cruise ship passengers, in each of the last five years. (AQW 15036/11-15)

Mrs Foster: All cruise ship operators use ground handling companies to assist them during their stay when in Northern Ireland. Touring itineraries with coach operators are contracted directly by the cruise line companies via their ground handlers.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) does not liaise directly with cruise ship operators or ground handlers. This relationship is managed by the Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau (BVCB).

Invest NI: Company Buyouts

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what work is being done by her Department and InvestNI to support the creation of workers co-operatives and worker buy outs of companies in administration. (AQW 15055/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI can, in cases where appropriate proposals are brought forward, consider supporting the buy-out of companies in administration, whether by workers co-operatives, management teams or other groups, providing such proposals demonstrate commercial viability and comply with the relevant guidelines. However, in recent years no such proposals have been submitted to Invest NI for its consideration.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what work her Department is taking to reap the benefits from a reduced level of Air Passenger Duty. (AQW 15057/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The process to complete the devolution of direct long Air Passenger Duty (APD) is well underway and an Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill is currently progressing through the Northern Ireland Assembly. This Bill will follow through on a Programme for Government commitment to eliminate APD on direct long haul flights which operate from Northern Ireland.

Devolving direct long haul APD, and reducing it to zero, will send a positive message to long haul airlines that Northern Ireland can be a viable option for their business. My Department, through Tourism Ireland is in dialogue with relevant airlines, and Belfast International Airport, on an ongoing basis to identify and develop opportunities for potential new routes to long haul destinations, and also the potential to re-instate routes to previously served destinations such as Canada.

Growth Loan Fund

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 13992/11-15, to detail the value of the contract awarded to Whiterock Capital Partners for managing the Growth Loan Fund. (AQW 15072/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The value of the contract awarded to Whiterock Capital Partners for managing the Growth Loan Fund was £6,740,588.

Child Trust Fund

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 14352/11-15, whether she intends to negotiate with the Department for Work and Pensions or the Financial Services Authority about the ability of Credit Unions to act as agents for Child Trust Fund accounts. (AQW 15135/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have no plans to negotiate with the Department for Work and Pensions or the Financial Services Authority.

Following the transfer of regulatory responsibility for Northern Ireland credit unions from my Department to the Financial Services Authority in March 2012, any credit union wishing to act as an agent for Child Trust Fund accounts may apply to HM Revenue and Custom for approval.

Child Trust Fund

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has held any negotiations with the Department for Work and Pensions or the Financial Services Authority about the ability of Credit Unions to act as agents for Child Trust Fund accounts. (AQW 15138/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has not held any negotiations with the Department for Work and Pensions or the Financial Services Authority about the ability of Credit Unions to act as agents for Child Trust Fund accounts.

Forth and Foyle: Job Losses

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the 22 full-time jobs at Forth and Foyle based in Maydown in Derry and Ballylumford in Larne.

(AQW 15203/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The company has advised Invest NI of their intention to cease trading at the end of October with the unfortunate loss of 22 jobs. 10 of the employees have been working on a rolling service contract at Ballylumford Power station with a further 8 operating out of the company's office in Londonderry. In addition 4 people operating from the company's Grangemouth office in Scotland will also be affected.

Discussions are ongoing between Invest NI and the company.

Caterpillar/FG Wilson

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 14393/11-15, to detail the dates on which the telephone calls and meetings took place.

(AQW 15240/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I wrote to the CEO of Caterpillar Inc on 11th September 2012 and received a reply on 12th September 2012. The reply confirmed the company's plan to continue to manufacture large gensets in Northern Ireland.

I had two telephone calls with the Head of Caterpillar's global Electric Power Division on 20th July & 10th September 2012. This was followed by a face-to-face meeting (along with Invest NI's Chief Executive) in the US on 23rd September 2012.

My team in Invest NI had two telephone calls on 5th September & 11th September with senior officials in the US as well as eleven face-to-face meetings with senior management in Northern Ireland and from the wider Caterpillar organization.

The dates of these meetings were as follows:

- 24th April;
- 21st May;
- 23rd May (two separate meetings were held on this date)
- 29th June;
- 18th July;
- 7th August;
- 24th August;
- 11th September and;
- 25th September 2012 (two separate meetings were held on this date)

Crown Estate: Revenue

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the expected revenue from the lease of the seabed to the Crown Estate for the recently announced wind farm and tidal energy projects.

(AQW 15453/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The expected revenue from the projects when they are operational is a commercial matter for The Crown Estate and my Department is not privy to such information.

Department of the Environment

Hydraulic Fracturing: Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) whether his Department has an established and agreed method of measuring the greenhouse gas emissions from hydraulic fracturing and to outline how his Department plans to assess the impact of the development of shale gas on greenhouse gas emissions; and (ii) whether an agreed method of measuring greenhouse gasses will be required before hydraulic fracturing is allowed to proceed.

(AQW 11109/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): (i) In response to the challenge presented by the prospect of hydraulic fracturing being introduced into Northern Ireland my Department is supplementing its knowledge of the process through reviewing and engaging with emerging research and liaising with counterparts in other Environment Agencies in Britain, Ireland and the US and through the various working groups established at an EU level.

I visited the United States in March this year, as have officials from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. We received briefings from the US EPA highlighting the work they are doing and plan to do, particularly their research on the potential impacts of shale gas extraction on drinking water supplies and potential technological and regulatory controls on gas

emissions. By establishing and maintaining these sorts of relationships we can ensure that on an ongoing basis we can benefit from the work of the US EPA in this area.

My Department has not yet established an agreed method of measuring the greenhouse gas emissions from hydraulic fracturing or a means of assessing the impact of shale gas on greenhouse gas emission. That work is in progress. It is part of a wider exercise being undertaken by my Department in terms of drafting an environmental regulatory framework for dealing with applications associated with hydraulic fracturing. However the specific suite of regulations that will be applied will not be finalised until the details of each application, the location and proposed working practices are known.

- (ii) No decisions have been taken by my Department in relation to permitting hydraulic fracturing. I have made it clear that I will uphold the most rigorous environmental impact assessment and any application will be robustly assessed in the context of best advice, research and legal requirements. I can confirm that a complete environmental regulatory framework, including a regime in relation to greenhouse gas emissions, will be established before any decisions are taken.

Rose Energy

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has held any recent discussions with the Ulster Farmers' Union in relation to the progress of the Rose Energy proposals.

(AQW 13985/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The applications are now in the final stage of consideration and I expect a report and a recommendation to be forwarded to me shortly. I have had and will continue to have a wide range of conversations with interested parties on this matter.

Planning Applications: Bushmills Dunes Golf Resort

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment to list the dates and means of all consultations held with UNESCO on the Bushmills Dunes Golf Resort planning application.

(AQW 14332/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Your question refers to an issue which inter alia is before the High Court by way of judicial review. That case is listed for hearing on 27 November for 4 days. The Member will appreciate that I am therefore constrained in what I can say, save that I am satisfied and content with the decision taken and the process that was followed leading to the decision.

Cavanacaw: Gold Mine

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment whether any investigation has been launched into the failings of his Department in respect of the planning regulations, and absence of sufficient assessment prior to commencement of the works of the gold mining at Cavanacaw near Omagh; and when the findings of any investigation will be made public.

(AQW 14476/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department fully accepts the findings and criticisms contained in the Ombudsman's report and I have instructed officials to take all appropriate action to ensure lessons are learned.

I consider the Ombudsman's Report to be exhaustive, the response is clear, and I do not identify how a further investigation will add to understanding what transpired, beyond what is already known.

As I have stated in response to other Assembly Questions I consider the appropriate action to be:

- Urgently review the staff resources available to the Enforcement Team within Strategic Projects Division and to make greater use of Area Office Enforcement Staff to carry out initial site visits in relation to complaints received;
- Move to a pro-active regime where in terms of specialist applications such as mineral extraction compliance with planning conditions is monitored to identify any breaches at an early stage, this will include engaging with applicants and the relevant industry bodies where appropriate;
- Ensure all staff has access to the most up to date technology to monitor sites – for example Strategic Planning Division Compliance Teams are now able to access real time high quality aerial photographs to deliver accurate mapping and analysis of topography, boundaries, levels which is ideal for monitoring quarries and landfill sites.
- Immediately review all current and recently approved minerals applications as well as a range of enforcement cases (minerals and unauthorised waste) to ensure compliance with the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations;
- Organise refresher training for staff on the requirements of the new Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations;
- Provide updated guidance to staff on the processing of Enforcement Cases.

Highway Code: Irish Language

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment how many requests his Department received for the Highway Code in Irish, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14629/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In the last five year period, the Department has received one request for an Irish language version of the Highway Code. This request was made in September 2010 by Fobairt Feirste, an Irish Language Development Agency. In

my view, this was a request from an organisation that captures and conveys the wider view of the Irish language speaking community.

In determining whether to provide a publication, including the Highway Code, in an alternative language the Department considers a range of factors including the size of the resident population, the number of requests for a specific version and whether schools deliver the core curriculum through a particular medium.

Fobairt Feirste's approach to the Department was made on behalf of a second level Irish medium school, Coláiste Feirste, following its decision to introduce the GCSE Motor Vehicle and Road User Studies (MVRUS) to the curriculum - a subject which the Department has helped to develop and actively supports through its Road Safety Education Service.

The overall aim of the MVRUS GCSE is to provide students with an early opportunity to become better informed and more responsible road users – better prepared for driver training and testing. This translation will be a particular support to the pupils as the Highway Code is an integral part of the MVRUS syllabus and pupils are assessed on many aspects of it.

The development of an Irish language version of the Code is also relevant to the promotion of road safety more generally. For example, it could also be used as a learning resource for students choosing to study the Irish language both at GCSE and A level. According to 2011 examination figures provided by CCEA, a total of 1854 candidates in Northern Ireland sat and obtained a grade in GCSE Irish, with a further 328 students obtaining a grade at A-level. From these figures it is estimated that some 4,400 young people are studying the Irish language in schools throughout Northern Ireland during Years 11 to 14 (approx. age 14 to 18 years). Many other pupils will also be introduced to the subject at an earlier stage in their education measuring tens of thousands.

The Irish translation of the Code was officially launched at Coláiste Feirste on Monday 24 September. It joins a list of five alternative languages available online including Lithuanian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese and Russian.

The provision of the on-line Irish translation cost £6,760 excluding VAT. In line with audit requirements, the proposal was subject to a Business Case that examined all monetary and non-monetary costs, benefits and risks.

The Department for Transport prepares an assessment each year of the values for preventing road casualties. For indicative purposes, the cost of preventing one slight road traffic injury, based on 2010 data, is £14,410.

I am fully satisfied that producing an online Irish language translation of the Highway Code will make a positive contribution to road safety. If it prevents just one person from incurring a slight road traffic injury, it will have more than repaid on the investment.

Highway Code: Irish Language

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment how much it costs to produce the Highway Code in Irish.
(AQW 14630/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In the last five year period, the Department has received one request for an Irish language version of the Highway Code. This request was made in September 2010 by Fobairt Feirste, an Irish Language Development Agency. In my view, this was a request from an organisation that captures and conveys the wider view of the Irish language speaking community.

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Planning: Developers/NI Water

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment, in respect of a planning application for a further dwelling within an existing development, whether it is a material consideration that the private sewer serving the development has never been adopted and is not up to adoption standards.

(AQW 14653/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Currently, under the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, a developer can choose or choose not to submit an application to NIW stating an intention for future adoption by NIW. That is, the developer enters into an agreement with NIW to have the sewers adopted after completion of the development. A monetary bond is lodged by the developer and NIW then has a duty to inspect the works as they progress on site.

Homeowners, businesses and developers can apply to NIW to have the sewerage system adopted retrospectively. NIW may refuse to adopt the sewerage system if it believes it has not been correctly constructed and maintained.

Where an application is received for a further dwelling in an existing development DOE Planning will consult with NIW, if there is no capacity the developer must demonstrate how it is proposed to deal with waste water and sewage. The outcome of the application will be dependent on the individual circumstances.

Planning permission will be granted where it is demonstrated that waste water and sewage can be adequately dealt with. This may involve an interim solution such as a private treatment works to address sewage disposal, however homeowners with unadopted sewers and associated pumping stations are responsible for the maintenance and any associated costs.

Planning permission may be granted with a negative condition stating that the house should not be occupied until works are complete to adequately address sewage disposal.

If the waste water and sewage cannot be dealt with adequately, or this issue cannot be addressed by use of a negative condition this will result in refusal of planning permission.

Rugby Road, Belfast: Listed Buildings

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the impact on listed buildings and their surroundings from road resurfacing work undertaken by the Department for Regional Development, such as that planned for Rugby Road in South Belfast; and what plans he has to develop a new policy, or strengthen existing planning policy, to protect floorscape and street furniture where they contribute to the character of an area.

(AQW 14867/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department's current policy for the protection of listed buildings is contained within Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage.

Once a building is listed, Article 44 of the Planning (NI) Order provides that consent is required for its demolition and for any works of alteration or extension in any manner which would affect its character as a building of special architectural or historic interest. This is referred to as "listed building consent" and it is a criminal offence to carry out such works without consent.

Policy BH 11 of PPS6 'Development affecting the Setting of a Listed Building' states that the Department will not normally permit development which would adversely affect the setting of a listed building.

Although the resurfacing work proposed by Roads Service may not require the express consent of the Department, NIEA does not consider that these works will detract from the setting of the listed buildings along Rugby Road. I have asked NIEA to further consider this assessment.

I am very aware of the concern of residents however and, upon being advised of the proposal by Roads Service, I spoke with the relevant Roads official and I also contacted the Roads Minister. Minister Kennedy has written to inform me that he has requested Roads Service to postpone the proposed scheme in Rugby Road until consultation with the local community and their public representatives has been carried out.

I believe that the proper outcome is the one requested by residents and I hope this will prevail.

In relation to current policy and the protection of street features, the Department has designated as Conservation Areas or Areas of Townscape Character a number of areas which it has assessed as exhibiting a distinct character based on their historic built form or layout. Rugby Road is one of many such areas that have been designated in draft BMAP as an Area of Townscape Character.

Policy for the control of development within Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape Character (ATC) is set out in Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage and the Addendum to Planning Policy Statement 6: Areas of Townscape Character.

In addition to PPS 6, the Department has published Supplementary Planning Guidance for individual Conservation Areas and has set out a brief analysis of the important characteristics of each ATC in draft BMAP.

The Department is therefore supportive of the retention and preservation of areas and streetscape which display considerable character or heritage. In light of this case, I have asked for further advice on if any development of policy is needed.

DOE: Quangos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of QUANGOs linked to his Department (i) at 8 May 2007; and (ii) at the date of this question; and how many people served on the QUANGOs on these respective dates.
(AQW 14870/11-15)

Mr Attwood: At 8 May 2007, The Department for the Environment was responsible for the following public bodies:

- The Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC);
- The Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland (LGSC);
- The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC);
- The Historic Buildings Council (HBC); and
- The Historic Monuments Council (HMC).

At 28 September 2012, this position has not changed.

The number of members serving on each of the bodies at 8 May 2007, and at 28 September 2012 is detailed in the table below.

Public Body	Number of Members at 8 May 2007	Number of members at 28 September 2012
NILGOSC	11 (Chair & 10 members)	13 (Chair & 12 members)
LGSC	15 (Chair & 14 members)	6 (Chair and 5 members)
CNCC	19 (Chair, Deputy Chair & 17 members)	14 (Chair, Deputy Chair and 12 members)
HBC	17 (Chair & 16 members)	18 (Chair and 17 members)
HMC	15 (Chair & 14 members)	15 (Chair and 14 members)
Total	77	66

I have commenced a review of the future of the LGSC and there may be an argument for a future merge of the HBC and HMC.

MOT Test: Vehicle Mileage

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment whether private car buyers can verify mileage declarations by requesting details of the readings taken when vehicles are inspected during MOT tests.
(AQW 14888/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The MOT test is a road safety check. It is a snapshot of the condition of the vehicle at the time of the test, and is not designed to validate or legitimise mileage records. However, mileage readings are captured from vehicles' odometers by vehicle examiners during tests, and these can be provided by the Driver & Vehicle Agency on request.

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Vehicle Mileage

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment whether private car buyers can verify a mileage declaration by seeking details of the readings provided by the vehicle owner when the car is taxed.
(AQW 14889/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Vehicle mileage may be provided to the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) on a voluntary basis, on relicensing forms and the forms used to notify changes of keeper. The recorded mileage does not appear on the registration certificate (V5C) that is issued to the new keeper, as the Agency is not able to check or verify this information.

Mileage is captured during the annual roadworthiness test, from when a vehicle reaches the appropriate testable age, and this information is updated on the vehicle register.

DVA supplies information on the registration of vehicles to a number of commercial companies for consumer protection and anti-fraud purposes. The information supplied by DVA may be added to by companies with details from the police. Information may also be obtained from finance or insurance companies, which offer a vehicle checking service to the public.

The current registered keeper of a vehicle may request information about the history of their vehicle and a member of the public wishing to confirm vehicle information, including mileage, may submit an enquiry to DVA through the fee paying enquiry service.

DOE: Proposed Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what legislation his Department plans to introduce during the remainder of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 14895/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The details of the 9 Bills that I propose to introduce to the Assembly during the remainder of the current Assembly mandate are contained in the attached table. The introduction of a Bill is subject to Executive agreement. Potentially prioritisation may arise. Consequently, the timelines should be treated as indicative, particularly for the later Bills, where public consultation is not yet completed.

I have also included details of the Marine Bill which I introduced to the Assembly in February 2012 and which has recently completed Committee consideration stage.

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT PROPOSED BILLS BETWEEN APRIL 2012 AND MARCH 2015

No	Bill	Purpose
1.	Marine Bill	To introduce a new system of Marine Planning, improved Marine Nature Conservation and further streamlining of Marine Licensing. Introduced: 21 February 2012 Royal Assent: early 2013
2.	Planning Bill	To bring forward a number of the planning reforms contained in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and apply them to the Department in advance of the transfer of powers to district councils. Introduction: autumn 2012 Royal Assent: mid 2013
3.	National Park Bill	To allow for the identification, designation and management of national parks. The Minister is currently conducting a series of future meetings in relation to this proposal.
4.	Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill	To provide for the reorganisation of local government; new governance arrangements for councils; a new ethical standards regime; the introduction of community planning powers and the power of well-being; and an updated service delivery and performance improvement regime. Introduction: November/December 2012 Royal Assent: autumn 2013
5.	Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill No 1	To lower the limits on blood alcohol levels for motorists and introduce other measures to tackle drink driving; amend the learner and novice driver regimes; and cover matters regarding the wearing of helmets when using quadricycles on public roads. Introduction: December 2012 Royal Assent: late 2013.
6.	Carrier Bags Bill	To allow the carrier bag levy to be extended to a broader range of carrier bags. Introduction: January 2013 Royal Assent: January 2014
7.	The Climate Change Bill	To introduce statutory targets for greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland. Introduction: May 2014 Royal Assent: January 2015
8.	The Environmental Better Regulation Bill	To reduce the environmental regulatory burden on business and enhance protection of the environment. Introduction: January 2014 Royal Assent: May 2015
9.	Buses (Licensing of Operators) Bill	To overhaul the bus licensing regime. Introduction: during 2013: Royal Assent: during 2014.
10.	Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill No 2	To introduce mutual recognition of penalty points for motoring offences between Northern Ireland and Ireland. This Bill may also be used to introduce new anti-drug driving laws. Introduction: during 2013: Royal Assent: during 2014

Goods Vehicles: Compliance Fees

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of the Environment whether he is aware of the concerns of local haulage companies in relation to the rises in testing fees which come into effect on 1 October 2012; and to outline the (i) process of consultation; and (ii) rationale behind these rises.

(AQW 14898/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am aware of the concerns of goods vehicle operators around the increases in compliance fees, which are collected at the same time as HGV test fees. I am concerned to ensure that any fees levied by my Department are required and are kept to the minimum level necessary. I recognise that economic circumstances are very difficult and therefore I personally interrogated the requirement for the increase in fees before approving them.

The increased compliance fees relate to the implementation of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 2010. The increases are due to the increased assurance activity that will take place to ensure compliance with the provisions of the Act. The need for greater regulation of the goods vehicle industry has been called for by the industry itself for some years, and was a factor in the development of the Act. The industry has strongly supported these measures as important to achieving a fairer and more competitive market position, improving road safety, reducing the environmental impacts of goods vehicles and tackling organised crime. The overall test and compliance fee is still substantially below those charged in Britain and Ireland, and the new compliance fee is less than £1 per week for a tractor unit, and less than 50p per week for a trailer. In addition, the implementation of the Goods Vehicles Act included the removal of Access NI requirements (and fees) and of the Road Freight Vehicle Fee of £60 per vehicle per year.

The fees related to the Act were consulted on between 5 December 2011 and 3 February 2012. There were 17 responses to the consultation, of which 14 were substantive. Of those responses, 10 supported the proposed fees. Those that did not, asked for a phasing in of the fees, or said that the increased charges could not be justified because the service levels in Northern Ireland were below those in Britain.

In its response, the Department indicated that the compliance activity for goods vehicles in Northern Ireland had increased in recent years, and that further enforcement officers would be deployed following the commencement of the Goods Vehicles Act, with those additional staff funded through the compliance fees. The Department also noted that the Driver & Vehicle Agency published compliance information in its annual report.

The Environment Committee of the Assembly noted the synopsis of response to the public consultation in February 2012, and subsequently approved the SL1 and the Fees Order introducing the fees.

Councils: Part-time Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to list the councils that employ staff, at management level, on a part-time basis.

(AQW 14899/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Council	Does the Council have management level staff employed on a part-time basis
Antrim Borough Council	Yes
Ards Borough Council	No
Armagh City & District Council	Yes
Ballymena Borough Council	No
Ballymoney Borough Council	No
Banbridge District Council	Yes
Belfast City Council	Yes
Carrickfergus Borough Council	No
Castlereagh Borough Council	No
Coleraine Borough Council	No
Cookstown District Council	Yes
Craigavon Borough Council	Yes
Derry City Council	No
Down District Council	No
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	Yes
Fermanagh District Council	No
Larne Borough Council	Yes
Limavady Borough Council	No
Lisburn City Council	Yes

Council	Does the Council have management level staff employed on a part-time basis
Magherafelt District Council	Yes
Moyle District Council	No
Newry & Mourne District Council	Yes
Newtownabbey Borough Council	Yes
North Down Borough Council	Yes
Omagh District Council	Yes
Strabane District Council	No

Fixed Penalty Notices: Litter

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment how many fixed penalty notices for litter offences have been issued in each council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14951/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department requests information on fixed penalty notices issued by district councils after the end of each financial year. Information on the number of fixed penalty notices issued in the district of each district council in each of the last three financial years in respect of the offence of leaving litter is set out in the following table.

Council	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Antrim BC	26	23	30
Ards BC	6	7	12
Armagh City & DC	14	34	14
Ballymena BC	42	73	30
Ballymoney BC	18	6	4
Banbridge DC	22	11	12
Belfast CC	1286	1995	1534
Carrickfergus BC	26	16	19
Castlereagh BC	-	38	26
Coleraine BC	42	53	16
Cookstown DC	15	13	12
Craigavon BC	1105	1038	1046
Derry CC	19	56	41
Down DC	65	51	60
Dungannon & South Tyrone BC	0	14	1
Fermanagh DC	71	16	8
Larne BC	76	73	23
Limavady BC	5	6	4
Lisburn CC	28	80	42
Magherafelt DC	50	39	40
Moyle DC	6	7	5
Newry & Mourne DC	60	167	89
Newtownabbey BC	118	48	150
North Down BC	22	8	4
Omagh DC	27	35	24
Strabane DC	-	23	22

Council	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Totals	3149	3930	3268

I am writing to all CE's of Councils, enclosing this information, stating the importance of a litter strategy and asking why their Council figure is as it is.

Local Government Reform: Preparedness

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the preparedness of the 26 Councils for the Reform of Local Government.
(AQW 14967/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Since the latter part of last year, I have continued to push hard on local government reform matters and the core objective of creating 11 new councils from the existing 26.

Despite the inherited inertia, the complexity and scale of the task and the need to involve and balance multiple interests, momentum is gathering and progress is being made, with local government working towards an improving state of preparedness.

I have established a number of structures to drive forward the implementation of the local government reform programme. These include a Regional Transition Committee to provide political leadership and insight; a Regional Transition Operational Board to provide operational input and support the Regional Transition Committee and a number of Task & Finish Working Groups.

Implementation and convergence at the local level is led by 11 Voluntary Transition Committees, which are made up of a number of elected members from each of the constituent councils. The Chairs of these 11 Committees and the NILGA Office Bearers come together at regional level on the Regional Transition Committee, which I chair. Lately, I have decided to establish a Political Reference Group to include representation from both central and local government for the purposes of inputting to the local government reform programme. I am finalising the nominations to that group with the seven political parties represented in both the Assembly and in local government.

A high level programme plan has been drawn up to identify what work needs to be done and by when. Council Transition Committees will be expected to translate the relevant tasks into local implementation plans and take these forward at a cluster level.

This will be a bigger test of Council preparedness and willingness to take reform forward at a greater pace over the next thirty months.

I am heartened that progress is and will be made within these clusters, a few Councils still appear reticent to fully move reform forward.

I have made it clear that the point of no return has been passed, reform will happen, the rate payers must see the full benefit of reform and all must measure up to the challenge.

I have now given a commitment to work towards the early establishment of Statutory Transition Committees as soon as possible next year. This is another example of measures to drive reform forward. Councils - all - must work with me in this task.

Waste Management Groups: Preferred Bidders

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment whether any preferred bidders for (i) Arc21; (ii) Southern Waste Management Partnership; and (iii) West Region Waste Management Group have been identified; and for his assessment of there being only one company left in the running for each project before preferred bidder status has been awarded.
(AQW 15191/11-15)

Mr Attwood: We are at a key phase in the Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme. I have already advised the Assembly by written statement on 15 October that SWaMP2008 has decided to terminate its procurement of a long-term residual waste treatment contract following a legal challenge to the bid consortium.

As regards the other two Waste Management Groups, NWRWMG has finalised its Appointment Business Case and has submitted it to the Department and DFP for approval. Once approved, this will allow the NWRWMG to consider appointing a Preferred Bidder.

Arc21 continues in dialogue with its remaining bidder with a particular focus on the development of the technical solution, draft environmental statement and it advised the Waste Infrastructure Programme Board in June of this year that it expected to appoint a Preferred Bidder in February 2013. This figure has subsequently slipped by approximately 10 months..

In relation to the issue of there being only one bidder left in each of the procurements, a single bidder situation does arise in PPP/PFI projects, and HM Treasury has devised specific guidance to deal with this eventuality by developing single bidder protocols, developing shadow bid models and market testing and bench marking the supply chain and costs generally. The Waste Management Groups are following that guidance rigorously, and are required in their business cases to demonstrate how they have secured best value in a single bidder situation. My Department or the Waste Management Groups will not enter into any contract which cannot demonstrate that it represents best value for a Waste Management Group's constituent councils.

Highway Code: Irish Language

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment what is the cost of the project to provide an online Highway Code in Irish; and how many people he expects to use this service.

(AQW 15192/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The provision of the on-line Irish translation cost £6,760 excluding VAT. In line with audit requirements, the proposal was subject to a Business Case that examined all monetary and non-monetary costs, benefits and risks.

In determining whether to provide a publication, including the Highway Code, in an alternative language the Department considers a range of factors including the size of the resident population, the number of requests for a specific version and whether schools deliver the core curriculum through a particular medium.

The Department for Transport prepares an assessment each year of the values for preventing road casualties. For indicative purposes, the cost of preventing one slight road traffic injury, based on 2010 data, is £14,410 – that is, more than twice the cost of translating the Highway Code into Irish.

In September 2011, the Department received a request for an Irish language version of the Highway Code from Fobairt Feirste, an Irish Language Development Agency. This approach was made on behalf of a second level Irish medium school, Coláiste Feirste, following its decision to introduce the GCSE Motor Vehicle and Road User Studies (MVRUS) to the curriculum – a subject which the Department has helped to develop and actively supports through its Road Safety Education Service.

The overall aim of the MVRUS GCSE is to provide students with an early opportunity to become better informed and more responsible road users – better prepared for driver training and testing. This translation will be a particular support to the pupils at Coláiste Feirste as the Highway Code is an integral part of the MVRUS syllabus and pupils are assessed on many aspects of it.

The development of an Irish language version of the Code is also relevant to the promotion of road safety more generally. For example, it could also be used as a learning resource for students choosing to study the Irish language both at GCSE and A level. According to 2011 examination figures provided by CCEA, a total of 1854 candidates in Northern Ireland sat and obtained a grade in GCSE Irish, with a further 328 students obtaining a grade at A-level. From these figures we can estimate that some 4,400 young people are studying the Irish language in schools throughout Northern Ireland during Years 11 to 14 (approx. age 14 to 18 years). Many other pupils will also be introduced to the subject at an earlier stage in their education.

The Road Safety Strategy to 2020 highlights that consideration will be given to how best to communicate the Highway Code to all road users in Northern Ireland. The availability of an Irish translation of the Code will therefore support this commitment by promoting the Code amongst all road users in Northern Ireland who speak Irish as a first or preferred language. Figures from the 2001 Census would indicate a potential target audience of 102,784 i.e. the number of respondents who indicated that they can at least read Irish.

The Irish translation of the Code was officially launched on Monday 24 September 2012 and joins a list of five alternative languages available online including Lithuanian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese and Russian. None are available to buy in hard copy.

I am satisfied that producing an online Irish language translation of the Highway Code will make a positive contribution to road safety. If it prevents just one person from incurring a slight road traffic injury, it will have more than repaid on the investment made to increase public awareness of the rules of the road.

MOT Test: Pre-1960 Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether he would consider making veteran or vintage cars exempt from MOT, similar to the system that operates in the Irish Republic; and (ii) what action he intends to take to encourage such car owners to use their vehicles on public roads.

(AQW 15195/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I have answered questions very similar to this on a number of occasions over recent months, most recently in September 2012 (AQWs 13794/11-15 and 13795/11-15), and the response remains the same, as detailed below.

The Department has consulted on possible exemption of certain categories of historic vehicles from MOT testing and the Environment Committee, at its meeting on 22 March 2012, considered the synopsis of responses to the Department's consultation. The responses indicated that there is broad support for exemption of pre-1960 vehicles from periodic testing.

The Committee was content with the Department's proposed way forward, which was to develop policy on the basis of the consultation responses that would make use of the exemption in Roadworthiness Directive 2009/40/EC concerning the periodic testing of pre-1960 vehicles. This would align with the British Government's current proposals which would, from November 2012, exempt pre-1960 vehicles from MOT testing.

With regard to Ireland, I understand that pre-1980 cars are exempt from the National Car Test (NCT) unless used as public service vehicles (limos, wedding cars etc) which require NCT if they are to be granted a PSV licence.

There have been significant European Commission (EC) policy developments since our consultation. On 13 July 2012, the EC published a 'Roadworthiness Package' that, amongst other things, addresses periodic roadworthiness tests for motor vehicles, therein making changes to the rules that apply to historic vehicles. The proposals are expected to be introduced no earlier than August 2014.

If implemented as currently drafted, the proposals will narrow the parameters within which the Department can provide for exemptions to historic vehicles, as the definition of an historical vehicle is more prescriptively described.

The Department's policy intentions remain the same; that is to make exempt pre-1960 vehicles from the MOT regime, but we have to be mindful of the changing legislative context, to ensure that any changes we make are not made redundant by incoming EC Regulations.

I expect to be in a position to provide further clarification on the Department's position in the coming weeks.

I have no plans to "encourage" owners of veteran or vintage car owners to use their vehicles on public roads. Such motorists are free to use their vehicles as they wish, provided of course they do so in compliance with vehicle approval, licensing and testing requirements for road use.

Fixed Penalty Notices: Litter

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment how many fixed penalty notices for littering were issued in each district council area in 2012.

(AQW 15262/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department requests information on fixed penalty notices issued by district councils after the end of each financial year. Information on the number of fixed penalty notices issued in the district of each district council in the 2011/12 financial year in respect of the offence of leaving litter is set out in the following table.

Council	2011/12
Antrim BC	30
Ards BC	12
Armagh City & DC	14
Ballymena BC	30
Ballymoney BC	4
Banbridge DC	12
Belfast CC	1534
Carrickfergus BC	19
Castlereagh BC	26
Coleraine BC	16
Cookstown DC	12
Craigavon BC	1046
Derry CC	41
Down DC	60
Dungannon & South Tyrone BC	1
Fermanagh DC	8
Larne BC	23
Limavady BC	4
Lisburn CC	42
Magherafelt DC	40
Moyle DC	5
Newry & Mourne DC	89
Newtownabbey BC	150
North Down BC	4
Omagh DC	24
Strabane DC	22
Total	3268

I have asked for further information on this matter given the wildly differential figures.

Waste Repatriation: Raveagh Road, Eskragh

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to detail the cost of removing domestic, industrial and commercial waste from lands at Raveagh Road, Eskra; (ii) who meets the cost of this work; (iii) what action his Department is taking to pursue those responsible for the illegal dumping of the waste; and (iv) for his assessment of the impact on the local environment. (AQW 15310/11-15)

Mr Attwood:

- (i) The full cost of the works will only be known after the work is completed and this aspect of the project is managed by Department of Finance and Personnel Central Procurement Directorate on behalf of Department of the Environment (DoE). However, based on experience with the other waste repatriation sites, it is estimated the cost of the work to DOE will be in the region of £40,000.
- (ii) Based on an agreement between the two governments, the cost of waste removal is shared on the following basis: 80% of the cost will be met by the Republic of Ireland and 20% by Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland bears the full costs of waste disposal.
- (iii) The Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Environmental Crime Unit has taken, and continues to take, action against a defendant in relation to the Raveagh Road site. Having pleaded guilty in March 2007 to eight waste and water offences in respect of this illegal dumping, Mr William Jordan is currently the subject of confiscation proceedings, being taken forward by the Serious Organised Crime Agency, under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, which aim to deprive him of the unlawfully earned proceeds from this action.
- (iv) During the Repatriation project, the works are undertaken at each site in a manner to minimise any impact on the local environment. Extensive sampling is carried out before, during and after completion of the works to ensure no further environmental damage. A site specific report is produced which records the monitoring results and demonstrates that the waste contamination has been removed from the environment.

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment for an estimate of the anticipated revenue that will be collected in the first year of the single use carrier bag tax; and on what data is this figure based. (AQW 15458/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The revenue estimates for the proceeds of the Carrier Bag Levy are based on an analysis of experience in other jurisdictions that have already introduced similar charging arrangements. This analysis included; Ireland; Washington DC; Hong Kong; Victoria (Australia); and the chain of IKEA stores in the United States.

The change in consumer behaviour was found to be relatively consistent across the examples considered, with a charge of just a few pence producing reductions in bag consumption of at least 84%.

Using the 11 data sets (7 years of data from Ireland and single year data from the other 4 jurisdictions) and adjusting for initial levels of bag consumption, a revenue model was constructed for Northern Ireland - allowing the amount of revenue to be estimated for any given levy amount.

The model was further modified to take account of VAT deductions (which will apply in circumstances where the retailer adds their own additional charge for each bag).

While the amount of revenue collected through the Carrier Bag Levy will ultimately depend on how consumers adapt their behaviour, the latest estimate of revenue collection for the first year of the levy is £2.32m

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of a decrease in the single use of plastic carrier bags he anticipates after one year of the imposition of the carrier bag tax. (AQW 15459/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Based on empirical evidence from other jurisdictions that have already introduced charging for carrier bags, it is anticipated that the consumption of single use plastic carrier bags will be reduced by at least 80% in the first year following the introduction of the Carrier Bag Levy.

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment for an estimate of the anticipated revenue that will be collected in the second year of the single use carrier bag tax; and on what data is this figure based. (AQW 15460/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The revenue estimates for the proceeds of the Carrier Bag Levy are based on an analysis of experience in other jurisdictions that have already introduced similar charging arrangements. This analysis included; Ireland; Washington DC; Hong Kong; Victoria (Australia); and the chain of IKEA stores in the United States.

The change in consumer behaviour was found to be relatively consistent across the examples considered, with a charge of just a few pence producing reductions in bag consumption of at least 84%.

Using the 11 data sets (7 years of data from Ireland and single year data from the other 4 jurisdictions) and adjusting for initial levels of bag consumption, a revenue model was constructed for Northern Ireland – allowing the amount of revenue to be estimated for any given levy amount.

The model was further modified to take account of VAT deductions (which will apply in circumstances where the retailer adds their own additional charge for each bag) and the later inclusion of low cost reusable carrier bags.

While the amount of revenue collected through the Carrier Bag Levy will ultimately depend on how consumers adapt their behaviour, the latest estimate of revenue collection for the second year of the levy is £4.62m.

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what monitoring will be conducted to ensure that there is no fraud by retailers in their returns on the single use carrier bag tax.

(AQW 15461/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 confer enforcement powers on the Carrier Bag Levy Team to question the seller or an employee of a seller and to require the production of documents or information if they have reasonable belief that there has been a failure to comply with a requirement of the regulations. The Department intends to use these powers as and when necessary to ensure consistent and equitable compliance with the regulations.

The Department will monitor bag usage returns and overall levels of compliance and intends to investigate alleged breaches of the regulations through a structured programme of visits to premises of sellers throughout Northern Ireland. Monitoring quarterly bag usage returns from sellers will also be a fundamental part of the Carrier Bag Levy Team operations.

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how much he will be spending on advertising and public awareness campaigns on the single use carrier bag tax.

(AQW 15462/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A budget of £20,000 has been made available for advertising and to promote public awareness. Downloadable materials will be available online from December 2012, providing retailers with a range of information documents for display in store. A customer focused campaign will be launched in January 2013 and will provide the public with key information regarding the introduction of the Carrier Bag Levy on 8 April 2013. There will also be a “Bring a Bag” week in Eco Schools in March 2013.

Waste Management Groups: Preferred Bidders

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the current position of (i) Arc21 and (ii) the North West Regional Waste Management Group, including their ability to fulfill their waste treatment contract.

(AQW 15569/11-15)

Mr Attwood: As the Member will understand, much of the detailed information pertaining to the procurements is subject to restrictions imposed by public procurement law and commercial confidentiality requirements. However, I can provide the following summary of each procurement’s current position:

arc21 is in the latter stages of dialogue with its remaining bidder and is working through a range of procurement issues. It advised the Waste Infrastructure Programme Board in June of this year that it expected to appoint a Preferred Bidder in February 2013. This figure has subsequently slipped by approximately six months.

The North West Regional Waste Management Group has finalised its Appointment Business Case and has submitted it for approval. Approved, this will allow the NWRWMG to consider appointing a Preferred Bidder. NWRWMG expects to reach financial close in March 2013.

I have made it a priority that this procurement exercise progresses and measures up to the requirements of affordability, deliverability, issues of the public purse, compliance with our EU commitments and developing to right approach in our circumstances. I will firmly hold to this position.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Business: Redundancies

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) how many firms have shed jobs to relocate them outside Northern Ireland; and (ii) how many jobs have been lost in this way.

(AQW 14903/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency collects information on businesses proposing to make 20 or more employees redundant in line with the Employments Rights (Northern Ireland Order) 1996 (amended 8 October 2006). Businesses are required to provide a reason for redundancies, which includes the "transfer of work to another establishment". However, there is no requirement for businesses to indicate where the work is being transferred to and it is therefore not possible to provide the information requested.

For information, the number of businesses citing the reason for proposed redundancies (of 20 or more employees) as the "transfer of work to another establishment" in each of the last 5 years, the number of such redundancies and the total number of businesses with redundancies and reported redundancies (>20 employees) is provided in the table overleaf. Please note that these figures may include a transfer of work to another establishment in Northern Ireland.

Year	Redundancies due to 'Transfer of work to another establishment'		Total redundancies	
	Number of firms	Number of confirmed redundancies	Number of firms	Number of confirmed redundancies
2008	7	1,127	57	2,782
2009	10	857	86	4,596
2010	9	133	73	2,096
2011	7	311	65	1,808
2012*	5	97	43	1,630

*to 31/08/12

Rates: Rating Debt

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the level of rating debt that was written off, in each district, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14959/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The levels of rating debt that were written off in each of the last three years (comparable information is not available prior to 2009/2010) in each district council area are set out in the attached table.

The figures for 2011/2012 are unpublished as LPS is awaiting the final outcome of the audit from the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and therefore the information should be treated as provisional.

Debt written-off may be recovered in subsequent years, generally as the result of the receipt of dividends, from claims lodged by LPS against the outstanding debt associated with bankrupt ratepayers.

District Council	Debt Written Off (£000s)		
	2011/2012 (Prov.)	2010/2011	2009/2010
Antrim	£590	£252	£227
Ards	£707	£287	£352
Armagh	£385	£388	£124
Ballymena	£709	£276	£280
Ballymoney	£128	£85	£88
Banbridge	£322	£219	£194
Belfast	£7,186	£6,532	£3,718
Carrickfergus	£407	£154	£117
Castlereagh	£657	£231	£131
Coleraine	£429	£329	£246
Cookstown	£145	£198	£123
Craigavon	£1,141	£731	£364
Derry	£1,745	£977	£783
Down	£592	£616	£176
Dungannon & South Tyrone	£224	£392	£175

District Council	Debt Written Off (£000s)		
	2011/2012 (Prov.)	2010/2011	2009/2010
Fermanagh	£719	£263	£218
Larne	£240	£76	£178
Limavady	£225	£216	£107
Lisburn	£1,331	£781	£850
Magherafelt	£227	£93	£109
Moyle	£65	£44	£42
Newry & Mourne	£1,377	£875	£467
Newtownabbey	£687	£323	£314
North Down	£1,079	£394	£568
Omagh	£212	£298	£126
Strabane	£289	£193	£148
Totals	£21,818	£15,222	£10,224

* Figures may not add due to roundings

Air Passenger Duty

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many jobs are projected to be created as a result of proposed changes to Air Passenger Duty rates.

(AQW 14984/11-15)

Mr Wilson: It is not possible to determine how many jobs will be created as a result of the devolution of direct long haul Air Passenger Duty (APD). However, without devolution Northern Ireland would have lost the United Airlines service which operates between Belfast and Newark, the only direct link between Northern Ireland and the US.

This link provides a vital and strategic access point for indigenous companies seeking to trade with North America. It also provides a very important gateway for inward investors seeking to establish or expand business operations in Northern Ireland. Invest NI Foreign Direct Investment clients, including the New York Stock Exchange, have stated that their presence here was only possible on the basis that direct air access to the Eastern Seaboard capital markets was readily available.

The Programme for Government commitment to complete the devolution of direct long haul APD, and to reduce it to zero, will send a positive message to long haul airlines that Northern Ireland can be a viable option for their business. Increasing Northern Ireland's connectivity to long haul destinations will result in economic benefits in terms of improved business linkages and increased inbound tourism.

Peace III

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there is an underspend in any elements of the PEACE III Programme that is available for redistribution; if so, by what criteria and process will this funding be reallocated; and to whom the surplus funds will be distributed.

(AQW 15016/11-15)

Mr Wilson: It is not anticipated that there will be an underspend within the PEACE III Programme.

In order to ensure that full commitment of the programme's budget is maintained until the end of the programming period, it may be necessary to reallocate funding between programme themes. Any such proposals would require the agreement of the relevant accountable government departments and the Programme Monitoring Committee. Reallocation across programme priorities would also require the approval of the European Commission.

To date, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), PEACE III Managing Authority, has not made any such proposals.

Peace III

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there is an underspend in the Positive Relations Programme in PEACE III; and, if so, to what extent and how will any surplus funds be distributed.

(AQW 15017/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The budget for Theme 1.1, Building Positive Relations at the Local Level, of the PEACE III Programme has been fully committed. An underspend is not anticipated.

Stormont Estate: Event Costs

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost to his Department of the event held in the grounds of the Stormont Estate on Wednesday 27 June 2012.

(AQW 15044/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel incurred costs of £ 60,217.82 in relation to the event.

Stormont Estate: Event Costs

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost to his Department of the event held in the grounds of the Stormont Estate on Saturday 29 September 2012.

(AQW 15045/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel incurred costs of approximately £1,500 in relation to the event.

Grants: Online Application Portal

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he would investigate the potential of establishing a single online application portal where organisations could apply for the various streams of Government funding available; and for his assessment of the benefits of such a portal.

(AQW 15049/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I can confirm that I have asked the Senior Responsible Owner for NI Direct to consider this request and to provide an assessment of the viability of such an approach and the likely benefits. Indeed the idea of a generic online grants application facility had already been identified by the NI Direct Programme. Under the Programme for Government commitment to improving online access to Government information NI Direct are currently investigating the potential for an online form to be used for applications under the OFMDFM administered Social Investment Fund and it is hoped that this solution could then be used as the basis for other similar types of grant or funding applications. This exemplar pilot should be available by the end of March 2013 and I will update the member at that time of the viability of having a single online solution or if multiple solutions would be required but based on reusing elements of the pilot solution to reduce the development timescales.

Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the success of the Empty Premises Rate Relief scheme in attracting new occupants to empty premises since it came into effect on 1 April 2012.

(AQW 15087/11-15)

Mr Wilson: To date there have been 32 successful applications to the new scheme with total relief awarded to date of £77,636.

As you have stated the one year rates concession was introduced in April 2012. The aim of the policy was to get long term empty shops and other retail premises back into business and to help rejuvenate town centres. Over recent months I have personally visited a number of businesses who have benefitted from the new scheme and have been impressed by the impact it is having in giving businesses a helpful start and also in arresting the decline in some of our traditional shopping areas.

Also, a couple of weeks ago the Scottish Government announced that they were going to follow suit and adopt a similar scheme there. So, this Assembly is leading the way in adopting policies that help rather than inhibit business growth.

DFP: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any staff within his Department have criminal charges outstanding; and what is his Department's position regarding their employment whilst court proceedings are pending.

(AQW 15187/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department is not aware of having any staff with criminal charges outstanding.

Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline all Public Private Partnership and Private Finance Initiative projects that have been entered into since May 2007, broken down by (i) cost; (ii) Department; and (iii) duration.

(AQW 15206/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Responsibility for the overview of PPP / PFI projects rests with Strategic Investment Unit in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However the information requested is collected and collated by HM Treasury and is published on its website. The information is available for download as an Excel spreadsheet. The website address is:

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/infrastructure_data_pfi.htm

Rates: Stranmillis, Belfast

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department is aware of the negative impact that the rising numbers of houses of multiple occupancy (HMO) have had upon the capital value of non-HMO properties within certain areas, such as Stranmillis, and that many of these properties are still subject to higher rates despite the reduction in value. (AQW 15216/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department has no direct say in planning policy matters which is a matter for the Environment Minister however this issue was brought to the attention of the head of Rating Policy within my Department when he attended a meeting of the Stranmillis Residents Association in May 2011.

At that meeting he explained that this was a matter to be taken into account at the next general domestic revaluation and was not something that could be reflected in the current assessments; nor can partial revaluations occur.

However, it is worth noting that although house prices throughout NI have declined substantially in recent years, for a variety of reasons, a general revaluation would not necessarily lead to reduced rates bills for Stranmillis residents.

Latest evidence show that values have on the whole fallen back to January 2005 levels, which is the common valuation date adopted for the current valuation list. If a revaluation of all properties were to take place now and we found that all values had decreased below the 2005 levels that were set, as the Executive and Councils still need the same amount of money out of the system, the rate in the pound would have to increase.

Where values have fallen and the relativity of those values has altered (in terms of type, location etc), then some ratepayers would pay less after a revaluation, some more and others the same – but overall the same level of revenue would be raised.

Properties for which the value has reduced in percentage terms by more than the average since 1 January 2005, would have a lower rates liability. Properties for which the value has reduced by less than the average, or indeed increased, would have an increased rates liability.

The Executive has currently no plans to carry out a general domestic revaluation during the spending review period and lifetime of this Assembly. Furthermore, carrying one out would be difficult at the moment, as the evidence required to establish the values is not sufficiently reliable, given the low volume of sales and the continued volatility in the housing market. However, my Department monitors the housing market through the authoritative Northern Ireland Residential Property Price Index produced by LPS. If house price relativities change substantially and the housing market recovers (in terms of being sufficiently stable and active to provide a reliable evidence base) the matter can be reconsidered by the Assembly in due course.

Public Procurement: Social Clauses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the (i) minimum requirement; and (ii) definition of a social clause. (AQW 15225/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are two ways that social considerations can be incorporated into contracts. These are as the 'subject matter' of the contract i.e. that they are about the product, service or the construction work to be procured, and/or when linked to the performance of the contract.

It is for Departments to determine what social considerations they intend to include in contracts. These social considerations are then incorporated into the contract in the form of clauses (social clauses) in either the contract specification or as part of the contract performance requirements.

Public Procurement: Social Clauses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what organisations have corresponded with his Department in regard to the promotion of social clauses. (AQW 15229/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel, mostly through Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), has corresponded with a wide range of organisations. Correspondence covers a number of issues relevant to procurement including the promotion of social clauses.

These organisations include the EU Commission, Cabinet Office and the devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland, Northern Ireland Departments and Centres of Procurement Expertise. In addition CPD corresponds with a number of representative business and professional organisations. This can be either individually or regularly through the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland (CIFNI) and the Business Industry Forum for Northern Ireland (BIFNI). A list of the membership of each forum is attached for information.

CIFNI Members

- Central Procurement Directorate
- Roads Service
- NI Water
- Health Estates
- NI Housing Executive

- Translink
- Invest NI
- Department for Social Development, Urban Re-generation
- Department for Social Development, Social Housing
- Strategic Investment Board
- Construction Industry Group
 - Specialist subcontractors College
 - Contractors College
 - Suppliers College
 - Professional College
- Quarry Products Association NI
- Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians
- Federation of Master Builders

BIFNI Members

- | | |
|--|---|
| ■ Central Procurement Directorate | ■ Business in the Community NI |
| ■ NI Housing Executive | ■ NI Council for Voluntary Action |
| ■ Translink | ■ Education & Library Board |
| ■ Sales Institute of Ireland, Northern Branch | ■ NI Water |
| ■ Irish Congress of Trade Unions | ■ Federation of Small Businesses |
| ■ Construction Employer's Federation | ■ Institute of Directors |
| ■ Chartered Accountants Ireland - Ulster Society | ■ Institute of Business Consulting |
| ■ Management Consultancies Association | ■ Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) |
| ■ Law Society of Northern Ireland | ■ Momentum |
| ■ Strategic Investment Board | ■ Confederation of British Industry - NI |
| ■ Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors | ■ InvestNI |
| ■ Strategic Investment Board | ■ Business Services Organisation Procurement and Logistics Services |

Public Procurement: Tenders

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the value threshold for external contracts to be subject to competitive tender; and under what circumstances this requirement could be waived.

(AQW 15253/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Procurement Guidance Note 04/12 – 'Procurement Control Limits and Basis for Contract Awards' states that all contracts above £5,000 must go to competitive tender. For spend below £5,000 Departments must carry out a price check to ensure value for money.

The Procurement Guidance Note 03/11 'Award of Contracts without a Competition' provides guidance and sets out the circumstances and procedures to be followed when awarding contracts without a competition.

These Procurement Guidance Notes are available on CPD's website www.dfpni.gov.uk/cpd.

Public Procurement: Tenders

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what guidance is provided to Departments on the requirements for contracts to be subject to competitive tender; and to detail the requirements for business cases to be updated to account for the passage of time.

(AQW 15254/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Procurement Guidance Note (PGN) 04/12 – 'Procurement Control Limits and Basis for Contract Awards' sets out the minimum requirements for competitive tendering for all bodies covered by Northern Ireland Procurement Policy. The circumstances and procedures to be followed when awarding contracts without a competition are set out in PGN 03/11 'Award of Contracts without a Competition'. These guidance notes are available on CPD's website www.dfpni.gov.uk/cpd.

My Department has also provided guidance to departments detailing the requirements for business cases to be completed or updated. This guidance can be found on the Department's website at: <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/index/finance/afmd/afmd-key-guidance/afmd-fds/fddfp0312.pdf>.

Foreign Nationals: Migration

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how annual net migration out of Northern Ireland by foreign nationals is quantified; and for his assessment of the reliability of these figures.

(AQW 15300/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Net migration is defined as migration into Northern Ireland less migration out of Northern Ireland. This includes movement of people to and from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

In Northern Ireland estimates of migration are made with reference to the country the person lived in before coming to Northern Ireland or moved to from Northern Ireland, not their nationality. Therefore, an estimate of net migration of foreign nationals is not made.

Estimates of migration flows are modelled using the data sources outlined in the attached table.

Place of Origin / Destination	Into Northern Ireland	Out of Northern Ireland
Great Britain	Transfer of GP registrations to Northern Ireland from Great Britain (HSC Business Services Organisation)	Transfer of GP registrations to Great Britain from Northern Ireland (GB Health Authorities)
Republic of Ireland	New registrations with a family doctor, previous country of residence Republic of Ireland (HSC Business Services Organisation)	Central Statistics Office Ireland (CSO) survey estimate of migration into Republic of Ireland from people previously resident in Northern Ireland
Rest of the World	New registrations with a family doctor, previous place of residence Rest of the World (HSC Business Services Organisation)	De-registrations with family doctor due to person now living in the Rest of the World (HSC Business Services Organisation)

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency produce annual migration estimates, alongside an annual report detailing migration evidence from other sources. These include the Worker Registration Scheme, the Points Based or former Work Permit system, National Insurance Number registrations to nonUK nationals, the School Census, Higher Education enrolments and Government household surveys. Comparisons of these sources, with the annual migration estimates show significant coherence and thus reliability in the Northern Ireland level migration estimates.

The latest migration estimates, relating to the period mid-2010 to mid-2011, show that 21,700 persons arrived to live in Northern Ireland, whilst 24,900 persons left Northern Ireland to live elsewhere. This resulted in a net migration loss of 3,200 people in the Northern Ireland population.

Welfare Reform Bill: Spending

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the amount of money that will be lost to the Northern Ireland economy as a result of the changes to the welfare system.

(AQW 15364/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Latest estimates indicate that overall spending on social security benefits will continue to increase after welfare reform has been implemented, however the rate of the increase will be lower.

Northern Ireland will continue to be able to draw down its actual social security spending needs with any fluctuations met directly from Westminster outside of the funds managed by the Northern Ireland Executive.

Under the Statement of Funding Policy UK ministers could adjust the Block grant were Northern Ireland ministers to decide to change social security policy. The level of the adjustment and the financial consequences would be a matter for discussion.

If the Welfare Reform Bill (Northern Ireland 2012) was not implemented there would be major negative financial consequences. Estimates are in the region of £207m for the current spending review and around £1.2billion in the next; the annual costs could reach up to £400million a year in 2018-19.

Measures such as Universal Credit, designed to enable customers to keep more as they move into work or increase their working hours, will bring an estimated £110million per year once fully implemented into Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland would have to meet higher IT and administration costs to deliver services to around 600,000 social security customers and would not get the significant cost advantages from using the same systems as GB and administering the same benefits.

Not implementing welfare reform would directly impact the money available to the Northern Ireland Executive for spending on key services such as health and education having a significant impact on our economy in difficult financial times.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Genetically Modified Food

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what consideration she has given to the research by Gilles-Eric Seralini which has raised concern about the safety of GM food; and (ii) whether she has any plans to introduce legislation to ensure that food production remains GM free.

(AQW 14993/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):

- (i) The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is the UK Government Department that has responsibility for the safety of genetically modified (GM) food and feed and has advised me regarding the publication by Seralini et al (2012) in relation to the safety of the GM maize variety NK603.

Any new evidence on the safety of approved GM materials needs to be carefully evaluated in order to identify any implications for consumers of the end products and Professor Seralini's recent publication on the safety of GM maize NK603 and the herbicide glyphosate has attracted significant attention.

Particular emphasis has been placed on the higher number of tumours that occurred in animals that ate the GM maize, compared with controls that ate a different, non-GM maize variety. However, the number of rats in each group is too small to determine whether there are genuine differences between groups. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the body responsible for carrying out the safety assessment for GMOs, is reviewing the Seralini et al. (2012) paper. In its initial statement EFSA advised that the study as reported cannot be used in the safety assessment of GM maize NK603 and therefore, EFSA does not see a need to reopen the existing safety evaluation of GM maize NK603. The FSA agrees with this conclusion.

EFSA is contacting the authors of the paper to obtain further information about their work and to review the results that were not included in the published paper.

The GM maize variety NK603 was approved in the EU for food and feed use in 2004, following a rigorous safety assessment. As with all GMOs, food products that contain GM material derived from GM maize NK603 must be labelled as such, to allow consumers to decide whether they consume such products.

- (ii) The GM Food and Feed Regulation allows for the authorisation and marketing of GM food and feed in the European Union (EU), including the UK. Once authorised GM foods can be freely marketed, providing that such products are labelled as containing or consisting of GM material. The fact that the UK food supply remains relatively GM free is mainly due to the policies of food retailers.

The role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is strictly limited to the enforcement of European law governing the importing of animal feeding stuffs and seed certification. DARD implements EU regulations which require labelling of all feed products derived from genetically modified material. Approval of GM seed is at European Union level and decisions are not made locally.

The Department of the Environment has responsibility for policy and legislation relating to the deliberate release of GM material into the environment, including the growing of GM crops. There are no GM crops grown in Northern Ireland, and the Department has no plans to legislate further on GM matters.

Psoriasis: Biologic Drugs

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to his Department's commissioning plan, why patients diagnosed with psoriasis must wait 39 weeks for biologics treatment while other National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence approved specialist therapies have a waiting time of three months.

(AQW 15021/11-15)

Mr Poots: The allocation of funding for biologic drugs is a matter for the Health and Social Care Board, as service commissioner, taking into account local circumstances, the strategic objectives established for the HSC and demands and pressures generally for access to a wide range of specialist drugs.

The Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency Commissioning Plan for 2012/13 indicates that the areas for investment this year will be:

- Biologics service for rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis to achieve a maximum waiting time of 3 months, in line with my Department's 2012 Commissioning Plan Direction target to reduce the waiting time from 9 months to 3 months by September 2012;
- Biologics service for inflammatory bowel disease; and
- Biologics service for the treatment of psoriasis to maintain a maximum waiting time of 39 weeks.

The current total budget for biologics for psoriasis is £3.6m. At the end of August 2012, 295 people were receiving biologic treatment for severe plaque psoriasis with 110 people waiting to commence treatment.

Psoriasis: Treatment

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking, in the short-term, to fund psoriasis treatments.

(AQW 15022/11-15)

Mr Poots: Most people with psoriasis can be treated by their GP. A patient's GP may refer them to a dermatologist if their symptoms are particularly severe or do not respond well to previous treatments. There are a wide variety of treatments available for psoriasis including topical therapies, phototherapy and systemic non-biological therapies. It is assumed however that this question relates to systemic biological therapies such as anti-TNF drugs.

The Health and Social Care Board has allocated additional funding to Trusts in 2012/13 to ensure that a maximum waiting time of 39 weeks for biologics treatment for psoriasis is achieved and maintained. The total budget for biologics for psoriasis including the 2012/13 allocation is £3.6m.

Dental Contracts

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the rationale behind the different Health Service dental prices incurred by patients in Northern Ireland compared to residents in England.

(AQW 15051/11-15)

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland operates under a very different health service dental contract to England and therefore operates a different patient charging policy. A new dental contract was introduced in England and Wales in 2006. Under this new contract, English and Welsh patients are charged a fee dependant on which one of three broad treatment bands they fall into. Patients in Northern Ireland (and Scotland) pay a fee based on each individual treatment item they have carried out, as set out in the Statement of Dental Remuneration, which is published annually. England and Wales operated the same patient charging system as Northern Ireland and Scotland prior to the introduction of the new dental contract in 2006.

My Department has been working with the British Dental Association and Health and Social Care Board to develop a new dental contract for Northern Ireland. This will include a new system for patient charges.

Fire and Rescue Service: Money Surrendered

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been surrendered from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service budgets in each of the last five financial years.

(AQW 15061/11-15)

Mr Poots: The amount of money surrendered from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's DEL Other Resource Budgets in each of the last 3 financial years is shown in the table below. Comparable information for 2007/08 and 2008/09 can only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Financial Year	Easements declared by NIFRS (1) £m	Retracted by DHSSPS £m	Total Amount Surrendered £m
2011/12	3.4	3.0 (2)	6.4
2010/11	3.2	-	3.2
2009/10	-	1.0 (3)	1.0

Notes:

- 1 Declared by NIFRS as part of routine budgetary management process.
- 2 Retracted in August 2011 in light of NIFRS projected expenditure profile.
- 3 Retracted as part of a wider review across all ALBs to assist in meeting Swine Flu financial pressures.

Bone Health: Treatment

Ms Brown asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of bone protection treatments and their effectiveness as a preventative measure against fractures.

(AQW 15065/11-15)

Mr Poots: Osteoporosis is a chronic condition which is caused when more bone cells are lost than are replaced, causing bones to become thin and weak. If not prevented or treated, the disease can cause bone fracture

"The Prevention and Management of Fragility Fractures in Northern Ireland" report was written in 2009 by a group including representatives from the Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts and the DHSSPS. It included a summary of the evidence base for improving bone health and management of fragility fractures. Good progress has been made by the Board and the Public Health Agency in taking forward the recommendations of the report.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has produced Technology Appraisals 160 and 161 on the effective prescribing of osteoporosis drugs for primary and secondary prevention of bone fractures and my Department has endorsed these.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Short-stay Unit

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 14438/11-15, and given the recent problems in our Accident and Emergency departments and the success of the short stay unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital, to explain the rationale for moving short stay from the Accident and Emergency department into the main hospital, including the clinical evidence that was used to make this decision; and whether this is happening in other Accident and Emergency departments.

(AQW 15073/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am advised by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust that although the future location of the short stay unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital is not in the footprint of the Critical Care Building it is adjacent to the emergency department. The rationale for its proximity to the Emergency Department is that patients in the short stay unit do not require to be in an Emergency Department facility, however as it is the Emergency Department consultants who are in charge of their care, it is appropriate that the unit is located close to the Emergency Department.

Short stay units in or attached to emergency departments may provide observation, assessment and diagnosis and/or short term management. Not all hospitals have such units; where they do, these can be in or attached to emergency departments. Decisions on whether to have a short stay ward and its geographical location within a hospital are a matter for individual Health and Social Care Trusts.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Parent and Family consultation on the UK Safe and Sustainable Review of Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services facilitated multiple consultations with different groups over a 2 year period in England and Wales, but allowed only one session of 1 hour for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15092/11-15)

Mr Poots: Following concerns expressed regarding the long term sustainability of the Paediatric Cardiac Surgical Service (PCCS) in Belfast I announced on 29 March 2012 that the HSC Board would carry out a review of PCCS in NI. In doing so, the Board commissioned an Expert Panel from England to carry out an independent review of the service in Belfast using standards that were used to assess centres elsewhere in the UK.

As part of the review the Expert Panel met directly and separately with two patient groups. In addition, patient representatives and families of children with congenital cardiac problems have been part of the working group established by the HSC Board and PHA to develop proposals for the future provision of this service for Northern Ireland. A consultation document was issued on 25th September and throughout the consultation process the HSCB and PHA will carry out a full and open consultation with patients, families and their representatives.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the findings of the UK Safe and Sustainable Report on Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services were based upon an agenda and criteria specifically created to address services in England and Wales, as opposed to using new criteria specifically suited to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15093/11-15)

Mr Poots: Standards used by the Safe and Sustainable Review were developed by a multi professional group of experts which received views and contributions from an extensive range of professional and lay organisations and included parents and patients. It is important that our children receive the same standard of care as that provided to children elsewhere in the UK – indeed it would not be acceptable for our children to receive a lesser service.

I announced on 25 September 2012 the commencement of a 12 week period of consultation on a draft service specification and standards for the future commissioning of this service in Northern Ireland, as well as a number of options for the delivery of this service in the future. The consultation will run until 21st December 2012, following which I will take a decision on the future provision of this service for Northern Ireland.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the consultation document that sets out the criteria for the Safe and Sustainable Review of Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services in England and Wales states that air travel has not been considered as a viable option in England and Wales, as it cannot always be relied upon, yet this is the only option available for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15095/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is my intention to ensure that the very best quality care is made available to the Northern Ireland population, taking account of the potential transport issues. In that context the consultation document that I announced on 25 September 2012 sets out a range of options on the future service model of paediatric cardiac surgery. Consultation on this will continue

until 21 December 2012 and I invite you to contribute to that process and to help shape the future of cardiac care for children in Northern Ireland.

I have also asked the Health and Social Care Board to carry out a robust analysis of the current transport arrangements for children, including those with congenital heart disease, to determine the best way to deliver these services. I will wish to see the outcome of this analysis before I take a final decision on the future model for Paediatric Cardiac Surgery and Interventional Cardiology in Northern Ireland.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which regulatory body is responsible for (i) the Health Service treatment; and (ii) private treatment provided at the Regional Fertility Centre at the Royal Group of Hospitals. (AQW 15167/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), is a statutory body, created in 1991 under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990). Its primary remit is to license and monitor UK clinics (both public and private) that offer infertility services, and all UK-based research into human embryos. It also regulates the storage of eggs, sperm and embryos.

The treatment of private patients is outside the remit of my Department, specific queries relating to private practice should be referred directly to the provider of the treatment, in this case, the Regional Fertility Centre.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many private patients have been treated at the Regional Fertility Centre in each of the last three years; and how much money the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has generated as a result. (AQW 15169/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), is a statutory body, created in 1991 under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990). Its primary remit is to license and monitor UK clinics (both public and private) that offer infertility services, and all UK-based research into human embryos. It also regulates the storage of eggs, sperm and embryos.

The treatment of private patients is outside the remit of my Department, specific queries relating to private practice should be referred directly to the provider of the treatment, in this case, the Regional Fertility Centre.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Service patients have availed of private treatment at the Regional Fertility Centre in each of the last three years. (AQW 15170/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), is a statutory body, created in 1991 under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990). Its primary remit is to license and monitor UK clinics (both public and private) that offer infertility services, and all UK-based research into human embryos. It also regulates the storage of eggs, sperm and embryos.

The treatment of private patients is outside the remit of my Department, specific queries relating to private practice should be referred directly to the provider of the treatment, in this case, the Regional Fertility Centre.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many private treatment fertility procedures have been carried out at the Regional Fertility Centre in each of the last three years. (AQW 15171/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), is a statutory body, created in 1991 under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990). Its primary remit is to license and monitor UK clinics (both public and private) that offer infertility services, and all UK-based research into human embryos. It also regulates the storage of eggs, sperm and embryos.

The treatment of private patients is outside the remit of my Department, specific queries relating to private practice should be referred directly to the provider of the treatment, in this case, the Regional Fertility Centre.

Cancer: Individual Funding Requests

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how long requests for cancer drugs in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust take under Individual Funding Requests; and what proportion of these requests were granted in the last twelve months. (AQW 15197/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) has advised that its Internal Scrutiny Committee (ISC) for Oncology and Haematology meets every week to review Individual Funding Requests (IFR) and forwards those it supports

to the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) IFR Panel for consideration. The HSCB has advised that all individual funding requests, including those for cancer treatments, are responded to within one week of the Panel's weekly meeting.

The IFR Panel approved 93% of IFRs received in relation to cancer treatments within the last 12 months.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in respect of the staff working at the Regional Fertility Centre how many (i) consultants; (ii) doctors; (iii) embryologists; and (iv) nurses perform private procedures or services in the Centre.

(AQW 15231/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), is a statutory body, created in 1991 under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990). Its primary remit is to license and monitor UK clinics (both public and private) that offer infertility services, and all UK-based research into human embryos. It also regulates the storage of eggs, sperm and embryos.

The treatment of private patients is outside the remit of my Department, specific queries relating to private practice should be referred directly to the provider of the treatment, in this case, the Regional Fertility Centre.

Asylum Seekers: Unaccompanied Children

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many asylum seekers, who claim to be unaccompanied minors, have been referred to Social Services, in the last three years; (ii) how many of these minors subsequently disappeared; and (iii) and what assurances he can give that this will no longer happen and be exploited by people involved in human trafficking.

(AQW 15255/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information is not available for the time period requested, however information is available for specific periods as detailed in the table below:

Period	Number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers / Unaccompanied Minors	Number Disappeared
1 January 2009 – 31 December 2009	2 classified specifically as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	0
1 January 2010 – 31 December 2010	2 classified specifically as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	0
1 January 2011 – 31 May 2011	3 classified specifically as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	1
1 June 2011 – 30 June 2012	5 classified specifically as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	3

My Department has sought assurances from the Health and Social Care Board that the risk of any child, including an asylum-seeking child, going missing from care is being effectively managed.

In February 2011 my Department and the PSNI issued guidance in relation to working with children who are or suspected of having been victims of Human Trafficking. The guidance establishes procedures for dealing with trafficked children and takes account of the requirements of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

Fluoridation

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any health and dental studies that were carried out before, during and after the fluoridation of water.

(AQW 15313/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not undertaken any public health or dental studies before, during or after the fluoridation of water in Northern Ireland.

Health Service: Catering Costs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of food per hospital per day in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 15326/11-15)

Mr Poots: The data is not currently available centrally nor in the form requested. However, the action plan accompanying the recently issued "Strategic Framework for the Delivery of Health & Social Care Catering Services" includes a plan to collect more accurate, more detailed management information on catering costs.

Outpatients: Cancelled Appointments

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many consultant clinics or procedures within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have been cancelled in the last twelve months, broken down by clinic or procedure; (ii) how many patients were affected; and (iii) for what reason was the clinic or procedure cancelled.

(AQW 15342/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on cancellations is collected on an appointment, not clinic or procedure, basis. The number of outpatient appointments cancelled by the Belfast HSC Trust during 2011/12 was 81,611 (Source: QOAR).

- (i) & (iii) As such, information on the number of consultant led outpatient appointments cancelled during 11/12, as well as the reasons, is shown in the table below.

Reason for cancellation	Number of consultant led outpatient appointments cancelled by Belfast HSC Trust (01/04/2011 – 31/03/2012)
Consultant not available	17,686
Medical staff not available	1,040
Patient treated elsewhere	537
Consultant cancelled appointment	1,575
Appointment brought forward	1,618
Appointment put back	15,188
Cancelled following validation/audit	444
Administrative error by hospital/GP	572
Hospital transport not available	81
Cancelled by hospital in order to rebook as alternative booking method	4,153
No reason or incorrect reason recorded	38,717
Total	81,611

Details of cancellations by specialty, if required, are available online in the

Northern Ireland Hospital Statistics: Outpatient Activity Statistics 2011/12, available at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2011_12.pdf

- (ii) This information is not available; information is collected on an appointment and not patient basis.

Ambulance Service: Recruitment Drive

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Ambulance Service is due to begin a new recruitment drive; and how many positions will be available.

(AQW 15358/11-15)

Mr Poots: Recruitment is a matter for individual health trusts. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has advised me that it is presently in the process of recruiting for the following:

Qualified Paramedics

The closing date for receipt of applications was Friday 5 October 2012. The Trust plans to recruit for 8 permanent vacancies, 25 temporary vacancies and its 0 Hours Contract (i.e. Bank Staff). Shortlisting is presently ongoing.

RRV Paramedics

These vacancies will be advertised internally on Monday 15 October 2012, with a closing date for receipt of applications as Monday 29 October 2012. The Trust plans to recruit for up to 28 permanent vacancies.

Businesses Service Transformation Programme Band 6 and Band 4

There are 2 temporary vacancies (1 for each Band), which will be advertised internally in the first instance. The Trust plans to advertise these vacancies by the end of October 2012.

Department of Justice

High Court: Judgements Outstanding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to list all outstanding High Court judgements, indicating in each case the date the court hearing concluded and the identity of the presiding judge.

(AQW 14288/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The table below lists the outstanding reserved High Court judgments as of 19 September 2012.

Judgment	Judge	Hearing Date	Date For Delivery
Hanna v Sarcon	Mr Justice Deeny	11.5.12	15.10.12
McGarrity v Sarcon			
Lincoln Centre v NIHE		28.6.12	8.10.12
NIHE v Lincoln Centre			
Brendan Kelly & Anr	Mr Justice Gillen	10.9.12	To be fixed
Lawrence McCrudden		10.9.12	To be fixed

Judgment	Judge	Hearing Date	Date For Delivery
JR 59 v Chief Constable	Mr Justice Treacy	16.12.11	4.10.12
JR 55 v NI Commissioner for Complaints		10.1.12	To be fixed
Artur Bransent v UK Border Agency		30.1.12	28.9.12
Gerard Pollock v PSNI		9.2.12	28.9.12
JR 64 v Western HSST		16.2.12	4.10.12
James Martin v Police Ombudsman		21.2.12	26.10.12
John Duggan v DHSSPS		24.2.12	26.10.12
In re Joseph Fitzpatrick		18.4.12	9.11.12
In re Terence Sheils			
In re Tullynaskeagh Farms Ltd		24.4.12	16.11.12
Donnelly v Roe Angling Association		9.5.12	To be fixed
JMCA v BHSCT		30.5.12	28.9.12
British Medical Association NI v DHSS		8.6.12	9.11.12
Patricia O'Hara v Belfast International Airport		12.6.12	9.11.12
Denise Brewster v NI Local Government Superannuation Committee		21.6.12	9.11.12
Elizeu Melo Da Silva & Ors v Immigration and Asylum Chamber (Upper Tribunal)		22.6.12	9.11.12

Amnesty International: Brendan Lillis

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the dates of any representations that Amnesty International has made to his Department in relation to Brendan Lillis.

(AQW 14835/11-15)

Mr Ford: Northern Ireland Prison Service has no record of any representations from Amnesty International on behalf of Mr Brendan Lillis.

Prison Service: Staff Training

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) on what date the Northern Ireland Prison Service first delivered training for (a) Supporting Prisoners At Risk; (b) Applied Suicide Intervention Skills; and (c) Mental Health First Aid; and (ii) whether all healthcare and discipline staff are fully trained.

(AQW 14838/11-15)

Mr Ford: Supporting Prisoners at Risk training first commenced in May 2009. Applied Suicide Intervention Skills training commenced in June 2007 and the delivery of Mental Health First Aid began in May 2009.

To date training has been delivered to 600 NIPS operational staff concentrating on staff who work and engage directly with prisoners.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has advised that all South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust staff are fully trained to mandatory level and specialist training is provided as and when required. Mental Health First Aid training is not a mandatory requirement and Prison Healthcare staff have not been trained in this. However, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has ensured that all prison healthcare staff have received the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training.

Speeding: A1/A2

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of convictions for speeding which had been caught by speed cameras on the (i) A1; and (ii) A2 in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14855/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no information in the convictions datasets on the location of the offence and therefore I cannot identify convictions for speeding occurring specifically on the A1 or the A2.

Further information in relation to the operation of the cameras and levels of detections (as opposed to convictions) may be obtained by contacting PSNI directly.

Prisoners: Samaritans Listener Training Course

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail how many prisoners (i) have been trained by the Samaritans in the peer support Listeners Scheme; and (ii) have utilised these skills, broken down by each facility.

(AQW 14910/11-15)

Mr Ford: 38 of the 42 prisoners in Maghaberry who completed the Samaritans' Listener training course joined the Listeners Scheme. Approximately 60 prisoners in Magilligan have completed the Samaritans' Listener training course and all those who completed the course went on to work as a Listener. In Hydebank Wood, two male inmates and seven female inmates completed the Samaritans' Listener training course and all inmates trained joined the Listener Scheme.

Crime: Agricultural and Rural Figures

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made with the PSNI in separating agricultural crime figures from rural crime figures.

(AQW 14940/11-15)

Mr Ford: Crime figures are a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Prison Service: Governors

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13948/11-15, how many governors are currently (i) under investigation; and (ii) suspended whilst under or pending investigation, broken down by grade.

(AQW 14942/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are no staff at Governor grade currently under investigation, or suspended from duty.

Legal Aid: Parades Commission Ruling

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost, or estimated cost, of the Legal Aid provided to the Carrick Hill resident for the High Court challenge to the Parades Commission ruling held on Friday 28 September 2012, broken down by (i) solicitors/law firm; and (ii) counsel.

(AQW 14945/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 I am precluded from discussing the details of individual applications for civil legal aid. However, all applications for civil legal aid are subject to the statutory means and merits tests and are considered on the basis of the facts submitted in support of the individual application.

Courts and Tribunals Service: Smoking Policy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the dates of any audits or inspections that have been carried out by the Courts Estate to ensure that there is no smoking at facilities, with the exception of designated areas; and (ii) whether he can offer an assurance that a zero tolerance policy is being enforced.

(AQW 14948/11-15)

Mr Ford: From 1 January 2005 there has been a ban on smoking in all Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) premises including courthouses.

No specific audits or inspections have been carried out by the NICTS. However, any instances of non-compliance are dealt with at each building by security staff, who, when necessary, advise Court users of the NICTS smoking policy. Security staff raise any concerns about non-compliance with local management.

Prisons: Supporting Prisoners at Risk

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) why the Prisoner at Risk process was replaced by Supporting Prisoners at Risk; and (ii) on what date the Northern Ireland Prison Service (a) made this decision; and (b) implemented the change. (AQW 14954/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prisoner at Risk process was replaced by the Supporting Prisoners at Risk process in response to issues highlighted in a number of scrutiny reports and as a result of lessons learned through the introduction of new procedures in England & Wales. The decision to replace the Prisoner at Risk process was part of the Safer Custody Strategy Project, which was approved on 13 November 2008.

A pilot of the Supporting Prisoners at Risk process was implemented in Ash House of Hydebank Wood Prison on 11 June 2009 and extended to the Young Offenders' Centre on 17 August 2009. Full implementation was rolled out in Maghaberry and Magilligan on 1 December 2009.

Assisted Suicide: Legislation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to seek clarity on, or make changes to the legislation surrounding assisted suicide. (AQW 14995/11-15)

Mr Ford: In February 2010 the Public Prosecution Service published its guidance document "Policy on Prosecuting the Offence of Assisted Suicide". The guidance included factors to be considered in the evidential test in the decision to prosecute or otherwise. The document is available at: <http://www.ppsni.gov.uk/Prosecution-Policy-and-Guidance---5084.html>

In terms of legislative change more generally, as Minister of Justice I have responsibilities around the creation and implementation of the criminal law. However, policy issues and legislation around assisted suicide cross Departmental interests and any potential change in the law would be a matter for the Executive and indeed the Assembly as a whole to consider. Any change would also require widespread public consultation. At this stage there are no proposals for legislative change.

DOJ: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether any staff within his Department have criminal charges outstanding; and what is his Department's position regarding their employment whilst court proceedings are pending. (AQW 15002/11-15)

Mr Ford: Employment whilst court proceedings are pending is governed by the NICS Staff Handbook which states "the person exercising formal disciplinary powers may, if the circumstances warrant it, pursue formal disciplinary action without waiting on the outcome of any police investigation and disposal of any resulting criminal proceedings". Careful consideration is given to appropriate action on a case by case basis.

As there are less than five members of staff within the Department of Justice who have criminal charges outstanding the actual number has been withheld. This is to protect the identity of the individuals concerned as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Legal Aid: Parades Commission Ruling

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice on what grounds was Legal Aid refused to a north Belfast resident who wished to challenge a Parades Commission ruling on a Twelfth of July parade in Ardoyne. (AQW 15003/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 I am precluded from discussing the details of individual applications for civil legal aid. However, all applications for civil legal aid are subject to the statutory means and merits tests and are considered on the basis of the facts submitted in support of the individual application.

Legal Aid: Case 12/090450

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much has been paid in Legal Aid in the case of 12/090450; and what is the estimated final cost once the trial has concluded. (AQW 15004/11-15)

Mr Ford: To date no bills have been submitted in this case.

It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of the final cost at this early stage of the proceedings.

Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Justice for how long his Department will trial the body scanning equipment at Magilligan and Hydebank Prisons before determining its suitability for introduction in Maghaberry Prison.

(AQW 15005/11-15)

Mr Ford: Two Millimetre Wave Scanners have been leased to facilitate a three month evaluation to take place. The first scanner has been installed in Magilligan Prison and has been operational from 26 September. The second scanner will be operational in Hydebank Wood Young Offender Centre later this month.

Both systems will be evaluated against the Northern Ireland Prison Service's existing search procedures over a three month period.

NIPS has also commenced the process to seek approval for the use of Transmission X-ray Scanners in prisons in Northern Ireland under the Justification of Practices Involving Ionising Radiation Regulations 2004. NIPS is aiming to have its application completed by the end of October.

Until such times as the evaluation of this technology has been completed it is not possible to provide an assessment of its suitability for use in the prison environment or a timescale for its introduction to Maghaberry prison.

Animal Welfare: Convictions

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice why the figures for the number of convictions for animal cruelty are only available until 2009.

(AQW 15054/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Statistics and Research Branch encountered technical difficulties in translating files from legacy systems and producing sentencing data beyond 2006. An alternative source for convictions data was identified for consequent years.

Data on convictions for 2007 and 2008 have been available for answering Assembly Questions since October 2011 and 2009 data since September 2012.

Work is currently progressing to provide data from 2010 onwards. The immediate priority is to clear the backlog but, once this is done, our aim is that conviction and prosecution data will be processed, fully validated and be made available within six months after the year end.

Prison Service: Voluntary Early Retirement

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme for NI Prison Service staff who were in receipt of Letter 3.

(AQW 15058/11-15)

Mr Ford: A total of 544 members of staff applied for the Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme. Of these, 159 staff have been released to date and a further 139 in receipt of "Letter two" have been told that they will be allowed to leave when it is operationally possible for them to do so. Staff in receipt of "Letter three" have been advised that their application remains under consideration.

Prisons: Suicides and Attempted Suicides

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice suicides and suicides within prisons has reduced since the introduction of the Supporting Prisoners at Risk process.

(AQW 15082/11-15)

Mr Ford: The number of attempted suicides recorded in each prison establishment has increased since the introduction of the Supporting Prisoners at Risk (SPAR) process. In 2009 there were 15 recorded incidents of attempted suicide across all three establishments. Following the introduction of the SPAR process, and improved record keeping, there were 69 recorded incidents of attempted suicide in 2010, 77 incidents recorded in 2011 and to date, 75 recorded incidents of attempted suicides in 2012. However, this increase may be indicative of the improved recording and reporting systems introduced following the introduction of the new SPAR process, and does not necessarily reflect an increase in the actual number of attempted suicides.

The last death in Northern Ireland Prisons which was confirmed as suicide occurred in 2007. Since 2007 there has been a number of suspected self-inflicted deaths in custody which have yet to be determined by a Coroner's verdict.

Appeal Tribunals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 14273/11-15, whether this matter was raised by respondents to the public consultation on Access to Justice; and whether the provision for legal aid for benefits appeals falls into the category of human rights legislation.

(AQW 15083/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Access to Justice Review report, published in September 2011, recommended that publicly funded representation should not be made available in all social security appeal cases but that contracts or grants for advice and assistance in

welfare matters should include provision for enhanced advice and advocacy services in such cases. The public consultation drew one response in this field. The respondent strongly opposed making legal aid available only for advice and assistance in preparation for cases and not for representation at the tribunals.

Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides a right to a fair trial. This would include a right to a fair trial in a Benefit Appeals Tribunal. If, in a highly exceptional case, an appellant in a benefits appeal believed that his Article 6 rights would be breached if he did not have legal aid for his appeal, he could apply to the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission for exceptional grant funding and, if requested by the Commission to do so, I could authorise such funding if I was satisfied that it was necessary to comply with the appellant's ECHR Article 6 rights.

Prison Service: Outline Estate Strategy

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Justice, since the publication of the Northern Ireland Prison Service's Outline Estate Strategy, how many prisoners have been moved from HMP Magilligan to another detainment facility in Northern Ireland. (AQW 15088/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since the publication of the Outline Estate Strategy nine prisoners have been transferred from Magilligan Prison to Maghaberry Prison for operational reasons. However none of these transfers have been as a direct consequence of the Estate Strategy.

The strategy is still subject to public consultation and I have made clear that no decision will be taken on any element of the strategy until the responses to the consultation have been properly considered and evaluated.

Prison Service: Outline Estate Strategy

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Justice, since the publication of the Northern Ireland Prison Service's Outline Estate Strategy, how many staff working at HMP Magilligan have been informed that their place of work will change. (AQW 15089/11-15)

Mr Ford: I can confirm that no member of staff has been informed that their place of work will change since the publication of the Outline Estate Strategy.

The strategy is currently subject to public consultation and, in light of the significant public interest in the strategy, the Northern Ireland Prison Service is continuing to host a series of consultation workshops, public meetings and staff meetings during October.

The consultation process has raised a number of important issues which must be carefully thought through. The final strategy must be informed by what is best for Northern Ireland in terms of reducing offending and public protection. That is why no decision will be taken on any element of the strategy - including the future of Magilligan - until after the consultation has ended and all views have been considered.

Magilligan Prison: Full-body Imaging Scanners

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice what criteria were used in establishing Magilligan Prison as the base for the use of body scanners for a trial period. (AQW 15104/11-15)

Mr Ford: Two Millimetre Wave Scanners have been leased to facilitate a three month evaluation to determine their suitability within the prison environment. As this technology has not previously been tested within prisons, it is not appropriate to run a pilot on category 'A' high risk prisoners.

It was therefore decided to test the technology in the two lower security prisons before taking a decision with regard to the effectiveness of the equipment. The first of the two pilots has commenced at Magilligan and the second is due to commence at Hydebank Wood this month.

Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice when he expects the evaluation of the body scanner pilot in Magilligan and Hydebank Wood Prisons to be completed. (AQW 15140/11-15)

Mr Ford: The first of the two pilots has commenced at Magilligan and the second is due to commence at Hydebank Wood this month. It is expected that both pilots will run for a period of three months and that the evaluation process will be completed in the New Year.

Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice what milestones his Department has set to determine which of the body scanner pilots will be permanently used within the prisons estate. (AQW 15143/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have previously announced the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) is committed to the evaluation of two types of full body imaging scanners - Millimetre Wave and Transmission X-Ray scanners.

Millimetre Wave Scanner

Two separate Millimetre Wave Scanner pilots, each lasting three months, will be undertaken. The first, in Magilligan Prison, commenced in September and the second, at Hydebank Wood, is scheduled to commence this month.

Transmission X-ray Scanner

There is currently no lawful authority to use Transmission X-ray equipment in UK prisons. In order to get that authority, a justification application must be made in accordance with the Justification of Practices using Ionising Radiation Regulations 2004.

The preparation of the NIPS aspect of the Justification Application is at an advanced stage and is due to be completed before the end of the month. However, statute requires that before a pilot can commence, the Northern Ireland Prison Service must not only receive formal approval for the use of such technology but, in advance of this approval, must also consult with specified agencies and bodies in Northern Ireland and within the rest of the United Kingdom in order to identify the likely benefits and/or detriments involved in the use of transmission x-ray technology for non-medical reasons.

The evaluation process

Full body imaging technology is currently untested in a prison environment. Each of the pilot schemes will need to be evaluated before any decision can be taken on the type of search technology which may be introduced. Full body searching will continue until the evaluation of the pilot schemes is complete.

The evaluation process will test whether advances in technology can lessen the need for full body searches in favour of effective and less intrusive methods, consistent with the Prison Review Team recommendation 8.

The evaluation process will also consider the operational application of the equipment within a prison environment, including how it performs alongside existing detection methods; the ability to detect drugs, weapons and other items that could be used to effect an escape or have the potential to be injurious to others; and sustainability in terms of running costs, ease of use and reliability.

Although it is very early in the process, NIPS officials expect that evaluation of the Millimetre Wave Scanners should be completed early in 2013.

Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice, following the completion of the body scanner pilots within prisons and when his Department has selected the technology to replace strip-searching, whether the technology will be rolled out throughout the entire prison estate.

(AQW 15146/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) is committed to evaluating two types of full body imaging scanners - Millimetre Wave and Transmission X-Ray scanners.

Two separate Millimetre Wave pilots will be conducted. The first, in Magilligan Prison, commenced in September and the second, at Hydebank Wood, is scheduled to commence later this month.

The objective of the three-month pilots will be to determine whether the technology can lessen the need for full body searches in favour of effective and less intrusive methods, consistent with the PRT recommendation 8, in order to develop a multi-layered approach to searching and prison security.

It remains my desire to deploy less intrusive search methods where possible, without impacting on safety and security within our prisons. It is too soon to make an assessment as to which, if any, of the technologies available should be introduced to any of the prisons within the prison estate.

DOJ: Budget

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what is his Department's current budget for this financial year.

(AQW 15149/11-15)

Mr Ford: Details of the Department of Justice (DOJ) budget allocation for 2012-13 are published in the Department's 2012-13 Main Estimate.

Included in the Estimate is a total resource budget of £1,498,360k, of which £311,247k is Annually Managed Expenditure (AME), and a net capital budget of £64,537k.

The DOJ's Main Estimate is included within the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13, a copy of which is available via the following link: <http://www.dfpi.gov.uk/main-estimates-2012-13.pdf>

Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice when the outcome of the full body scanner trial period currently under way at Magilligan Prison will be published.

(AQW 15202/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have previously announced the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) is committed to the evaluation of two types of full body imaging scanners - Millimetre Wave and Transmission X-Ray scanners. This is in keeping with Recommendation 8 of the Prison Review Team's Report.

The piloting of Millimetre Wave technology has already commenced and is due to last for three months. The Magilligan pilot started on 26 September and a similar pilot using a scanner from a different supplier is due to commence on 20 October 2012 in Hydebank Wood.

The objective of the evaluation process will be to test whether advances in technology can lessen the need for full body searches in favour of effective and less intrusive methods, consistent with the Prison Review Team Recommendation 8.

The evaluation will also consider the operational application of this type of equipment within a prison environment including how it performs alongside existing detection methods; its ability to detect drugs, weapons and other items that could be used to affect an escape or have the potential to be injurious to others; and sustainability in terms of running costs, ease of use and reliability.

Although it is very early in the evaluation process NIPS officials expect that it will be completed in early 2013, at which time I will consider which of its findings it would be appropriate to publish, taking account of security considerations.

Magilligan Prison: Replacement

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice for an estimate of the acreage that would be required for a replacement of Magilligan Prison, as contained in the review of the Prison Service estate.

(AQW 15288/11-15)

Mr Ford: The consultation process for the Northern Ireland Prison Service's Outline Estate Strategy has not yet concluded and no final decision will be taken on the future of Magilligan Prison until after the process has ended and all views have been considered.

It is not possible at this stage to provide an estimate of the acreage that may be required should a decision be taken to replace Magilligan.

Criminal Justice: Anonymity Orders

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the historic and international commitment of the judicial process to open justice and the importance of this to public confidence, to outline the reasons for the increase in anonymity orders in criminal cases, prohibiting the naming of defendants, from one in 2010 to fourteen to date this year.

(AQW 15304/11-15)

Mr Ford: The decision to impose reporting restrictions is a judicial matter based on the statutory provisions and facts of individual cases. It is not something upon which I can comment.

Access NI: Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Justice what steps have been taken to ensure that there is no unnecessary duplication or delays in applications for clearance from Access NI in cases where the individual has recently received clearance.

(AQW 15323/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under current legislation all applications received by AccessNI must be treated separately without reference to any previous application. Section 113B of Part V of the Police Act 1997 requires relevant police forces to provide information which, in the chief officer's opinion, might be relevant to the position applied for and which ought to be disclosed. This means that relevant police forces must treat each application separately and consider the position applied for. In addition, Disclosure Certificates are a 'snap shot' of a person's criminal history at the time they are

processed and police forces may have new information to consider on receipt of a subsequent application. It is for organisations requiring a Certificate, however, to decide if they will accept a dated Certificate or will seek a new one on each occasion. That is not a matter for AccessNI. The organisations, of course, have to consider the risk to safeguarding.

That situation will change. In spring 2011 I commissioned Sunita Mason to conduct a review of the Criminal Records Regime in Northern Ireland. In Part 1 of her report Mrs Mason recommended the implementation of portable checks. I accepted the recommendation and officials are working to find a way of delivering such a solution, subject to technical viability and a costed and approved Business Case. Delivering a portable Disclosure solution requires significant adjustments to AccessNI's already complex IT infrastructure. It also requires primary legislation. Given those challenges we are unlikely to have the new service before spring 2014. AccessNI customers are being kept informed of developments.

With regard to turnaround times, AccessNI publishes its targets, and performance against those targets, on its website. The organisation is alive to the desire of employers to receive their disclosure checks as quickly as possible. The target time for Enhanced checks is 90% in 28 days. In the first 7 months of 2012 AccessNI processed almost 61,000 Enhanced disclosure applications, of which 93% were completed within the 28 day target; with an average turnaround time of 20 days.

DOJ: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15335/11-15)

Mr Ford: All Department of Justice contracts over £10,000 are awarded through our Centre of Procurement Excellence (COPE), Central Procurement Directorate, DFP.

Due to their nature supplies and services contracts generally only include “work placements” and therefore the question of apprentices does not arise.

For construction contracts the agreed social clause requirement is that 5% of the contractor's workforce and that of first tier subcontractors, with 20 or more employees, must be employed on formally recognised paid apprenticeships.

Construction contract requirements for apprenticeships are thus normally managed as a compliance issue rather than collation by numbers of apprentices recruited.

Stalking: Convictions

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of convictions for offences related to stalking in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15346/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no specific offence of stalking in Northern Ireland law however three related offences may be prosecuted under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (“the Order”). The table below details the number of convictions for harassment; breach of an injunction prohibiting harassment; and causing another to fear violence under the Order for 2007 – 2009 (the latest year for which figures are currently available). Prosecutions for harassment are not limited solely to what may be known as stalking but cover any course of conduct which amounts to knowingly harassing another person.

Number of convictions for harassment offences, 2007 – 2009

	2007	2008	2009
Harassment	53	46	80
Breach of injunction prohibiting harassment	1	0	2
Causing another to fear violence	2	2	1

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how the Marie Stopes Clinic will be monitored by criminal justice agencies to ensure that it complies with abortion laws.

(AQW 15579/11-15)

Mr Ford: The first obligation to comply with the law on abortion in Northern Ireland rests with the Marie Stopes organisation and the individuals concerned. As I understand it the future regulation and monitoring of the operation of the proposed clinic will be a matter for the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority under the authority of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Minister of Health is currently considering how that might be achieved. If there is evidence of a crime having been committed the police and independent prosecuting authorities will investigate and prosecute as appropriate.

Department for Regional Development

Penalty Charge Notices: Disabled Person's Parking Space

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will amend legislation to make wrongful parking in disabled bays a criminal offence.

(AQW 14746/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has advised that parking a vehicle in a designated disabled person's parking space, without clearly displaying a valid Blue Badge, is a decriminalised parking contravention, for which a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) may be issued by a Traffic Attendant.

I should advise that decriminalised parking enforcement is provided by my Department's Roads Service, through its contract with NSL Services Group and the charge for a PCN is £90, with a 50% discount applied if the charge is paid within 14 days.

It is considered that public awareness in this area will continue to develop as enforcement continues to be provided and PCNs are issued, where contraventions are detected. Therefore, my Department has no plans, at present, to revert to making wrongful parking in disabled bays a criminal offence.

For your information, the feasibility of decriminalised parking enforcement was first evaluated in July 2002, by the current First Minister when he was Minister for Regional Development.

Roads: Beechfield and Ashfield Estates, Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to resurface the roads in the Beechfield and Ashfield Estates, Donaghadee.

(AQW 14757/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no current plans to carry out resurfacing in the Beechfield and Ashfield Estates in Donaghadee. These estates have not been resurfaced since they were built sometime in the mid sixties.

I can advise that roads would generally have a design life of approximately 25 years. However, this is not absolute, as the life of the road is affected by various factors including the volume and type of traffic.

Flooding: Killyleagh

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to alleviate the problems caused by recent flooding at Shane's Road, Killyleagh, and to outline the plans in place to ensure that future flooding is avoided.

(AQW 14796/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that due to the topography of the surrounding land along Shane's Road, where, at some locations, the fields adjacent to the road are at a higher level, there is no means of draining the area, other than by using soakaways. Recently, as heavy and persistent rain fell onto already saturated ground, these soakaways were of very limited value. Roads Service officials further advise that they are aware of an incident where they believe an outlet pipe, into a field, was deliberately blocked.

Roads Service has recently cleaned gully tops and opened outlets, and enlisted the use of a specialist contractor to jet the drainage pipes along the road. Officials have also identified a number of locations along the road for drainage works, which are envisaged to be completed during the current financial year. This work will involve the renewing and extension of existing soakaways.

In addition, I have been informed by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the flooding at Shanes Road was not related to its sewerage infrastructure.

Flooding: Home Insurance

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the discussions he has had, or will have, with the insurance industry on behalf of residents in areas at risk of flooding, who are now disadvantaged in obtaining home insurance policies.

(AQW 14810/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As Minister for Regional Development I have no responsibility for private home insurance and have therefore had no discussions with the insurance industry on behalf of residents.

I have been advised by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that a Statement of Principles (SoP), which aims to ensure that flood insurance remains as affordable and widely available as possible, was agreed between the Executive and the Association of British Insurers (ABI), representing the insurance industry, in July 2009. The agreement commits insurers to continue to provide flood insurance on the condition that the Executive effectively manages the risk of flooding. As the current SoP expires in June 2013, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is planning to meet with a representative of the ABI towards the end of this month in order to identify a replacement, thereby ensuring continuation of availability and affordability of flood insurance.

The Minister for Social Development has advised me, in relation to social housing, that the Housing Executive has advised that buildings insurance is not a matter for their tenants. A "Your Rights and Responsibilities" booklet advises that the Housing Executive is responsible for the structure of a tenant's home. However, the Housing Executive strongly recommends that tenants arrange for insurance of the contents of their home so that they will be protected against accidental damage, loss or theft; they advise tenants that they can arrange house contents insurance through any bank, building society or insurance agent. As the uptake of home insurance is low the Housing Executive routinely runs publicity campaigns on the benefits of home insurance. In addition their annual Housing News publication for tenants regularly features an article on the need to have home contents insurance.

Road Safety: Bangor Grammar School

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what safety measures, in relation to the new Bangor Grammar School site, Bangor, his Department intends to put in place.

(AQW 14913/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A comprehensive range of safety measures, such as a new PUFFIN road crossing and Safe Routes to School signage, have been incorporated into the design of the new Bangor Grammar School, therefore, my Department's Roads Service has advised that it currently has no plans to carry out any further works at the site.

Car Parking for Residents: Coleraine

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any residents only parking schemes for the Coleraine area are under consideration.

(AQW 14938/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is currently considering a request from a resident of Adelaide Avenue, Coleraine to introduce a 'residents only parking' at this location. Initial parking surveys have been completed and Roads Service intends to carry out more detailed surveys in the near future, following which further analysis will be carried out. Officials will advise the resident and Member of the outcome and any proposals that are deemed appropriate.

Footpaths: Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new footpath resurfacing schemes are planned for the Ballyholme and Groomsport areas of Bangor in each of the next three years.

(AQW 14975/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformatiotype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Street Lighting: Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for the Ballyholme and Groomsport areas of Bangor in each of the next three years.

(AQW 14976/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Car Parks: Staff Guidelines

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether staff, whose duties include ensuring that vehicles in pay and display car parks display a valid ticket, follow guidelines or are allowed to apply discretion.

(AQW 14981/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Traffic Attendants are expected to issue Penalty Charge Notices to vehicles detected as being parked in contravention of parking restrictions. In performing their duties, Traffic Attendants should apply the appropriate operational procedures that have been developed for the various types of contraventions, and should not exercise their discretion to ensure that drivers are treated equitably and consistently across Northern Ireland.

I would advise the Member that a parking enforcement awareness campaign will commence prior to the commencement of my Department's new parking enforcement and car park management contract with NSL Ltd, which is scheduled for 30 October 2012.

This campaign will include the distribution of information leaflets to drivers to remind them of the importance of parking restrictions and the benefits of effective parking enforcement. The leaflet will include a number of 'Dos and Don'ts' for drivers, advising them of where they should and should not park.

In addition, the Department will also be publishing a parking enforcement protocol to provide the public with detailed information on the various parking contraventions that can be enforced by traffic attendant.

Traffic Lights: Maintenance/Operation

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Regional Development what agency is responsible for the maintenance and operation of traffic lights.

(AQW 14997/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise that my Department's Roads Service is responsible for the maintenance and operation of traffic lights.

Translink: Bomb Scares

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what was the financial cost to Translink over the last two years of postponed or reduced services as a result of bomb scares on the rail network.

(AQW 15024/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that the financial cost of postponed or reduced services as a result of bomb scares on the rail network in the last two years is as set out in the table below. Costs for the current financial year to date are also included for information.

2012/13 (year to date)	£12,658
2011/12	£8,730
2010/11	£37,188

I would also point out that it is not possible to capture the important, and potentially much more substantial, indirect costs of these events arising from loss of passenger confidence in service reliability and subsequent loss of revenue to Translink.

DRD: Budget

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his current departmental budget.

(AQW 15025/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The following table details my Department's budget up to, and including, the 2014-15 financial year. The 2012-13 figures include June Monitoring adjustments.

	2012-13			2013-14			2014-15		
	Resource	Capital	Total	Resource	Capital	Total	Resource	Capital	Total
	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000
Total	503,613	392,585	896,198	460,195	451,879	912,074	453,822	417,759	871,581

Street Lighting: Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for the Abbey area of Bangor over the next three years.

(AQW 15026/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Footpaths: Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new footpath schemes are planned for the Abbey area of Bangor over the next three years.

(AQW 15027/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Unadopted Roads: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the unadopted roads in the North Down constituency that are in receipt of a preliminary certificate of adoption that was issued more than twelve months ago; and why a final certificate has not been issued in each case.

(AQW 15068/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the roads which remain unadopted in the North Down constituency, for which a preliminary certificate of adoption was issued more than 12 months ago, and the reasons why a final certificate has not been issued, are detailed in the table below:

Development Site	Reason Certificate Not Issued
Woodvale Gardens, Bangor	A number of minor road defects are to be addressed by the developer prior to final roads adoption.
Victoria Drive, Bangor	A number of minor road defects are to be addressed by the Roads Service Measured Term Contractor prior to final roads adoption.
Rathgill Parade, Bangor	NI Water final adoption certificate is required before adoption of the street can occur.
Moss Road, Millisle	Awaiting clearance from statutory bodies.

Road and Water Surety Bonds: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development, for each of the last five years, what enforcement action has been taken in relation to road and water surety bonds in the North Down constituency; and what was the outcome of the action taken. (AQW 15069/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service takes the lead in the administration of Departmental bonds, which provide security for road and sewer installations within developments. Northern Ireland Water (NIW) works in close conjunction with Roads Service and provides input into the enforcement procedures. Any necessary Enforcement Notices are issued by Roads Service.

Details of the enforcement action taken, in relation to road and water surety bonds within the North Down constituency in the last five years, are set out in the table below:

Year	Development Site	Enforcement action taken
2012	Clifton Park Manor, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 05/04/12. Issues surrounding the street lighting apparatus and sewers (NIW) have to be resolved prior to adoption.
2012	Seapark, Holywood	Article 11 notice served on 30/03/12. The developer has responded by completing surfacing works to the street, however, a lands issue remains to be resolved in relation to the sewers (NIW) prior to adoption
2012	The Meadow, Brackenridge, Donaghadee	Article 11 notice served adoption imminent.
2012	Carnmoon, Donaghadee	Article 11 notice served 1/5/12. Work has commenced, however, issues surrounding the street lighting apparatus and sewers (NIW) have to be resolved prior to adoption.
2012	Seahill, Donaghadee	Article 11 notice served on 8/8/12. About to appoint contractor to carryout pre-adoption repairs.
2012	East Street, Donaghadee	Article 11 notice served on 3/9/12. The developer has decided to complete the pre-adoption repairs himself.
2012	Manor Farm, Donaghadee	Article 11 notice served 5/10/12. NIW issues still have to be addressed.
2011	Ballyrolly, Millisle	Article 11 notice served 4/1/12. NIW adoption certificate is awaited.
2011	Rockhill, Donaghadee	Article 11 notice served, now adopted.
2010	Gibson's Green, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 02/06/10. Roads Service carried out pre-adoption repairs using its Measured Term Contractor to allow adoption on 17/10/11.
2010	Willowbrook Park, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 02/06/10. Roads Service carried out pre-adoption repairs using its Measured Term Contractor to allow adoption on 17/10/11.
2009	Victoria Drive, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 06/10/09. Pre-adoption repairs to be completed by the Roads Service Measured Term Contractor in November 2012, with adoption to follow.
2009	Balmoral Square, Bangor	Article 11 notices served on 25/08/09 and 24/09/09. Roads Service carried out pre-adoption repairs using its Measured Term Contractor to allow adoption on 05/10/11.
2009	Crawfordsburn Close, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 31/03/09. The developer responded to the Article 11 notice and completed the outstanding works to allow adoption on 17/05/11.

Year	Development Site	Enforcement action taken
2008	The Crescent, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 18/08/08. The developer responded to the Article 11 notice and completed the outstanding works to allow adoption on 30/10/09.
2008	Primacy Road, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 11/06/08. The developer responded to the Article 11 notice and completed the outstanding works to the footway to allow adoption on 15/06/09.
2008	Ashley Drive, Bangor	Article 11 notice served on 19/05/08. The developer responded to the Article 11 notice and completed the outstanding works to allow adoption on 15/06/09.

Adopted Roads: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the roads in the North Down constituency for which a preliminary certificate of adoption has been issued in each of the last twelve months.

(AQW 15070/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that those roads, within the North Down constituency, which have received a preliminary certificate of adoption in each of the last twelve months, are detailed in the table below:

Month	Road Names
October 2011	Main Street Conlig (widened footway); Ballycrochan Avenue, Bangor; Ashfield Manor, Bangor
November 2011	Balloo Link, Balloo Retail Park, Bangor; Uprichard Court, Bangor; Uprichard Gardens, Bangor
December 2011	Shaftesbury Road, Bangor
March 2012	Bridge Road, Helen's Bay
June 2012	Rossdowan Meadows, Bangor
August 2012	Stonebridge Row, Conlig; Ballycrochan Park, Bangor

Unadopted Roads: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the unadopted roads in the North Down constituency for which a preliminary certificate of adoption was issued more than twelve months ago, what steps have been, and will be taken, to resolve any outstanding issues.

(AQW 15071/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in relation to the following unadopted roads in the North Down constituency, for which a preliminary certificate of adoption was issued more than 12 months ago, the steps that have been and will be taken to resolve any outstanding issues, are detailed in the table below:

Development Site	Steps Taken to Resolve Outstanding Issues
Woodvale Gardens, Bangor	A joint site inspection with the developer and Roads Service shall be arranged in the coming weeks to identify a number of minor defects to be addressed prior to final roads adoption. Adoption will follow upon completion of any remedial action required.
Victoria Drive, Bangor	An Article 11 Enforcement Notice has been served on the developer. Pre-adoption repairs are to be completed by the Roads Service Measured Term Contractor in November 2012, with adoption to follow.
Rathgill Parade, Bangor	Roads Service awaits the NI Water final adoption certificate that will permit final adoption of the development roads. Adoption will proceed immediately after.

NI Railways: Passenger Journeys

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers have used NI Railways over the last three years.

(AQW 15074/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink report on the number of passenger journeys recorded as opposed to the number of passengers, and have advised me that the number of passenger journeys made on NI Railways over the last three years are as follows:

2008-2010	10.0 Million
2009-2011	10.4 Million
2011-2012	10.7 Million

For future reference please note that this is publicly available information which is published within Translink's Annual Report and Accounts each year, and is available in the assembly library.

Translink: Passenger Journeys

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers have used Translink over the last three years. (AQW 15075/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer you to the answer given in AQW 11422/11-15

Translink report on the number of passenger journeys recorded as opposed to the number of passengers, and have advised me that the number of passenger journeys made on Translink over the last three years are as follows;

YEAR	Translink Total (Millions)
2009 -2010	78.2
2010 -2011	77.0
2011 -2012	77.3

(Figures are rounded to one decimal place)

This is publicly available information which is published within Translink's Annual Report and Accounts each year, and is available in the assembly library. The target for Translink is 77 million passenger journeys per annum.

Translink: Train Services

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many train journeys there have been in the last three years. (AQW 15076/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer you to the answer in AQW 15074/11-15.

Translink have also provided the following statistics based on the number of train services operated (by financial year):

Year	Total number of services
2009-10	110,040
2010-11	110,262
2011-12	109,867

In referring to train services Translink have provided the following definitions:

Trains to Belfast

A train operating from its point of origin to its terminal point in Belfast or to its turnaround point at GVS/Central is considered a single service.

Trains from Belfast

A train operating from its point of origin in Belfast or from its point of turnaround at GVS/Central to its point of destination outside of Belfast is considered a single service.

Portrush-Coleraine Branch Service

All trains operating between Coleraine and Portrush and Portrush-Coleraine are considered single service.

Railway Stations

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many railway stations there are. (AQW 15077/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that it's rail network comprises 22 stations which are staffed, and 32 halts.

Housing: Unfinished Developments

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the health and safety risks to residents who live in unfinished housing developments, whether he has any plans to install street lamps and paint appropriate road markings in these developments.

(AQW 15086/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As I am sure the Member will appreciate, it is important to recognise that developers are primarily responsible for the health and safety risks associated with new housing development roads, including street lighting and road markings, until such time as the roads are completed and adopted into the public road network. Therefore, my Department's Roads Service has no plans to assume these responsibilities on behalf of developers.

However where roads, including street lighting and road markings, are not finished within a reasonable time, Roads Service officials will negotiate with the developer, or other responsible parties, to have the work completed. If the developer will not, or cannot, complete the necessary work, officials will take enforcement action under Article 11 of the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, and call on the bond monies to pay for the works needed to bring the roads up to adoption standards.

I should also advise that in cases where urgent repairs in a private street are required to prevent or remove danger to persons or vehicles, my Department may, on giving at least 48 hours notice to the responsible person, carry out such urgent repairs under Article 22 of the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980.

Ballymena Railway Station

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the level of customer service at Ballymena Railway Station as a result of Translink's staff cuts which, in the last week in September, resulted in one member of staff having to cope with ticket sales, information provision, cleaning, operational duties and having to take verbal abuse from disgruntled customers.

(AQW 15147/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: This is an operational matter for Translink who advise that the majority of the NI Railways stations and halts are unstaffed and passenger ticketing and passenger information is provided by on-train Conductors alongside static information at stations/halts. At busier stations such as Ballymena, passenger information and passenger ticketing is provided by station staff. It is not uncommon for stations such as Ballymena to have only one member of staff on duty at certain times of the day to deal with the essential customer service and operational duties.

Regrettably from time to time staff do have to deal with more difficult customers and they are trained how to deal with such situations. Translink do not condone any form of abuse against any of their staff at any time and where sufficient evidence exists they will initiate prosecution.

NI Water: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development, for each of the last five years, to detail how many (i) grievance procedure cases have been taken against NI Water; and (ii) whistleblowing complaints have been made against NI Water.

(AQW 15148/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the number of internal grievances and whistleblowing complaints over the last 5 years is as detailed in the table below:

Year	Grievance Cases	Whistleblowing
2007/08	20	2
2008/09	16	2
2009/10	28	4
2010/11	17	7
2011/12	12	8
Total	93	23

Salt Bins: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of grit boxes, including the locations, in the North Down area.

(AQW 15150/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Firstly, I would advise the Member that my Department's Roads Service provides salt bins and grit piles, but not grit boxes.

Roads Service currently provides 181 salt bins within the North Down Borough Council area, at the following locations:

HOLYWOOD: 52 BINS

- Cultra Slip Road Belfast bound to Folk Museum
- East Link S/L 2
- West Link S/L 8
- Abbey Ring S/L 34
- Abbey Ring S/L 12
- Abbots Wood near junction Demesne Road
- Strathearn Court at S/L No. 1
- Cedar Grove opposite S/L No.4
- Firmount Crescent @ No.15
- Firmount Crescent @ No.81
- The Green at S/L No.1
- Inver Park opposite S/L No.4
- Demense Park at No.15 at wall
- Demense Avenue at No.15
- Spencer Street opp No.55 @ jct with Hillview Place
- Elizabeth Road opp S/L No.3
- Croft Park @ S/L 9
- Ardmore Road at S/L No.6
- Ardmore Heights opposite No.9 at S/L No.6
- Ardmore Road No.39 (past No. 39) near radius
- Glenview Road No.7
- Glenview Avenue opposite S/L No.3
- Ardmore Park at No.3
- Brook Street at Clinic
- Windsor Avenue at No.12
- Victoria Road at end of grass verge
- The Esplanade, RHS to rear of bridge
- Tudor Oaks No 3 at wall
- Old Quay Court No.4
- Kintyre Avenue at S/L No.5
- Princess Gardens at S/L No.16
- Princess Park opposite No.9 on corner
- Princess Gardens jct of Lochinver Ave opp 109 @ green box
- Torgrange at No.10 near S/L
- Invergourie Road at Stathleven Park name plate
- Entrance to The Coaches, Brown's Brae
- The Spires at S/L No 3
- Woodcroft Park outside No 3
- Seafront Road jct with Circular Rd @ S/L No.6
- Station Road, Craigavad No.4
- Carlston Avenue No.1/Whinney Hill
- Old Seahill Road jct Seahill Drive at white wall
- Martello Park No.10
- Martello Park No 28
- Rhanbuoy Park S/L10
- Larch Hill No.1 (half way up hill)
- Larch Hill Ave No.5 junction with Larch Hill Drive
- Ballygrainey Road No.3 (at wall near A2)
- Dalchoolin at No 19
- Cultra Avenue opposite No.41
- Tarawood at S/L No.1
- Carney Hill near junction A2

HELEN'S BAY: 2 BINS

- Quarry Court past S/L No.3

CRAWFORDSBURN: 6 BINS

- Ballymullen Road opposite No.40
- Ballymullen Road at No.6
- Meadow Way (junction near Ballymullan Road)
- Burnside Park at No.2 (at wall/Meadow Way)
- Meadow Park North No 11 at mini pillar
- Carolsteen Park at No.1A junction Bridge Road

BANGOR: 113 BINS

- Killaire Avenue opposite S/L No.8 (at fence)
- Ailsa Park at S/L No.3
- Ravelstone Avenue junction Killaire Park (at wall)
- Killaire Avenue at No 5
- Station Rd opposite S/L No.15 (on grass) below No.68 on waste ground
- Station View at S/L No.1
- Wandsworth Park junction Wandsworth Road
- Lyndhurst Avenue opposite No.2
- Sharman Rise opp no.10
- Kilieen Avenue near S/L No.9
- Jubilee Drive near S/L No.15
- Viceroy's Wood at entrance 1/2 way up hill
- Springhill Heights No.10
- Farm Grove junction Springhill Avenue
- Bryansford Meadow opp S/L No.3
- Ballyquinton Gardens side of No.18 at BT pole
- Kilclief Gardens at S/L No.474
- Craigboy Mews at telegraph pole
- Balligan Gardens at S/L No.403
- Birch Park junction Birch Drive
- Clandeboye Way at S/L No.1
- Monea Way at S/L No.11 at wall
- Rostrevor Way at No.12
- Clandeboye Way near SL No 10
- Rostrevor Drive opposite name plate
- Enterprise Road opp S/L No.2
- Moyne Road, Conlig, junction Vermont Avenue at S/L No.5
- Bangor Road, Conlig, at top of Green Road
- Meadowvale opposite No.15
- Meadowvale Park at S/L No.2
- Beechfield junction Main Street, Conlig
- Beechfield Avenue @ S/L No.18
- Tower Road/Main Street, Conlig
- Forrest Hill/Main Street, Conlig

- Forrest Hill, Conlig at S/L 10 at side of No. 74
- Westmorland Crescent side of No.2 (on grass)
- Westmorland Crescent at S/L No.8
- Harehills Drive junction Westmorland Crescent
- Silverstream Crescent at No.61 (in laneway)
- Silverstream Road at S/L 9
- Silverstream Drive at No.18 (at wall)
- Silverstream Avenue at No 31
- Manor Park/Manor Avenue
- Hillcrest Walk outside No 9
- Bangor Police Station/Castle Park Avenue
- King Street at sign no. 4
- Tennyson Avenue at S/L No.1
- Princetown Road at Junction of Seacourt Lane
- Lorelei opp S/L 1 @ garage
- Ranfurly Avenue S/L 15
- Princetown Road opp S/L 9
- Knockmore Park S/L 12
- Manse Road @ Ent to No.12
- Railwayview Street No.54
- Windsor Gardens at No.2-4
- Rugby Avenue opposite No.60
- Donard Avenue No.44 (upper side of BT pole)
- Donard Avenue No.25
- Maryville Park opposite No.22
- Bryansglen West No.7 (lower side of S/L)
- Bryansglen Avenue No.21
- Grange Avenue No.5
- Bryansburn Gardens @ No.10 in corner
- Downshire Road upper side of Maxwell Road at S/L No.14
- Downshire Road lower side of Maxwell Road at S/L 15
- Clelland Park South at No.12
- Alexandra Gardens SL 6
- Church Avenue junction Church Drive at wall
- Abbey Park No.49/51
- Balloo Crescent opp Howells
- Ballyree Gardens opp No 9 near steps
- Willowbrook Rise at side of No 1 @ wall
- Willowbrook Park @ No.62
- Cranley Road opposite No.4
- Cranley Grove S/L No. 4
- Cranley Grove SL No 9
- Cranley Hill No.2
- Cranley Ave opp S/L No.1
- Irvine Park outside No 38
- Hanover Chase at wide footpath beside No 7 Hanover Court
- Regency Square @ s/l 2
- Beaumont Drive outside No.26
- Ravenswood opp No 10
- Kinwood Road @ No.2 Jct with Albany Road
- Marlo Cres @ S/L No.2
- Fernbank Park opp S/L 3
- Knightsbridge Court at entrance to NIE substation
- Fairfield Road at wall of No.60
- Fairfield Road opposite No.103 on verge
- Dellmont Drive at S/L 4 outside No 10
- Sunningdale Park No.7
- Glenanne Park opp Sunningdale Court between hedges
- Stanley Road opposite No.9
- Seaforth Road opposite S/L No.3
- Grove Park junction Bellevue
- Baylands Fourth Avenue at No.4
- Beverly Hills junction Beverly Drive at white wall
- Beverly Gardens junction Beverly Drive opposite No.34
- Conniston Drive beside S/L No.2
- Ambleside Road opp S/L at No.10
- Chippendale Vale junction Chippendale Park
- Ardmillan Park S/L 4
- Thornleigh Gardens S/L 6
- Windmill Lane at S/L No.1
- Portview/Ballymacconnell Road
- Towerview at S/L No.4
- Ivyhill Crescent at S/L No. 2
- Ballymacormick Park at name plate
- Ballymacormick Cres at S/L1
- Towerview Crescent opposite No.101 @ S/L No.20
- Towerview Crescent at side wall of No 125
- Towerview Avenue outside No 14
- Sherwood Road opp No.22 at green box

GROOMSPORT: 8 BINS

- The Hill opp No.5
- The Brae junction Ard-Na-Ree
- Springwell Drive beside S/L No.3
- Springwell Drive juncton The Brae opposite No.7 P/C 4643
- Springwell Crescent No.58 at BT pole
- Springwell Crescent opposite S/L 4 at rose bed
- The Brae (at wall opposite Hillfoot)
- Glenganagh Park at S/L 3

Salt Bins: Qualification Criteria

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria for a street to qualify for a grit box. (AQW 15151/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: For the purposes of this response, it has been assumed that your question refers to a salt bin.

My Department's Roads Service commits significant resources to maintaining approximately 4,800 salt bins that are provided on public roads.

Salt bins may be provided for use by the public, on a self-help basis, on roads or streets which do not qualify for inclusion in the gritting schedule, provided that the necessary criteria are met. There is no limit placed on the number of salt bins which may be provided, although they will not normally be provided within 100m of another bin. However, new bins will not be provided, unless requested by a member of the public who also agrees to spread the salt provided.

Roads Service will consider the provision of a salt bin when the following criteria are met:

- the location in question must be on the publically maintained road network;
- the gradient of the road in question must be over 5%;
- no reasonable alternative route shall be available; and
- the subject road attains a minimum overall score, derived using a specific formula, where points are awarded depending on road geometry, residential usage, community welfare and commercial usage.

Salt bins can also be provided to schools that are regularly affected by severe wintry weather.

Where salt bins are provided, they are inspected regularly and refilled, as necessary, during

the winter months and made available for use from November to March inclusive. Where necessary, they may be removed during the summer months to prevent vandalism or theft.

Car-parking Charges: Christmas Waiver

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to waiver car parking charges for town centre businesses over the Christmas period.

(AQW 15152/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that my Department intends to make an announcement on pre-Christmas arrangements in the near future.

Park-and-ride Services

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures are in place to promote Park and Ride services.

(AQW 15153/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service works, in conjunction with other parts of my Department, to develop and build park and ride facilities.

In addition Translink's website has a link to a Park & Ride information site (www.translink.co.uk/en/Services/Other-Translink-Services/Park--Ride/). The site opens with an interactive geographical map with a search facility for the various locations.

You may also be interested to know that I will be making an announcement in the near future in relation to additional Park & Ride services for Belfast leading up to Christmas.

NI Water: Water Meters

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 14577/11-15, to detail (i) the total amount of the original 2647 bills issued; and (ii) the total amount of the bills after all adjustments and reclassifications were made.

(AQW 15158/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that (i) the total amount of the 2,647 bills issued was around £5.4 million and (ii) the total amount of the bills following adjustments and reclassifications was £2.9 million (including new bills).

Adopted Roads and Sewers: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the roads and sewers that have been adopted in the North Down constituency in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 15166/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the roads and sewers that have been adopted by my Department's Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water (NIW), in each of the last twelve months, are detailed in the table below:

Month	Roads	Sewers
October 2011	Balmoral Square, Bangor. Wilbrook Park, Bangor. Gibson Green, Bangor.	

Month	Roads	Sewers
November 2011	Stonebridge Square, Conlig. Stonebridge Park, Conlig. Stonebridge Avenue, Conglig (part Adopted). Stonebridge Cottages, Conlig. Stonebridge Gardens, Conlig. Stonebridge Lane, Conlig. Stonebridge Green, Conlig.	Cornmill Phase 1, Moss Road, Millisle. Rockhill, Warren Road, Donaghadee.
December 2011	Woodcroft Lane, Holywood. Rockhill, Warren Road, Donaghadee	
February 2012	Dellmount Crescent, Bangor.	
March 2012		Rathgill Avenue, Phase 1, Bangor.
April 2012		Green Gables, Conlig.
May 2012		Stonebridge Avenue, Conlig.
June 2012	Rathgill Avenue, Bangor.	Riverwood, Donaghadee Road, Bangor.
July 2012	Edgewater, Millisle Road, Donaghadee.	
August 2012		Upritchard Court, Bloomfield Rd South, Bangor.
September 2012		Thalassa, Downshire Lane, Bangor. Seahill, Donaghadee.

Translink: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) how many grievance cases have been taken; and (ii) how many whistleblowing complaints have been made, against Translink.

(AQW 15212/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that in the last five years the total number of (i) grievance cases and (ii) whistleblowing complaints are as detailed in the table below.

Year	Grievance Cases	Whistleblowing Complaints
2008	23	3
2009	47	1
2010	33	6
2011	51	0
2012	14 (To date)	1
Total	168	11

Roads: Speed Limits

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria it uses to assess whether speed limits in an urban area should be (i) 30 mph; or (ii) 20 mph.

(AQW 15218/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that my Department has legislative powers for setting or changing speed limits on the public road network and has established key policies and procedures for doing so in consultation with PSNI and others.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that current legislation dictates that, where there is a system of street lighting present on a public road, the speed limit automatically defaults to 30 mph. This can only be changed by the passing of a Traffic Regulation Order and the amended speed limits are clearly signed at the start of the lit area and at regular intervals within it. The Roads Service Speed Management policy states that 30 mph should normally be the default speed limit for urban areas.

Officials further advise that Roads Service has been installing 20 mph zones for a number of years. These contain self enforcing engineering measures, such as road humps, and have played a significant role in greatly reducing serious and fatal collisions in residential areas. Most social housing areas have been treated and Roads Service continues to install further traffic calming measures on roads, where vulnerable road users are present.

The Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy to 2020 contains action measures that encourage further roll out of these zones. There is also a commitment to pilot the implementation of 20 mph speed limits that will not have any additional engineering measures installed. However, implementation has been delayed due to enforcement and resource issues. Roads Service's speed management strategy also gives encouragement to local traffic managers to further extend 20 mph zones, where they are considered necessary.

Craigantlet Hills: Road Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the objectives of the proposed Craigantlet Road Scheme, project no. N1004/400679.

(AQW 15221/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the objectives of the proposed Craigantlet Road scheme are to:

- (i) improve road safety; and
- (ii) relieve the current traffic progression difficulties experienced during peak periods.

Craigantlet Hills: Through-route

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the rationale behind the decision to withdraw the through-route as an option in Craigantlet, under project no. 400521.

(AQW 15223/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the through-route option was withdrawn due to the potential environmental impact, and it was also anticipated that traffic using the Dunlady Road would have experienced considerable delays during the construction phase.

Craigantlet Hills: Traffic Lights

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the outcome of the appraisal for traffic lights options for the Craigantlet area.

(AQW 15224/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that this option was considered for the Craigantlet area but was ruled out at an early stage in the assessment process. Although costing significantly less than the current proposal, the installation of traffic signals at junctions on rural roads, which carry high speed traffic and have limited geometric standards, is not considered an appropriate solution to traffic problems.

Craigantlet Hills: Roundabout

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the queue lengths and travel times associated with the Dunlady Road during peak traffic flows as detailed in the vissim model of the proposed roundabout scheme for Craigantlet, project no. N1004/400679.

(AQW 15227/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the queue lengths and travel times associated with the Dunlady Road during peak traffic flows, as detailed in the vissim model for the proposed layout, are as detailed in the table below:

Journey Times (seconds)

	AM	PM
Dunlady Road - Craigantlet Road	125.06	95.72
Dunlady Road - Ballymiscaw Road	84.34	84.82

Queue Length (metres)

	AM		PM	
	Average	Maximum	Average	Maximum
Dunlady Road	1	44	0	20

DRD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) whether any departmental staff have been charged with criminal offences; and (ii) what is his Department's position regarding staff employment whilst court proceedings are pending.

(AQW 15285/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is aware of one member of its staff who is currently charged with a criminal offence.

Offences leading to court proceedings may range from relatively minor driving offences to those involving more serious charges such as theft or assault. Where staff face such proceedings, the Department considers on a case by case basis, depending on the seriousness of the criminal charge, and obtains any necessary legal advice. Issues addressed by the Department include the appropriateness (or otherwise) of the officer's continued attendance at work and the timing of any internal disciplinary action. Suspension from duty is considered where, in the Department's opinion, this would be a necessary precaution in the public interest pending the outcome of a criminal investigation.

Translink: Car Allowances

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are any plans to change the car allowances given to executives within Translink.

(AQW 15289/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is the Board of Translink, and not the Department, who have responsibility for setting the Terms and Conditions for its executives, including decisions relating to the provision of cars, which would be considered and agreed as part of the overall remuneration package. The Department can, and does, challenge the provision of any discretionary benefits such as bonuses but has to take account of contractual / legal constraints.

Translink has advised me that car / car allowances are part of Executives' terms and conditions of employment, as offered to and accepted by individual Executives. Translink argue that benchmarking against other similar transport organisations shows this to be an appropriate part of a package.

Millennium Way, Lurgan

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to complete phase two of the Millennium Way, Lurgan project, given that the project has been on-going for many years.

(AQW 15298/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that the position in relation to this matter remains as I indicated during the Adjournment Debate on 7 February 2012 on the completion of Millennium Way. At that time, I confirmed that I fully understood the potential benefits that an extension of Millennium Way from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road could provide, including relieving peak hour traffic congestion on the road network in that part of Lurgan. In addition, this improvement would also enhance the attractiveness of Millennium Way as a through-traffic route generally.

However, you will be aware that the resources currently available for road improvements are focused on the strategic road network, primarily on the A5, A8 and A2 projects, and are committed up to 2014-15. Therefore, funding for other road improvements beyond this timeframe will be dependent on future budget settlements. Given the present economic climate, future funding may not be sufficient to deliver schemes contained in the current Strategic Road Improvement Programme, within the timescale envisaged in the Department's Investment Delivery Plan for Roads. The same also applies to schemes, such as the extension of Millennium Way from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road, that do not form part of the strategic road network.

I can assure the Member that I remain committed to identifying, within the prevailing financial constraints and competing demands, the funds required to progress this scheme as quickly as possible. In this respect, I can confirm that my Department's Roads Service, having obtained Planning Approval for the scheme, continues to develop this proposal in preparation for progressing it through the Vesting Order, should the necessary resources become available.

Translink: Disposal of Old Train Sets

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans for the disposal of old train sets, including the tendering process.

(AQW 15314/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The disposal of old train sets is subject to a tendering process and Translink advises that tendering procedures have already been implemented for the majority of old train sets. Contracts for the disposal of these have been let.

In addition Translink is reviewing potential business cases which may facilitate the disposal of a number of old train units to heritage railway organisations/registered transport museums.

Roads: Oil Spills

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development, for each of the last three years, to detail (i) the number of oil spillages on roads; (ii) the number and value of the claims made as a result; and (iii) the number and value of successful claims.

(AQW 15315/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the information requested for the first part of your question is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

However, in the table below, it has provided information on the number of claims made as a result of oil spills on the road and of these, the number which have been successful for the past three financial years:

Year	Number of Claims Received	Number of Successful Claims	Total Compensation Paid
2009/10	38	1	£963.64
2010/11	37	1	£6937.52
2011/12	28	Nil	Nil
Total	103	2	£7901.16

I am also advised that the total value of the claims received is not known, as Roads Service Claims Unit only assesses the value of a claim, if it intends to make an offer of compensation.

Roads: Potholes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many potholes have been repaired in each of the last two years. (AQW 15371/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain figures solely in relation to numbers of potholes either recorded or repaired. However, figures for the total number of surface defects repaired, during the last two financial years, are detailed in the table below:

	April 2010 – March 2011	April 2011 – March 2012
Number of defects repaired ¹	228,557	225,019

1 Total number of repaired surface defects (including potholes) comprises of those defects located on the carriageway, hard shoulder and lay-bys.

Roads Service: Staff

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) the number of people employed by the Roads Service; and (ii) their aggregated salaries. (AQW 15388/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The following information is included in the Roads Service Annual Report and Accounts for the years in question.

Year	Average Number of Persons Employed	Wages and Salaries (including Pension Costs and Social Security Payments) £000
2007/08	2,188	64,207
2008/09	2,152	64,958
2009/10	2,103	66,554
2010/11	2,021	64,008
2011/12	1,969	65,147

Department for Social Development

DSD: Access to Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland Website

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development why departmental staff are unable to access the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland website from their office computers. (AQW 14833/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): In the interests of protecting Departments against misuse of the internet, IT Assist, who provide IT services for the NICS, use a web security solution called Websense that automatically blocks certain categories of internet sites. Websense as a private organisation own and retain the software and associated rights of their web security solution, and the NICS, through IT Assist, simply purchase the use of this facility. The Websense categorisation setting had placed the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland website in a blocked category for all NICS Departments, and therefore blocked those using the IT Assist network to access the site.

Whilst a block was applied to the IT Assist network, approximately 85% of staff within my Department access the intranet through the Department of Works and Pensions network and access to the Grand Lodge of Ireland website was not blocked to these staff. Certain Departmental officials who avail of the internet via IT Assist required access to this particular site as part of their normal duties and individual permission for these staff was granted under a bespoke rule.

Websense recently recategorised the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland website; however, a bespoke rule which allowed access to approved staff had already been applied. The Websense recategorisation did not remove the block for some NICS Departments because of a technical error, as they, including DSD, had already applied the bespoke rule to allow access to certain departmental officials.

The Department has now taken action to rectify this technical error, and all staff have access to the Grand Lodge of Ireland website in the same way as they have access to other unblocked websites.

Appeal Tribunals: Panel Members

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been paid to panel members of Benefits Appeal Tribunals in each of the last four years, broken down by (i) legally qualified members; (ii) medically qualified members; and (iii) disability aware members.

(AQW 14837/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total amounts paid to Legally Qualified Members (LQM), Medically Qualified Members (MQM) and members with experience in disability (DEM), including fees, travel and expenses in the past 4 financial years are set out in the table.

	2008-09	2009-2010	2010-11	2011-12
LQM	£1,036,423	£1,075,013	£1,241,602	£1,401,052
MQM	£673,977	£704,687	£899,462	£978,398
DEM	£333,777	£313,012	£271,050	£266,905

Housing: One-bedroom Dwellings

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans his Department has to create single dwelling accommodation through Housing Associations.

(AQW 14841/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With the potential impacts for single social housing tenants on benefits arising from Welfare Reform, the Housing Executive is taking a number of steps to define the need for one bed properties. This includes:

- Commissioning research on the impact of Welfare Reform on the social housing sector;
- Asking Housing Associations to bring forward schemes with one bed units within the current year to the value of £5million or 100 units; and
- Seeking 'Off the Shelf' submissions from Housing Associations which include one bed units as part of an overall mix for schemes in the current year.

My Department, in conjunction with the Housing Executive, will assess the outcomes of the pilot schemes, as well as the potential to convert existing supply to one bed units or shared accommodation to inform the composition of the future Social Housing Development Programme for 2013/14 and beyond.

Child Maintenance

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many cases there have been of failure to pay child maintenance, over the last twelve months.

(AQW 14842/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Over the past 12 months the number of non paying child maintenance cases has reduced from approximately 4,000 in August 2011 to 3,600 in August 2012. The current figure of non paying cases represents about 10% of the total case load.

There is a continued focus on getting more cases paying.

Housing Executive: Fuel Poverty

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive households are currently experiencing fuel poverty.

(AQW 14844/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive advises that 48,961 Housing Executive households, representing 57% of its stock, were experiencing fuel poverty according to its 2009 House Condition Survey. A person is said to be in fuel poverty where they need to spend 10% or more of their income on energy costs.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Home Heating: Pay as you Go

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the pay-as-you-go home heating oil scheme.

(AQW 14884/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A Pay as You Go for Oil pilot was launched in February 2012 and the results have been extremely positive. I am very keen for this technology to be rolled out and my officials have been having on-going discussions with both Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services. I have asked officials to progress this important initiative as quickly as possible as I believe the installation of Pay as You Go for Oil systems would significantly help households who struggle to pay for a fill of oil.

Housing Executive: Window Replacement

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development whether he would consider allowing casement windows to be used in the Housing Executive window replacement scheme.

(AQW 14885/11-15)

Mr McCausland: From 2010 the Housing Executive has been fitting flush casement style windows in their ground floor properties and this remains the preferred option now for their low and medium rise stock.

Social Housing Newbuilds: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of social housing new builds in the rural areas of Upper Bann, including timescales for the work.

(AQW 14934/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The number of completed social housing new builds in the rural areas of Upper Bann constituency, including timescales for the work are as follows:-

- 24 units at Woodside Park, Loughbrickland - November 2011
- one unit at Hillside, Gilford - March 2011
- 14 units at Derrymacash due to complete in October 2012.

The Social Housing Development Programme currently includes the following two schemes for 2013/14:-

- Bayview, Derrymore – four units
- Hillside Park, Gilford – one unit

Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballysally, Coleraine

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development how many vacant domestic properties there are in Ballysally, Coleraine, which could become units of accommodation for people on the waiting list.

(AQW 14949/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not hold the information relating to all vacant domestic properties in Ballysally, Coleraine. However, in relation to social housing in the area the Housing Executive currently has ten vacant dwellings in Ballysally, of which nine are currently on offer to applicants on the social housing waiting list for imminent occupation. The other dwelling is undergoing repairs and will be allocated to a housing applicant on completion of the required works.

In relation to Housing Associations, SHAC currently own 25 dwellings in Ballysally, of which 19 are vacant awaiting refurbishment on a phased basis. The first phase of improvements to ten of the properties is due to commence in early 2013. SHAC are hopeful that the completion of this first phase of works will generate further demand for housing in the area and therefore allow for the implementation of the second phase of redevelopment to the remaining properties.

The reasons houses are left empty are complex and range from the individual who for some reason is unable or unwilling to do anything to bring the house back into use, to houses being situated in areas where people do not want to live. Therefore, a variety of approaches need to be developed if such empty properties are to be brought back into use. A draft Empty Homes Strategy including an Action Plan is currently being developed. In the coming months the finalised Action Plan will be put in place to ensure that empty homes throughout Northern Ireland are properly targeted and over time brought back into use.

Housing Executive: Woodland House, Newtownabbey

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the standard of work undertaken by Northern Ireland Housing Executive contractors in Woodland House, Newtownabbey, where ducting for the digital upgrade was taped

to the ceiling of flats instead of being fixed with screws; and whether there will be a resulting extra cost to NIHE for the required rectification.

(AQW 14956/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The work referred to at Woodland House, Newtownabbey is still underway. This work is necessary to convert the analogue television signal to digital for the digital switchover. The cables are attached with tape on a temporary basis before being permanently screw fixed in place before the scheme is complete.

In some areas of Woodland House cables are hanging loosely from ceiling level owing to a temporary fixing methodology being employed prior to the final more secure fixing. The contractor has been asked to ensure that this temporary fixing does not cause any health and safety risks and to follow up with the final fixings as quickly as possible. There will be no extra cost to the Housing Executive as the temporary fixing of the cables is part of the installation process.

Disability Living Allowance: Doctors' Fees

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his plans for limiting the fees charged by doctors for the provision of medical notes that are required at Disability Living Allowance appeals tribunals; and whether, and what, penalties will be imposed on doctors who fail to provide the notes.

(AQW 14960/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Appeals Service currently makes no payment for the provision of a patient's medical records. General practitioners however, can claim a fee of £10 for completion of an accompanying short medical report form that outlines the past and current complaint, any clinical findings and any ongoing treatment. If the general practitioner determines it is necessary to provide a more detailed medical report, the fee per patient rises to £17.

There is no legal requirement to complete the forms, so there can be no question of imposing penalties on those who may fail to provide them. The Appeals Service paid a total of £18,614 in fees for provision of medical information (GP and consultant reports) for all benefits from April 2011 to March 2012.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development, for each of the last three years, to detail (i) the number of scheduled Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunals that were postponed due to the absence of medical notes; and (ii) the additional costs incurred as a result of the deferrals.

(AQW 14961/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The number of Disability Living Allowance cases adjourned on the hearing date due to the absence of General Practitioner notes in each of the last 3 years is set out in the table. The additional costs incurred as a result of these adjournments is not collated.

Year	No. of DLA cases adjourned
2009-10	848
2010-11	754
2011-12	708

Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail for each of the last three years (i) the number of Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunals held; (ii) the number of appeals upheld at tribunal; and (iii) the number dismissed.

(AQW 14962/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format sought. The Legally Qualified Member of the tribunal records whether the decision made on appeal is more advantageous than the original ruling. This may include decisions to increase the allowance or that a new award should be made. A less advantageous decision by the tribunal may be to reduce the allowance or to retain it in accordance with the decision under appeal. The following table details the total number of DLA appeals in each of the last 3 years where a final decision was reached (ie. adjourned hearings are excluded) and shows the breakdown between more or less advantageous decisions.

Year	No. of DLA appeals where final decision reached	No. of appeals allowed (= more advantageous)	No. of appeals disallowed (= less advantageous)
2009-10	5,147	1,836	3,311
2010-11	4,607	1,651	2,956
2011-12	3,826	1,511	2,315

DSD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development whether any staff within his Department have criminal charges outstanding; and what is his Department's position regarding their employment whilst court proceedings are pending.
(AQW 15001/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Two members of staff in the Department for Social Development currently have criminal charges outstanding. In such cases the Department, in line with the provisions of the NICS Disciplinary Procedures policy, decides whether the member of staff should be suspended from duty if that course is a necessary precaution in the public interest pending the outcome of criminal or disciplinary investigations or proceedings and no alternative course, such as transfer to other duties, is appropriate. In making such a decision, the Department always takes legal advice.

Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) mobility; and (ii) wheelchair bungalows in the North Down constituency; and whether there are any plans to increase the current stock.
(AQW 15067/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely record separately the number of bungalows for mobility use and wheelchair use. However, the Housing Executive currently has a total of 267 mobility/wheelchair bungalows within its Bangor District Office area. Housing Associations have two mobility bungalows and 61 wheelchair bungalows in the North Down constituency.

Not all bungalows within Social Housing Development Programme schemes are wheelchair/mobility bungalows, unless that is required by the client. With regard to plans to increase the current stock, neither the Housing Executive nor the Housing Associations have plans at present to increase current stock.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Housing: One-bedroom Dwellings

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of single dwelling stock available within (i) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and (ii) Housing Associations.
(AQW 15097/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the number of one bedroom dwellings currently available within the Housing Executive stock.

District Office	Property
Antrim	375
Armagh	239
Ballycastle	109
Ballymena	375
Ballymoney	83
Banbridge	278
Bangor	502
Carrickfergus	347
Castlereagh	682
Coleraine	310
Collon Terrace	201
Cookstown	42
Downpatrick	326
Dungannon	199
East Belfast	309
Fermanagh	130
Larne	280
Limavady	172

District Office	Property
Lisburn Antrim Street	662
Lisburn Dairy Farm	207
Lurgan Brownlow	407
Magherafelt	32
Newry	495
Newtownabbey 1	412
Newtownabbey 2	475
Newtownards	473
North Belfast	533
Omagh	180
Portadown	311
Shankill	238
South Belfast	347
Strabane	112
Waterloo Place	365
Waterside	176
West Belfast	536
Total one bedroom properties	10,920

Housing Associations advise that there are 7,817 single dwelling units across their sector.

Housing Executive: Transfers

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of requests that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has had from residents wishing to transfer to smaller properties in the past six months; and the number of these requests that were successfully completed.

(AQW 15098/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not record the number of tenants who applied for a move to a smaller home. However, they have confirmed that in the last six months from April to September 2012 they received 4,351 applications for a transfer. During this period 1,564 transfer applications were rehoused. It should be noted that these tenants may have been on the waiting list longer than six months.

Housing Executive: Reversible Windows

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether there is an extra cost in fitting reversible windows, rather than casement windows, to Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties.

(AQW 15100/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Following a detailed cost appraisal, the Housing Executive advise that storm proof casement windows reflect a saving of £1.46 over a fully reversible window. This is applied across a typical Housing Executive dwelling containing on average seven windows. However, while this may not effect any significant saving on paper, it will accommodate a wider supply base in the windows manufacture market. This in turn will generate more competition and create the possibility of greater savings as part of the planned Window Procurement, operative from early 2013.

The new window installation protocol is also already reflecting savings due to the non-requirement to pay redecoration grants with initial estimated savings of £15m.

Housing: Waiting List

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to provide the numbers on the annual housing waiting list in each district council area since 1992.

(AQW 15106/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as prior to the year 2000 the statistics are not available by District Council area. However, table 1 below details the overall number of people on the waiting list for the years

from 1992/93 through to 2000/01. Table 2 below details the number of people on the waiting list from 2001/02 through to 2011/12 broken down by District Council area.

Table 1 – Waiting List

Year	Total Waiting List
1992/93	23,568
1993/94	22,962
1994/95	23,355
1995/96	23,349
1996/97	23,756
1997/98	22,691
1998/99	23,193
1999/00	23,084
2000/01	22,054

Table 2 – Waiting List

District Council	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Antrim	574	631	709	737	792	979	1,038	991	972	977	852
Ards	1,008	1,080	1,174	1,194	1,276	1,525	1,671	1,682	1,706	1,811	1,486
Armagh	479	531	559	584	659	828	841	797	760	802	708
Ballymena	974	964	1,032	1,082	1,254	1,411	1,622	1,530	1,420	1,520	1,256
Ballymoney	263	266	286	327	392	477	539	497	439	496	390
Banbridge	367	324	410	421	508	674	695	698	665	677	479
Belfast	7,550	7,268	7,439	7,908	8,220	9,070	9,936	10,017	9,941	10,178	8,773
Carrickfergus	848	842	839	849	916	1,007	1,073	1,032	994	974	818
Castlereagh	1,060	973	984	990	1,060	1,150	1,354	1,371	1,367	1,462	1,167
Coleraine	731	718	855	913	1,034	1,234	1,427	1,292	1,219	1,297	1,026
Cookstown	209	239	230	310	326	367	382	408	371	407	362
Craigavon	1,029	1,042	1,072	1,366	1,444	1,769	2,030	1,974	1,755	1,922	1,607
Derry	1,493	1,593	1,611	1,813	1,993	2,157	2,417	2,418	2,574	2,993	2,762
Down	930	976	919	928	1,027	1,166	1,297	1,292	1,213	1,323	1,250
Dungannon	408	455	517	599	667	753	859	915	895	1,022	920
Fermanagh	536	614	734	785	918	1,038	1,029	894	833	853	639
Larne	371	368	370	390	380	505	518	526	509	550	406
Limavady	303	289	337	403	474	522	569	521	497	472	372
Lisburn	1,761	1,791	1,876	2,053	2,109	2,391	2,666	2,670	2,607	2,595	2,268
Magherafelt	272	302	356	397	409	495	524	503	507	512	429
Moyle	169	187	225	275	289	301	365	359	357	334	326
Newry & Mourne	1,157	1,238	1,301	1,375	1,562	1,727	1,801	1,778	1,828	1,827	1,571
Newtownabbey	1,323	1,310	1,293	1,313	1,459	1,578	1,825	1,726	1,691	1,743	1,514
North Down	1,312	1,423	1,488	1,517	1,639	1,857	1,913	1,930	1,885	1,884	2,146
Omagh	360	354	370	472	514	640	704	620	590	622	495
Strabane	416	470	529	607	587	561	593	482	525	638	511

District Council	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Total	25,903	26,248	27,515	29,608	31,908	36,182	39,688	38,923	38,120	39,891	34,533

Homeless People

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to provide the number of people presenting as homeless in each district council area since 1992.

(AQW 15107/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as prior to the year 2000 the statistics are not available by District Council area. Therefore, Table 1 below details the overall number of people who presented as homeless for the years from 1992/93 through to 2000/01. Table 2 below details the number of people who presented as homeless from 2001/02 through to 2011/12 broken down by District Council area.

Table 1 – Homeless Presenters

Year	Homeless Presenters
1992-93	10,081
1993-94	10,099
1994-95	10,068
1995-06	10,768
1996-97	11,092
1997-98	11,672
1998-99	11,552
1999-2000	10,997

Table 2 – Homeless Presenters by District Council

District Council	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Antrim	429	454	611	677	522	652	584	468	510	539	600	541
Ards	584	558	679	698	638	611	618	635	631	743	726	695
Armagh	120	164	192	178	154	207	286	309	250	223	278	300
Ballymena	600	723	648	763	754	1,014	951	733	726	763	904	806
Ballymoney	100	103	115	210	214	273	271	236	164	156	172	209
Banbridge	271	343	328	332	343	445	510	457	307	303	345	310
Belfast	3,842	4,001	4,541	4,817	4,665	5,779	5,829	5,143	5,053	5,343	5,544	5,285
Carrickfergus	365	347	520	479	480	472	517	447	437	450	500	466
Castlereagh	413	465	465	529	556	617	619	548	500	651	715	714
Coleraine	288	254	417	517	748	753	718	653	590	545	586	536
Cookstown	136	152	126	120	124	126	145	126	191	238	247	180
Craigavon	355	407	594	633	718	750	982	975	744	792	868	821
Derry	1,013	1,152	1,291	1,208	1,107	1,144	1,195	1,222	1,343	1,394	1,523	1,655
Down	534	526	677	576	519	533	550	547	557	525	609	574
Dungannon	282	298	329	352	538	555	552	529	491	547	611	561
Fermanagh	302	260	317	495	543	581	653	543	409	409	475	407
Larne	223	279	294	260	314	314	404	322	291	236	291	293
Limavady	118	114	106	113	248	266	314	272	284	282	219	276
Lisburn	862	1,188	1,380	1,280	1,275	1,736	1,930	1,660	1,617	1,568	1,563	1,661

District Council	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Magherafelt	176	243	201	293	194	180	215	199	203	163	191	190
Moyle	41	46	55	58	72	92	153	137	119	112	137	124
Newry&Mourne	459	481	547	608	675	825	807	726	781	742	770	805
Newtownabbey	496	813	891	834	809	1,002	1,028	955	827	958	1,057	1,125
North Down	434	550	828	761	774	846	839	768	755	698	804	689
Omagh	124	137	168	163	171	203	197	244	164	119	219	249
Strabane	127	106	106	196	207	145	146	176	132	165	204	265
Total	12,694	14,164	16,426	17,150	17,362	20,121	21,013	19,030	18,076	18,664	20,158	19,737

Welfare Reform Act 2012/Welfare Reform Bill

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail each of the differences between the Welfare Reform Bill and the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

(AQW 15121/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are minimal differences between the Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland and the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

The Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland does not include an equivalent to the following sections of the Welfare Reform Act 2012:

	Description	Reason
60	Claimants dependent on drugs etc	This repeals provisions introduced by the 2009 Act which were not replicated in NI
76	Calculation of working tax credit	Section in Welfare Reform Act 2012 extends to Northern Ireland
103 & Schedule 12	Supersession of decisions of former appellate bodies	This clause has no relevance in NI because the social security appeal bodies have not been replaced by the Upper tribunal as in GB.
109	Recovery of fines etc by deductions from employment and support allowance	This amends a criminal justice provision on fines which has no counterpart in NI.
117	Benefit offences: disqualifying and sanctionable benefits	This brings tax credits within the regime in certain sections of the Social Security Fraud Act. Tax credits are however an excepted matter. As the clause deals solely with tax credits and is not ancillary to other provisions it would be outside legislative competence to replicate this clause. Tax credits should be dealt with under the Westminster Fraud Act in the same way as war pensions (see s 6A(2) of that Act).
120	Loss of tax credits	This amends the Tax Credits Act on a UK wide basis and already contains appropriate NI references.
122	Tax credit fraud: investigation	This extends certain of the investigations provisions of the Administration Act to offences relating to tax credits. Tax credits are however an excepted matter. As the clause deals solely with tax credits and is not ancillary to other provisions it would be outside legislative competence to replicate this clause. Tax credits should be dealt with under Westminster legislation.
123	Information-sharing for prevention etc of tax credit fraud	This extends information sharing provisions in the Administration to Tax Credits. Tax credits are however an excepted matter. As the clause deals solely with tax credits and is not ancillary to other provisions it would be outside legislative competence to replicate this clause. Tax credits should be dealt with under Westminster legislation.
124	Tax credit fraud: prosecution and penalties	This amends the Tax Credits Act on a UK wide basis and already contains appropriate NI references.

	Description	Reason
125	Unauthorised disclosure of information relating to tax credit offences	This amends the Administration Act to permit disclosure of tax credit information). Tax credits are however an excepted matter. As the clause deals solely with tax credits and is not ancillary to other provisions it would be outside legislative competence to replicate this clause. Tax credits should be dealt with under Westminster legislation
126	Tax credits: transfer of functions etc	This extends UK-wide and already provides for the transfer of tax credit functions in NI and the consequential amendment of NI legislation.
127	Information-sharing between Secretary of State and HMRC	Section in Welfare Reform Act 2012 extends to Northern Ireland
128 & 129	Information-sharing between Secretary of State and DPP	This enables HRMC to share information with those including DSD administering social security. It extends to NI and already contains appropriate NI references.
135	Functions of registration service	Relates to Registration Service Act 1953 – different structure in Northern Ireland - not required
141	Review of fees regulations	Relates to Child Maintenance pilot- not applicable for Northern Ireland to pilot
143	Standards of decision-making	GB are abolishing the standards of decision making report – NI are going to continue to produce this report.
145 & Schedule 13	Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission	This amends the Child Poverty Act and related enactments on a UK-wide basis Commission is UK wide
146	UK child poverty strategies	No equivalent amendments required for Northern Ireland legislation as the Child Poverty Act extends to Northern Ireland
148 & 149	Financial Provision & Extent	Technical provisions of a Westminster Bill, not required for an Assembly Bill.

The Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland has additional clauses not in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 as detailed below:

	Description	Reason
128	Reduced fee for dog licences	updates the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 to include certain income-related benefits for the purposes of reduced dog licence fees.
129	Orders of SoS under Administration Act	This amendment is in relation to reciprocal agreements and the need for it has arisen from a previous consequential amendment to section 165 made by paragraph 10 of Schedule 4 to the Tax Credits Act 2002 which unintentionally narrowed the scope of the power and prevented its exercise by the Secretary of State. This restores the original position.
130	Rate relief schemes: application of housing benefit law	This amends Article 30A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, which is an existing enabling power that allows DFP to make whatever regulations are necessary to maintain support schemes for domestic ratepayers. This amendment will allow that power to be extended to cover the replacement for the rates element of Housing Benefit, which will cease to exist from 1 April 2013.

Welfare Reform Bill: Regulations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department is seeking to ensure that all regulations flowing from the Welfare Reform Bill will be approved by the Assembly by March 2013; and to outline the consequences should these regulations not be enacted by this date.

(AQW 15122/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There will be many sets of regulations flowing from the Bill not all of which will have an operational date of April 2013. Where the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) operational date for regulations is April 2013 or before, I am seeking to have the equivalent Northern Ireland regulations approved by the Assembly as soon as possible after Royal Assent, and where possible to match the DWP operational date.

Delays with regard to timing could have repercussions on funding for our benefits' system here in Northern Ireland which is predicated on the assumption that we will seek to maintain parity, both in terms of substance and timing insofar as possible. Whitehall has expressly reserved its right to review funding arrangements should it be considered there is undue delay in implementing reform here. As I said during the 2nd Stage debate the financial impact of not implementing the Welfare Reform Bill is likely to be very significant. The estimated direct costs amount to some £207 million over the three remaining years of this Spending Review period.

Undoubtedly, given our dependence on IT systems operated via DWP there could well be cost implications should Northern Ireland be out of step with change implementation, similarly there would be operational considerations for the Social Security Agency.

There are also possible repercussions over some aspects of the reform agenda, e.g. the Social Fund, where proposals are that some elements will move outside of the Social Security system altogether. I am keen that the funding stream for any replacement scheme is not jeopardised by undue delay and that those dependent on such support are not disadvantaged as a result.

Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Criteria

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the new criteria for the Personal Independence Payment. (AQW 15123/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The proposed Personal Independence Payment assessment criteria, weightings and entitlement thresholds are intended to reflect and differentiate between the barriers and extra costs faced by individuals who require extra support to undertake a range of everyday tasks taking account of physical, sensory, mental, intellectual and cognitive impairments. Eleven key activities, fundamental to everyday life, will be assessed – each relating to one of the two new components of the benefit:

Daily Living Component

- 1 Planning and buying food and drink;
- 2 Preparing and cooking food;
- 3 Taking nutrition;
- 4 Managing medication and monitoring health conditions;
- 5 Managing prescribed therapies other than medication;
- 6 Washing, bathing and grooming;
- 7 Managing toilet needs or incontinence;
- 8 Dressing and undressing; and
- 9 Communicating with others.

Mobility Component

- 1 Planning and following a journey; and
- 2 Moving around.

In November 2011 a second draft of the Personal Independence Payment assessment criteria was published, which significantly revised and improved the first draft following testing of current Disability Living Allowance customers, including 180 from Northern Ireland, and a lengthy consultation and engagement process with disabled people and their representative organisations.

Formal consultation on the assessment criteria, which sought views from a broad range of local disability and advice groups, was carried out between 16 January and 30 April. My officials are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to analyse the replies, and a response to the consultation is due in the autumn.

Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Contract

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development when the new contract for the assessing company of the Personal Independence Payment will be agreed. (AQW 15124/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The procurement process for the awarding of the contract has been completed but there remain a small number of approval and contract award processes which have yet to be completed.

It is anticipated that the formal award will take place within the next 4-6 weeks

Welfare Reform Bill: Financial Consequences

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development what would be the financial consequences for his Department if the Welfare Reform Bill was not passed in sequence with similar changes in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 15132/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The financial consequences of the Welfare Reform Bill (Northern Ireland) 2012 not progressing in accordance with accepted practice will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive which could impact on the total funding available in Northern Ireland for the delivery of public services.

Were decisions to be taken not to mirror welfare reform, there would need to be discussions between the Northern Ireland Executive and the United Kingdom government as to the consequences arising from the break in parity and the implications arising from the Statement of Funding Policy. Early financial estimates are that the consequences could be in the region of £1.5 billion over the SR 2010 and SR 2014 periods.

It is likely that the costs of delivering benefit services to benefit customers would significantly increase through increased costs for IT systems and more administrative based delivery methods.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development when he last met the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on its Community Asset Transfer research.

(AQW 15139/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I have not met with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation although my officials have engaged with the authors of the research project into 'Social Economics, Assets and the Community and Voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.'

The findings and conclusions from this research project will inform the development of a community asset transfer policy framework in Northern Ireland.

Community Asset Transfer: Legislation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development whether he plans to introduce legislation to underpin his Community Asset Transfer policy.

(AQW 15141/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am aware that legislation forms part of the enabling framework for Community Asset Transfer in the rest of the UK. The need for new legislation to support Community Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland will be considered by a cross-Departmental Steering Group, supported by research and analysis and early consultation with key stakeholders.

The ultimate decision on whether or not legislation is necessary will rest with the Executive.

Community Asset Transfer: Assistance Available

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development what training, support, grants or other assistance is available to ensure the use of assets transferred to the community through his Community Asset Transfer policy.

(AQW 15142/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My department is leading on the development of a policy framework for Community Asset Transfer, which will be governed by a cross-Departmental Steering Group. The Steering Group will consider a range of issues including safeguards to ensure sustainable use of transferred assets and the accountability of a receiving organisation to the local community.

The transfer of individual assets will in all cases need to be supported by an appropriate business case which would be expected to address the viability of the proposed use of the asset and the capacity of the receiving organisation to manage and develop the asset.

In addition, my department is funding the Development Trusts Northern Ireland as a key partner to support the implementation of Community Asset Transfer policy. They will advise the Steering Group on the level of both monetary and non-monetary support required to facilitate successful Community Asset Transfer and will develop and deliver resources tailored to Northern Ireland circumstances.

Community Asset Transfer: Sustainability

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development how he will ensure the future sustainability of transferred assets under his Community Asset Transfer policy.

(AQW 15144/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Risk management is an important part of Community Asset Transfer and extensive guidance has been developed elsewhere in the UK which will be useful to inform policy and practice in Northern Ireland.

The transfer of individual assets will in all cases need to be supported by an appropriate business case which would demonstrate sustainability. Community Asset Transfer can take different forms, ranging from short-term 'meanwhile' uses, to management

agreements and leases and including full transfer of ownership. The nature of the risks involved will vary from case to case. The nature of the asset, the proposed plans for the asset and the experience of the receiving organisation would all be important factors. Ongoing costs associated with managing and maintaining the asset would need to be addressed at the outset.

The cross-departmental steering group on Community Asset Transfer will be considering funding opportunities to support Community Asset Transfer.

In addition, my department is funding the Development Trusts Northern Ireland as a key partner to support the implementation of Community Asset Transfer policy. They will support the delivery of a number of demonstration projects which will identify key lessons for policy and practice.

Social Security: Computer System

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been spent on the Social Security computer system in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15174/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Each year my officials are provided with a detailed itemised monthly bill by the Department for Work & Pensions of all costs which are attributed to the running of the Agency's Social Security computer systems. The table below summarises this information.

Year	Total
2011/12	£14,244,134
2010/11	£16,483,522
2009/10	£16,232,371
2008/09	£14,760,813
2007/08	£10,300,000

Children: Income Poverty

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of children are currently classed as being in poverty; and what the figure was in 2002.

(AQW 15175/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The percentage of children who live in a household which is considered to be in relative income poverty in 2010/11 was 21% of the child population in Northern Ireland. The figure is presented on a Before Housing Costs basis.

The percentage of children who live in a household which is considered to be in relative income poverty in 2002/03 was 25% of the child population in Northern Ireland. The figure is presented on a Before Housing Costs basis.

The results are produced using the Family Resources Survey and Households Below Average Income datasets for Northern Ireland. In April 2002 the Family Resources Survey was extended to include households in Northern Ireland, resulting in 2002/03 analysis being the earliest available for Northern Ireland. Analysis of poverty previous to this was only available at the Great Britain level. The latest available information is from the 2010/11 survey year. Results for 2011/12 are expected in June of 2013.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the number of existing Housing Executive homes that will benefit from the double glazing scheme; and how many of these are in the East Londonderry constituency.

(AQW 15185/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive currently has 22,500 dwellings programmed for double glazing installation over the three year period 2012/13 to 2014/15.

Of these dwellings 1,119 are in the East Londonderry constituency. Three schemes involving 289 dwellings are currently on site. Another scheme for 264 dwellings is due on site in January 2013. The remaining 566 dwellings will be addressed over the next two years through the new double glazing contract being introduced in late January 2013.

Public Procurement: Social Clauses

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development how he will ensure that the definition of social clauses in public contracts reflects the maximum requirement from Central Procurement Directorate guidance and is not defined as a twenty six weeks steps to work scheme.

(AQW 15186/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In accordance with the Programme for Government commitment and Central Procurement Directorate's guidance, my department considers the inclusion of social clauses in all public procurement contracts for supplies, services

and construction. This is considered on a project by project basis, to determine which social considerations are relevant to the needs and the obligations to be met by the procurement. Any relevant social considerations are/will be clearly stated in tender documentation. My department promotes that public procurement should be undertaken and managed via a Centre of Procurement Expertise namely Central Procurement Directorate within the Department of Finance and Personnel. Subsequently this helps to ensure that social clauses are included where appropriate.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing

Mrs Dobson asked Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 13996/11-15, why the Housing Executive does not designate properties as older person's dwellings or non-older person's dwellings; and how it is able to prioritise works, such as single glazed window replacement, for elderly and vulnerable tenants.

(AQW 15199/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive does not designate properties as older person's dwellings or non-older person's dwellings because in accordance with the housing selection scheme accommodation is allocated on the basis of applicant's housing needs, as determined by the totality of their circumstances and not on the basis of their age.

The only exception to this is the sheltered housing scheme at Ardavan in North Belfast which is restricted to households aged over 55 years old, reflecting the purpose for which sheltered housing complexes were originally constructed.

With regard to the second point, the prioritisation of planned maintenance works, such as single glazed window replacement schemes, is on the basis of the lifecycle and condition of such a component and will conventionally be addressed on a "worst first" basis.

Housing Executive: Window Replacement

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the current arrangements for replacing windows in Housing Executive properties which are damaged as a result of accident or vandalism; and whether single glazed windows are replaced on a like-for-like basis in such circumstances.

(AQW 15200/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that under its general conditions of tenancy the responsibility for replacement of glass lies with the tenant. Under Schedule 4 of the Conditions of Tenancy the Housing Executive is responsible for, "...work including structural repairs to external walls, external doors, windows (but not glass, roofs....". In exceptions where the Housing Executive does replace glass, the policy is to replace glass on a like-for like basis. However, if the window requires replacement of both the frame and glass the Housing Executive will replace with a double glazed unit.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 13996/11-15, (i) what steps he has taken to ensure that a new double glazing contract will be in place for January 2013; (ii) why such a contract can not be put in place sooner; and (iii) whether funds will be returned to the Executive by his Department as a result of such a contract not being in place.

(AQW 15201/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In relation to (i) the Housing Executive is currently working on the tender documentation for the commencement of a procurement exercise that will deliver a specific double glazing contract. The procurement plan has scheduled a start date of February 2013 subject to a legal challenge not being made.

In relation to (ii) the Housing Executive currently has a contract in place which includes the provision of window replacements. This contract expires on 27 January 2013. An earlier start to the new double glazing contract may attract a legal challenge.

Finally, in relation to (iii) the Housing Executive anticipates spending the 2012/13 budget amount allocated for double glazing in full.

Social Fund: Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development how many successful applications have been made to the Social Fund in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15214/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Social Fund Awards

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Sure Start Maternity Grants	8,842	10,064	9,904	10,453	3,994
Funeral Payments	2,508	2,657	2,612	2,639	2,421
Community Care Grants	25,899	26,797	24,936	24,110	23,822

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Budgeting Loans	96,430	100,497	104,560	120,096	118,698
Crisis Loans	78,621	101,271	116,746	122,903	114,492
Total	212,300	241,286	258,758	280,201	263,427

Social Housing: People with Disabilities

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing properties are available for people with disabilities.

(AQW 15247/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available in the format requested as it is the nature of the disability which dictates whether or not accommodation is suitable for an individual's needs and many social housing properties have had adaptations carried out for people with disabilities. For example, a profoundly deaf person can live in the same type of housing as hearing persons while requiring only some approved equipment to offer assistance answering the door and telephone.

The Housing Executive provides an adaptation service for tenants or members of their household who have a disability. Provision of suitable social housing for people with disabilities can be achieved through a variety of options. In addition, of a current total stock of 89,780 properties, the total bungalow stock is 18,349, of which 6,767 are described as meeting mobility standards. Ground floor flat stock is currently 8,601.

Housing Associations advise that in the main all accommodation in the Housing Association sector is available for people with disabilities although some would not be suitable to certain disabilities e.g. wheelchair accessible. Also many Housing Association properties have been built to Lifetime Homes Standards which means they are easily adaptable to meet the needs of disabled residents.

The Housing Executive is currently working on the development of the Accessible Housing Register. This is an information tool that will enable the Housing Executive to make better decisions on the identification of properties that may meet the needs of specific groups of applicants on the waiting list. Initially the Register will consist of Housing Executive stock only, holding data on the various types of property available within each area and identify properties that have been adapted. The Housing Executive is working with Housing Associations to discuss the logistics of including Housing Association stock in such a register.

Social Housing: Adaptations

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses have had to be adapted for people with disabilities in the last five years; and what was the total cost of these adaptations.

(AQW 15248/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available in the format requested as the figures provided relate to adaptation works, not houses, and there will also be instances of houses being subject to more than one adaptation. However, the Housing Executive has confirmed that it carried out 29,015 major and minor adaptations to its housing stock, at a cost of £69.4million. A further 7,638 adaptations were completed to properties in the private sector, for which £77m was provided in Disabled Facilities Grant Aid.

The Housing Executive also administered funding of £11m in Disabled Facilities Grant for the Housing Association sector facilitating 6,080 adaptations.

Housing Associations have advised that they have carried out a further 1,745 adaptations to their own stock over the last five years, at a cost of £1.7m which has not been grant funded.

Housing: Complex Housing Needs

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development for his Department's definition of complex housing needs.

(AQW 15249/11-15)

Mr McCausland: While my Department does not have a definition for people with complex housing needs, applicants with intense care or support needs will be considered, for the purposes of the Housing Selection Scheme, as being "Complex Needs Applicants" People requiring adapted or purpose built accommodation, such as wheelchair accommodation, and who do not have intense care / support needs are not considered to be Complex Needs applicants for the purposes of the Housing Selection Scheme.

The procedures involve a multi-disciplinary approach between housing and Health and Social Services personnel in the identification of Complex Needs applicants and agreement on the most suitable re-housing options available to them. The two main housing options for such applicants are:

- a Supported Housing Option.

- b General Needs Accommodation Option - with an agreed, tailored care package for the relevant Applicant, or household member.

The Housing Selection Scheme contains the following information on Complex Needs:-

- Some applicants may have special circumstances which mean they require intensive care and support.
- This need may be met in a specialist housing scheme, where additional support or care services are provided or in general housing where a tailored support and care package has been arranged.
- Where a specialist scheme is considered appropriate, applicants will be placed on a separate, non-pointed waiting list.
- Where support and care can be provided within general housing, applicants may be awarded additional points under the Health and Social Well-Being category

The Housing Association Guide places the emphasis on Supported Housing as being that which caters for people with a need for a more supportive and intensive style of housing management than is found in 'ordinary' housing. The Guide advises that there is a reluctance to label people who have complex needs as various groups are covered e.g. learning, mental health related problems, or a combination of problems.

Community Asset Transfer: Legislation

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Social Development when he proposes to bring Community Asset Transfer legislation to the Executive, in line with his Programme for Government commitment.

(AQW 15267/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department's commitment under the Programme for Government is to develop policy to support Community Asset Transfer. A cross-Departmental Steering Group has recently been established to govern this process. The question of whether legislation is needed in Northern Ireland will be considered by the Steering Group and will ultimately be a matter for the Executive to determine.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Social Development how many households in each constituency are in fuel poverty in relation to those which spend (i) 10 percent; and (ii) 20 percent of their household income on fuel.

(AQW 15275/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested. The table overleaf details the number of households in fuel poverty, taken from the 2009 House Condition Survey, and is shown by proposed review of public administration council areas.

I expect that latest findings from the 2011 House Condition Survey to be available in the coming weeks and these results will include updated fuel poverty statistics from Northern Ireland.

Proposed RPA Council Areas	Near Fuel Poverty (0.1 -10%)	Marginal Fuel Poverty (10.1-15%)	Moderate/Severe Fuel Poverty (15.1 to >20%)	Total
Belfast	67,578	30,036	26,166	123,780
	54.60%	24.30%	21.10%	100%
Derry City & Strabane	30,518	12,433	10,644	53,595
	56.90%	23.20%	19.90%	100%
Armagh City & Bann	38,724	17,694	15,701	72,119
	53.70%	24.50%	21.80%	100%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	44,760	11,786	15,893	72,439
	61.80%	16.30%	21.90%	100%
Newry and Down	29,435	14,264	14,115	57,814
	50.90%	24.70%	24.40%	100%
Antrim & Newtownabbey	30,607	12,304	10,253	53,164
	57.60%	23.10%	19.30%	100%
Ards and North Down	37,089	15,791	12,864	65,744
	56.40%	24.00%	19.60%	100%

Proposed RPA Council Areas	Near Fuel Poverty (0.1 -10%)	Marginal Fuel Poverty (10.1-15%)	Moderate/Severe Fuel Poverty (15.1 to >20%)	Total
Causeway Coast	32,473	11,365	13,913	57,751
	56.20%	19.70%	24.10%	100%
Fermanagh & Omagh	22,000	7,193	9,253	38,446
	57.20%	18.70%	24.10%	100%
Mid Antrim	30,462	13,419	9,790	53,671
	56.80%	25.00%	18.20%	100%
Mid Ulster	25,499	5,689	11,744	42,932
	59.40%	13.30%	27.40%	100%
Total	389,145	151,974	150,336	691,455
	56.30%	22.00%	21.70%	100%

Numbers are too small to permit disaggregation below the level on the table. The >20% as a group by proposed RPA has figures that are too small to be meaningful.

Please note that numbers are estimates and should be rounded if quoting. Caution should be used with smaller numbers (6,000 – 9,000 range).

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Older People: Poverty

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Social Development what action he will take to reduce the poverty experienced by older people. (AQW 15276/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department delivers a range of measures to tackle poverty and disadvantage. Two of these measures have a particular focus on older people: Benefit Uptake and Fuel Poverty.

Whilst not a statutory requirement, my Department has demonstrated a very clear commitment to working across government to tackle income poverty by diverting almost £4m to date to a range of proactive, evidence based approaches to inform people about the range of benefits that they could be entitled to, to encourage them to have a full and confidential entitlement check; and, where entitlement is identified, to make a claim.

This investment to date has generated over £50m in additional annual benefit, £40m of which went to those aged 60 and over.

This year the 2012/13 Benefit Uptake Programme will include four direct targeting exercises aimed at providing 27,000 older people with an opportunity to receive a full benefit entitlement check. It will also include a wide ranging multi channel promotional campaign, which will seek to build on the success of the Make the Call advertising campaign. The campaign will include different types of advertising and a range of promotional approaches to help increase the uptake of benefits. Building on some pilot work that the Social Security Agency has been trialling, engagement with partners over and above traditional (advice sector) partners are being explored and all opportunities optimised. These include churches and faith based groups, community and sports/community development organisations and civic partners.

A new three year Strategy for Improving Benefit Uptake will be launched for consultation later this year.

To help address Fuel Poverty, my Department will continue to deliver mainstream schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme and the Housing Executive's Heating Replacement Scheme for older people and others and is working on a number of new projects to tackle fuel poverty.

I recently launched a new Boiler Replacement Scheme, following on from the pilot scheme which ended in March 2012. The scheme offers a grant of up to £1,000, to older people and others, towards the cost of replacing old, inefficient boilers, depending on householders income. The level of grant also depends on whether householders replace oil with oil or gas and whether controls are also installed.

My Department has recently commenced an Affordable Warmth pilot, working with OFMdfM, DARD, the University of Ulster, Housing Executive and a number of local councils to target areas of high fuel poverty. This area based approach will deliver energy efficiency improvements to homes in small concentrated areas. The University of Ulster have developed a sophisticated targeting methodology which can identify areas of poor housing and low incomes which could indicate a high prevalence of fuel poverty.

In February 2012 a Pay as You Go for Oil pilot was launched in conjunction with Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services. This exciting new technology offers householders an opportunity to pay of oil as they use it, similar to the process that is in place for electricity and gas. The technology was piloted for 3 months and both the evaluation from Carillion Energy

Services and an independent evaluation by the Housing Executive have been extremely positive. Officials are having on-going discussions about the development of a Pay as You Go Oil system which could be rolled out in future energy efficiency schemes.

National Insurance Numbers: Foreign Nationals

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many National Insurance numbers have been issued to foreign nationals in each year since 2000; and (ii) to list (a) the twenty countries which had the most National Insurance numbers issued to their nationals; and (b) the total number issued for each country.

(AQW 15299/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information regarding how many National Insurance numbers have been issued to foreign nationals is only available from June 2005 and is set out in the table below.

Period	National Insurance numbers issued
June 2005 – March 2006	14,054
April 2006 – March 2007	19,856
April 2007 – March 2008	16,744
April 2008 – March 2009	12,486
April 2009 – March 2010	9,016
April 2010 – March 2011	9,756
April 2011 – March 2012	9,039
April 2012 – Sept 2012	4,244

The information regarding the nationality is only available from April 2008. The table below lists the top twenty countries and the numbers of national Insurance Numbers issued to their nationals during the period April 2008 – Sept 2012.

Nationality	April 08 – March 09	April 09 – March 10	April 10 – March 11	April 11 – March 12	April 12 – Sept 12	Total
Polish	3192	1815	1746	1683	941	9377
Irish	1380	1690	1883	1793	965	7711
Lithuanian	1135	1088	1517	1149	507	5396
Slovakian	862	313	370	314	193	2052
Latvian	397	544	562	351	124	1978
Portugese	481	300	409	472	235	1897
Hungarian	369	238	256	324	215	1402
Indian	350	273	350	275	90	1338
Chinese	286	240	283	70	59	938
Romanian	138	294	272	165	30	899
Spanish	147	150	191	213	138	839
French	178	149	131	128	71	657
Bulgarian	275	139	100	104	22	640
Czech Rep	240	110	90	93	39	572
American	124	115	131	101	43	514
German	98	96	122	122	70	508
Filipino	170	134	128	44	18	494
Italian	66	80	100	121	53	420
Australian	99	81	62	59	24	325
South African	59	30	35	7	9	140
Total	10046	7879	8738	7588	3846	38097

Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development which areas of the Neighbourhood Renewal plans are still to be implemented for the Kilcooley Estate in Bangor.

(AQW 15308/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Kilcooley Neighbourhood Partnership's Action Plan sets out priorities for implementing Neighbourhood Renewal through to 2015. The action plan is reviewed yearly by the Neighbourhood Partnership with new actions and projects added. The areas of the plan remaining to be implemented, which may attract Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund assistance, include:

- support for local community infrastructure;
- training and pre-employment;
- childcare;
- restorative justice;
- healthcare; and
- numeracy and literacy programmes.

The Department is also working with the Partnership on a number of potential capital projects to enhance local community and sports facilities.

Welfare Reform Bill: Jobs at Risk

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development what communication he has received from the Department for Work and Pensions regarding a risk to Social Security jobs in Northern Ireland should there be a delay in the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill.

(AQW 15366/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since being appointed Minister for Social Development in May 2011, I have met regularly Department for Work and Pensions Ministers to discuss Welfare Reform. At these meetings I have sought assurances that the jobs in both the Social Security Agency's Belfast Benefit Centre and Child Maintenance and Enforcement, which support customers in Great Britain, will continue to remain in Northern Ireland. Whilst the Department for Work and Pensions Ministers have been sympathetic to my viewpoint, they have not, to date, been in a position to provide me with that assurance. The Belfast Benefit Centre was not successful in Department for Work and Pensions' recent Universal Credit site selection Phase 1 and, at my meeting with Lord Freud this week, I will once again restate the importance of these jobs to Northern Ireland.

Around 1,400 Northern Ireland staff jobs are currently employed in providing services to Department for Work and Pensions in Great Britain. These jobs may be at risk if Northern Ireland does not progress with welfare reform because many of the competitive advantages which Northern Ireland offers the Department for Work and Pensions will disappear as the staff will no longer be operating the same social security systems.

Welfare Reform Bill: HMRC Staff

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development whether any employees of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs will become Northern Ireland Civil Service staff if the Welfare Reform Bill becomes law.

(AQW 15435/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Welfare Reform Bill seeks to make changes to a number of existing benefits and to introduce a Universal Credit. Universal Credit will replace Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit which are presently administered by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

My officials continue to work closely with colleagues from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. This work includes consideration of the organisational and staffing implications of Welfare Reform.

At this stage no decisions have been taken regarding implications for staff.

Fuel Poverty: Social Development Committee Report

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development if she has fully considered, and agreed to adopt, the recommendations contained in the recent Committee for Social Development Report on Fuel Poverty.

(AQO 2722/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In May 2012, I welcomed the report produced by the Committee for Social Development on Fuel Poverty. The Inter Departmental Group on Fuel Poverty and the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group have been amalgamated into the Cross Sectoral Fuel Poverty Partnership and the key recommendation to develop thematic action groups is very much in line with my department's approach. I am confident that the approach taken by my department will meet the recommendations of the Committee.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Union Flag

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether it will review the days on which the Union Flag is flown from Parliament Buildings to include Ulster Day.

(AQW 14891/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The arrangements for the flying of the Union flag from government buildings in Northern Ireland are set out by the Flags Regulations (NI) 2000, as amended by the Flags Regulation (NI) (Amendment) 2002. The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission follows these Regulations.

A list of designated days under the Regulations are issued each year, generally 15 in total and I have attached for your information, the anticipated timetable for flags in 2012. There are exceptions to flying only the Union flag. For example, on Commonwealth Day the regulations permit the flying of the Commonwealth flag alongside the Union flag on a building with two poles. On Europe day the regulations permit the flying of the European Flag alongside the Union Flag.

The Assembly Commission operates within existing statutory guidance in this area. Your question will be brought to the attention of the Assembly Commission at a future meeting.

2012 - DAYS FOR HOISTING FLAGS ON GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE FLAGS REGULATIONS

- 20 January Birthday of The Countess of Wessex
- 6 February Her Majesty's Accession
- 19 February Birthday of The Duke of York
- 10 March Birthday of The Earl of Wessex
- 12 March Commonwealth Day#
- 17 March St Patrick's Day
- 21 April Birthday of Her Majesty The Queen
- 9 May Europe Day
- 2 June Coronation Day
- 10 June Birthday of The Duke of Edinburgh
- 16 June The Queen's Official Birthday*
- 15 August Birthday of The Princess Royal
- 11 November Remembrance Sunday**
- 14 November Birthday of The Prince of Wales
- 20 November Anniversary of Her Majesty's Wedding

Notes:

Commonwealth Day is the second Monday in March

* The day appointed for the official celebration of Her Majesty's Birthday

** Remembrance Sunday is the second Sunday in November. Flags should be flown right up all day and not at half- mast.

Dates confirmed by publication in the Belfast Gazette on Friday 27 January 2012

On the above days flags should fly from 8am until sunset

Pensions: Ministers/MLAs

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission to detail the pensions paid to former and current MLAs and Executive Ministers in the 2011/12 financial year; and to provide a breakdown of the amount received by each individual.

(AQW 15048/11-15)

Mr Weir (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The total value of the pensions paid to former Members of the Assembly and to the dependents of deceased former Members of the Assembly is published each year in the Pension Scheme Annual Report and Accounts. The accounts for the 2011-12 financial year are due to be laid before the Assembly by 31 October 2012.

Five MLAs are appointed by the Assembly as Trustees of the Assembly Members' Pension Scheme. The Trustees are responsible for ensuring the pension scheme is administered in accordance with the scheme rules and pensions legislation. Pensions are calculated according to the Scheme Rules and with reference to a number of factors including whether the Member transferred service from another pension arrangement or purchased added years of service in the scheme. In this regard, the Assembly Commission is not responsible for the disbursement of pension benefits.

The Trustees are registered as data controllers in respect of pension scheme information and are of the opinion that it is reasonable for the Scheme's pensioners to expect that their financial details are not disclosed in such a way that they could be identified. Therefore, the Trustees have not provided a breakdown of individuals and their pension amounts. The total value of the pensions paid over the 2011-12 year was £752,881 in respect of 69 pensioners and individual pensions range from approximately £500 per annum to £16,000 per annum.

Pensions are paid to Members only when they leave the Assembly. A Member may not receive a salary as a Member and a pension simultaneously. The additional pension due to Ministers is calculated using the same formula as the additional pension due to any other Assembly Officeholder. There are no special Ministerial pension arrangements.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 26 October 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Child Abuse: Non-institutional Settings

Mr P Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what options are being explored, or will be put in place, to hear and investigate the cases of abuse from children in foster care and non-state run residential children's homes.
(AQW 14930/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Any institutions here that fall within the definition set out in the Terms of Reference will be within the scope of the Inquiry into historical institutional abuse, that is: "any body, society or organisation with responsibility for the care, health or welfare of children in Northern Ireland, other than a school (but including a training school or borstal) which, during the relevant period, provided residential accommodation and took decisions about and made provision for the day to day care of children".

The issue of child abuse outside the institutional setting is no less important or emotive than that which will be investigated by the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. As such, the Executive will have to give careful consideration as to how it should be dealt with following the Inquiry.

Judicial Appointments Commission: Lay Members

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) who sat on the selection panel giving rise to the recent appointment of lay members to the NI Judicial Appointments Commission; (ii) how many applications were received; (iii) how many applicants were interviewed; and (iv) how many names forwarded for consideration by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 15133/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:

- (i) The selection panel for the competition to appoint lay members to the NI Judicial Appointments Commission comprised a Chair and three panel members. Frank Duffy the Director of Arms Length Bodies and Financial Governance in OFMDFM chaired the panel. The members of the panel were Gareth Johnston the Head of Criminal Justice Policy and Legislation Division of the Department of Justice, Edward Gorrings the Chief Executive of NIJAC, and Orla Moore an independent assessor.
- (ii) Eighty-seven applications were received.
- (iii) Nine candidates were invited to interview and eight candidates attended.
- (iv) Four names were put forward for consideration by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Scope

Mr Clarke asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any consideration has been given to widening the scope of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry.

(AQO 2569/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We have agreed to amend the starting parameter for the Inquiry from 1945 to 1922. However, we are content that the current scope, as outlined in the Terms of Reference definition of "institution", remains the same.

OFMDFM: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15256/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: No apprentices have been employed in our department through departmental contracts this financial year.

Social Investment Fund

Mrs Dobson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any money which has been allocated from the Social Investment Fund to date.

(AQW 15293/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Monies to date have been allocated to taking forward the necessary work to finalise the policy proposals and to establish the Steering Groups in the Social Investment Zones.

Further funding has recently been allocated to appoint consultants to support the Steering Groups to develop the strategic area plans. This spend will be incurred over the area planning stage, with a view to having plans submitted to the Department by February 2013.

Former MoD Lands: Costs

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the approximate annual maintenance, security and other associated costs of the former Ministry of Defence lands that are currently under their Department's ownership.

(AQW 15452/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The approximate annual maintenance, security and other associated costs of the former Ministry of Defence lands that are currently under the Department's ownership are as follows:

	Maintenance (£)	Security (£)	Other Associated costs (£)
Maze/Long Kesh	22,706	144,478	3,106
Crumlin Road Gaol	91,212	78,686*	40,692
Ebrington	58,675	135,946	40,491
St Lucia, Omagh	8,920	42,304	4,348
St Patrick's, Ballymena	37,671	223,945	8,980
Shackleton, Ballykelly	174,592	262,995	48,695

* Security costs for the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood site are shared equally between OFMDFM and DSD. OFMDFM pays the security costs for the first 6 months and DSD the security costs for the last 6 months.

DFP: Press Releases/Press Association

Mr Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will issue a directive to their staff to ensure that the ban from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the issuing of press releases to the Press Association is lifted immediately and that the Executive Information Service will ensure that a free press is respected.

(AQW 15468/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There is no ban from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the issuing of press releases to the Press Association.

Social Investment Fund

Ms P Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the Social Investment Fund.

(AQO 2644/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Following Executive agreement to the final operation of the Social Investment Fund, political and community steering group membership has been finalised and appointed.

A two-day workshop was held in Crumlin Road Gaol on 17 and 18 October. We have set aside a four-month period for the area planning process; we expect to have completed plans, supported by economic appraisals, for proposed projects, with the Department by February 2013.

We are also driving change through our announcement on 10 October in relation to 6 signature projects to immediately begin addressing some of our most intractable social and economic issues.

OFMDFM: Disposals through Auctions

Mr McNarry asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the items which their Department has disposed of at auctions in (i) 2010/11; and (ii) 2011/12, including the auction value of each item.

(AQW 15621/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has not disposed of any items at auctions in either 2010/2011 or 2011/2012.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any money will be returned from the Social Investment Fund as part of the October Monitoring Round.

(AQO 2646/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As an Executive fund, the Social Investment Fund monies do not sit within the OFMDFM Budget line but are held centrally by DFP. The issue of return of funding is therefore not relevant to Executive funds.

Older People's Strategy

Mr McElduff asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Older People Strategy.

(AQO 2649/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Officials have been working closely with the Ageing Strategy Advisory Group, which includes representatives of many of the organisations that work with older people here and is chaired by Claire Keatinge, the Commissioner for Older People.

Officials have benefitted enormously from the regular meetings with the Advisory Group in recent months and its expertise and advice has led to the draft Strategy being extensively reworked to reflect best practice. Junior Ministers have also met with Claire Keatinge and discussed the development of the Strategy and are currently arranging to meet with representatives from the Age Sector on this issue and related matters.

Accordingly, the content of the Strategy has been informed by people who work closely with older people and also by older people who are active in the voluntary and community sector.

We have also benefitted greatly from the advice of Alan Walker, Professor of Social Policy and Social Gerontology at the University of Sheffield and we would like to thank Professor Walker for his input to the development of the Strategy, particularly on the importance of the Active Ageing agenda.

The focus now in our work with the Advisory Group is on the proposed draft plan to implement the Strategy. We are currently developing draft work programmes to enable this strategy to be implemented through the Delivering Social Change framework.

This new framework aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages, thus breaking the long-term cycle of multi-generational problems.

We are taking a radical new approach with this delivery framework. It has clearly defined governance structures, and is designed to pursue a smaller number of additional key objectives in order to add real value.

Officials met the Advisory Group on 16 October to discuss the work programme proposals and the implementation timeline. Following public consultation in the coming months on both the strategy and the work programmes, our intention is that the final Strategy will be published in 2013. This will include consultee views on the priority work programmes and will initiate high-level strategic projects to address the key issues facing older people. These projects will be additional to ongoing work in departments. They will adopt a joined-up approach to the issues and have project targets and deadlines.

Gender Equality Strategy

Ms Brown asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps their Department has taken to increase gender awareness.

(AQO 2652/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our Department leads the implementation of the Executive's Gender Equality Strategy. The Strategy provides a framework for addressing identified gender inequalities across all policy areas and is being taken forward by departments via Gender Equality Action Plans. We liaise with departments on the content and delivery of these Action Plans.

We will shortly be initiating a review of the Gender Equality Strategy, including the Action Plans.

Economy: Executive Meeting

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to convene a special Executive meeting to discuss the economy.

(AQO 2655/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: An Executive meeting dedicated to the economy will be held at the end of this month.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Childcare Strategy will be published.

(AQO 2656/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Work on a consultation document is at an advanced stage and will be published shortly. The Strategy will be published following consideration of the consultation responses, and Executive agreement.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

DARD Headquarters: Savings

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of the expected savings that will be made from moving the departmental headquarters to Ballykelly, rather than relocating it to a green field site.

(AQW 14682/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): The estimated cost of providing modern office accommodation for headquarters staff is £26m. It follows that by using the Executive-owned site, and utilising the buildings on the site, there is potential to reduce the cost of relocation significantly.

I have asked my officials to produce a business case detailing the options available at Ballykelly. The final cost of the project will be dependent upon the agreed configuration.

Animal Welfare: Maximum Sentence

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many people have received the new maximum sentence for animal cruelty offences since its introduction.

(AQW 14974/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The new penalties for animal welfare offences were introduced in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 and became fully operational on 2 April 2012.

My Department does not hold the information you ask for. However I have sought input from the Department of Justice who inform me that given the recency of the introduction of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, figures in relation to the new maximum sentence for animal cruelty offences have not yet fed through onto their convictions database, which records verified information.

However, the Department of Justice has advised me that it appears from provisional management information that the maximum penalty has not yet been imposed in any case.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many formal appeals have been received by her Department under the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme in each of the last four years.

(AQW 15090/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The start date for the first agreements for the NICMS was 1 January 2009 and the first claims for NICMS were made in May 2009. At 11 October 2012, the number of appeals received by DARD in each of the last four years is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The numbers of NICMS appeals received by DARD

Claim year	Appeals
2009	0
2010	0
2011	24
2012	34
Total	58

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the process to lodge a formal complaint under the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme.

(AQW 15091/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Participants in the NI Countryside Management Scheme may appeal against a penalty applied their payment. The appeals procedure is included in Annex A (placed in library).

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a formal complaints procedure which is included in Annex B (placed in library).

DARD: LGBT Sector

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what work her Department is undertaking to support the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community.

(AQW 15125/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to announce that my Department will co-fund a research project with the Rainbow Project to identify issues impacting on the LGBT sector in rural areas. This research will identify barriers to accessing services for the LGBT community as well as detailing experiences around homophobia and community safety.

All DARD staff undergo "Diversity Now" training to raise awareness of their responsibility to treat co-workers with respect. However, should an individual believe they have been treated unfairly because of their sexual orientation staff may use the NICS Dignity at work policy to address any workplace issues. Harassment Contact Officers offer advice and support on an informal basis and Equal Opportunities Section in addition to advice and support offer mediation services.

DARD's Equality Branch Intranet site has dedicated pages on Sexual Orientation and Transgender issues. These pages provide useful information for our staff and policy makers such as latest Equality Commission publications, information about civil partnerships, research material and statistical information; links to recent reports such as the Yogyakarta Principles, and contact details of LGBT organisations. The information available is regularly updated with new publications and circulated to business areas for their information.

A specially developed programme, Building a Culture of Respect, is being rolled out to Customer Service Improvement Branch (CSIB) staff in local DARD Direct offices. This supports good staff interactions internally, but also positively enhances awareness amongst staff of the need to deal fairly and inclusively with everyone. To date it has been rolled out in the majority of DARD Direct offices and plans are in place to continue with this until all staff across the network have been provided with an opportunity to participate. DARD Direct offices also provide a facility for local charities and not-for-profit organisations to make leaflets available to callers to the office, including those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides its students with contact points for organisations who will provide appropriate support in relation to sexual identity. The College has a student support officer who can advise students in relation to specific concerns, a 24 hour confidential helpline and a free counselling service. The College has policies on sexual identity, equality and harassment and these are published on Blackboard, the student Virtual Learning Environment.

Eggs: Illegal/Non-compliant

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many illegal eggs have been seized in the last 12 months.

(AQW 15211/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has seized no illegal or non compliant eggs during the past 12 months.

EU Egg Marketing Regulations require all Class A hen eggs placed on the market to be labelled with their method of production and to comply with certain quality, weight and labelling provisions. My Department's inspectors take enforcement action to control the marketing of any batches of eggs found to be in breach of these provisions.

In the last 12 months, Egg Marketing enforcement action has been taken to prevent eggs which failed to meet minimum quality criteria from being placed on the Class A market. These eggs may be used for processing or disposed of as Animal By-product.

During the past 12 months a small number of consignments of eggs from other Member States have been encountered. Origin details of these consignments were checked against Member States' lists of compliant premises or details confirmed directly with the Member State's Competent Authority. All eggs were found to be compliant with production method criteria. One consignment failed to meet minimum quality standards and were prevented from being placed on the Class A market.

DARD Headquarters: Relocation

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the scores allocated to each of the twenty three potential locations for DARD headquarters; and (ii) whether the proximity to other DARD services, such as the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, were taken into consideration when ranking the locations.

(AQW 15215/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Score of the 23 Potential Locations

Location	Score	Location	Score
Antrim	30	Down	53
Ards	50	Dungannon	49
Armagh	44	Fermanagh	41
Ballymena	35	Larne	45
Banbridge	57	Limavady	59
Belfast	34	Lisburn	24
Carrickfergus	17	Newry & Mourne	56
Castlereagh	20	Newtownabbey	21
Coleraine	37	North Down	23
Cookstown	53	Omagh	42
Craigavon	49	Strabane	73
Derry	51		

With the availability of modern information and communication technology, the proximity to other DARD services was not considered as a factor which should influence the decision on the location of the new Headquarters.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she intends to proceed with the recently announced Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme.

(AQW 15237/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I would refer you to the reply I gave the Member for Strangford on 11 October 2012 in response to AQW 13173/11-15.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the £4 million allocated for the Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme will be made available for other projects, if she does not proceed with the scheme.

(AQW 15239/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I would refer you to the reply I gave the Member for Strangford on 11 October 2012 in response to AQW 13174/11-15

DARD: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15257/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: No apprentices have been employed within DARD through Departmental contracts in this financial year.

Ballykelly Forest: Maintenance

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much has been spent on maintenance and improvement work at the Ballykelly Forest in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15287/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The direct costs associated with maintenance and improvement work carried out at Ballykelly Forest in each of the last 3 years is as follows:-

2009/2010	£2,794
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2010/2011	£1,248
2011/2012	£1,753

Rural Development Programme: Axis 3

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the operating rules of Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme prevent groups of residents, who are opposed to a funding application from, meeting the board of a Rural Area Partnership to express their concerns.

(AQW 15302/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: All eligible applications to Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme are considered objectively by an assessment panel and are scored, based solely on evidence, in an open competitive process. An economic appraisal is one of the key documents presented to the panel and provides the evidence for decision making, covering a range of issues including project sustainability and information from key informants. Neither the applicant or any person outside the Local Action Group assessment panel members can participate in the selection panel. Only those projects meeting a specific threshold are funded. It is important to make sure that this process is consistent across the local action groups and transparent.

Loughs Agency: Boat Patrols

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many boat patrols the Lough Agency's patrol staff have carried out off the Co Antrim coast in each of last 12 months.

(AQW 15303/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As the waters off the Co. Antrim coast are within the DCAL jurisdiction and DCAL has not requested Loughs Agency within the last 12 months to assist with or provide boat patrols for this area, the Agency has not carried out any patrols in this area. DCAL enforcement staff have had meetings with Loughs Agency staff to discuss enforcement issues, share intelligence and assist each other in relation to investigations into illegal fishing activity. DARD Sea Fisheries inspectorate staff and equipment have been used to carry out enforcement duties in the DCAL area. Intelligence on illegal fishing activity is shared between both Departments and joint sea patrols have routinely been carried out in the past.

Rural Development Programme: Voluntary Modulation Moneys

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of voluntary modulation monies are assigned to each Axis of the Rural Development Programme.

(AQW 15355/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The percentage of voluntary modulation monies assigned to each Axis of the Rural Development Programme 2007 – 13 is shown below.

	% of VM Allocation Assigned to each Axis
Axis 1	22.8
Axis 2	50.2
Axis 3	0
Axis 4	23.8
Axis 5	3.2

Rural Development Programme: Voluntary Modulation Moneys

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of voluntary modulation monies allocated in each of the last four years.

(AQW 15356/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The amount of voluntary modulation monies allocated to the NIRD in each of the last four years are as follows:

2009	€21,697,224
2010	€19,724,801
2011	€20,602,256
2012	€21,496,137

These amounts are deducted from Pillar 1 Direct Payments in the previous scheme year. For example, the 2012 amount of €21,496,137 was deducted from the 2011 SFP.

Rural Development Programme: Axes 1–4

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures are covered under each Axis of the Rural Development Programme.

(AQW 15357/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-2013 is designed to bring together a wide range of support for the farming, forestry and primary processing sectors; rural enterprise and business development; diversification; and rural tourism. There are four Axes under the Programme:

Axis 1 Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector.

Axis 2 Improving the environment and the countryside

Axis 3 Delivery of the LEADER approach

Axis 4 Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy

I have attached a table detailing the Measures and schemes under each Axis.

Annex

Axis		Measure	Schemes
1	1.1	Vocational Training and Information Actions	Benchmarking Farm Family Options Focus Farms
	1.2	Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability	The Agricultural and Forestry Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG) Scheme
	1.3	Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings	Farm modernisation programme (FMP) Short Rotation Coppice Programme (SRC) Manure Efficiency Technology Scheme (METS)
	1.4	Supply Chain Development Programme	
2	2.1	Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowances Scheme	
	2.2	Agri-Environment Programme	Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) The Organic Farming Scheme (OFS)
	2.3	First Afforestation (forest expansion)	The Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) The Farm Woodland Premium Scheme (FWPS)
	2.4	Forest Environments	
	2.5	Forest Management	
3	3.1	Diversification into non-agricultural activities	
	3.2	Business creation and development	
	3.3	Encouragement of tourism activities	
	3.4	Basic Services for the economy and rural population	
	3.5	Village renewal and development	
	3.6	Conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage	
4	4.1	Implementation of Local Development Strategies	
	4.2	Inter-territorial and Transnational Co-operation	

Axis		Measure	Schemes
	4.3	Running costs, Acquisition of skills and Animation	

Forest Service: Job Locations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the location of Forest Service jobs in each constituency.

(AQW 15363/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The location of Forest Service jobs in each constituency are as follows:

Dundonald House	Belfast East
Castlewellan Forest Park Office	South Down
Tollymore Forest Park	South Down
Rostrevor Forest	South Down
Enniskillen Forest Office	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Mallaghfad Forest	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Kesh Forest	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Lough Navar Forest	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Florence Court Forest Park	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Pubble Workshop	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Garvagh Forest Office	East Derry
Somerset Workshop	East Derry
Springwell Forest	East Derry
Gosford Forest Park	Newry & Armagh
Hillsborough Workshop	Lagan Valley
Belvoir Park Forest	Belfast South
Glenariff Forest Park	East Antrim
Parkanaur Forest Park	Mid Ulster
Portglenone Forest	North Antrim
Pomeroy Forest	Mid Ulster
Drum Manor Forest Park	Mid Ulster
Derrynoid Forest	Mid Ulster
Lough Braden Forest	West Tyrone
Castlederg Forest	West Tyrone
Gortin Glen Forest Park	West Tyrone

Countryside Management Scheme

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of Countryside Management Schemes for 2011 which remain unpaid; (ii) the total value of unpaid cases; and (iii) the date by which they will be paid in full.

(AQW 15398/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department received 903 claims for the NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS). Payment processing began in September 2012. (i) At 8 October 2012, 106 payments have been processed and 797 payments have yet to be paid. (ii) Each claim that is currently being processed must be validated before a payment can be made. The value of claims cannot be quantified until the validation and payment process is complete, however I can confirm that at 8 October 2012 over £315,000 had been paid to claimants. (iii) On-going payment of claims will continue into November, and the timescale for completion of payments may be affected by the requirement to complete additional inspections. Claims cannot be paid until my Department is satisfied that all work claimed has been completed to the required standard.

DARD: Press Releases/Press Association

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether there is a ban in place on the issuing of press releases by staff in her Department, or its arm's-length bodies, to the Press Association.

(AQW 15402/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There is no ban in place on the issuing of press releases by staff in my Department, or its arm's-length bodies, to the Press Association.

Lough Neagh Working Group

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the individuals or organisations who were included in the recent Lough Neagh consultation.

(AQW 15418/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Lough Neagh Working Group comprises representation from 5 NICS Departments - DARD, DCAL, DOE, DRD and DETI. In addition to the research and work being undertaken by the individual Departments involved in the Working Group, an informal consultation was launched with a wide range of groups and organisations that were identified by officials from each of the Departments as key stakeholders. The purpose of the informal consultation is to obtain their high-level views on the proposal regarding public ownership. Fifty-seven key stakeholders have been asked for comment. A list of the consultees is attached for information.

List of Consultees for Lough Neagh Working Group

- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ Invest NI | ■ Rural Community Network |
| ■ Geological Survey NI (DETI) | ■ Ulster Farmers Union |
| ■ Tourist Board | ■ Portadown Boat Club |
| ■ NI Water | ■ Cullybackey and District Game and Sea Angling Society |
| ■ The Utility Regulator | ■ Rectory Lodge Trout Fishery |
| ■ Consumer Council | ■ Ballysaggart Lough Environmental Group |
| ■ Cookstown DC | ■ NI Pike Society |
| ■ Magherafelt DC | ■ Ballyronan Marina |
| ■ Craigavon DC | ■ Friends of the Earth NI |
| ■ Antrim BC | ■ Council for Nature Conservation and Countryside |
| ■ Dungannon and South Tyrone DC | ■ RSPB NI |
| ■ Armagh DC | ■ Norman Emerson Group |
| ■ Lisburn City Council | ■ Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute |
| ■ Ballymena BC | ■ Lough Neagh Partnership |
| ■ ECOS Centre | ■ Lough Neagh Fishermans Co Op |
| ■ Monaghan County Council | ■ Outdoor Recreation NI |
| ■ Quarry Product Association NI | ■ Lagan Canal Trust |
| ■ WWF | ■ Inland Waterways Association Ireland |
| ■ Woodland Trust | ■ River Bann and Lough Neagh Association |
| ■ Ballinderry Fish Hatchery | ■ Kinnego Marina |
| ■ Six Mile Water Trust | ■ Lough Neagh Rescue |
| ■ Ulster Angling Association | ■ Rams Island Management |
| ■ The Honourable Irish Society | ■ The Blackwater Regional (Tourism in Ireland) |
| ■ Waterways Ireland | ■ Countryside Alliance of Ireland (CAI) |
| ■ Ulster Coarse Fishing Federation | ■ British Association for Shooting Conservation |
| ■ Lough Neagh Sand Traders Association (NI) Ltd | ■ Scottish Association of Country Sports |
| ■ AMK Association | ■ Sports NI |
| ■ Rural Development Council | ■ National Trust |
| ■ Constructed Wetlands for NI | |

Single Farm Payment

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of (i) land; and (ii) landowners, who were eligible to establish entitlements for Single Farm Payments in 2005, that did so; and for her assessment of this figure.

(AQW 15448/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In 2005, approximately 1,010,000ha of agricultural land was used to establish Single Farm Payment entitlements. This represents around 97% of all agricultural land.

My Department does not hold information on the legal ownership of land.

Castlewellan Forest Park–Slievenaslat: Walking Trail

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is aware of the views of users of the pathway between Castlewellan Forest Park and Slievenaslat that this pathway should be returned to the status of a maintained walking trail; and to explain the rationale behind the decision, taken in 2006, to no longer maintain this trail.
(AQW 15507/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Access from the car park at Castlewellan Forest Park to the viewpoint within the forest at Slievenaslat is provided by a 7.6 km way-marked trail and there are no plans to cease maintaining a walking trail to this important and well-used viewpoint.

Field Boundary Restoration

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) how many Field Boundary Restoration payments have been incorrectly paid by her Department and attributed to computer error, in each of the last five years; and (ii) what action her Department has taken to correct the process and ensure that this does not happen again.
(AQW 15508/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) I am aware of one such instance in the last 5 years. There was an issue in respect of Field Boundary Restoration (FBR), where the claim form issued to applicants continued to show FBR payment details. The IT solution intended to prevent FBR works being automatically included in year 6 applications for Countryside Management (CSM) and New Environmentally Sensitive Areas (NESA) Schemes failed to be applied across all Agreements. The Department noticed this error on 22/6/2011.

While the Department regrets when forms are incorrectly pre-populated and have taken steps to address the cause of this, the form states clearly that it must be checked by the claimant.

The total number of cases that were paid incorrectly during the last five years was: 32 (28 CSM and 4 NESA)

- (ii) By 27/6/2011 the Department had rectified the IT issue and introduced additional administrative procedures to ensure that all subsequent claims and payments for Field Boundary Restoration were appropriate.

Where an overpayment situation had already occurred the Department initiated recovery procedures.

Lough Neagh Working Group

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the rationale for the consultation on Lough Neagh.
(AQW 15521/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As part of the scoping exercise being undertaken by the cross-departmental Lough Neagh Working Group to examine the potential for bringing Lough Neagh into Public ownership, it was recognised that there is a large number of stakeholders/organisations with a wealth of knowledge about the Lough, its features and the current management arrangements. It was on this basis that the Working Group undertook a short informal consultation as a means of gathering useful information and evidence to help inform its work.

Squirrel Forum: Membership

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the membership of the NI Red Squirrel Forum; and (ii) what engagement she and her Department have had with this forum.
(AQW 15531/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The NI Squirrel Forum is chaired by the NI Environment Agency (NIEA) and is comprised of representatives of the following organisations: -

- DARD Forest Service
- DARD Countryside Management Branch
- Biodiversity Officers employed by Councils
- The National Trust
- The Ulster Wildlife Trust
- Belfast Zoo
- Queens University Belfast
- Abercorn Estates Ltd
- Shanes Castle Estate Company Ltd
- Scottish Woodlands Ltd

- The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)
- Local Red Squirrel Volunteer Groups

DARD is represented on the NI Squirrel Forum by Forest Service and Countryside Management Branch.

Red Squirrel Group: Membership

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the membership of the British Red Squirrel Forum ; and (ii) what engagement she and her Department have had with this forum.

(AQW 15532/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Red Squirrel Group is comprised of representatives of the following organisations: -

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| ■ NI Squirrel Forum | ■ Countryside Council for Wales |
| ■ England Squirrel Forum | ■ Scottish Natural Heritage |
| ■ Wales Squirrel Forum | ■ DARD Forest Service |
| ■ Scottish Squirrel Group | ■ Forestry Commission Wales |
| ■ NI Environment Agency | ■ Forestry Commission England |
| ■ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs | ■ Forestry Commission Scotland |
| ■ Natural England | ■ Forest Research |
| | ■ The Wildlife Trusts |

DARD is represented on the Red Squirrel Group by Forest Service.

Red Squirrels: Adenovirus and Poxvirus

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans there are to halt the spread of adenovirus and poxvirus and other diseases that would be detrimental to the red squirrel population.

(AQW 15533/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Forest Service will continue to work closely with the NI Environment Agency and organisations represented on the NI Squirrel Forum to ensure best practice is followed to limit the impacts of poxvirus and adenovirus on red squirrels in its forests.

Field Boundary Restoration

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the errors in Field Boundary Restoration payments and as the errors occurred within her Department, if she can confirm that (i) no interest will be charged on any overpayment; and (ii) consideration will be given to writing off or part-writing off the debts.

(AQW 15557/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: (i) Where a farmer claims and is paid for Field Boundary Restoration work that they have not completed, my Department must recover the money in line with Sections 14 & 15 of the Countryside Management Regulations (NI) 2008. In addition, Article 5 of Commission Regulation (EU) No 65/2011 requires that interest must be paid if undue payment is made by DARD.

These conditions apply whether or not the form was populated correctly by the Department, because the form states clearly that it must be checked by the claimant. The Department regrets when forms are incorrectly pre-populated and have taken steps to address the cause of this.

- (ii) With regard to writing off debts, in principle, my Department should always pursue recovery of overpayments, irrespective of how they came to be made. This is accepted practice throughout Government.

Cogry Manor/Bridge Road, Burnside: Viable Works

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the recommendations outlined within her Department's feasibility study of 2010 carried out after flooding incidents in 2008, for an update on the improvements works for Cogry Manor and Bridge Road, Burnside.

(AQW 15846/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that the viable works at Cogry Manor and Bridge Road, Burnside, identified as a result of the feasibility study, will be considered for inclusion in the work programme within the next financial year.

Ash Plants: Imports

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is planning to ban importing ash tree plants due to the threat posed by Chalara dieback disease.

(AQW 15877/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Ash is one of the commonest native species on this island so we must do all we can to minimise the risk of Chalara Dieback of Ash (*Chalara fraxinea*) becoming established here. My Department is currently carrying out monitoring of ash plants at nursery and retail premises and at sites of recent planting in both amenity and woodland areas for any signs of this damaging disease, and so far we have not found any evidence of the disease.

Meanwhile, I have sent out a very clear message to the forest and forest nursery industry of my intention to introduce emergency legislation banning the movement of such plants from areas where the disease may be present. I am also concerned that untreated ash wood may be a possible pathway for disease to enter Ireland, and I am minded to extend the ban to cover that also, although I acknowledge that the movement in plants presents the greatest risk. I will work closely with Minister Simon Coveney, as we need to make sure that we have a consistent fortress-Ireland approach.

Fishing: Sentinel Fishery

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) when the data obtained from the Sentinel Fishery will be made available to the fishing industry; and (ii) whether the report will be used as evidence to increase the cod total allowable catch in the Irish Sea during this year's negotiations in Brussels.

(AQW 15925/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The length and catch rate data has already been made available to the industry, but not the age data. One of the main objectives of the fishery was to investigate the age structure of the catches as this is an area where more data is required. Fish ageing is a time consuming process and the results will not be available until late November.

The final results will be presented to ICES for use in the 2013 assessment, but there is no mechanism for an updated assessment this year.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Fishing: Illegal

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has considered introducing a memorandum of understanding between her Department's bailiffs and Loughs Agency bailiffs so that they can provide support to each other when cracking down on illegal fishing and related activities.

(AQW 15127/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The Department has a Service Level Agreement with the Loughs Agency, which provides the basis for the provision of bailiffing services by staff of the Loughs Agency for the protection of fisheries in the Public Angling Estate owned or leased by DCAL located within the jurisdiction of the Loughs Agency. The Agreement specifies the functions to be carried out by the Service Provider under the Foyle Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1952 and clarifies the obligations on both parties to ensure the effectiveness of the Agreement.

At this time a Memorandum of Understanding is not considered necessary as both DCAL and Loughs Agency staff currently share intelligence information on alleged illegal fishing activity if the incidents occur in the other jurisdiction. Parallel enforcement is also carried out if required and regular meetings take place to discuss enforcement related issues.

DCAL also works closely other Government bodies and enforcement agencies such as DARD Sea Fisheries Inspectorate, the PSNI and Private Water Bailiffs attached to angling clubs to combat illegal fishing activity.

This response has been prepared by DCAL with input from DARD and the Loughs Agency. The response is in answer to AQW 15127 1/11-15 and AQW 15128 1/11-15 on behalf of both the DCAL and DARD Ministers.

Department of Education

Schools: Admissions

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the schools in each Education and Library Board which asked for an increase in their admissions number, in each of the last three years; and whether the increase was granted.

(AQW 15270/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Before the 2012/13 school year, the Department of Education did not electronically record statistics regarding the total numbers of schools requesting temporary increases to their admissions numbers, and of these, which requests were approved. This means that some of the data requested is unavailable. However, officials have manually extracted as much information as possible from school records and this is reported below.

The total number of post-primary schools that have sought permission to have temporary variations in their admissions numbers in each of the last three years is as follows:

School Year	Number of Requests	Requests Granted
2009/10	51	39
2010/11	35	20
2011/12	30	19

The total number of primary schools that have sought permission to have temporary variations in their admissions numbers in each of the last three years is not held in the format requested and can only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

The schools that were granted permission to have temporary variations in their admissions numbers in each of the last three years are detailed below.

BELB Schools	School Name
2009/10	Primary Schools:
	Ligoniel PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Methodist College
	RBAI
	Belfast Royal Academy
	St Dominic's HS
	St Malachy's College
2010/11	Primary Schools:
	St Therese of Lisieux PS
	St Michael's PS
	Holy Family PS
	Forge Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	St Malachy's College
	Victoria College
2011/12	Primary Schools:
	Ligoniel PS
	Holy Family PS
	Forge Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools
	Belfast Boys Model School
	Methodist College
	Strathearn School
	Victoria College

WELB Schools	School Name
2009/10	Primary Schools:
	St Patrick's PS Enniskillen
	Broadbridge PS
	St Patrick's PS Castlederg
	St Patrick's PS Omagh
	Omagh Integrated PS
	Roevalley Integrated PS

WELB Schools	School Name
2009/10 <i>(continued)</i>	Post-Primary Schools:
	St Fanchea's College Enniskillen
	St Michael's College Enniskillen
	Thornhill College Londonderry
2010/11	Primary Schools:
	St Patrick's PS, Mullanaskea
	St Mary's PS, Mullymesker
	Drumlish PS Omagh
	St Dympna's PS Dromore
	Gaelscoil Na Gcrann
	Roevalley Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Oakgrove Integrated College
2011/12	Primary Schools:
	Ballougry PS Londonderry
	Strabane Controlled PS
	Greenhaw PS Londonderry
	St Patrick's PS Enniskillen
	Drumlish PS Omagh
	St Lawrence's PS Omagh
	St Columbkille's PS Omagh
	St Dympna's PS Dromore
	Chapel Road PS Londonderry
	Gaelscoil Na Gcrann
	Post-Primary Schools:
	St Fanchea's College Enniskillen
SEELB	School Name
2009/10	Primary Schools:
	Victoria PS Ballyhalbert
	Londonderry PS Newtownards
	St Francis PS Castlewellan
	St Mary's PS Newtownards
	St Mary's PS Ardglass
	Bangor Central Integrated PS
	Rowendale Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Priory College Holywood
	Friends School Lisburn
	Wallace HS Lisburn

SEELB	School Name
2010/11	Primary Schools:
	Greyabbey PS
	Portavogie PS
	Bangor Central Integrated PS
	Rowendale Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	St Columbanus College Bangor
	Priory College Holywood
	Our Lady and St Patrick's College Knock
2011/12	Primary Schools:
	Greybbey PS
	Harmony Hill PS
	Londonderry PS Newtownards
	Rathmore PS Bangor
	Maghaberry PS
	Cumran PS Downpatrick
	St Malachy's PS Downpatrick
	St Patrick's PS Downpatrick
	St Francis PS Castlewellan
	St Mary's PS Ardglass
	St Ita's PS Belfast
	Our Lady & St Patrick's PS Downpatrick
	Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche
	All Children's Integrated PS
	Drumlins Integrated PS
	Rowendale Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	St Columbanus College Bangor
	Strangford Integrated College
	Sullivan Upper School
SELB	School Name
2009/10	Primary Schools:
	Dromore Central PS
	Bocombra PS Portadown
	Markethill PS
	Killyman PS Dungannon
	St Patrick's PS Newry
	St Mary's PS Armagh
	Ballyholland PS Newry
	St Mary's PS, Barr

SELB	School Name
2009/10 <i>(continued)</i>	Roan St Patrick's PS
	St Patrick's PS, Donaghmore
	St Patrick's PS, Magherafelt
	St Mary's PS, Newry
	St Patrick's PS, Dungannon
	St Colman's PS, Newry
	Seagoe PS Portadown
	Phoenix Integrated PS
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Newtownhamilton HS
	Markethill HS
	Fivemiletown HS
	Craigavon Senior HS
	St Paul's HS Bessbrook
	St Catherine's College Armagh
	Holy Trinity College Cookstown
	Banbridge Academy
	St Louis GS Kilkeel
	Abbey GS Newry
	St Colman's College Newry
	St Patrick's GS, Armagh
2010/11	Primary Schools:
	Clare PS Tandragee
	Dromore Road PS Warrenpoint
	Donacloney PS Craigavon
	Fair Hill PS Dromore
	Christian Brothers' PS Armagh
	St Malachy's PS Armagh
	St Patrick's PS Newry
	St Brigid's PS Newry
	Ballyholland PS Newry
	Holy Cross PS Newry
	St Mary's PS, Barr
	Roan St Patrick's PS
	St Patrick's PS, Hilltown
	St Mary's PS Mullaghbawn
	St Francis' PS Aghderg
	Seagoe PS Portadown
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Dromore HS
	Fivemiletown HS

SELB	School Name
2010/11 <i>(continued)</i>	St Ciaran's HS, Ballygawley
	St Paul's HS, Bessbrook
	St Catherine's College Armagh
	Holy Trinity College Cookstown
	Banbridge Academy
	St Joseph's GS, Donaghmore
	Sacred Heart GS Newry
	St Patrick's GS Armagh
2011/12	Primary Schools:
	Dromore Road PS Warrenpoint
	Carntall PS Clogher
	Fivemiletown PS
	Bronte PS Banbridge
	St Brigid's PS Newry
	St Mary's PS Armagh
	Holy Cross Primary School Newry
	St Mary's PS, Barr
	Edendork PS Dungannon
	Roan St Patrick's PS
	St Mary's PS, Mullaghbawn
	St Patrick's PS, Cullyhanna
	St Jarlath's PS Dungannon
	St Mary's PS, Aughnacloy
	St Francis' PS Aghderg
	St Joseph's & St James' PS Newry
	Seagoe PS Portadown
	Gaelscoil Ui Neill
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Dromore High School
	Craigavon Senior High School
	St Catherine's College Armagh
	Our Lady's GS, Newry
	St Joseph's GS, Donaghmore
NEELB Schools	School Name
2009/10	Primary Schools:
	Woodburn PS Carrickfergus
	Loanends PS Crumlin
	Fourtowns PS Ballymena
	Broughshane PS
	Millquarter PS Antrim

NEELB Schools	School Name
2009/10 <i>(continued)</i>	New Row PS Magherafelt
	St Trea's PS Magherafelt
	Gaelscoil Na Speirini
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Ballyclare Secondary School
	St Colm's HS, Draperstown
	St Paul's College, Kilrea
	St Pius X College Magherafelt
	St Patrick's College, Maghera
	Slemish College Ballymena
	Sperrin Integrated College Magherafelt
	Ballyclare HS
	Coleraine HS
	Antrim GS
	Cambridge House GS Ballymena
	Dalriada School Ballymoney
	Loreto College Coleraine
	Rainey Endowed School Magherafelt
	Belfast HS
	St MacNissi's College
2010/11	Primary Schools:
	Clough PS Ballymena
	Toreagh PS Larne
	New Row PS Magherafelt
	St Brigid's PS Magherafelt
	St Mary's PS Ballymena
	Gaelscoil Eanna
	Ballycastle Integrated PS
	St Columba's PS Coleraine
	Post-Primary Schools:
	Dunclug College Ballymena
	St Pius X College Magherafelt
	Coleraine Academical Institution
	Loreto College Coleraine
2011/12	Primary Schools:
	Parkgate PS Ballyclare
	The Diamond PS Ballymena
	Clough PS Ballymena
	Damhead PS Coleraine
	Broughshane PS
	Carniny PS Ballymena

NEELB Schools	School Name
2011/12 (continued)	Creggan PS Antrim
	Mount St Michael's PS Antrim
	New Row PS
	St Trea's PS Magherafelt
	St Columba's PS Magherafelt
	St Eoghan's PS Magherafelt
	St Brigid's PS Magherafelt
	St Macnissi's PS Newtownabbey
	St MacNissi's PS Larne
	Gaelscoil Eanna
	Post-Primary Schools:
	St Colm's High School Draperstown
	St Pius X College Magherafelt
	St Killian's College Ballymena
	Sperrin Integrated College Magherafelt
	Antrim GS
	St Mary's GS Magherafelt

Schools: Inspections

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what is the maximum amount of time between full school inspections in the (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary sectors.

(AQW 15327/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Until September 2010, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) aimed to inspect each school at least once every seven years with more frequent inspection of a school being undertaken where it was deemed necessary.

In September 2010, ETI introduced a more proportionate and risk-based inspection strategy whereby the need for an inspection is identified by information from school performance indicators, risk factors including the length of time since the last formal inspection and from ongoing monitoring of schools by inspectors at local level.

Literacy and Numeracy: Computer-based Assessments

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what steps have been taken, and will be taken, to address the widespread complaints from schools on the functioning and value of the computer-based assessments in literacy and numeracy.

(AQW 15347/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: While some schools have reported problems with the operation of the new computer based assessment programmes, many others have successfully completed the assessments.

However, it is not acceptable to me that any school should be facing avoidable difficulties in operating the assessments.

I have already written to primary schools to assure them that they can stop the assessment process until CCEA has identified the source or sources of the current technical problems and put in place solutions.

I have met with senior officials from CCEA and the Western Education and Library Board which is responsible for the C2k service which hosts the assessments and have made clear to them my expectation that solutions will be put in place as a matter of urgency. I have also met with the private companies which provided the literacy and numeracy assessments and with the company contracted to deliver the C2k managed service to schools to seek their assistance in identifying and fixing the current problems.

I will be keeping this issue under review until I am satisfied that the difficulties some schools have encountered have been addressed.

As regards the value of the assessments, it is important to note that these are not "tests" and their outcomes are not collected centrally. They are designed to help teachers diagnose and respond to pupils' learning needs in the core areas of literacy and numeracy and to help teachers engage with parents early in the new school year. Their value is linked to how effectively teachers use their professional judgement to interpret their outcomes and to tailor their lessons to build on pupils' strengths and address any areas for improvement.

My Education and Training Inspectorate is already planning a survey to determine how effectively schools make use of this assessment information and I look forward to receiving its report and findings later in this school year.

Literacy and Numeracy: Computer-based Assessments

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education why the computer-based assessments in literacy and numeracy were introduced without being adequately trialed and proven fit for purpose.

(AQW 15349/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I can assure the member that the assessments were trialled extensively.

Over 30% of all primary schools took part in the trialling during the period January to May 2012. In addition, a programme of training and support was put in place to help schools prepare and implement the new computer-based assessments.

The purpose of these trials was to ensure that the assessments were fit for purpose; that they were compatible with the C2K network and schools' systems; and that any issues could be identified and addressed and lessons learnt. The outcomes of the trial were evaluated by CCEA and changes made to address concerns.

CCEA has also assured me that teachers were consulted at an early stage - before the specification for the assessments was finalised on what they would like to see in a future diagnostic assessment for primary pupils.

It is a matter of concern to me that, despite the trialling and training that has taken place, some schools are experiencing difficulties. I have made clear to CCEA my expectation that the source or sources of these problems will be identified as a matter of urgency and solutions put in place so that schools can complete these assessments during the current term.

Children and Young People's Strategy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what correspondence his Department has had with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to the Children's Strategy.

(AQW 15409/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department has a key role to play in the delivery of the Children and Young People's Strategy and has had ongoing correspondence with the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in the development of the Strategy, the associated Action Plans and the overarching Delivering Social Change (DSC) Framework. Regular updates to OFMDFM on progress against relevant actions within the Action Plan (2008-11) were provided. It is planned that future action will be taken forward through the DSC Framework and the Department is represented, at official level, on the DSC Programme Board. The Department continues to correspond with the Office of the First Minister on the DSC Framework and the implementation of the Children and Young People's Strategy as necessary.

Teachers: All-Ireland Mobility

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Education to detail the work undertaken by his Department to remove obstacles to teachers' mobility across the island of Ireland.

(AQW 15444/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have raised the issue of teacher mobility at a number of recent meetings as part of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). One of the greatest challenges faced by teachers in one jurisdiction is having their qualifications and accreditation recognised in the other jurisdiction – particularly in respect of teachers from the north.

At the NSMC meeting on 15 June 2012, Minister Quinn and I requested an update on the work undertaken to increase teacher mobility across the island. The work undertaken to date has identified a number of legislative and policy obstacles which need to be overcome before we can achieve the desired level of teacher mobility. However, a number of positive recommendations have been made including:

- consideration of a fee waiver for assessing teaching qualifications from the north of Ireland which have already been accredited by GTCNI. It is expected that this will be implemented by 30 June 2013;
- consideration of the introduction of a form of provisional registration with TCI for teachers from the north; and
- simplifying the application process for candidates who qualify in the north of Ireland and who wish to register with the Teacher Council of Ireland (TCI).

Also ongoing discussions between Marino College of Education and the University of Ulster (UU) regarding delivery of the Irish language qualification requirement An Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge (SCG) are at an advanced stage. The UU is currently assessing the level of interest from its 2012/2013 Diploma in Irish intake. St Marys University College are also exploring the possibility of delivering the qualification and have recently approached Marino College of Education and the Teaching Council Ireland. If and when implemented the proposals will be of considerable benefit to teachers from the north.

Under the auspices of the NSMC, there has been co-operation between Department for Education and Skills in the south and Department of Finance and Personnel on the issue of the transfer of teachers' pension entitlements between north and south. A Pensions Working Group was set up to consider this issue and identified the transfer of the value of accrued pension entitlements as the only realistic option going forward. Information for teachers on the transfer of pension entitlements

between the north and the south of Ireland has been published on the websites of the respective Education Departments, the Border People website and in the publications and websites of the teachers' unions.

Teachers: All-Ireland Mobility

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's efforts to remove barriers to teacher mobility across the island of Ireland.

(AQO 2707/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have raised the issue of teacher mobility at a number of recent meetings as part of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). One of the greatest challenges faced by teachers in one jurisdiction is having their qualifications and accreditation recognised in the other jurisdiction – particularly in respect of teachers from the north.

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Departments, the Border People website and in the publications and websites of the teachers' unions.

Literacy and Numeracy: Improvement Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to outline the proposed timescales associated with the recently announced scheme for improving literacy and numeracy.

(AQW 15543/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I warmly welcome the announcement by the First and deputy First Ministers of investment in the employment of 230 recently qualified teachers, on a two year contract, to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of our young people. Not only does this provide employment opportunities for recently qualified teachers who are without permanent employment but it should have a positive impact on my raising standards agenda by improving the educational outcomes of pupils who are most at risk of under achieving.

Work is currently being undertaken to establish arrangements for the development of the project including timescales for its implementation.

Schools: Closures

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what support his Department provides to pupils when a school is closed down, particularly in relation to their travel needs.

(AQW 15635/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: When a school is closed, the Education and Library Boards, and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools where appropriate, are responsible for supporting the affected families both in terms of ensuring that they secure an alternative school placement in the area and in terms of ensuring that any additional educational needs that those pupils have are also met in their new school.

If there is a need to provide additional places, due to pressure in the area caused by the school closure, the Department will intervene to provide a temporary variation to school numbers to ensure all pupils are placed in a suitable school within a reasonable travelling distance of their home address.

In relation to transport, the Boards have informed me that when the intention to close a school is known, and prior to approval of the Development Proposal, the Boards' Transport Departments are involved in discussion in respect of possible transport

services and the position is made known to School Principals and Board of Governors as to what is possible within the Transport Policy.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education whether, under the draft legislation to establish the Education and Skills Authority, controlled integrated schools will be represented by the controlled sectoral body rather than by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

(AQW 15646/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Provisions relating to the definition of Sectoral Support Bodies (SSBs) are at Section 63 of the Education Bill. These do not specify which sectors or schools are to be represented by which support bodies. Rather they provide that a sectoral body is a body "recognised by the Department as representing the interests of grant-aided schools of a particular description"; and otherwise is a body funded by the Department under certain provisions.

The SSBs for Controlled schools should, when created, be capable of providing support and representation for all controlled schools. The same should apply to the SSBs in their representation of Irish-medium and Integrated schools.

Moreover, it will be important for SSBs to work together in fulfilling their role. DE has recently provided to the relevant sectoral interests a paper entitled Sectoral Support Post RPA – September 2012 (a copy is in the Assembly library). This paper broadly defines the role and nature of sectoral support.

One of the roles expected of an SSB is to build co-operation and engage with other sectors in matters of mutual interest, including promotion of tolerance and understanding, respect for diversity.

Sectoral Support Bodies: Controlled Schools

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education whether the proposed new controlled sectoral body will have representatives from Irish Medium and Integrated schools.

(AQW 15647/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: One of the many challenges the Sectoral Support Body for Controlled schools will face will be the representation of a very large and diverse sector. It should, when created, be capable of providing support and representation for all controlled schools including Irish medium and Integrated schools.

It should also be capable of working with other sectoral bodies as it does this. DE has recently provided to the relevant sectoral interests a paper entitled Sectoral Support Post RPA – September 2012 (a copy is in the Assembly library). This paper broadly defines the role and nature of sectoral support – not least so that DE may provide funding for sectoral support on a consistent and clear basis. This paper gives the following as one of the key functions of all sectoral support bodies: "Building co-operation and engaging with other sectors in matters of mutual interest, including promotion of tolerance and understanding, respect for diversity and the aims of A Shared Future".

Key to fulfilling this objective will be how the Sectoral Support Body for controlled schools works with the two Sectoral Support Bodies that will represent Irish Medium and Integrated Schools respectively.

Sectoral Support Bodies: Statutory/Advisory Role

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education whether the proposed new controlled sectoral body will have a statutory or an advisory role.

(AQW 15649/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Sectoral Support Bodies (SSBs) will not have a statutory role. The Education Bill will define them (Section 63) and otherwise it will give them specific consultative roles in relation to the appointment of Governors and development proposals (Section 39 - 2 (2) (a) or 3 (2) (a) and Section 28) Otherwise, funding for SSBs will be in respect of a representational and advocacy role. This will include advice and support to schools in responding to consultation exercises in respect of education policies, initiatives and schemes, and in regard to relationships with the Department, the ESA and other Departments.

Sectoral Support Bodies: Integrated Sector

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what role the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education will have in the consideration of a proposal for a school to transform to integrated status, if it is not a recognised sectoral body.

(AQW 15650/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has already engaged NICIE to work with them on becoming the Sectoral Support Body for Integrated schools. I expect this work to progress successfully so they can fulfil a support role for the integrated sector.

Schools: Private-hire Transport

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary; (ii) post-primary; and (iii) special needs school pupils were transported to school by private hire bus in each Education and Library Board area in 2010/11; and what is the unit cost of transporting pupils to each of these school types.

(AQW 15682/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am advised by the Education and Library Boards that the number of (i) primary; (ii) post-primary; and (iii) special needs school pupils transported to school by private hire bus in each Education and Library Board area in the 2010/11 financial year; and the unit cost of transporting these pupils to each of these school types is:

Education and Library Board	Primary	Post-Primary	Special Primary	Special Post-Primary	Special School
Belfast	23	0	16	0	330
North Eastern	515	84	13	21	216
South Eastern	14	1	36	15	114
Southern	1,179	2,022	3	7	22
Western	595	1,256	12	43	34
Total no. of pupils	2,326	3,363	80	86	716
Cost	£1,811,100	£1,811,046	£155,460	£90,720	£1,158,532
Unit Cost per pupil	£779	£539	£1,943	£1,055	£1,618

Crawfordsburn Primary School: Transport

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education why Crawfordsburn Primary School has informed parents living in the Holywood area that it will no longer provide school transport.

(AQW 15712/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am advised by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) that the transport service provided by Translink for Crawfordsburn Primary School was a private arrangement between the company and the school. Such private arrangements lie outwith the school transport service provided under the Department of Education's transport policy.

I have been advised by the school, however, that the service was no longer financially viable and the school's Board of Governors took the decision to remove it. Parents were advised of the decision by letter.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail the current levels of pay variation, for similar grades, in each of the eight existing organisations that will be amalgamated into the Education and Skills Authority.

(AQW 15717/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Staff in the majority of the Department's Arms Length Bodies, which will form the Education and Skills Authority, are subject to National Joint Council terms and conditions and pay levels. Details of the grade structures and pay ranges are as follows:

Grade	Salary Range
Clerical Officer	£12,448 - £15,444
Senior Clerical Officer	£15,726 - £16,830
Executive Officer	£17,161 - £21,519
Senior Executive Officer	£22,261 - £27,052
Administrative Officer	£27,849 - £30,851
Senior Admin Officer	£31,753 - £34,549
Assistant Principal Officer	£35,430 - £38,042
Principal Officer	£38,961 - £41,616
Senior Principal Officer (1)	£41,616 - £44,216
Senior Principal Officer (2)	£44,216 - £46,697
Education Officer	£49,288 - £51,866

Grade	Salary Range
Assistant Senior Education Officer	£54,438 - £57,083

Staff in one of the bodies which will form part of the Education and Skills Authority are subject to local Civil Service terms and conditions and pay levels. Details of the grade structures and pay ranges are as follows:

Grade	Salary Range*
Administrative Assistant	£15,849 - £17,533
Administrative Officer	£18,298 - £22,180
Executive Officer II	£23,124 - £23,999
Executive Officer I	£25,438 - £26,638
Staff Officer	£27,835 - £30,825
Deputy Principal	£34,847 - £39,282
Grade 7	£45,694 - £51,034
Grade 6	£53,407 - £62,407

Note:

*With effect from 1 September 2012

It is not possible to detail the levels of pay variation across the Arms Length Bodies for similar grades as individual salary points are determined in numerous ways dependent on the job, level, and profession.

Catholic Maintained Schools: Ownership

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail the current ownership of all properties and land currently in use by Catholic Maintained Schools, broken down by school.

(AQW 15718/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently 491 Catholic Maintained Schools in the North of Ireland. All of these schools are in the ownership of the School Trustees.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to expand on the proposed commercial role of the Education and Skills Authority, as intimated in the draft Education Bill.

(AQW 15719/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There is no specific commercial role proposed at this time. Provisions of this type are often included when establishing non Departmental public bodies, and it is prudent to do so in the Education Bill, so that the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) may avail of any commercial opportunities that arise. Any commercial activities will require the approval of my Department, and must not be at odds with, or detract, from ESA's functions under the Education Orders.

Schools: Absenteeism, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of absenteeism in the North Down area in (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; and (iii) integrated schools at (a) primary; and (b) post-primary level.

(AQW 15748/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

Absence rates for primary schools in the North Down area by management type of school, 2010/11

Management Type	Overall absence rate (% of total half days absent)
Controlled (not including integrated)	4.5
Controlled integrated	4.9
Maintained	4.5
Grant Maintained Integrated	N/A
Voluntary	3.6
Total	4.5

Absence rates for post-primary schools in the North Down area by management type of school, 2010/11

Management Type	Overall absence rate (% of total half days absent)
Controlled (not including integrated)	9.0
Controlled integrated	11.5
Maintained	9.0
Grant Maintained Integrated	N/A
Voluntary	3.6
Total	7.5

Notes:

- 1 Maintained includes Catholic and other maintained schools.
- 2 Figures for primary schools include Years 1-7 and for post-primary schools include Years 8-12.
- 3 The figures are based on 23 primary schools and 6 post-primary schools in the North Down parliamentary constituency.
- 4 Attendance is recorded for every pupil in half day sessions – morning and afternoon.
- 5 N/A = Not applicable. There are no schools of this management type in the North Down parliamentary constituency.

Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore: Newbuild

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore.
(AQW 15767/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A major capital works project for Dean Maguirc College is one of a large number of proposals currently with the Department. There are a number of site and planning issues still to be resolved around the plans for a new build for the school.

The new build for Dean Maguirc will be considered within the on-going area planning process. However I recognise that area plans for schools will require scrutiny and public consultation. In the interim I will continue to examine the case for capital investment and expect to make a further announcement before the end of the calendar year.

Proposals for Dean Maguirc College will be considered together with other new build propositions as part of any future announcement.

Arvalee School and Resource Centre

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education whether planning permission has been granted and all the necessary approvals from the Department of Finance and Personnel have been acquired for the mobile classrooms at Arvelee Special School; and when he expects work to begin.
(AQW 15841/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Western Education & Library Board has and is working in close collaboration with other statutory bodies to expedite the relocation of the pupils of Arvalee School and Resource Centre back to their original site at the earliest opportunity. A Planning Application has been lodged and a business case for the replacement accommodation is under urgent consideration by my Department.

It is expected that work on the replacement accommodation can progress shortly.

Special Educational Needs: Statements

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of statemented children with Special Educational Needs in each of the last five years.
(AQW 15880/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Pupils with a statement of Special Educational Need in schools and in funded pre-school education, 2007/08 – 2011/12

School type	2007/ 08	2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12
Voluntary and private preschool centres	21	18	16	8	17
Nursery schools	50	50	62	64	71

School type	2007/ 08	2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12
Primary schools	4,545	4,537	4,546	4,508	4,470
Post-primary schools	4,163	4,446	4,785	5,090	5,264
Special schools	4,195	4,220	4,165	4,228	4,268
Total	12,974	13,271	13,574	13,898	14,090

Source: School census

Note:

- 1 Figures for primary schools include pupils in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
- 2 Children with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) are those children at Stage 5 of the SEN Code of practice.

Knockavoe School

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education why Knockavoe Special School is excluded from using all of the buildings located on its site.

(AQW 15889/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Knockavoe site also contains the WELB managed Resource Centre which was built as an independent stand-alone provision for the specific use of Children and Young People's Services to meet the needs of all pupils within the WELB area. The services located in the Resource Centre provide a wide range of provision to pupils from early years, behavioural support and education other than at school.

The Knockavoe Education Resource Centre is being used in a temporary capacity by Arvalee School. These facilities are not, and have never been, part of Knockavoe Special School.

Once vacated, the facilities will return to normal use by Children and Young People's services to support children and schools in the Western Board Area.

The accommodation is utilised by children and young people as well as officers of the Western Board.

Knockavoe School

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he is aware that the facilities of Knockavoe Special School are being used by Arvalee Special School; (ii) whether, when the facilities are vacated, they will be allocated in full to the Principal of Knockavoe Special School for the use of the students; and (iii) if not, why the facility, which was built with rooms specifically designed for use by pupils with special needs, would be used as offices.

(AQW 15890/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Knockavoe site also contains the WELB managed Resource Centre which was built as an independent stand-alone provision for the specific use of Children and Young People's Services to meet the needs of all pupils within the WELB area. The services located in the Resource Centre provide a wide range of provision to pupils from early years, behavioural support and education other than at school.

The Knockavoe Education Resource Centre is being used in a temporary capacity by Arvalee School. These facilities are not, and have never been, part of Knockavoe Special School.

Once vacated, the facilities will return to normal use by Children and Young People's services to support children and schools in the Western Board Area.

The accommodation is utilised by children and young people as well as officers of the Western Board.

DE: Company Cars

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether any staff in his Department use 'company' cars.

(AQW 15942/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No staff in my Department use 'company' cars. The Department owns a Ministerial car which is only used by me and by those officials who, on occasion, accompany me.

DE: Special Bonus Payments

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether any bonus payments have been made to departmental staff members over the last three years.

(AQW 15943/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Special Bonus payments were paid to Department of Education staff in 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12 in accordance with the arrangements relating to the NICS Special Bonus Scheme set out in the NICS HR Handbook.

Free School Meals

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education when he will review the criteria for free school meals and extend the working tax credit entitlements to pupils in the post-primary sector.

(AQW 15960/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans at present to extend the free school meal Working Tax Credit criterion to post-primary pupils and the pupil's eligibility will therefore cease when he/she transfers to post-primary school.

The reason the criterion is not being extended to post-primary pupils is that by targeting younger children it is considered that the greatest impact will be achieved with the available budget. This is consistent with the wider strategy for child poverty that early intervention is more efficient at lifting children out of poverty. Early intervention also has more impact in encouraging healthy eating habits which are more likely to be carried on independently at post-primary school.

My Department is, however, reviewing the eligibility criteria at present in light of the introduction of Universal Credit in April 2014 as part of the welfare reform proposals. Under this a number of the existing benefits which are currently used to determine eligibility for free school meals and clothing allowances, including Working Tax Credit, will be replaced. It will be necessary, therefore, to amend the criteria to take account of this change.

Department for Employment and Learning

Employment: Graduates

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what reassurances he can give to university graduates on the availability of graduate orientated employment opportunities.

(AQW 15110/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Evidence shows that those people with higher level skills are more likely to be employed than those with lower skills. While the proportion of leavers from Northern Ireland higher education institutions recorded as unemployed has risen from 4% in 2006/07 to 9% in 2010/11, for 2010/11 the unemployment rate of the total 18 to 24 year old Northern Ireland population stood at 18%.

We know from research, and existing trends, that an increasing number of people will require skills at Level 4 (Higher National Diploma or equivalent) and above to meet the needs of employers. This is supported by Invest NI which is informed by local ICT, financial services (again generally ICT for financial services industry) and digital media production entities that there continues to be a demand for appropriately skilled ICT graduates. However, the demand for higher level skills is not consistent across all subject areas.

Forecasts show that the degree subjects sought by employers are likely to continue to become more skewed towards the likes of physical sciences, mathematical and computer sciences, engineering and technology.

Acquiring the skills and qualifications that employers require at college and/or university is crucial if employment is to be secured. Making informed decisions on subject choice at each stage of the education system can be complex and may impact future career choice. My Department's Careers Service works in partnership with post primary schools to help young people articulate their aptitudes and aspirations, provide information on current and future job opportunities and help them evaluate their options.

Furthermore, my Department's first higher education strategy for Northern Ireland – 'Graduating to Success' – sets out the importance of ensuring that higher education learners not only undertake higher level courses in economically relevant subjects but also gain the skills, experiences and attributes needed to succeed within employment.

Both Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster have initiatives and programmes in place to help graduates gain both the academic and 'soft' employability skills employers require.

However, I appreciate that the current downturn has meant that many graduates have found it difficult to gain employment. For this reason, both my Department and the universities have taken forward a number of programmes aimed at helping unemployed graduates gain work experience and/or new skills in areas which are experiencing skills shortages.

These initiatives include the University of Ulster's Professional Experience Programme, Queen's University Belfast's Employability Framework, my Department's Graduate Acceleration Programme and the Youth Employment Scheme. These support existing schemes such as my Department's Graduate Entry to Management Programme which has been offered since 2007, operating under the INTRO brand.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Electrical Industry

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assurances he can give to the electrical trade that Programme-Led Apprenticeships will not lead to a reduction in standards.

(AQW 15463/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme aims to assist young school leavers who have been unable to find the requisite employed status to train as an apprentice through the Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the economic downturn. They were put in place at the time as an exceptional response to the recession.

I believe that the social consequences of not doing so were unacceptable as my Department has a policy responsibility of a guaranteed training place to all eligible unemployed 16-17 year-olds. To deny that guarantee could mean that many more young people end up part of those in the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) statistics.

My Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme which is employer-led must always be the preferred option. It is the Department's flagship training model and requires the continued support of employers. Apprenticeships work for both businesses and individuals, providing companies with a skilled workforce to help them grow, and giving people hands-on experience, guidance and qualifications, helping them to develop real skills in their chosen career. I would encourage employers to re-consider the value of apprenticeships and the benefits they can bring to their businesses. Their active engagement in creating apprenticeships is crucial in opening up opportunities for young people.

However, young people are still finding it particularly difficult to secure employment in the current economic climate. The significant numbers on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme underpin the need for such an intervention.

A programme-led apprenticeship does not mean a lesser or second-tier qualification nor is it a means to circumvent an agreed framework as it offers quality training and the same level of qualification as the employer-led route. It provides a young person with the opportunity to gain qualifications at Level 2 in a chosen skill area and to progress to a Level 3 apprenticeship on securing employment.

Some young people on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme are following a Level 2 Engineering Framework which allows for a range of possible career progressions including a Level 3 apprenticeship in electrical installation through the ApprenticeshipsNI programme on securing employment. Participants on the programme are aware that they are undertaking qualifications at Level 2.

My Department has an arrangement with the Electrical Training Trust to assist where appropriate those learners who have undertaken training through a programme-led apprenticeship with an opportunity to advance to Level 3 Electrotechnical training.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Availability

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for how long Programme-Led Apprenticeships will be available. (AQW 15464/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme aims to assist young school leavers who have been unable to find the requisite employed status to train as an apprentice through the Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the economic downturn. The programme provides an opportunity for its participants to work towards a Level 2 apprenticeship and was put in place at the time as an exceptional response to the recession with the aim of facilitating experienced and qualified young people who will be ready to meet the needs of employers when the eventual upturn in the economy comes.

I believe that the social consequences of not having such an intervention are unacceptable as I have a policy responsibility to provide a guaranteed training place to all eligible unemployed 16- 17-year-olds. To deny that guarantee could mean that many more young people end up part of those in the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) statistics.

Current Occupancy at 15 October 2012 shows 5,089 young people following Programme-Led Apprenticeships. Such significant numbers on programme underpin the need for such an intervention.

It is my intention to re-structure the Level 2 provision for the young unemployed through my Department's Training for Success programme. However, the introduction of a re-structured provision has been significantly delayed due to an ongoing legal challenge tied to the award of new contracts.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Electrical Industry

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether applicants for Programme-Led Apprenticeships in the electrical industry are informed that they will not have the requisite NVQ Level 3 qualification, to become an electrician, at the end of their course (AQW 15465/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme aims to assist young school leavers who have been unable to find the requisite employed status to train as an apprentice through the Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the economic downturn. They were put in place at the time as an exceptional response to the recession.

I believe that the social consequences of not doing so were unacceptable as my Department has a policy responsibility of a guaranteed training place to all eligible unemployed 16-17 year-olds. To deny that guarantee could mean that many more young people end up part of those in the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) statistics.

My Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme which is employer-led must always be the preferred option. It is the Department's flagship training model and requires the continued support of employers. Apprenticeships work for both businesses and individuals, providing companies with a skilled workforce to help them grow, and giving people hands-on experience, guidance and qualifications, helping them to develop real skills in their chosen career. I would encourage

employers to re-consider the value of apprenticeships and the benefits they can bring to their businesses. Their active engagement in creating apprenticeships is crucial in opening up opportunities for young people.

However, young people are still finding it particularly difficult to secure employment in the current economic climate. The significant numbers on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme underpin the need for such an intervention.

A programme-led apprenticeship does not mean a lesser or second-tier qualification nor is it a means to circumvent an agreed framework as it offers quality training and the same level of qualification as the employer-led route. It provides a young person with the opportunity to gain qualifications at Level 2 in a chosen skill area and to progress to a Level 3 apprenticeship on securing employment.

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My Department has an arrangement with the Electrical Training Trust to assist where appropriate those learners who have undertaken training through a programme-led apprenticeship with an opportunity to advance to Level 3 Electrotechnical training.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Numbers

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people are currently in Programme-Led Apprenticeships, broken down by the provider of each apprenticeship.

(AQW 15466/11-15)

Dr Farry: Current occupancy at the 15th October 2012 shows there are 5,089 participants on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme.

I have placed the information you have requested in the Assembly Library. This table outlines the number of participants and the apprenticeship frameworks being followed across the Training Suppliers delivering the programme.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Electrical Industry

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what safeguards are in place to stop Programme-Led Apprenticeships being used as a device to circumvent the agreed framework for electrical installation.

(AQW 15467/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme aims to assist young school leavers who have been unable to find the requisite employed status to train as an apprentice through the Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the economic downturn. They were put in place at the time as an exceptional response to the recession.

I believe that the social consequences of not doing so were unacceptable as my Department has a policy responsibility of a guaranteed training place to all eligible unemployed 16-17 year-olds. To deny that guarantee could mean that many more young people end up part of those in the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) statistics.

My Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme which is employer-led must always be the preferred option. It is the Department's flagship training model and requires the continued support of employers. Apprenticeships work for both businesses and individuals, providing companies with a skilled workforce to help them grow, and giving people hands-on experience, guidance and qualifications, helping them to develop real skills in their chosen career. I would encourage employers to re-consider the value of apprenticeships and the benefits they can bring to their businesses. Their active engagement in creating apprenticeships is crucial in opening up opportunities for young people.

However, young people are still finding it particularly difficult to secure employment in the current economic climate. The significant numbers on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme underpin the need for such an intervention.

A programme-led apprenticeship does not mean a lesser or second-tier qualification nor is it a means to circumvent an agreed framework as it offers quality training and the same level of qualification as the employer-led route. It provides a young person with the opportunity to gain qualifications at Level 2 in a chosen skill area and to progress to a Level 3 apprenticeship on securing employment.

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My Department has an arrangement with the Electrical Training Trust to assist where appropriate those learners who have undertaken training through a programme-led apprenticeship with an opportunity to advance to Level 3 Electrotechnical training.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Funding

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how much funding has been allocated to Programme-Led Apprenticeships since its introduction; and (ii) for an estimate of the average spend per apprentice.

(AQW 15500/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme aims to assist young school leavers who have been unable to find the requisite employed status to train as an apprentice through the Department's ApprenticeshipsNI programme during the economic downturn. They were put in place at the time as an exceptional response to the recession.

My Department has a policy responsibility of a guaranteed training place to all eligible unemployed 16-17 year-olds. To deny that guarantee could mean that many more young people end up part of those in the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) statistics. Young people are still finding it particularly difficult to secure employment in the current economic climate. The significant numbers of programme-led apprenticeships underpin the need for such a demand led intervention.

Since its introduction in September 2009 expenditure is as follows:

Year 1	September 2009 - March 2010	£8,148,879.31
Year 2	April 2010 - March 2011	£24,042,554.23
Year 3	April 2011 – March 2012	£33,077,840.06
Year 4	March 2012 – September 2012	£16,355,140.67

The funding available ranges from £8,320 up to £10,770 depending on which apprenticeship framework the participant is following.

Elements of Programme Led Apprenticeships attract part funding from the European Social Fund.

Employment: Sector Skills Councils

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 14714/11-15, how often his Department liaises with the Sector Skills Councils on maintaining and updating employment opportunities and trends.
(AQW 15591/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has a very close working relationship with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in Northern Ireland, reviewing their annual action plans, sitting on relevant Employer Boards and providing funding support for Northern Ireland specific projects. This work includes, for example, careers attractiveness projects such as E-skills UK 'Bring IT On Campaign' for the IT sector. Such work helps inform young people of the jobs available in the sector and the qualifications required to find employment.

In conjunction with the SSCs, my Department develops and maintains information on employment opportunities and trends. This is presented in industry factsheets which are available online at www.nidirect.gov.uk/careers. The factsheets are refreshed every two years. They were last updated in 2011 and are due for a further refresh in 2013.

In addition, there is ongoing liaison between my Department's Careers Service and the SSCs to ensure that the careers advisers keep up to date with employment opportunities and trends. The SSCs issue regular briefings via email and this is supplemented by a Careers Service monthly newsletter.

Sector Skills Councils also attend professional development days for Careers Service staff. For example, in May and June 2011, SSC speed networking events were organised to update careers advisers on key employment issues. Fifteen Sector Skills Councils attended.

Employment: Careers Advisers

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what checks are in place to ensure that careers advisors have the most up-to-date training and knowledge.
(AQW 15593/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department's careers advisers are professionally qualified and are members of the Institute of Careers Guidance. A requirement of this membership is adherence to the Institute's code of ethics which includes a commitment to continuous professional development and accountability for their actions and advice to the public.

Further to their professional qualification, the Department provides each careers adviser with at least 20 hours professional development activities per year to ensure that their knowledge and skills are fully up-to-date. These activities include information sessions on current and future employment opportunities, priority and emerging skills requirements, social inclusion policies and principles, graduate development opportunities, and new initiatives within the Department for Employment and Learning - Youth Employment Scheme, NEETs Strategy, Higher Education strategy.

The Careers Service and the Department's Analytical Services team, in conjunction with the Sector Skills Councils, develop and maintain appropriate Labour Market Information which is used by careers advisers to ensure that young people receive the most up-to-date careers advice.

To date twenty five industry factsheets have been developed. They provide information on job prospects, relevant skills and entry requirements as well as highlighting opportunities.

Careers advisers receive regular briefing from the Sector Skills Councils via email and this is supplemented by a Careers Service monthly newsletter which highlights key information.

To ensure that practitioners' skills are kept up-to-date the University of Ulster has provided refresher seminars at the continuous professional development events on current developments and best practice in the provision of career guidance. The University of Ulster is an Approved Centre within the UK for the delivery of the Qualification in Careers Guidance. The University of Ulster and the Careers Service have a reciprocal agreement whereby the Careers Service provides student placements in return for professional development events.

In addition individual training and development needs are identified and addressed through the Department's performance management system.

IBEC/CBI: Proposed Forum

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the work that the forum proposed in the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry Joint Business Council Report 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-Border Undergraduate Education' would carry out.

(AQW 15598/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has been advised that the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry (IBEC-CBI) Joint Business Council has changed its structure and is now focussing on core issues for its members. These issues include Energy Policy, Trade, Employment Relations, Banking, Research and Development and International Trade. As a result of this change in focus, the proposed forum was not, therefore, established and it was agreed that each organisation would continue to lobby on the key recommendations from the Undergraduate Mobility report in their respective jurisdictions.

However, I can advise that those recommendations from the report which fall to my Department will be taken forward through the implementation of the Higher Education Strategy, Graduating to Success.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people in the 2011/12 academic year claimed Education Maintenance Allowance.

(AQW 15683/11-15)

Dr Farry: I can confirm that a total of 25,170 students received Education Maintenance Allowance in academic year 2011/2012.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he intends to increase the household income threshold for Education Maintenance Allowance to allow for more than one dependent.

(AQW 15690/11-15)

Dr Farry: Following a formal review of the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme, my Department and the Department of Education are currently publicly consulting on five options for the future structure of the scheme in order to better target it at the most disadvantaged learners. These options are structured around the existing scheme and look at the three weekly payment bands, the bonus payments and the household income thresholds.

None of these options include the introduction of a higher threshold for households with more than one dependent. I can advise, however, that following completion of the public consultation on 2 November, my Department and the Department of Education will carefully consider all responses received prior to making a joint decision on the future structure of the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme.

FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the actions his Department has taken following the announcement of job losses at FG Wilson and First4Skills.

(AQO 2709/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Redundancy Advice Service has already started delivering a tailored package of support to staff across all three FG Wilson sites.

In addition, officials are working with the company's appointed out-placement provider, Lee Hecht Harrison, represented locally by Gilpin Executive Search and Development, to organise a job and a training and recruitment fair at each of the sites. These both commence this week.

On Friday, 14 companies were listed to participate in the jobs fairs, with a further 28 posts identified in the food processing sector, mainly with Moy Park. I am delighted at this response.

Should individuals need training to facilitate their move into these new roles my Department will arrange and fund this.

In addition, the organised training and recruitment fairs, will provide an opportunity for affected workers to find out more about relevant opportunities and pathways into a different career. Northern Regional College, South Eastern Regional College and

Belfast Metropolitan College have been invited to participate in these fairs, along with the relevant Sector Skills Councils and a number of private recruitment agencies.

In relation to First4Skills, my officials have written directly to each of the individual employees offering redundancy advice. The network of Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres has also been alerted to the situation to enable support and guidance to be offered.

My Department has agreed with the Administrator, Deloitte, that an assignment of the contract is a possibility. As a result, Deloitte has commenced a process of identifying a preferred bidder or bidders for the Department to consider and if appropriate award a contract to ensure an effective resolution to the situation currently faced by the apprentices, who were being trained by First4Skills. My primary concern is to ensure that they are able to continue with their training, so that they can complete their apprenticeships. I would like to stress that none of the apprentices has lost their jobs as a result of First4Skills going into administration.

Northern Regional College: Ballymoney Campus

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the future of the Ballymoney campus of the Northern Regional College.

(AQO 2708/11-15)

Dr Farry: Following the approval of a high level analysis of the estate's needs of the College the Northern Regional College is now preparing an Outline Business Case which will examine estates issues in detail across its entire region, including Ballymoney. It is expected that this will be submitted to my Department by December 2012, with assessment and approval expected to take a further three months.

Youth Employment Scheme

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the number of training places, coupled with additional sector based work experience, that are available for young people as part of the Youth Employment Scheme.

(AQO 2710/11-15)

Dr Farry: With the available budget of £4 million this year, we expect to offer 1,000 short 2 to 8 week work experience placements, 400 longer 6 to 9 month skills development opportunities and subsidise 800 jobs by March 2013. By March 2015 these figures will rise to 3,000, 1,800 and 1,200 respectively. In total we will spend £31 million over 4 years on the Youth Employment Scheme and a further £10million on the NEET Strategy.

Since the beginning of July our efforts have concentrated on putting the infrastructure in place to support the Scheme. Following the successful promotional event on 26 September in the Titanic Building in Belfast, we have already placed the first participants on the scheme and I expect numbers to increase rapidly in the next few weeks as we begin to secure more agreements from employers.

Members should encourage businesses in their areas to support this Scheme and encourage their young unemployed constituents to avail of the opportunities it offers.

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Numbers

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the number of students, over the past three years, enrolled in the programme led apprenticeship scheme.

(AQO 2711/11-15)

Dr Farry: The numbers enrolled in each in-take of the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme since its introduction in September 2009 are as follows:

- 2009/10 – 3,397 participants
- 2010/11 – 3,519 participants
- 2011/12 – 3,588 participants

So far in this academic year (2012/13), a total of 2,654 participants have been enrolled on the programme.

Employment Law Review

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the timetable for his Department's Employment Law Review.

(AQO 2714/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have given a commitment in the Executive's Economic Strategy to conduct a review of employment law, which will seek to stimulate business confidence whilst maintaining the rights of individual employees.

In May 2012, I launched a discussion paper, seeking views on a range of policy proposals under three themes: early resolution of disputes; efficient and effective tribunals; and Better Regulation.

I am currently holding a series of meetings with key stakeholders to inform the review process.

I plan to make a statement to the House on 13 November on how I propose to take forward the review of employment law.

This is a very substantial review that deals with every aspect of the current employment relations system here.

I plan to launch a public consultation in spring 2013 that will set out proposals for creating a modern, flexible employment relations system for Northern Ireland.

I would anticipate that any policy and legislative changes will take place over the period from the autumn of 2013 until the end of the current mandate.

Skills Strategy

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline progress on the delivery of the Skills Strategy.
(AQO 2715/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department's work is joined by one theme - equipping people with the qualifications and skills that they need to achieve their full potential and support businesses to grow our economy. This is the vision articulated within the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland known as 'Success through Skills - Transforming Futures'.

Achieving the vision of the Skills Strategy is dependent on each of the main strategies of my Department, current and emerging, and their attendant policies, being implemented effectively. Only then will the strategic goals set out in Success through Skills - Transforming Futures be achieved.

I will shortly be making available a document, entitled 'Structured to deliver Success', which will clearly show how each of the Department's strategies contribute directly to the implementation of the Skills Strategy.

In the last few months, a number of important initiatives have been progressed which address the themes outlined in the Skills Strategy.

- To help productivity through addressing sectoral imbalances, I have indicated that the Department will have a more 'sectoral' approach to employment and skills issues. To this end, I have identified a number of sectors which will be the focus of the Department's provision. Working groups, focusing on the skills needs of these sectors, have already been established for ICT, Food and Drink Processing and Manufacturing and Advanced Manufacturing.
- To help tackle the skills barriers to employment, I have launched the Youth Employment Scheme which will assist our young people to gain valuable work experience and new skills to enter the labour market.
- To help productivity by increasing the skills of the current and future workforce, I launched my Higher Education Strategy 'Graduating to Success' in April 2012 which acknowledges the need to ensure that higher education provision reflects the skills needs of local businesses, now and in the future. This will necessitate rebalancing the current academic profile towards economic need and also increasing the number of learners undertaking an economically relevant degree course.

Employment: Over-25s

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the programmes he intends to put in place to help over twenty-five year olds to get back to work.
(AQO 2713/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is currently developing a new adult return to work programme which will replace the current Steps to Work programme. The new programme, Steps to Success, will be available to all those over 18 years of age who are in receipt of a working age benefit. For those aged 25 and over it is intended to provide earlier access to the new programme than is currently available under Steps to Work.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: Film Industry

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what follow up tourism opportunities have arisen as a result of the success of films which were primarily made in Northern Ireland and distributed overseas.
(AQW 15102/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (NI Screen), Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Tourism Ireland are engaged in a number of activities to develop marketing and press opportunities to boost the tourism potential of the success of films made in Northern Ireland.

NI Screen are currently in discussion with the Causeway Coast and Glens office who are interested in running a Game of Thrones bus tour and are working with NITB on the development of a web based marketing film centered on a Game of Thrones fan coming as a tourist to Northern Ireland.

NITB is currently developing a new web section on discovernorthernireland.com which will showcase screen locations across the region and highlight the tourism offering surrounding screen tourism. More recently NITB hosted an international familiarisation trip based on Game of Thrones filming locations.

Tourism Ireland assisted Invest Northern Ireland and NI Screen to bring Indian production company Getaway Films to Belfast for an initial exploratory visit for a brand new Indian film called David. Filming took place in the city in September. Films such as this are a cost-effective way to reach mass audiences, particularly in emerging markets such as India, where raising awareness of Northern Ireland as a holiday destination is the first step in a longer-term campaign to attract more visitors.

Natural Gas Network

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department will consider extending the natural gas network to Whitehead.

(AQW 15228/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has been considering the issues associated with extending the natural gas network to new areas of Northern Ireland, and will continue to liaise with the Utility Regulator, and the gas industry on such matters, including consideration of extending the gas network to towns such as Whitehead.

DETI: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15260/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has not let any contracts in this financial year.

Science Park: Funding

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 14708/ 11-15, whether this level of funding will be provided in the future.

(AQW 15301/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The vast majority of the funding already provided to the Northern Ireland Science Park (NISP) has been for its physical construction and to enable it to become financially self-sustaining. Other than existing commitments for the NISP Connect and Halo Programmes, there are no current plans to provide any further public funding to NISP. However, in line with a commitment in the Executive's Economic Strategy, my Department is currently working with NISP to examine whether it could evolve into an Open-Innovation Institute. Any public investment in such an institute would be subject to normal value for money tests.

Investment: Foreign Direct Investment

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans InvestNI has to promote foreign direct investment after assistance is prohibited by the EU from 2013, given the criticisms of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report in March 2012.

(AQW 15305/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report correctly highlighted Invest NI's successful track record in attracting high quality Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), particularly during the most recent Programme for Government period (2008-2011). The agency promoted over 7,500 new FDI jobs during this period against a target of 6,500, with 75% of jobs promoted attracting salaries in excess of the Northern Ireland Private Sector median.

The report also highlighted the role that Regional Aid, in the form of Selective Financial Assistance (SFA) to companies, has played in the rebuilding of the Northern Ireland economy and the risk to the economy of the proposed changes to Regional Aid.

While it is recognised that there may be changes to Regional Aid within Northern Ireland post 2013, particularly in terms of coverage, there is no indication that assistance will be prohibited. Discussions are still ongoing between the Commission and Member States on revisions to the Regional Aid Guidelines (RAG) and it is therefore too early to speculate the nature or extent of those changes at this stage. However my Department continues to make every effort to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland in the RAG discussions, including direct engagement with the EC and at a UK Government level.

I recognise the importance of Regional Aid in continuing to help narrow the gap between the Northern Ireland economy and the rest of the UK but I am also aware that, for most companies that invest here, financial assistance is only part of the overall proposition. We also have a ready supply of skilled and talented people, excellent university/business linkages, an advanced telecommunications infrastructure and world class companies operating in key knowledge-based sectors. Operating costs are highly competitive and can be significantly lower than many regions of the UK and Europe, including the Republic of Ireland.

Over the past few years, Invest NI has strategically been modifying the support offerings to take account of anticipated changes to Regional Aid. This has included enhancing our support under other financial instruments including R&D and Training and roll out of a suite of debt and equity instruments under our Access to Finance Strategy. In addition, Invest NI has developed a range of advisory services and capability workshops and provides a suite of business development services to

existing and potential investors. Invest NI's support is designed to enable both indigenous and externally owned companies to grow their business, maximise efficiencies, develop their product and sell in overseas markets. The feedback that I have personally received from companies that have chosen to locate in Northern Ireland suggests that support from Invest NI is crucial, and often a major factor in the decision.

Investment: Job Creation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when InvestNI will be able to detail the number of jobs actually created, rather than jobs promoted.

(AQW 15306/11-15)

Mrs Foster: For those projects supported through the 'Jobs Fund', Invest NI can and does report on the number of jobs that have been created. This is possible, because a management information system was developed which supports the collation and reporting of this data.

In relation to other types of interventions, a new Offers and Claims Management System (OaCMS) was introduced by Invest NI in May 2012. This new system will enable job creation to be reported for offers of Selective Financial Assistance issued by Invest NI from 1 April 2012 onwards. Data will therefore be available this year but as these offers typically have a three year life span, a detailed and meaningful analysis of this job creation data will not be possible until the end of each contract period.

The distinction between the two forms of assessing job creation should be noted. The project based approach, which is addressed by the first part of this answer will require at least three years before a sufficient time period has elapsed for the information to be meaningful. The other aspect to job creation is based on the overall change in business employment, reported through official government survey sources. Invest NI is currently involved in a research project which aims to provide an updated analysis by March 2013.

Tourism: South American Market

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that the number of people from Brazil visiting the Tourism Ireland website more than doubled in 2012, what steps her Department has taken to harness the South American tourism market,

(AQW 15312/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Tourism Ireland recently completed a review of potential new markets and, arising from this, it has developed a strategy to attract more high-spending visitors from Brazil. This involves working closely with airlines, tour operators in Brazil and UK inbound operators who specialise in South America, to encourage them to include Northern Ireland in their programmes and brochures.

Earlier this month, representatives from Tourism Ireland travelled to Brazil and other locations in South America. Workshops were held for key trade and media contacts.

Visits to Tourism Ireland's Brazil website have increased by 42% this year, when compared to the same period in 2011 - from 33,700 (Jan-Sept 2011) to 47,944 (Jan-Sept 2012). Tourism Ireland will launch a new website and market book targeting potential Brazilian holidaymakers later this year.

Tourism: Signage Policy

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQO 2549/11-15, to outline the recommendations for amending the criteria for the erection of brown tourism signs.

(AQW 15317/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourism Signage Policy is operated by Roads Service within the Department for Regional Development (DRD) with support from Local Councils and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB).

My Department has undertaken a review of the policy to ensure it reflects developments in tourism and is more flexible in its implementation, given the evolving nature of tourism product and experiences. I have subsequently written to Minister Kennedy (DRD) to present our recommendations regarding proposed amendments.

I do not wish to prejudice the outcome of the discussions with DRD, therefore I am not in a position to set out the full detail of my recommendations at the present time.

However, I can advise that recommendations relate to the update of definitions, eligibility criteria, tourist accommodation categories (reflecting new legislation) and general terminology (to reflect the increased use of technology to access information).

I have also recommended that consideration be given to a review of the policy's administration, standardisation in its application, the inclusion of additional service symbols on existing tourist attraction signage, and greater flexibility in signposting tourist accommodation from A and B class roads.

Investment: Job Creation

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of new jobs created; and (ii) the level of financial investment for job creation, in each year between 1998 and 2007, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 15318/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI reports employment related projects on the basis of jobs promoted and not jobs created as this is consistent with the targets set out in the Programme for Government. Invest NI does not hold historical information relating to the period prior to its establishment in April 2002.

Tables 1 to 6 detail the 23,256 jobs that Invest NI has promoted by Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA) between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2008. The tables also provide the amount of financial assistance offered by Invest NI to employment-related projects and the associated amount of investment planned by businesses.

Some projects aim to create both new jobs and safeguard existing jobs. In many cases the split between assistance to promote and safeguard jobs is not readily available, therefore the full amount of assistance offered to employment related projects has been included in the tables below. As a result, the tables will show some PCAs where there has been employment-related assistance offered, but no new job promotion figure.

Table 7 provides an analysis of an additional 11,149 jobs supported through business start-up programmes. This is presented separately because there are no investment figures associated with the programme.

Table 1: Invest NI Support Offered to Employment-Related Projects by PCA (2002-03)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Belfast East	32	0.14	0.72
Belfast South	147	1.59	8.23
Belfast West	87	1.06	6.46
East Antrim	100	1.56	5.39
East Londonderry	17	0.14	0.62
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	391	2.45	9.99
Foyle	73	10.40	92.13
Mid Ulster	122	0.69	8.88
Newry And Armagh	430	3.23	10.15
North Down	41	0.22	1.58
South Antrim	815	16.20	123.87
South Down	67	1.80	8.07
Upper Bann	133	12.68	60.33
West Tyrone	31	3.30	15.51
Total	2,485	55.45	351.91

Table 2: Invest NI Support Offered to Employment-Related Projects by PCA (2003-04)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Belfast East		8.80	33.61
Belfast North	14	0.49	8.68
Belfast South	752	8.89	44.39
Belfast West	217	6.00	19.78
East Antrim	25	0.20	0.90
East Londonderry	24	0.17	1.13
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	202	1.44	3.94
Foyle	486	3.82	11.67
North Antrim		2.72	14.44

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
North Down	331	2.62	8.14
Strangford	5	0.01	0.01
Upper Bann	226	2.80	16.12
West Tyrone	175	5.13	26.78
Total	2,457	43.09	189.60

Table 3: Invest NI Support Offered to Employment-Related Projects by PCA (2004-05)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Belfast East	429	8.36	11.33
Belfast North	5	0.07	0.38
Belfast South	1,320	8.53	33.21
Belfast West	784	6.56	22.28
East Antrim	149	1.61	10.14
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	10	1.69	11.78
Foyle	41	2.88	37.85
Lagan Valley	82	1.43	8.24
Mid Ulster	170	4.06	23.28
North Antrim	212	5.70	23.43
North Down	140	0.99	5.33
South Antrim	304	3.50	14.34
South Down	21	0.34	2.62
Upper Bann	158	13.08	49.84
West Tyrone	53	1.17	4.43
Total	3,878	59.96	258.49

Table 4: Invest NI Support Offered to Employment-Related Projects by PCA (2005-06)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Belfast East	276	2.31	14.12
Belfast North	100	2.96	28.17
Belfast South	969	9.32	63.86
Belfast West	31	0.35	1.96
East Antrim	231	11.84	49.27
East Londonderry	51	0.49	7.63
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	129	1.12	8.31
Foyle	668	20.61	76.88
Lagan Valley	387	8.27	77.83
Mid Ulster	118	0.67	8.25
Newry And Armagh	633	3.08	12.37
North Antrim	98	0.39	3.38
North Down	56	0.22	0.53

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
South Antrim	141	2.60	17.06
South Down	275	3.68	13.12
Strangford	120	1.84	9.49
Upper Bann	298	6.66	27.37
West Tyrone	124	0.97	12.32
Total	4,705	77.39	431.93

Table 5: Invest NI Support Offered to Employment-Related Projects by PCA (2006-07)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Belfast East	678	10.11	36.57
Belfast North	91	1.96	20.75
Belfast South	966	9.02	53.58
Belfast West	58	0.12	0.68
East Antrim	67	0.42	3.14
East Londonderry	56	0.43	4.15
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	722	6.10	46.28
Foyle	875	6.93	30.76
Lagan Valley	131	1.30	11.79
Mid Ulster	270	1.21	12.64
Newry And Armagh	424	3.23	18.98
North Antrim	242	2.45	13.70
North Down	255	1.08	5.58
South Antrim	48	0.30	2.99
South Down	93	0.46	2.75
Strangford	86	1.09	11.01
Upper Bann	147	1.28	19.00
West Tyrone	116	0.79	7.60
Total	5,325	48.27	301.96

Table 6: Invest NI Support Offered to Employment-Related Projects by PCA (2007-08)

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Belfast East	299	13.03	96.04
Belfast North	51	0.41	4.25
Belfast South	527	4.36	33.01
Belfast West	62	0.88	8.72
East Antrim	284	1.80	17.34
East Londonderry	389	3.06	9.72
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	250	7.33	71.37
Foyle	994	10.20	46.79
Lagan Valley	107	0.55	3.73

PCA	New Jobs Promoted	Assistance Offered (£m)	Total Planned Investment (£m)
Mid Ulster	398	3.54	39.35
Newry And Armagh	425	5.18	118.97
North Antrim	95	3.44	17.59
North Down	37	0.30	1.96
South Antrim	65	0.69	3.87
South Down	61	0.81	3.39
Strangford	61	0.22	2.55
Upper Bann	102	1.18	12.00
West Tyrone	199	1.71	19.86
Total	4,406	58.68	510.52

Notes to Tables 1 to 6:

- 1 New Jobs Promoted represent the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
- 2 Planned Investment includes Assistance Offered.
- 3 Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.

Table 7: Invest NI Jobs Supported through Enterprise Development Programme by PCA (2002-03 to 2007-08)

PCA	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	Total
Belfast East	32	64	76	65	59	84	379
Belfast North	42	55	68	89	58	77	389
Belfast South	52	84	119	87	81	86	510
Belfast West	45	58	94	90	81	85	453
East Antrim	66	83	125	98	104	97	574
East Londonderry	66	88	163	132	120	149	719
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	89	130	207	179	184	202	990
Foyle	75	115	199	142	125	164	821
Lagan Valley	74	66	87	90	81	78	476
Mid Ulster	102	126	161	170	141	166	867
Newry & Armagh	91	109	172	139	112	136	760
North Antrim	65	63	118	106	122	142	615
North Down	55	95	96	89	69	56	460
South Antrim	58	78	96	88	80	76	476
South Down	98	128	186	175	102	132	821
Strangford	63	96	116	110	80	72	537
Upper Bann	84	103	144	140	85	108	664
West Tyrone	61	79	111	118	121	148	637
Total	1,219	1,621	2,338	2,107	1,806	2,058	11,149

Note to Table 7:

- 1 These figures are based on an estimate of jobs created by an individual EDP offer. This estimation process is derived from independent monitoring of the Enterprise Development Programme. As such, the totals in the table may not add due to rounding.

Broadband: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the provision of broadband in the North Down constituency; and what steps are being taken to improve the provision.

(AQW 15361/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has taken forward a number of initiatives aimed at improving broadband access for businesses and consumers across Northern Ireland, including North Down. This includes the £51m Next Generation Broadband (NGB) project, which has facilitated the roll-out of the highest level of fibre-to-the-cabinet technology in the UK.

Through a combination of the NGB project and BT's own investment programme, a total of 122 street cabinets have been fibre enabled within the North Down Parliamentary Constituency, delivering access to broadband speeds of between 2 to 40 megabits per second (Mbps). Those interested in acquiring a service can use the two websites that have been created to check availability in their area - www.fasterbroadbandni.com and www.nibroadband.com. However, as fibre-to-the-cabinet technology is distance related, not all premises will be able to access the fibred services.

Broadband services are nevertheless delivered via a mix of technologies including fixed-line, satellite, radio (wireless) and mobile. This is similar to many regions globally where there are geographic and topographic challenges to network development.

Constituents in North Down can access the satellite broadband service available under the Department's contract with Onwave Ltd. Onwave offers services with download speeds of 8, 12 and 18 Mbps. Details of Onwave's services can be found on the company's website at www.onwave.co.uk/ni or by contacting the company directly on 0845 43 43 500.

My Department also established the £1.9m Northern Ireland Broadband Fund, through which there has been significant deployment of fixed-wireless broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland. One of the companies supported under the Fund, North West Electronics (NWE), is currently delivering fixed-wireless broadband services in some areas across North Down. NWE offers services with download speeds of between 10 Mbps and 100 Mbps. More information can be found on North West Electronic's website at www.nwewn.com or by contacting them directly on 028 7135 1999.

Looking forward, my Department has secured £4.4m under the UK Coalition Government's Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) initiative, which together with its Budget allocations for 2011-2015, will be used to extend the delivery of higher speed services, into those areas of Northern Ireland where, despite previous investments, a minimum download speed of 2Mbps via fixed-line technology cannot currently be attained.

DETI officials are also in discussions with BDUK to source additional funds to deliver an innovative project, aimed at improving mobile broadband coverage across Northern Ireland. Work on scoping both projects is underway.

Energy: Domestic

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an estimate of the percentage share of the domestic energy market held by each company in (i) the Greater Belfast area; and (ii) the remainder of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15404/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

Natural Gas

Information prepared by the Utility Regulator shows that, based on connection numbers at end of June 2012, Airtricity Gas Supply (formerly Phoenix Supply Ltd) had an 86% share, and firmus energy a 14% share, of the domestic gas supply market in the Greater Belfast and Larne gas licensed area.

In the '10 Towns' licensed area outside Greater Belfast, firmus energy has the exclusive right to supply gas to domestic properties until 1 April 2015.

Electricity

During the period April-June 2012, information prepared by the Utility Regulator notes that Power NI supplied 85.3% of the domestic electricity market in Northern Ireland, Airtricity supplied 12.9%, Budget Energy supplied 1.7%, and Electric Ireland supplied around 0.05% of the domestic market. The Department does not routinely hold information which would provide a breakdown of the electricity supply market between the Greater Belfast area and the rest of Northern Ireland.

DETI: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people employed in his Department are (i) suspended from work pending criminal charges or investigations; and (ii) continuing in their duties whilst facing criminal charges or investigations.

(AQW 15420/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI has currently no staff (i) suspended from work pending criminal charges and (ii) is not aware of any staff facing criminal charges or investigations.

Tourism: Bed and Breakfasts, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how her Department is promoting Bed and Breakfasts in the North Down area.

(AQW 15427/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) does not promote and market individual businesses as this could create commercial advantage in a competitive marketplace. However NITB does provide platforms for the tourism industry through its marketing campaigns whereby providers are able to promote special offers via the NITB consumer website discovernorthernireland.com.

There are currently 15 Bed and Breakfasts certified in the North Down area all of which are advertised on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's website discovernorthernireland.com. The website receives approximately 2.5 million visitors each year, with many of these visitors (375,000 approximately) sourcing information on accommodation.

Two of the Bed and Breakfasts in the North Down area currently participate in the voluntary NITB quality star rating scheme which is a useful source of business and marketing advice. The scheme offers a one to five star rating which the Bed and Breakfasts can use to promote their offering to potential guests.

Broadband: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's efforts to improve mobile phone and Broadband coverage in North Down.

(AQW 15428/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

Mobile Phone Coverage

Coverage targets for mobile services are set at a UK national level by telecoms regulator, Ofcom meaning that Mobile Network Operators can effectively meet their targets by providing coverage in the largest towns and cities in the UK.

The impact of this is that in many areas of the UK there is a limited commercial case for Mobile Network Operators to improve coverage and quality of service. This particularly impacts on Northern Ireland, having a high density of rural dwellers.

This deficiency is recognised by both my Department and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Whitehall. DETI is currently scoping a project aimed at delivering improvements in 3rd Generation (voice, text and mobile broadband) services across Northern Ireland but including North Down while, at the same time, future-proofing networks for the delivery of 4th Generation (voice, text and high speed mobile broadband) services when commercial roll-out commences in 2013. The delivery of 4G services will be dependent on the auction of radio spectrum which is to be taken forward by Ofcom towards the end of 2012. In announcing its plans for the auction of 4G radio spectrum taking place this year, Ofcom stated that one of the licensees will be obligated to provide a mobile broadband service for indoor reception to at least 98% of the UK population by the end of 2017. That licensee will also be obligated to ensure that the same service is available to at least 95% of the population of each of the UK nations. This regional obligation is something for which I have been lobbying Ofcom over a number of years.

The DETI project will effectively build upon the DCMS-led Mobile Infrastructure project announced in October 2011. The aim of this £150m project is to improve access to mobile services (primarily voice services) across the UK, including parts of Northern Ireland. I cannot say at this stage if North Down will be included as the precise locations within Northern Ireland will not be known until the procurement process has been completed and a contract awarded in early 2013. My officials continue to engage with DCMS on this project.

Broadband Coverage

I refer the member to my response to AQW 15361/11-15.

DETI: EU Funding

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the EU funding that her Department currently receives and administers, including when the funding will end.

(AQW 15491/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department is Managing Authority for the EU Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland 2007–2013. The Programme aims to promote investment in research and technology, enterprise and entrepreneurship, energy efficiency, renewable energy and telecoms infrastructure.

The Programme has an overall value of €613.667million of which 50% is funded from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

In addition, DETI acts as Northern Ireland Accountable Department for tourism, enterprise, energy and telecoms elements of the Interreg IVA which is managed and administered by the Special EU Programmes Body. The overall Interreg IVA Programme value is €256million of which 75% is funded from ERDF.

Once all projects across the Interreg IVA Programme are approved, the DETI element is forecast to be in the region of €40million - €45million (£37million approved to date based on October HMT euro rate of 1.2531).

Both Programmes run from 2007–2013 and require all funding to be contractually committed by 31 December 2013 and spent by 31 December 2015.

FG Wilson: Job Losses

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, between the time of the announcement of 160 job losses at FG Wilson in July 2012 and 760 job losses in September 2012, what contact she had with (i) Doug Oberhelman, Caterpillar's chairman and CEO; (ii) Bill Rohner, vice-president of Caterpillar's electric power division; and (iii) representatives of FG Wilson.

(AQW 15528/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I wrote to the CEO of Caterpillar and received a reply which confirmed the company's plan to continue to manufacture large gensets in Northern Ireland.

I had telephone calls with the Vice President of Caterpillar's global Electric Power Division. This was followed by a face-to-face meeting in the US on 23rd September 2012.

During the period between the two announcements, my team in Invest NI held four meetings with management in addition to various e-mail exchanges and telephone calls on this issue.

FG Wilson: Job Losses

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, between the time of the announcement of 160 job losses at FG Wilson in July 2012 and 760 job losses in September 2012, what contact InvestNI had with (i) representatives of Caterpillar; and (ii) representatives of FG Wilson.

(AQW 15529/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI held four meetings with Caterpillar/F G Wilson over the period from July 2012 to the redundancy announcement in September. Of these, one meeting was with F G Wilson local representatives, another was with Caterpillar management while the remaining two involved discussions with both local and US management.

In addition, over this period Invest NI had two telephone calls with senior officials in the US as well numerous e-mail exchanges and telephone calls on a range of matters relating to this decision.

Caterpillar: DETI Meeting

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following her visit to the United States where she met with Bill Rohner, what action points were agreed by both sides.

(AQW 15530/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I met with senior management of Caterpillar in the US as soon as possible after the redundancy announcement in order to discuss in more detail the company's decision and to identify any opportunities that could mitigate the job losses.

During the meeting Alastair Hamilton, CEO, Invest NI and I outlined the support available in a number of areas, including Research & Development and training. We discussed a number of potential opportunities, not only within Caterpillar's Electric Power Division where the local operation sits, but also in relation to other functions within the wider group that could be competitively serviced from Northern Ireland.

The key actions arising from the meeting relate to Invest NI following up on these potential areas for new business development and I can confirm that a number of constructive meetings have since been held here in Northern Ireland, with both local and US management. The opportunities being discussed are, in the main, at an early stage and are therefore commercially sensitive but I can assure the Member that every effort is being made to fully exploit these.

Invest NI: Funding

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of funding that InvestNI has allocated to the (i) Ballycastle; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Ballymena areas, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15545/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI does not "allocate job creation investment" to specific constituency areas. All support is demand-led by businesses bringing forward viable projects to improve their competitiveness and gain a larger share of international markets.

For consistency, information is presented at the level of District Council Area. As such Ballycastle is included in Moyle DCA. The table below shows the amount of assistance, or funding, that Invest NI has offered to businesses in the relevant DCAs in each of the last five financial years.

**Invest NI Assistance Offered in Ballymena, Ballymoney and Moyle DCAs
(2007-08 to 2011-12)**

Year	Ballymena £m	Ballymoney £m	Moyle £m
2007-08	3.40	0.43	0.32
2008-09	1.85	0.18	0.56
2009-10	5.55	0.52	0.07
2010-11	5.90	0.17	0.10
2011-12	1.84	0.52	0.25
Total	18.54	1.81	1.31

Note: Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.

Broadband: Garvaghy/Ballygawley, County Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for her assessment of broadband provision in the Garvaghy/Ballygawley areas of West Tyrone; and (ii) to detail why the cabinet situated near Kelly's Inn, Garvaghey, has not been activated although there is a fibre optic connection to the box.

(AQW 15558/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has taken forward a number of initiatives aimed at improving broadband access for consumers across Northern Ireland, particularly those located in rural areas such as Garvaghey and Ballygawley. This includes the Next Generation Broadband (NGB) project which has facilitated the roll-out of the highest level of fibre-to-the-cabinet technology in the UK.

Under this project, three of the four cabinets serving the Ballygawley exchange area, namely those at Sixmilecross Road, at the roundabout at Augher Road and at Dungannon Road, have been fibre enabled. The fourth cabinet near Kelly's Inn on the Omagh Road has not been fibre enabled. Any decision to upgrade further cabinets is an operational matter for BT and is subject to commercial considerations

Broadband services in Northern Ireland are delivered via a mix of technologies including fixed-line, satellite, radio (wireless) and mobile. This is similar to many regions globally where there are geographic and topographic challenges to network development.

It is important to recognise that fibre-to-the-cabinet technology is distance related and not all premises will be able to access this service. That is why under the NGB contract, arrangements have been made for businesses to use other Broadband technologies such as Broadband Enabling Technology (BET). Companies that wish to pursue this option should register their interest on the www.fasterbroadbandni.com website.

Customers in the Garvaghey and Ballygawley areas of West Tyrone are also able to access the satellite broadband services available under my Department's contract with Onwave Ltd. Onwave offers services with download speeds of 8, 12 and 18 Megabits per second, details of which can be found on their website at www.onwave.co.uk/ni or by contacting the company directly on 0845 43 43 500.

My Department has also supported the deployment of fixed-wireless broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland.

North West Electronics is currently delivering fixed-wireless broadband services, with download speeds up to 100 Mbps, which customers in the Garvaghey and Ballygawley areas may be able to access. More information can be found on North West Electronics' website at www.nwewn.com or by contacting them directly on 028 7135 1999.

Looking forward, my Department has secured £4.4m under the UK Coalition Government's Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) initiative which, together with its Budget allocations for 2011-2015, will be used to extend the delivery of higher speed services into those areas of Northern Ireland where, despite previous investments, a minimum download speed of 2Mbps via fixed-line technology cannot currently be attained. Work on scoping this project is currently underway.

Wi-Fi: Free in Town Centres

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how her Department intends to assist councils to help with developing free WiFi in town centres.

(AQW 15586/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no programme under which it can provide funding to councils to enable them to provide free WiFi in town centres.

However, DETI has supported a number of pilot projects to provide free WiFi in the centres of Antrim, Ballycastle, Enniskillen, Newcastle and Londonderry.

Full Post Project Evaluations (PPEs) were undertaken following completion of these pilots. My Department would be happy to share with the councils the learning that has been obtained from these pilot projects by making the evaluations available to them.

Tourism: Angling

Mr McAleer asked Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for her assessment of the benefits of angling for tourism west of the Bann; and (ii) what level of support her Department provides to the Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers in recognition of their efforts to promote angling in the region.

(AQW 15594/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In terms of an assessment of benefits of angling for tourism west of the Bann, research shows that there is a downturn in estimated spend by direct Great Britain and overseas visitors who participated in angling during their stay in Northern Ireland, from £6.1m in 2010 to £2.9million in 2011, which is due to fewer people participating in angling.

The number of direct GB and overseas visitors who participated in angling in 2011 was 45% less compared with 2010. Those who participated in angling during their stay in 2011 also spent on average 11% or £49 less per trip compared with 2010.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is responsible for promoting Northern Ireland to the domestic and ROI market. Within these markets angling has not been designated as a priority. The majority of domestic anglers are members of angling clubs and do not require information from the Tourist Board.

Although demand has decreased, angling remains an important product and NITB is working closely with destinations in developing plans to optimise their tourism potential and many of these e.g. Fermanagh have identified that angling is a key component of their tourism offering.

NITB works closely with Tourism Ireland to host press trips for angling journalists and liaises with the many government agencies who have responsibility for angling, to ensure that the key links are available on www.discovernorthernireland.com/angling to provide the prospective angler with relevant accurate information.

To Date my department has had no direct dealings with Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers. NITB can offer support in promoting events and activities that are 'tourism focused' on www.discovernorthernireland.com

Petroleum Licences

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the terms and conditions of each petroleum licence currently granted.

(AQW 15606/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Each Petroleum Licence comprises its own terms and conditions.

These terms and conditions are governed by the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 and the associated Regulations made under that Act. The Model Clauses in Schedule 2 to the Petroleum Production Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987 [SR 1987 No 196] as amended by the Petroleum Production (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 [SR 2010 No 169] ("the Model Clauses") are incorporated in Petroleum Licences unless otherwise specified in individual licences.

Both the individual petroleum licence documents and the underpinning legislation can be accessed via the following link: http://www.detini.gov.uk/deti-energy-index/minerals-and-petroleum/petroleum_licensing_2.htm

Growth Loan Fund

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 15072/11-15, to detail the procedure used to select Whiterock Capital Partners to manage the Growth Loan Fund.

(AQW 15607/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The award of the management contract to Whiterock Capital Partners followed a competitive tendering process.

The tender was advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union. The Official Journal of the European Union is the central database for European public sector tender notices.

The contract was awarded on the basis of best practice procurement advice, as provided by Central Procurement Directorate.

Following assessment of all tenders submitted the Whiterock proposal was considered the most economically advantageous.

DETI: Disposals through Auctions

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the items which her Department has disposed of at auctions in (i) 2010/11; and (ii) 2011/12, including the auction value of each item.

(AQW 15617/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment has not disposed of any items at auctions in the financial years 2010/11 and 2011/12.

National Trust: Creationism

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) how many times, to date, correspondence was sent from her Department to the National Trust making reference to (a) creationism; and (b) a creationist exhibition being a condition of financial support.

(AQW 15671/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no record of any such correspondence having been sent to the National Trust.

The content of the visitor centre at the Giants Causeway was developed by the National Trust. At no time did my Department try to dictate or influence the content of the exhibition at the visitors centre or make the content a grant condition of financial support.

This has already been confirmed by the National Trust in a recent press release.

National Trust: Creationism

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why an internal email within her Department referred to the 'National Trust's unwillingness to accept creationism to be included in the exhibition as a grant condition'.

(AQW 15672/11-15)

Mrs Foster: At no time did my Department try to dictate or influence the content of the exhibition at the visitors centre or make the content a condition of grant support. The letter of offer to the National Trust did not make the inclusion of creationism in the exhibition a grant condition.

The final decision as to the content of the interpretive solution was taken by the National Trust as project promoters. It was based on research into visitor expectation and need and involved consultation with a wide group of stakeholders.

National Ecosystem Assessment

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) whether she is aware of the recommendations contained in the Northern Ireland chapter of the UK National Ecosystem Assessment; and (ii) how the findings in the document have been utilised by her Department.

(AQW 15703/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am aware of the key recommendations set out in the Northern Ireland National Ecosystem Assessment. My Department's commitments are set out in the Programme for Government and the Sustainable Development Strategy.

Growth Loan Fund

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 15072/11-15, to list the organisations that submitted bids for the tender to deliver the Growth Loan Fund, including the value of each tender.

(AQW 15722/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The award of the management contract for the Growth Loan Fund to a consortium led by Braveheart Investment Group, which in turn set up Whiterock Capital Partners to deliver the contract, followed a competitive tendering process.

The contract was awarded on the basis of best practice procurement advice, as provided by Central Procurement Directorate.

Following assessment of all tenders submitted the Braveheart Consortium (subsequently Whiterock) proposal was considered the most economically advantageous.

Details of other bidders and the content within their submitted bids are considered to be commercially sensitive and cannot therefore be disclosed. Moreover, in addition to being commercially sensitive to those organisations involved in the tender, any disclosure of details and costs has the potential to impact on future tenders of this nature to the detriment of the public purse.

Giant's Causeway: Creationism

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department held discussions with the National Trust or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on the potential for the reflection of creationism within the new Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre being a condition of the grant that the National Trust received from her Department.

(AQW 15755/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department received a number of representations relating to the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre about a range of issues including creationism. At no time did my Department try to dictate or influence the content of the exhibition at the visitors centre or make the content a condition of grant support. The letter of offer to the National Trust did not make the inclusion of creationism in the exhibition a grant condition.

The final decision as to the content of the interpretive solution was taken by the National Trust as project promoters. It was based on research into visitor expectation and need and involved consultation with a wide group of stakeholders.

Giant's Causeway: Visitor Centre

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any meetings that her Department has had with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board since 8 May 2007 in relation to the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre.

(AQW 15756/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There have been a substantial number of meetings between the Department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in relation to the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre since 8 May 2007.

Freedom of Information Act: Redacted Information

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department complies with the Freedom of Information Act in relation to the amount of redacted information that it releases in response to written requests.

(AQW 15758/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department makes use of redaction/blanking-out of information only in circumstances where such information is considered to be exempt from disclosure to members of the public under the Freedom of Information Act, the Environmental Information Regulations, or the Data Protection Act. In such circumstances, the applicant is also referred to the relevant section of legislation under which the information is being withheld.

Tourism Development Scheme

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the likelihood of those on the reserve list for the Tourism Development Scheme receiving funding.

(AQO 2718/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A total of 65 applications were received under the Tourism Development Scheme 2011-13 open call for applications. Projects have been shortlisted based on the budget available to the scheme. Projects which receive offers must fully claim by 31 March 2013.

Should projects drop out from the shortlist, applications will be taken from the reserve list on an ability to deliver basis. That is, with all match funding and permissions in place to allow the project to spend by 31 March 2013 deadline.

However my Department is bidding to secure additional funding for 2012/13 and into 2013/14 to enable those projects on the reserve list to be supported.

Investment: Indigenous Businesses

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that over thirty percent of InvestNI funding to indigenous businesses went to two constituencies in 2011/12, can she detail what incentives she intends to provide to encourage the growth of home-grown businesses in other constituencies.

(AQO 2724/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI provides a range of financial and non financial support to help locally-owned companies to accelerate their growth and increase profitability. During the last financial year, some 73% of Invest NI's total assistance was offered to locally owned companies, promoting over 1,700 new jobs.

Let me make it absolutely clear, as I have done so repeatedly in this house before, Invest NI does not direct its investment support to specific constituency areas nor does it have the tools to do so.

Economy: Productivity

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what local action her Department has taken to address the issues of low productivity in manufacturing, retail, transport, financial services and agriculture identified in the NI Economic Strategy.

(AQO 2725/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The NI Economic Strategy is clear that the key route to productivity growth is to support local companies to become more competitive in international markets through investment in innovation, R&D and skills.

The supporting Comprehensive Action Plan sets out the actions that all Departments are taking to support growth in exports, productivity and employment across all sectors of the economy.

Business Bank

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions have taken place with the Business Secretary regarding the recent announcement of a new business bank for small businesses and the potential it will have for local businesses.

(AQO 2726/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Business Secretary announced plans in September 2012 for a new government-backed business bank to address gaps in finance for SMEs, further details of which will be announced later this year. While I have not had discussions with the Business Secretary about this new initiative to date, I welcome this development and both the Finance Minister and I will be pressing to ensure that it is open to, and will be of benefit to, Northern Ireland based businesses.

Invest NI: Job Creation

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what criteria her Department and InvestNI use to decide how to allocate job creation investment to constituencies.

(AQO 2727/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI does not allocate job creation investment to specific constituency areas.

FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department has taken to mitigate the impact of the multiple job losses at FG Wilson and First4Skills.

(AQO 2728/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI is working with colleagues across government, including the Department for Employment and Learning, the Social Security Agency and HMRC to provide a redundancy advice service and other information about the options and support available.

Invest NI has a healthy pipeline of potential projects at various stages of negotiation. Should they all come to fruition, they could generate £500 million investment and the create 2,700 jobs.

Invest NI is working with a number of local and international companies which currently have specific employment enquiries, whilst the recently announced Regional Start Initiative will also enable those individuals who may wish to consider self-employment to access relevant support.

Telecommunications: 4G

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what level of coverage is expected from the introduction of the 4G network.

(AQO 2729/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In announcing its plans for the auction of 4G radio spectrum taking place this year, Ofcom stated that one of the licensees will be obligated to provide a mobile broadband service for indoor reception to at least 98% of the UK population by the end of 2017. That licensee will also be obligated to ensure that the same service is available to at least 95% of the population of each of the UK nations. This regional obligation is something for which I have been lobbying Ofcom over a number of years. Furthermore, Everything Everywhere, having been given the go ahead to deliver 4G services ahead of the auction using existing spectrum, has committed to delivering services to 98% of the UK population by 2014.

Department of the Environment

Biffa: Waste Infrastructure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of Biffa, which is the sole bidder for two out of three waste management projects, being in financial trouble and facing an uncertain future.

(AQW 15189/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Biffa is not a bidder for any of the waste infrastructure projects. It had been a participant in each of the Waste Management Groups' procurement competitions but subsequently withdrew, for different corporate reasons in each case. It currently provides some services to arc21 but these are not such as to impact on arc21's major waste infrastructure procurement.

Waste Management Groups: Assessment

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment how (i) Arc21; (ii) Southern Waste Management Partnership; and (iii) North West Region Waste Management Group plan to treat waste; and for his assessment of the proposed methods.

(AQW 15190/11-15)

Mr Attwood: District councils have legislative responsibility for establishing and implementing Waste Management Plans to collect, treat and dispose of waste in a manner that represents the best possible and practicable balance of social, economic and environmental impacts. The current infrastructure procurements being taken forward by the Waste Management Groups (WMGs) include provision for a proposed combination of technologies and have been formally endorsed by their constituent councils through their Joint Committees.

Each of the planned procurements by the WMGs includes provision for an energy from waste facility, specifically a gasifier in the North West region and an incinerator in the arc21 region. The specifics are:

Arc21 – plans a two stage process with up front Mechanical Biological Treatment of the Municipal Solid Waste to gain additional recycle and biologically treat the remaining material to produce a fuel for combustion in a second stage conventional Energy from Waste plant.

NWRWMG – plans up front Mechanical Biological Treatment to produce additional recycle and a fuel for combustion in a second stage gasification plant.

Following the recent decision by the SWaMP2008 Joint Committee to abandon its infrastructure procurement project the Committee will be initiating contingency planning for delivery of an alternative solution.

The allowable technologies within each procurement have been decided by the WMG constituent councils and will be taken forward in compliance with the NI Waste Management Strategy 2006-2020 and with the NI Best Practicable Environmental Option. All key infrastructure requirements will be subject to full planning and permitting assessments by the Department prior to construction.

Biffa: Waste Management

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment what impact Biffa's financial problems will have on its current waste management contracts.

(AQW 15193/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Biffa is not a bidder for any of the waste infrastructure projects. It had been a participant in each of the Waste Management Groups' procurement competitions but subsequently withdrew, for different corporate reasons in each case. It currently provides some services to arc21 but these are not such as to impact on arc21's major waste infrastructure procurement.

Driver Training and Testing: Compulsory Logbooks

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment what the proposed measure to introduce compulsory student logbooks for all learner drivers would entail in practice.

(AQW 15273/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The introduction of compulsory logbooks is one of a package of measures in the forthcoming Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill designed to reform driver training and testing and to change how new drivers gain experience once they have obtained their full licence.

A compulsory logbook system will reinforce to all learners that learning to drive is a progressive process and give accompanying drivers more ownership and involvement in the learning to drive process. It will also help Approved Driving Instructors and supervising drivers guide trainees' learning on different type of road, traffic environments and weather and lighting conditions.

Implementing this measure will involve making it a requirement for a learner driver to provide evidence, before taking the practical driving test, that they have completed a logbook recording their lessons (if any), practice and progress through a proposed new Learning to Drive syllabus.

The format and content of the logbook is being finalised as drafting of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, which will make changes to the driver training and testing regime, progresses.

It is intended that the logbook will have to be completed either by a DOE Approved Driving Instructor or by a supervising driver who must be aged 21 or over and have held a full driving licence for at least three years.

It is intended that it will be an offence for anyone to forge, or make a false statement in, a learner logbook. If logbook information is found to have been forged or to contain false statements any licence obtained on foot of that evidence of having completed the prescribed course of training will be revoked.

Driver Training and Testing: Passenger Carrying Restriction

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment how he plans to enforce the proposal that all young new drivers will not be allowed to carry passengers who are between the ages of fourteen and twenty four for the first six months of driving, unless they are close family relatives, or if the front seat passenger is over twenty-one years old and has held a full licence for three or more years.

(AQW 15274/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The passenger carrying restriction is one of the package of measures in the forthcoming Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill designed to reform driver training and testing and to change how new drivers gain experience once they have obtained their full licence. It is intended that the restriction will apply to young new drivers up to the age of 24 carrying young passengers (aged 14 to 20, except immediate family members) during the first six months post test. The restriction will not apply if there is a supervising driver (aged 21 or over who has held a full driving licence for at least three years) seated beside the new driver.

Enforcement of the passenger carrying restriction will involve new drivers, their parents, the police and insurance companies all of whom will have a role to play in ensuring compliance.

Driving laws are to a large degree self-enforcing and motorists are well aware of the penalties and other consequences they face for non-compliance. Some of the most effective enforcement of the passenger carrying restriction will therefore be by young drivers themselves. Many will comply with the restriction because it is the law and they want to avoid being penalised. Others will comply because they know it is the safe thing to do. It is also notable that noting the enforcement issue, the PSNI support the issue.

Parents will have a role given the age range of young drivers and because in many cases they will either be the owners or insurers of the vehicle involved. The parents' role will be to encourage them to comply with the restriction to enable them to gain experience in low risk conditions – without carrying young passengers – in the first six months after they have passed their test.

PSNI are working with the Department to ensure that police have the investigative powers they need to enforce the restriction.

Insurers also have a role in enforcing compliance with the passenger carrying restriction. If a young driver is found to have broken the law by breaching the restriction, an insurer could exercise a range of sanctions, which could potentially include refusing to pay out on a claim for vehicle damage or choosing to cancel the policy.

Flooding: Compensation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many households in each district council area have been awarded the £1000 compensation payment for flooding.

(AQW 15353/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The attached table states the number of households that have received a £1,000 payment under the Emergency Financial Assistance Scheme. This is provided by council area and covers the period from June 2012. The £1,000 payment is to provide practical assistance where householders have suffered severe inconvenience. It is not a compensation payment.

Council	Number of Householder Claims as of 16/10/2012
Antrim	4
Belfast	750
Castlereagh	329
Coleraine	4
Down	17
Lisburn	298
Moyle	12
Newtownabbey	3
North Down	8
Total	1,425

Planning Application Y/2008/0365/F, Carryduff

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment when a decision will be made on planning application Y/2008/0365/F at Carryduff.

(AQW 15377/11-15)

Mr Attwood: This is a contentious application, which has generated concern in relation to roads safety issues and the impact on the local character of the area and on residential amenity of existing residents. I am currently considering all of the issues before a final decision is issued.

MOT Test: Numbers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment how many cars have been through the MOT in each of the last two years.

(AQW 15441/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The numbers of cars that have been through an MOT test in each of the last two years are as follows.

Test Type	2010-11	2011-12
Full Test	641,320	677,078

Test Type	2010-11	2011-12
Retest	135,301	144,769
Total	776,621	821,847

Source: Driver & Vehicle Agency, BSP Report, V4

The figures do not include those for customers who were given appointments but who failed to attend.

Biffa/Arc21

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of the Environment, given Biffa's recent financial troubles, whether it is still in a solvent position to take the ARC21 project forward.

(AQW 15449/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Biffa is not a bidder for any of the waste infrastructure projects. It had been a participant in each of the Waste Management Groups' procurement competitions but subsequently withdrew, for different corporate reasons in each case. It currently provides some services to arc21 but these are not such as to impact on arc21's major waste infrastructure procurement.

Arc21: Energy from Waste

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of the Environment whether the waste figures, upon which the original ARC21 Residual Waste Treatment bid is based, are still accurate; and whether this process will be reviewed, particularly the required waste capacity for an Energy from Waste plant.

(AQW 15450/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The impact of changes resulting from successful recycling initiatives, reduced waste arisings and reduced economic activity are documented in the updated Analysis of 2020 Residual Waste Infrastructure Requirements in Northern Ireland to meet EU Obligations which I oversaw earlier this year. The updated Analysis confirms that the quantum of new infrastructure required to provide assurance of compliance at NI level with those obligations to divert waste from landfill has reduced significantly.

Each of the Waste Management Groups has kept the proposed scale of their facilities under constant review since their procurements commenced, and reduced the scale of their proposals accordingly. In arc21's case this has led to its estimate of the most economically advantageous size of its proposed energy from waste plant reducing from up to 370,000 tonnes in 2008 to 210,000 tonnes.

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Postal Correspondence

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment on how many occasions, in each of the last three years, have complaints been made to the Driver and Vehicle Agency regarding postal correspondence being returned to an incorrectly named person.

(AQW 15469/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A search of the Driver & Vehicle Agency complaints database indicates that a total of 15 complaints have been received in the past three years regarding postal correspondence being returned to an incorrectly named person. The breakdown of this figure is as follows:

- 2009/10 – 3 complaints received
- 2010/11 – 7 complaints received
- 2011/12 – 4 complaints received
- 2012/13 - year to date – 1 complaint received

Wind Turbines

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking with consultees in relation to wind turbines.

(AQO 2734/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department recognises the contribution that renewable energy proposals make to the NI economy and to the reduction of carbon emissions. It also acknowledges the importance of processing these types of applications in a timely manner.

To improve the consultation process and ensure substantive responses are received in a timely basis I have instructed my staff to monitor the performance of the statutory bodies for which agreed Service Level Agreements or Memorandums of Understanding are in place. Staff have been advised to be robust in this regard.

I have also asked senior officials to meet with all other interested parties to ensure the consultation process is operating effectively. For example, recently I met with a fixed link operator to discuss a way forward in relation to their consultation responses to avoid any unnecessary delays in processing wind turbine applications.

Planning staff are engaging with consultees in the planning process to ensure that any relevant information required in respect of renewable energy is submitted at the beginning of the process and that consultation is focused and timely. Planning staff have also been reminded that they should only consult in the correct circumstances to avoid unnecessary consultations. I have also met with NIEA officials to stress that their responses need to be timely and grounded in good process and proper grounds.

The Department has also introduced a new planning application form (Form P1W) which must accompany planning applications for single wind turbines and wind farm developments. The aim of this form is to assist consultees in establishing the exact dimensions and locations of proposed turbines which it is hoped will help inform their consultation responses.

Furthermore, the Department intends to introduce a Planning Bill to the Assembly shortly which will include a statutory duty for consultees to respond to consultation requests within a prescribed timeframe.

I have also established a sub group of the Planning Forum which focuses on renewable energy applications. This group is looking at a range of measures to improve decision making for renewable energy project applications.

I make a point of meeting with the renewable businesses. As arguably Ireland's biggest Economic opportunity and given the 2020 renewables target, there is a need to best manage the full range of renewable applications. It is worth noting, mindful of the significant grid connection issues, that clearly impact on what will happen, existing and consented windfarms have the potential to provide 28.79% of the 2020 target. There are 38 windfarm planning applications with the potential to provide a further 17.5% of the 2020 target of 40% from renewable sources. Separately there will be a contribution from wind turbines, anaerobic digestion, and potential solar farms.

Chauffeurs

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on proposals to exempt chauffeurs from taxi regulations which enforce vehicle signage.

(AQO 2735/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My Department will shortly be consulting on proposals for the licensing of "special occasion" type vehicles. A vehicle licensed in this way would not be required to display a roof sign or external plates. I anticipate that chauffeur driven vehicles would be included within this licensing regime.

Local Government: Capacity Building

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment how much funding he has secured for capacity building for councillors and officials to date.

(AQO 2736/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I believe that there should be targeted central government assistance with local government reform, including the key capacity building workstream which embraces councillors, council staff and Northern Ireland Civil Service staff who are to transfer to local government in 2015. The scale of the new planning functions to go to Councils mean that transfer needs to be got right and that includes capacity building. That said, the Councils themselves need to do all they can to get RPA right, including capacity building.

However, when the Northern Ireland budget for 2011-15 was approved by the Assembly in March 2011 there was, at that time, no decision on local government reform and no budget cover for any financial assistance. In any case, the last Executive had agreed that there would be no financial assistance with the upfront costs of reform. The present Executive endorsed that position last November.

I made a bid in the June Monitoring Round for £2.3 million to support local government reform in the current financial year. However, this bid was unsuccessful and I have made public my view at the outcome.

Moving forward, I immediately advised the Minister of Finance and Personnel that I would return to this issue before the October Monitoring Round and expand my bid for funding up to the formation of the new Councils. I have been pursuing this issue in discussions and correspondence with Minister Wilson and other Executive colleagues. I have made it clear that I:-

acknowledge that it is reasonable to expect local government to contribute to the cost of reform initiatives from which they will ultimately benefit;

consider, however, that there are key transition workstreams vital to successful delivery of reform which should be funded by the Executive – particularly those, such as capacity building, which are inescapable and have no cash releasing benefits for the sector;

have identified associated transition costs, in the order of tens of millions of pounds, over the 2012-13 to 2014-15 period; and would be presenting a paper to the Executive on this issue.

I have prepared an Executive paper which seeks the provision of central government funding to support these transition workstreams, including capacity building. It is currently being considered by Ministers.

Local Government: d'Hondt System

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of the Environment how D'Hondt will be used for future local government arrangements, following the implementation of the Review of Public Administration.

(AQO 2737/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am committed to ensuring that the positions of responsibility on the new councils will be shared across all the political parties represented on them. D'Hondt will be one of the methods that will be available to the councils to achieve this, the others will be Saint Lague and the Single Transferrable Vote.

The practical operation of the d'Hondt process will be the same as that used by this Assembly for the determination of Ministers and chairs of committees. I want to ensure that opportunities exist for independents and political parties with lower levels of representation to hold positions of responsibility. Taking account of the historical provision that the chairs or mayors of councils and the other positions of responsibility change on an annual basis which will continue in the new councils, the d'Hondt process will be applied at the start of the council term to allocate all the positions of responsibility over the full term.

North/South Ministerial Council: Environment

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the agenda items for the next meeting of the North South Ministerial Council when it meets in Environment Sectoral Format.

(AQO 2738/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The next NSMC Environmental Sectoral meeting is scheduled to take place on Wednesday 31 October 2012 in NSMC Joint Secretariat Offices, Armagh. At the meeting I intend to discuss a range of environmental matters of mutual interest including; waste management, cross border movements of waste, environmental protection, water quality, environmental reporting and research, repatriation of waste, the forthcoming Irish Presidency of the EU.

As you may be aware, a Joint Communiqué outlining the main discussion points of the meeting will be released following the meeting. I also intend to make an Oral Statement to the Assembly in mid-November updating Members on the outcomes from the meeting.

Planning: Rose Energy

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on Rose Energy's planning application for an incinerator at Glenavy.

(AQO 2741/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The former Minister's announcement of August 2010 to proceed by way of a Notice of Opinion to approve was the subject of judicial review proceedings. Lord Justice McCloskey adjourned the judicial review proceedings on 2 March 2011 on the basis that the application process had not been completed.

Following the submission of further environmental information by the applicant the proposal is in the final stage of consideration. The Department will make a recommendation to me on whether to proceed by way of a Notice of Opinion to approve or refuse the applications or by way of a Public Inquiry. It raises a number of

complex issues and I will consider each of them and all representations received very carefully before making a balanced decision. This application raises environmental and economic issues, including compliance with European Directives, the potential impact on the local area, the needs of the agri-food sector, European views on best practice, etc

Article 31 Planning Applications

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment whether Article 31 planning applications are being processed in accordance with good practice guidelines.

(AQO 2742/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am satisfied that in exercising its development management function the Department employs good practice guidelines which seek to facilitate and manage development rather than merely controlling undesirable forms of development. This is particularly the case in major Article 31 planning applications which by their nature involve complex and varied issues. In recognition of this I have emphasised to my officials the importance of ensuring a consistency of approach and the appropriate expertise within the Strategic Planning Division to deal with Article 31 applications.

- My officials place significant emphasis on pre application discussion which seeks to establish planning policy issues and in liaison with key consultees seek to establish at an early stage the complete range of information required by the Department to determine the application. Management structures are in place within the strategic projects teams to ensure that projects can be assessed and discussed at an early stage with appropriate staff, officials actively engage with applicants and their agents as appropriate to facilitate the resolution where possible of issues and applications are regularly monitored.

- Officials are satisfied that the employment of good practice guidelines is contributing to improved performance, this year to date 18 Article 31 applications have been processed to a determination and I have recently announced my decision on a further 3.
- However, I am advised by officials that experience to date is that improved performance can not rely on good practice guidelines alone but can only be achieved through working inclusively with all key stakeholders in the overall planning system. This includes the submission of acceptable schemes at the outset. I would encourage applicants to engage with the local community and to enter into pre-application discussions with my Department prior to the submission of major planning applications.
- There will be times when decisions will be challenged. I support the scope offered by the courts for JR of public policy, though it has been argued that the threshold for leave being granted in our courts is generous.
- I believe strongly that article 31's need to proceed expeditiously consistent with evidence, law, planning law and practice.

Planning Service: Staff

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how can he ensure that the balance of experienced staff in the Planning Service can be retained through the Voluntary Retirement Scheme.

(AQO 2743/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The main purpose of the Voluntary Early Retirement (VER) scheme for P&T Planning Officers is to assist in the ongoing effort to reduce staffing numbers in Planning, and to facilitate the reintegration of c70 planners who are currently on loan and secondment, back into the Department ahead of the transfer of functions to local government in April 2015.

The Department has decided to use cost as the sole criterion to determine which staff will be permitted to leave under the terms of the scheme. This will help to ensure that the maximum number of staff are facilitated to leave within the limits of the funding made available.

It is inevitable that the Department will lose a number of experienced Planning Officers as a result of the VER scheme. However, the Department is satisfied that the final selection of Planning Officers leaving on cost grounds will involve a mix of grades and ages and include a number of staff who are already past the normal retirement age or would have retired in the next year or so on age grounds. The VER scheme will also provide a mechanism to ventilate the system and to create a number of promotion opportunities for the very able Planning Officers who will remain.

A further benefit of the VER scheme will be that there will be fewer senior P&T Planning Officers retiring between 2015-2018 when the planning function will have transferred to local government and when stability and continuity in terms of staffing will be a distinct advantage in terms of service delivery.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Catholic/Protestant Breakdown

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how representation of Catholics and Protestants at senior levels of the Civil Service has changed over the last five years; and what he is doing to ensure that the senior levels of Civil Service is representative of the wider community.

(AQW 15196/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The table below shows the Protestant/Roman Catholic breakdown of staff in Grade 5 and above in the General Service discipline at 1 January 2007 and 1 January 2012.

Year	Protestant		Roman Catholic	
2007	114	62.0%	70	38.0%
2012	105	59.0%	73	41.0%

In the interests of achieving the most efficient service possible, I will continue to ensure that recruitment and promotion procedures ensure that the most suitable person for the job is appointed.

Public Procurement: Social Clauses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he would consider putting social clauses on a statutory basis for all Departments.

(AQW 15226/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Executive took the decision in 2002, when approving the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy, that it was not necessary to enact legislation to implement new policies and practices. Instead it was decided that compliance should be achieved by means of administrative action. The Procurement Guidance Notes (PGN), as approved by the Procurement Board, represent that administrative action.

A PGN on integrating social consideration into contract is currently being developed but has not yet been approved by the Procurement Board. This new guidance will support the Procurement Board's guide on integrating equality and sustainable development (including social clauses) in public procurement which was endorsed by the Executive in 2008.

Rates: Orange Halls

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the amount of money that the Loyal Orders have saved since the abolition of rate charges for Orange halls.

(AQW 15233/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Article 41A was inserted into the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 from April 2006. Since that date it is estimated that £4.6 million has been saved through exemption under the terms of Article 41A by the Loyal Orders.

Youth Unemployment: Change in Rate

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what has been the change in the rate of youth unemployment in each district council area between 2006 and 2011.

(AQW 15263/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The official measure of unemployment is sourced to the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS). However, the LFS is a sample survey and the current rates of youth unemployment in each District Council Area are not sourced to the LFS because of the relatively large confidence intervals around the estimates. This is due to sample size constraints in the LFS.

The following table is sourced to the claimant count measure of unemployment. This shows the annual average number of persons aged 18-24 claiming unemployment related benefits in 2006 and 2011 and these figures as a percentage of the resident working age population of that age group (rate). The table also includes the total change in the number of claimants and the percentage point change of the rate, over the period.

Table 1 – Change in Youth Claimant Count between 2006 and 2011

District Council Area	2006		2011		Total Change	% Points Change of Rate
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate		
Antrim	190	3.7	390	7.7	200	4.0
Ards	300	4.7	640	10.3	340	5.6
Armagh	165	3.0	580	9.9	415	6.9
Ballymena	230	4.1	495	9.0	265	4.9
Ballymoney	115	4.4	315	11.9	200	7.5
Banbridge	110	2.6	385	9.6	275	7.0
Belfast	2,430	6.8	3,820	10.6	1,390	3.8
Carrickfergus	155	4.5	345	9.6	190	5.1
Castlereagh	180	3.6	430	7.8	250	4.2
Coleraine	265	4.7	530	10.0	265	5.3
Cookstown	125	3.3	305	8.0	180	4.7
Craigavon	385	4.5	965	10.4	580	5.9
Derry	1,190	9.5	1,775	15.7	585	6.2
Down	290	4.2	680	10.0	390	5.8
Dungannon	155	2.8	510	8.4	355	5.6
Fermanagh	190	3.2	475	8.7	285	5.5
Larne	125	4.6	270	10.0	145	5.4
Limavady	195	5.5	510	16.7	315	11.2
Lisburn	515	4.6	1,030	9.1	515	4.5
Magherafelt	110	2.5	350	8.1	240	5.6
Moyle	90	5.8	185	12.1	95	6.3

District Council Area	2006		2011		Total Change	% Points Change of Rate
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate		
Newry and Mourne	335	3.4	1,070	10.4	735	7.0
Newtownabbey	345	4.4	675	8.5	330	4.1
North Down	265	3.9	525	8.1	260	4.2
Omagh	215	4.0	515	10.4	300	6.4
Strabane	340	8.7	495	13.3	155	4.6
Northern Ireland	9,010	5.0	18,265	10.2	9,255	5.2

Youth Unemployment: UK Comparisons

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the percentage of youth unemployment compares to the UK average; and to the percentage in (i) England; (ii) Scotland; and (iii) Wales.

(AQW 15277/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Official estimates of unemployment for Northern Ireland are sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) which is conducted by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The LFS uses internationally accepted definitions of labour market status in line with EU regulations.

The table overelaf provides youth unemployment data by UK regions.

	Unemployment rate of those aged 18-24 ¹	Proportion of all those aged 18-24, who are unemployed ²
England	19.3%	14.1%
Scotland	22.6%	17.7%
Wales	22.2%	15.8%
NI	23.5%	14.1%
UK	19.9%	14.5%

1 Relates to all those who are aged 18-24 and economically active.

2 Relates to all persons aged 18-24, i.e. includes students and all those economically inactive

Source: Labour Force Survey, May – July 2012

Youth Unemployment: Age Range

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the age range for the classification of youth unemployment.

(AQW 15278/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Official estimates of unemployment for Northern Ireland are sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) which is conducted by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The LFS uses internationally accepted definitions of labour market status in line with EU regulations.

Statistics on youth unemployment can incorporate all those aged 16-24. However, as a default measure, NISRA defines youth unemployment as those aged between 18 and 24. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, those who are aged 16 – 17 and live at home cannot claim Job Seekers Allowance and, secondly, the 16-17 age group also contains a high proportion of young people who remain in full-time education and are therefore economically inactive.

DFP: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15333/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) includes, in construction contracts that it awards on behalf of departments, a requirement that 5% of the contractor's workforce and the workforce of its first tier subcontractors (with 20 or more employees) must be employed on formally recognised paid construction apprenticeships.

This requirement is based on a proportion of apprentices rather than new starts in order that main contractors and their supply chains will be discouraged from laying-off existing apprentices simply to recruit new ones for a particular contract. This approach also incentivises contractors who aim to work for Government on a regular basis to retain apprentices within their workforce beyond the contract period.

Compliance with this contract requirement is monitored monthly during the contract by the Project Manager. Given the nature of the requirement, data on the number of apprentices recruited in relation to specific contracts is not held.

Supplies and services contracts do not afford the same opportunities as are available over a fixed term construction contract. For supplies and services contracts 83% have a value less than 100K (2010/11). CPD works closely with Departments to identify opportunities to facilitate work experience or placements under the DEL schemes in appropriate contracts for supplies and services.

Empty Premises Relief Scheme

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, following the introduction of the empty retail rate concession for new occupants of long term empty premises in April 2012, how the uptake of new retail tenants in the April-June quarter compares with corresponding figures for the same quarter in the preceding three years.

(AQW 15399/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the uptake of new retail tenants in the April-June quarter in comparison with figures for the same quarter in the preceding three years is unavailable. LPS does not have information which would identify whether a retail tenant is new, is an existing tenant who is expanding their business or is an existing retailer who has decided to change location.

Bearing this in mind it is estimated that, in the period 1st April 2011 to 2nd October 2011, a total of 1,473 retail occupancies commenced. In a similar 6 month period from 1st April 2012 to 30th September 2012 it is estimated that 1,504 retail occupancies commenced. However, it should be borne in mind that the number of retail occupancies commenced has been broadly balanced by the number of occupancies ending.

Empty Premises Relief Scheme

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the impact of the empty retail rate concession to date will be assessed within or, in addition to, the in-year review of the Small Business Rate Relief scheme.

(AQW 15400/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The one year rates concession was introduced in April 2012. The aim of the policy was to get long term empty shops and other retail premises back into business and to help rejuvenate town centres.

Over recent months I have personally visited businesses in a number of towns across Northern Ireland including Fermanagh, Larne, Lisburn and Londonderry who have benefitted from the new scheme and have been impressed by the impact it is having in giving businesses a helpful start and also in arresting the decline in some of our traditional shopping areas.

A couple of weeks ago the Scottish Government announced that they were going to emulate our policy and adopt a similar scheme there. So, this Assembly is leading the way in adopting policies that help rather than inhibit business growth. Within the next few weeks I will be considering the case for extending the scheme for a further period given its apparent early success.

To date there have been 32 successful applications to the new scheme with total relief awarded to date of £77,636.

DFP Press Releases: Press Association

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will issue a directive to his staff immediately lifting the ban of the issue of press releases to the Press Association.

(AQW 15414/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The matter was resolved some time ago.

Suicide: East Belfast

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the suicide rate in the East Belfast constituency for each of the last three years, broken down by (i) council district; (ii) age; (iii) gender; and (iv) religious background.

(AQW 15475/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The attached tables give the number and rate of deaths registered due to 'suicide and self-inflicted injury'¹ or 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted'² in East Belfast by the (i) councils within East Belfast (ii) age, (iii) gender.

Figures by Religious Background are not available as religious denomination of the deceased is not collected as part of the death registration process.

- (i) 1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes X60-X84, Y87.0
- (ii) 2 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes Y10-Y34, Y87.2

Table 1: Registered deaths due to 'suicide and self-inflicted injury' or 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted', 2009-2011.

	2009	2010	2011 ^P	2009-2011
Belfast East	17	23	14	54
Under 25	3	6	4	13
25-34	3	3	4	10
35-44	5	5	2	12
45+	6	9	4	19
Male	15	17	9	41
Female	2	6	5	13
Within Belfast LGD2	9	14	12	35
Within Castlereagh LGD2	8	9	2	19

- 1 In the UK, in considering suicide events it is conventional to include cases where the cause of death is classified as either 'Suicide and self-inflicted injury' or 'Undetermined injury'.
- 2 Figures relate only to the parts of Belfast LGD and Castlereagh LGD which fall within Belfast East
- P Data for 2011 remains provisional until the publication of the Annual Report of the Registrar General which is due to be published in November 2012.

Note:

Vital Statistics are based on the year of registration of the event rather than the year of occurrence. Events such as suicide are likely to be referred to the coroner. This can take some time, therefore deaths registered in any year may have occurred in previous years.

Table 2: Death rates due to 'suicide and self-inflicted injury' or 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted', 2009-2011 per 100,000 population 1,3.

	2009	2010	2011 ⁴	2009-2011
Belfast East	19	25	15	20
Under 25	11	21	14	15
25-34	24	24	32	27
35-44	37	38	15	30
45+	17	25	11	18
Male	35	39	39	32
Female	4	13	13	9
Within Belfast LGD ²	16	24	21	20
Within Castlereagh LGD ²	25	28	6	20

- 1 In the UK, in considering suicide events it is conventional to include cases where the cause of death is classified as either 'Suicide and self-inflicted injury' or 'Undetermined injury'.
- 2 Figures relate only to the parts of Belfast LGD and Castlereagh LGD which fall within Belfast East
- 3 Rate per 100,000 population
- 4 Rates for 2011 are based on 2010 population estimates

Notes: Vital Statistics are based on the year of registration of the event rather than the year of occurrence. Events such as suicide are likely to be referred to the coroner. This can take some time, therefore deaths registered in any year may have occurred in previous years.

Directive 2011/7/EU: Consultation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department has responded to the consultation on implementing Directive 2011/7/EU on Combating Late Payment in Commercial Transactions.

(AQW 15504/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department worked closely with the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) in advance of this consultation exercise and provided contact details of key local industry and other interest groups to BIS to ensure that they received immediate notification of the consultation. This approach, rather than a single response from DFP, is aimed at maximising the input of the NI business community and will also allow sector specific concerns to be highlighted. My department has also promoted the consultation heavily on our procurement portals such as e-Source and Account NI.

Arm's-length Bodies: Payment of Invoices

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made by arm's-length bodies in fulfilling the December 2008 Ministerial commitment on paying invoices from suppliers within 10 days.

(AQW 15506/11-15)

Mr Wilson: DFP has issued guidance to all departments on the importance of prompt payment and has asked accounting officers to ensure that all guidance is brought to the attention of all arms' length bodies (ALBs). In addition, I have separately written to Ministerial colleagues seeking their support on this matter. My Department does not gather statistics on the prompt payment performance of ALBs, which would be a matter for individual departments.

I understand that the Comptroller and Auditor General has been considering prompt payment performance across the public sector and intends to include a report on the matter in his annual report, due for publication in early November.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the extension of the Small Business Rate Relief scheme in April 2012 to include properties with a Net Annual Value (NAV) between £5,001-£10,000, how many properties with an NAV between £5,001-£10,000 have ceased trading in the period since April 2012 compared with the figures for the same period in the preceding three years.

(AQW 15525/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Land & Property Services (LPS) does not hold information on how many properties with a NAV between £5,001-£10,000 have ceased trading. LPS holds information on the number of properties in the Valuation List which are occupied or vacant at any point in time. The following table shows the number of properties with NAV £5,001-£10,000 which were Occupied or Vacant as at 31st March 2010, 31st March 2011, 2nd October 2011, 31st March 2012 and 30th September 2012. As can be observed, both the number of occupied properties with a NAV between £5,001-£10,000 and the occupancy rates have remained stable over the last 2½ years.

Properties with an NAV between £5,001-£10,000

Date	Occupied Properties	Vacant Properties	Total Properties	Occupancy Rate
31st March 2010	12,019	1,927	13,946	86.2%
31st March 2011	11,970	2,013	13,983	85.6%
2nd October 2011	11,895	1,930	13,825	86.0%
31st March 2012	11,994	1,967	13,961	85.9%
30th September 2012	12,048	1,967	14,015	86.0%

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, of all the properties eligible for the Small Business Rate Relief scheme, how many in total have ceased trading since its initial introduction in April 2010, in comparison to correspondingly-rated properties that ceased trading in each of the previous tax years from 2008-2010.

(AQW 15526/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Land & Property Services (LPS) does not hold information on how many properties, eligible for Small Business Rate Relief, have ceased trading. The Small Business Rate Relief Scheme (SBRR) commenced in April 2010 with the intention to support and sustain small businesses within Northern Ireland by providing small businesses with rate relief. The conditions of eligibility for SBRR have changed since the scheme was introduced. For instance, from April 2010 to March 2012 there was a 50% relief level for eligible properties with a Net Annual Value (NAV) of £2,000 or less and a 25% relief level for eligible properties with a NAV of more than £2,000 and not more than £5,000. A new 20% relief level was introduced from 1st April 2012 for eligible properties with a NAV of more than £5,000 but not more than £10,000. Further, from 1st April 2012 the SBRR has been modified so that ratepayers who occupy four or more properties are no longer eligible. This change has led to some properties, which were eligible for SBRR from April 2010 to March 2012, being ineligible from April 2012.

Over the last 2½ years the number of occupied properties within the SBRR NAV ranges have remained stable in spite of the challenging economic climate.

Properties with an NAV of £2,000 or less

Date	Occupied Properties	Vacant Properties	Total Properties	Occupancy Rate
31st March 2010	10,295	5,862	16,157	63.7%
31st March 2011	10,425	5,972	16,397	63.6%
2nd October 2011	10,486	6,951	17,437	60.1%
31st March 2012	10,632	7,084	17,716	60.0%
30th September 2012	10,527	7,237	17,764	59.3%

Properties with an NAV more than £2,000 but not more than £5,000

Date	Occupied Properties	Vacant Properties	Total Properties	Occupancy Rate
31st March 2010	14,423	3,081	17,504	82.4%
31st March 2011	14,408	3,151	17,559	82.1%
2nd October 2011	14,455	3,311	17,766	81.4%
31st March 2012	14,519	3,099	17,618	82.4%
30th September 2012	14,615	3,068	17,683	82.7%

Properties with an NAV between £5,001-£10,000

Date	Occupied Properties	Vacant Properties	Total Properties	Occupancy Rate
31st March 2010	12,019	1,927	13,946	86.2%
31st March 2011	11,970	2,013	13,983	85.6%
2nd October 2011	11,895	1,930	13,825	86.0%
31st March 2012	11,994	1,967	13,961	85.9%
30th September 2012	12,048	1,967	14,015	86.0%

Civil Service: Priority Pool for Transfer, Foyle

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many (i) males; and (ii) females were listed on the Civil Service Priority Pool for transfer to the Foyle constituency in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 15527/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The table below shows the male / female breakdown of staff currently listed on the Civil Service Priority Pools for transfer to the Foyle constituency.

Male	Female
4	4

Historical data over the last 3 years is not available as once an employee is placed, the relevant data is removed from HRConnect pool's records meaning that historical reports cannot be reproduced.

Rates: Arrears

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what flexibility Land and Property Services (LPS) has in agreeing repayments of rates arrears for people who request an instalment plan or alternative payment plan; and (ii) for his assessment of such voluntary payment plans and their use in avoiding unnecessary hardship, enabling LPS to recoup arrears and preventing costly legal action.

(AQW 15592/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In respect of rate arrears for previous year's liability, LPS has a payment arrangement policy in place. This policy enables LPS to offer extended payment arrangements for rating debt, over a number of years. Arrangements will cover 100% of the current year's liability plus a proportion of any previous years' arrears. For in-year rate liability, LPS may offer additional flexibility in certain circumstances, to extend the number of monthly payments from the standard 10 to 12 payments in that year. If the ratepayer does not pay the full liability for the current year, the ratepayer's debt will only continue to grow.

LPS will normally offer to extend a payment arrangement over the number of years the arrears relate to. For example, if the arrears relate to 2 years rates, an arrangement for payment over 2 years would normally be offered.

Payment arrangements are a useful tool to try and secure payment from customers who are facing large arrears, without undue hardship to the ratepayer and the cost of legal action. However, they do increase the levels of end year rating debt. Payment arrangements only work where ratepayers continue to make payments to clear their debt. When arrangements are persistently broken, LPS has no choice but to pursue legal action to secure the debt.

Ulster Covenant: Centenary

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people were in the grounds of the Stormont Estate for the Ulster Covenant event on 29 September 2012.

(AQW 15636/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As this was a non-ticketed event, it is not possible to accurately determine how many people were in the grounds of the Stormont Estate on 29 September. Figures released by the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland suggest that in the region of 20,000 people participated in the parade through Belfast to the Stormont Estate.

People Deemed Out of Work, Unemployed and Economically Inactive

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of people deemed (i) out of work; (ii) unemployed; and (iii) economically inactive, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 15660/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Official estimates of unemployment for Northern Ireland are sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) which is conducted by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The LFS uses internationally accepted definitions of labour market status in line with EU regulations.

Table 1 provides LFS estimates of the total number of persons aged 16 and over who were (i) not working (ii) unemployed and (iii) economically inactive, in each of the last five years.

Table 1 – NI Labour Force Survey estimates of labour market status of those aged 16 and over 1, 2.

Period	Not in employment	Unemployed	Economically Inactive
2007	568,000	34,000	535,000
2008	584,000	32,000	551,000
2009	622,000	54,000	568,000
2010	623,000	59,000	564,000
2011	612,000	62,000	550,000
June – August 2012	623,000	72,000	551,000

1 Data are not seasonally adjusted.

2 Data are rounded to the nearest 1,000.

3 Totals of unemployed and economically inactive may not sum to those not in employment due to rounding.

Suicide: Change in Rate

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the change in the suicide rate between 2001 and 2011.

(AQW 15775/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of deaths registered and the death rate due to 'suicide and self-inflicted injury'¹ or 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted'² has increased from nine per 100,000 population (158 deaths) to 16 per 100,000 population (289 deaths) from 2001 to 2011 – Table 1.

1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes X60-X84, Y87.0

2 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes Y10-Y34, Y87.2

Table 1: Registered deaths due to 'suicide and self-inflicted injury'¹ or 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted' and rate per 100,000 population, 2001-2011.

Registration Year	Deaths Registered as Suicide ¹	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Population
2001	158	9.4
2002	183	10.8
2003	144	8.5

Registration Year	Deaths Registered as Suicide ¹	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Population
2004	146	8.5
2005	213	12.4
2006	291	16.7
2007	242	13.8
2008	282	15.9
2009	260	14.5
2010	313	17.4
2011 ^{P,2}	289	16.0

1 In the UK, in considering suicide events it is conventional to include cases where the cause of death is classified as either 'Suicide and self-inflicted injury' or 'Undetermined injury'.

2 Rates for 2011 are based on 2010 population estimates.

P Data for 2011 remains provisional until the publication of the Annual Report of the Registrar General which is due to be published in November 2012.

Note: Vital Statistics are based on the year of registration of the event rather than the year of occurrence. Events such as suicide are likely to be referred to the coroner. This can take some time, therefore deaths registered in any year may have occurred in previous years.

Government: Financial Accountability

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 2688/11-15, to outline the requirements, in terms of financial accountability, to his Department and the collective obligations of all Departments, including Education.

(AQW 15783/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During the course of the Budget 2011-15 process, the Executive agreed that Savings Delivery Plans should be developed to provide both transparency to the public about how departments were dealing with the constrained financial position and reassurance that the impact on frontline public services was minimal.

The precise details of the content of each Savings Delivery Plan are a matter for individual Ministers as they are charged with delivering the savings within their respective departments.

As stated above the Savings Delivery Plans are intended to provide some degree of reassurance to Northern Ireland citizens that Ministers are doing all within their power to manage the impact of the economic downturn without merely targeting elements of frontline service delivery.

As Finance Minister I have tried to bring transparency to the delivery of Savings Delivery Plans by examining the underlying detail – something which is not readily available in many of the published plans – and by providing six monthly reports on performance to the Executive and Finance Committee.

There is no de facto obligation for the Education Minister to provide the information requested, although by opting out of the monitoring process it will be more difficult for the wider public to be reassured that the Education Minister is doing everything possible to minimise the impact that constrained budgets inevitably have on the delivery of educational services.

Government: Tax Revenue

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline all tax revenue generated for the year in which the most recent data is available.

(AQO 2750/11-15)

Mr Wilson: While HMRC does not publish regional tax revenue figures, my department produces its own estimates in this regard as part of its annual Net Fiscal Balance report. The latest published report estimates that Northern Ireland revenues totalled some £12.8 billion in 2008-09.

The Member may also wish to note that this year's Net Fiscal Balance report is being prepared for publication later this month and will provide tax revenue estimates for both 2009-10 and 2010-11.

Civil Law Reform

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the proposed Civil Law Reform.

(AQO 2751/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department continues its work on a number of projects in the area of civil law reform: most recently officials of the Department briefed the Departmental Committee on a consultation paper on the law of damages which explored the issues of claims for damages for wrongful death, bereavement damages; and damages for gratuitous care. Other projects include reform to land law and vulnerable witnesses in civil proceedings.

Executive: Borrowing Powers

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the out-workings of all borrowing powers which are available to the Executive, including their relationship to the Block Grant.

(AQO 2752/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The only borrowing power currently available to the Executive is the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative. This allows the Executive to borrow up to £200 million per annum. This limit remains subject to HM Treasury approval.

Since these borrowing powers were granted in 2003-04 the Executive has borrowed some £1.3 billion in total. The cost of servicing this debt has been increasing steadily with interest payments totalling some £40 million in 2011-12. Servicing this debt is a direct cost to the Northern Ireland Block.

Exceptionally HM Treasury allowed the Executive to borrow an additional £175 million in 2011-12, which provided the Executive with additional resources to provide assistance in relation to the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

Government: Non-tax Revenue

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the sources of non-tax revenue generated in the last 12 months.

(AQO 2753/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I assume that the Member is interested in receipts scoring within the Northern Ireland departmental DEL budgets since these translate into additional spending power for the Executive. These receipts amounted to £927 million of resource income and £165 million of capital income in the 2011-12 year.

The resource income is generated from a wide variety of revenue streams arising from the services provided by departments, whilst the capital income stems mainly from the sale of surplus assets and repayment of loans to public corporations. Income from the EU is also included in both the resource and capital income numbers.

Excluded from these figures are the income from regional rates and the RRI £200 million loan facility.

DFP: Savings Delivery Plan

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his Department's compliance in the recent Savings Delivery Plan monitoring exercise.

(AQO 2754/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department has fully complied with the Savings Delivery Plan monitoring exercise and all updates can be found on the DFP website.

Narrow Water Bridge

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the progress made in plans to build a bridge linking North Louth and South Down at Narrow Water, using EU funds.

(AQO 2755/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Narrow Water Bridge project application is currently progressing through the INTERREG IVA assessment process. The Special EU Programmes Body anticipates this project will be brought before the Programme Steering Committee for decision later this month.

Government: Procurement

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he can ensure best value from tri-nations procurement tenders.

(AQO 2756/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy encourages increased collaboration both locally and with other jurisdictions. Before such arrangements are put in place consideration is given to the impact on the local market to ensure there is a balance between supporting the local economy and achieving the best value for money.

Civil Service: Equality

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the latest report on Equality Statistics for the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQO 2757/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The report from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency “Equality Statistics for the Northern Ireland Civil Service” provides an overview of equality and diversity in the Northern Ireland Civil Service workforce at 1 January 2012 and how the composition has altered over time since 2000. The report shows that the NICS has now a lower proportion of males and a higher proportion of females when compared to the economically active population. Female representation has grown substantially over time, particularly at more senior levels and greater proportions of both male and female staff are now working on a part-time basis.

In overall terms, the community background balance of the NICS workforce is similar to that of the NI economically active population. Changes over time in the community background composition are broadly similar in scale to those in the public sector as a whole. The proportion of staff who declared a disability is broadly in line with the wider NI population. The proportion of older workers aged over 50 has increased and younger workers aged under 24 has decreased over the time period and in comparison to the economically active population in these age groups.

In relation to the recruitment exercises that closed in 2011, the report found overall no inequalities in outcomes in respect to gender and community background. In the large volume Executive Officer II competition there were some differences in candidates’ performances by gender and community background at different stages in the selection process with males having a higher success rate than females at the test stage while females had a higher success rate at interview.

Officials in my department will consider the key data and findings in this latest Equality statistics report, together with the most recent Article 55 and Gender reviews, with a view to taking appropriate lawful affirmative action to address any identified lack of fair participation. As is clear from the last Article 55 and Gender Reviews, this approach has had some successes with Protestants and Roman Catholics enjoying fair participation at senior grades and a significant improvement in the proportion of females at these grades.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fragility Fractures: Treatment

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to increase the percentage of people who are prescribed bone-protecting treatment following a fragility fracture.
(AQW 15145/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Quality and Outcomes Framework is a system to remunerate general practices for providing good quality care to their patients, and to help fund work to further improve the quality of health care delivered. It is a fundamental part of the General Medical Services (GMS) Contract, introduced on 1st April 2004. The core philosophy underpinning the framework is that incentives are the best method of resourcing work, driving up standards, and recognising practices’ achievements.

Osteoporosis indicators are included in the framework from 2012/13 and include the percentage of patients aged 50-74 with fragility fracture in whom Osteoporosis is confirmed on DXA scan, who are currently treated with an appropriate bone-sparing agent and the percentage of patients aged 75+ with fragility fracture who are currently treated with an appropriate bone sparing agent. The inclusion of osteoporosis indicators in the framework replaces the previous Osteoporosis Clinical Priority for GPs, which also promoted the use of bone sparing agents for people with fragility fractures.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority has any remit for Health Service or private practice at the Regional Fertility Centre.
(AQW 15168/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Regional Fertility Centre which is based at the Royal Victoria Hospital, providing both health service and private treatment is not subject to regulation (registration and inspection) by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

However, RQIA has the power to conduct reviews of particular types of health and social care services for which statutory bodies or service providers have responsibility. Such reviews could include the management, provision, quality, access to or availability of those services.

Accident and Emergency: Northern and Southern Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to list the changes that were made at Craigavon Area Hospital to improve Accident and Emergency services; (ii) which of these changes have been implemented at Antrim Area Hospital; and (iii) why all the changes have not been implemented at Antrim Area Hospital.
(AQW 15222/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no standard set of changes which will improve emergency care performance across all hospitals. Each hospital has different challenges and strengths, and improvements in emergency care will depend on changes to whole systems, not just emergency departments. HSC Trusts engage with each other on an ongoing basis to ensure learning

across the HSC family. The Emergency Care Improvement Action Group which was established in April 2012 to help improve emergency department performance held a shared learning event in June focusing on actions which have proved effective in different Trusts.

The Southern Trust has made a concerted effort to improve patient flows from 2005. Specific changes introduced in 2012 in the emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital are:

- the recruitment of five additional emergency department consultants;
- improving senior decision resource in the emergency department;
- recruitment of two additional Emergency Nurse Practitioners (ENPs);
- implementation of improved Northern Ireland Regional Accident & Emergency System (an ED information system);
- relocation of Orthopaedic Fracture Clinics from Craigavon Area Hospital emergency department to Outpatients.

The Northern Trust has advised that since April 2012 the emergency department at Antrim Area Hospital has been engaged in a 12-month Emergency Department Quality Improvement plan. Improvements that have been established to date include:

- review of the floor plan/layout of the current emergency department. Changes in the flow of patients through the department have been implemented;
- NI Ambulance Service handover area has been established to facilitate timely, confidential handover of patients from NIAS within a 15 minute timeframe;
- update training on all time-dependent conditions and audit data to review practice;
- revision to Physiological Early Warning Score to reflect more the emergency department timeframes;
- medical handover for all doctors twice daily;
- GP Out of Hours Service support from 6-10pm weekdays and 10am to 10pm weekends/bank holidays for non emergency department patients attending emergency department at these times;
- quarterly patient satisfaction surveys since March 2012 with action plans developed to monitor improvements;
- communication with GPs regarding patients who frequently re-attend;
- direct GP admission to a medical ward 11am-4pm Monday to Friday for assessment and treatment plan;
- consultant vetting and sign off of junior medical staff decisions.

Work is currently under way at Antrim Area Hospital on a new emergency department and new ward accommodation which are due to open next year.

Regional Fertility Centre

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times the Regional Fertility Centre has had to close temporarily in the last five years; and for what reasons.

(AQW 15230/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast Health and Social Care has advised that the Regional Fertility Centre has not closed at any time during the last five years.

From 6 December 2011 until 23 January 2012, refurbishment took place at the Regional Fertility Centre. Although it was not possible to deliver treatment cycles during this time, the service was reprofiled to deliver new and review outpatient clinics.

Health and Care Centre: Derry

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he intends to reactivate plans to build a new Health and Social Care Centre in Derry.

(AQW 15307/11-15)

Mr Poots: Under the plans for the implementation of "Transforming Your Care" which is currently the subject of public consultation, there is a proposal to continue with the development of a "hub and spoke" model for health and care centres across the region. At present, primary care services are delivered through a range of facilities such as GP practices and health and care centres which deliver varying levels of service depending on local needs. The consultation document includes an illustrative model of the proposed hubs and spokes, which includes two health and care centres in Derry – Waterside and Cityside.

Due to capital budgetary constraints, the funding of all of these centres through capital funding is not included in the current ISNI period (up to 2021). I have, therefore, set up a Health Infrastructure Board to explore alternative funding models through a private financing model. Depending on the outcome of this work and the outcome of the consultation, it may be possible to progress the plans for a new HCC in Derry sooner than would be possible under capital funding.

Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Prime Minister's announcement of a £15 million investment in Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy, whether he has any plans to introduce the treatment here; and whether this investment will have an impact in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15309/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Regional Cancer Centre in the Belfast Trust has advised that Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy (IMRT) is already available in Northern Ireland. The technique is complex and it is being gradually phased in for different cancer sites. At present, suitable prostate, pelvic node, head and neck tumour patients are treated with IMRT.

The Belfast Trust has advised that in 2008 14 patients benefitted from IMRT. In the year to date 143 patients have already benefitted from the therapy.

DHSSPS: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15334/11-15)

Mr Poots: The current departmental policy with regard to capital construction contracts in the health and social care and public safety sectors requires the inclusion of a range of social clauses, including a condition that 5% of the contractor's workforce and the workforce of the its first tier subcontractors (with twenty or more employees) must be employed on formally recognised paid construction apprenticeships.

Since the contractual requirement is expressed as a percentage, data on the actual number of apprentices recruited in relation to specific contracts is not held by the Department.

DHSSPS: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people employed in his Department are (i) suspended from work pending criminal charges or investigations; and (ii) continuing in their duties whilst facing criminal charges or investigations.

(AQW 15336/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) No staff are currently suspended from work pending criminal charges or investigations.
- (ii) My Department is not aware of any staff who are currently continuing in their duties whilst facing criminal charges or investigations.

Transforming Your Care: South West Acute Hospital

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact the implementation of Transforming Your Care will have on the delivery of services at the new South West Acute Hospital.

(AQW 15338/11-15)

Mr Poots: On 9 October 2012 I launched a three-month consultation "Transforming Your Care: From Vision to Action" which outlines my proposals for change in Health and Social Care services in response to the report "Transforming Your Care: A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland" (published December 2011). With regard to the South West Acute Hospital, the consultation document's key proposals are that the hospital will reflect the needs of its population areas including the dispersed rural population and provide all general hospital services. The hospital would network strongly with both Altnagelvin Area Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital.

No decisions have been taken yet on the proposals in the consultation document. The Health and Social Care Board is carrying out the consultation on my behalf. The consultation document, together with the Draft local Population Plans and Strategic Implementation Plan, are available on the HSCB's website at www.tycconsultation.hscni.net; an information leaflet will be issued to every household in Northern Ireland; and there will be a series of public and stakeholder meetings. The consultation will run until 15 January 2013 and I would encourage everyone to make their views known as part of that process.

There will also be further consultation on significant service changes which will provide the opportunity in the future for service users and the wider public to have their say on more specific service changes as they emerge over time.

Altnagelvin Area Hospital: PCI Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the proposed enhanced cardiology services at Altnagelvin Hospital will lead to a reduction in cardiology services at the new South West Acute Hospital.

(AQW 15339/11-15)

Mr Poots: Transforming Your Care proposes the introduction of a new 24 hour emergency primary Percutaneous Coronary Intervention (PCI) service at Altnagelvin Hospital. Hence it is not a reduction in the service in South West Acute Hospital

(SWAH) I. It will mean improved care pathways with cardiologists in SWAH able to bring their patients to Altnagelvin; provide PCI; and support their return to SWAH and home.

Disability: Dental Treatment

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how long is the waiting list for adults with a disability to receive dental treatment, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 15340/11-15)

Mr Poots: Waiting list figures for dental treatment for adults are not broken down in relation to disability.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Travel-to-work Area

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration the Northern Health and Social Care Trust gave to (i) the travel to work area and; (ii) the availability of public transport in its proposal to introduce car parking charges for staff at the Causeway and Antrim Area Hospitals.

(AQW 15362/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Trust has advised that it carried out a staff survey in relation to Antrim Hospital, gathering information on staff travel to work areas. In subsequent negotiations with Translink, the fact that the largest number of staff travel from the Ballymena area was one of the reasons they were prepared to include a stop at the front of Antrim Hospital for the Ballymena to Belfast Goldline Express Service which has been operating since summer 2012.

The Antrim Ulsterbus Town Service (321e) also stops at the hospital to facilitate staff living in the Antrim area.

It is intended to complete a similar survey for the Causeway Hospital in the coming weeks, although the Coleraine Goldline Express service and the Ulsterbus Town service currently provide a service to the Hospital.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he can give an assurance that the operation of the proposed Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast will be closely monitored to ensure there are no infringements of the law on abortion in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15421/11-15)

Mr Poots: Abortion is governed by the Criminal law. Investigation of potential criminal offences is a matter for the police and, if a prosecution is taken, ultimately for the courts.

The onus is on doctors, and the establishments that employ them, to ensure that they are practicing in compliance with the law. As I informed the Assembly on 15 October 2012, it is my intention to put in place a robust system to record all terminations of pregnancy carried out in Northern Ireland, in any establishment. That system cannot give absolute assurance that the law is being complied with, but it will provide useful information about the reasons for terminations of pregnancy.

In the meantime, as a matter of urgency my officials have been considering additional safeguards including those that may be obtained by bringing the Marie Stopes facility within the remit of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Marie Stopes has confirmed that they intend to fully comply with all laws and regulatory systems in Northern Ireland.

Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in the event of the Causeway Hospital being aligned with Altnagelvin Hospital, what proportion and range of accident and emergency services will be retained in Coleraine.

(AQW 15424/11-15)

Mr Poots: On 9 October 2012 I launched a three-month consultation "Transforming Your Care: From Vision to Action" which outlines my proposals for change in Health and Social Care services in response to the report "Transforming Your Care: A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland" (published December 2011). With regard to the Causeway Hospital, the consultation document sets out three options for the future development of the hospital's formal networking arrangements and indicates that an appraisal of the implications of each option should be undertaken. The document also indicates that there would be access to 24/7 emergency/urgent care on both Antrim and Causeway Hospital sites, which would be doctor led.

No decisions have been taken yet on the proposals and it would be premature to comment on the future of accident and emergency services in advance of the outcome of the public consultation. The document invites people to indicate if they agree with the proposals or whether there better alternatives. The Health and Social Care Board is carrying out the consultation on my behalf. The consultation document, together with the Draft local Population Plans and Strategic Implementation Plan, are available on the HSCB's website at www.tycconsultation.hscni.net; an information leaflet will be issued to every household in Northern Ireland; and there will be a series of public and stakeholder meetings. The consultation will run until 15 January 2013 and I would encourage everyone to make their views known as part of that process.

There will also be further consultation on significant service changes which will provide the opportunity in the future for service users and the wider public to have their say on more specific service changes as they emerge over time.

Chronic Pain: Services

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to his statement made during the Pain Summit on May 15th, in which he stated that chronic pain should be included within the Policy Framework 'Living with Long Term Conditions', how will he ensure that services for patients suffering from chronic pain receive the same prominence as other long term conditions such as diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

(AQW 15436/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department is committed to improving health and wellbeing and quality of life for all of the population of Northern Ireland, irrespective of their specific medical conditions.

To this end, I launched the Long Term Conditions Policy Framework in April 2012, which focuses on six key areas of care including supporting self management, medicines management and improving care and services. The policy framework is designed to be relevant across a wide range of long term conditions and is inclusive of pain management.

Implementation of the Policy Framework will be taken forward by a Regional Implementation Steering Group which will be established by my Department shortly. The Steering Group will develop an Action Plan identifying how the good practice outlined in the six development areas in the policy framework can be implemented and extended regionally and at a local level, working in partnership with the voluntary, community and independent sectors. The Action Plan will be in place and approved by the Department within 6 months of the Steering Group being established.

The Terms of Reference for the Steering Group will include arrangements for reporting to my Department on progress against the Action Plan.

'Living with Long Term Conditions'

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what processes will be used to monitor the progress of the implementation of the 'Living with Long Term Conditions' policy document, to ensure that care for patients with chronic pain is included in Health and Social Care Trust planning.

(AQW 15437/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department is committed to improving health and wellbeing and quality of life for all of the population of Northern Ireland, irrespective of their specific medical conditions.

To this end, I launched the Long Term Conditions Policy Framework in April 2012, which focuses on six key areas of care including supporting self management, medicines management and improving care and services. The policy framework is designed to be relevant across a wide range of long term conditions and is inclusive of pain management.

Implementation of the Policy Framework will be taken forward by a Regional Implementation Steering Group which will be established by my Department shortly. The Steering Group will develop an Action Plan identifying how the good practice outlined in the six development areas in the policy framework can be implemented and extended regionally and at a local level, working in partnership with the voluntary, community and independent sectors. The Action Plan will be in place and approved by the Department within 6 months of the Steering Group being established.

The Terms of Reference for the Steering Group will include arrangements for reporting to my Department on progress against the Action Plan.

Pain Management: Population Plan

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is the only Trust to include pain management within their Population Plan, how he will ensure that the remaining Trusts consider chronic pain within their plans.

(AQW 15438/11-15)

Mr Poots: Transforming Your Care sets out a series of proposals for improving services for people with long term conditions and pain management is one aspect of long term conditions management. All five Health and Social Care Trust draft Population Plans include reference to long term conditions management which is based on needs established in each Local Commissioning Group area.

Chronic Pain: Management

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what level of post-graduate training, including continuous professional development, is provided for health care professionals on chronic pain management, within the framework of his Department.

(AQW 15473/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department invests heavily in continuous professional development for healthcare professionals. Training in chronic pain management is an integral as well as a standalone component of many post graduate education and training programmes including emergency, palliative, cancer and joint care. The training provided is subject to regular review and updated as necessary in line with emerging technologies.

Chronic Pain: Management

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what processes will be put in place to ensure that best practice in chronic pain management will be shared.

(AQW 15474/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has endorsed a number of NICE technology appraisals and clinical guidelines, relating to chronic pain management, as applicable for implementation in Northern Ireland. As any new or updated Technology Appraisals or Clinical Guidelines relating to chronic pain management are published by NICE in the future, these will be locally reviewed and, where appropriate, endorsed by my Department for implementation within health and social care in Northern Ireland.

Chronic pain management requires multidisciplinary approaches and includes a range of interventions for example, pharmacological, non pharmacological, physical and psychological techniques. It is part of integrated care pathways approaches for certain conditions.

Chronic pain requires effective treatment and communication across the primary, community, voluntary and hospital sectors where appropriate. Reform and modernisation of the health services, including the development of Integrated Care Partnerships, and networked approaches will facilitate closer working relationships and the sharing of information and best practice.

Suicide: Tackling Rates

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the work being carried out to tackle suicide rates.

(AQW 15477/11-15)

Mr Poots: A wide range of activity has been supported under the Protect Life Strategy to address suicide in Northern Ireland. This includes counselling, bereavement support, awareness training, training, crisis intervention, follow up for those presenting at A&E in emotional distress, enhanced surveillance to identify potential emerging suicide clusters, and establishment of multi-agency plans to respond promptly to suicide clusters. Independent evaluation of Protect Life will be published later this month.

These actions are in line with international evidence about what works in suicide prevention. However, despite this, the Northern Ireland suicide rate has not declined since 2005. Whilst it is not possible to calculate how many lives have been saved through suicide prevention actions to date, the personal testimony of service users indicates that people are alive today because of these services.

It is widely acknowledged that suicide is a societal issue and that a reduction in suicide rates requires actions across Government Departments and across sectors to reduce risk factors such as unemployment, community fragmentation, adverse childhood experiences, family breakup, domestic violence, crime, debt, substance misuse, and low educational attainment. The Ministerial Co-ordination Group on Suicide Prevention was established to ensure suicide prevention is a priority across Government.

Suicide: East Belfast

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the work that has been carried out during his Ministerial term to combat suicide rates, particularly in East Belfast.

(AQW 15479/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following work has been carried out to combat suicide during my term as Health Minister:

- Community-led programmes and initiatives.
- Public information campaigning to: encourage help-seeking; raise awareness of suicide and positive mental health; and reduce stigma associated with suicide and mental health.
- Lifeline 24/7 helpline and associated support services.
- Extension of the Deliberate Self Harm Registry to all A&E Units and operation of the Card Before You Leave (CBYL) protocol at A&E sites.
- Local research into suicide and self harm.
- Training on suicide/mental health awareness.
- Development of community emergency response plans to respond to potential suicide clusters.
- Programmes targeted at vulnerable young men.
- Updated media reporting guidelines.

These services are supported by annual investment of £6.7m under the Protect Life Strategy.

In addition, I commissioned independent evaluation of Protect Life and approved publication of the Refreshed Protect Life Strategy. Furthermore, I hosted a major suicide prevention conference for community and voluntary organisations, and I have engaged with Executive colleagues to ensure that suicide prevention is a priority for all relevant Government Departments. As a result of this, there is now joint working between DHSSPS, DCAL, and DARD on the development of a suicide prevention

initiative involving sporting, cultural and rural bodies. My department is also working with Education on the development of a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing programme.

In relation to East Belfast, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Trust work with, and help fund, a number of organisations to deliver suicide and self harm prevention services. These organisations, some of which are based in East Belfast and some of which have city-wide coverage, include Contact NI, East Belfast Community Development Agency, East Belfast Independent Advice Centre, Suicide Awareness Support Group, Rainbow, New Life Counselling, Charter for NI, Barnardos, and FASA.

Services provided include crisis response and counselling for a range of high risk groups such as families affected by suicide, ex-prisoners, people who self harm, people with substance misuse problems, and men living with HIV.

Melanoma: Yervoy

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the current status of the drug ipilimumab, which is marketed as YERVOY, in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15481/11-15)

Mr Poots: Yervoy is not routinely commissioned in Northern Ireland, however the drug can be accessed by way of the Individual Funding Request mechanism, as referred to in my previous response to AQW 14076/11-15.

This drug is currently undergoing NICE appraisal for previously treated unresectable stage III or IV malignant melanoma. NICE has also been consulting on the draft scope for guidance on Yervoy in combination with dacarbazine for previously untreated unresectable stage III or IV malignant melanoma. As soon as NICE publishes final guidance, my Department will locally review it for applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, endorse it for implementation in health and social care.

Mental Health: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for his assessment of the impact on the staff, staffing numbers and mental health provision at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh from the proposed in-patient acute mental health unit at Altnagelvin and Enniskillen Hospitals; and (ii) to outline any long-term plans for the future provision of mental health care which were not included in the Review of Health and Social Care.

(AQW 15494/11-15)

Mr Poots: I would expect these matters to be considered in the business case for the second mental health acute inpatient unit to be provided in the Western Trust area. The new unit at Gransha is due to open shortly.

'Transforming Your Care' endorses the Bamford vision that people with a mental illness should be treated in the community thereby reducing demand for inpatient care.

Midwife-led Unit: Omagh

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether, during the Review of Health and Social Care, he considered a Midwifery Led Maternity Unit for Omagh; and whether he will release the report on this issue that was commissioned by the previous Western Health and Social Services Board.

(AQW 15497/11-15)

Mr Poots: The consultation on Transforming Your Care makes recommendations for the future of maternity care, which are in line with the recommendations in my Department's recently published document, A Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland 2012-2018.

The Maternity Strategy contains recommendations on the importance of Midwife Led Units (MLUs). These include a recommendation that each Trust should provide at least one consultant led unit, which should have a MLU on the same site. In addition, there is a recommendation that freestanding MLUs should be established where there is an assessed need and the service contributes to sustainable maternity services.

The HSC Board and the Public Health Agency will lead on the Strategy's implementation, working in collaboration with Trusts and other organisations.

The feasibility study on the possible development of a MLU for the Omagh Area was developed by the former Western Health and Social Services Board and, as such, any requests to have sight of the study should be directed to the Health and Social Care Board.

Consultant-led Acute Medical Care

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the hospitals which meet and do not meet the level of consultant led acute medical care recommended by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) and the Society of Acute Medicine (SAM); and what action he proposes to take to ensure that the RCP and SAM guidance is followed.

(AQW 15514/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department does not routinely measure staffing levels against norms set by various professional bodies but expects Trusts to take such normative figures into account in developing staffing profiles to ensure that the services they provide are safe and effective.

Downe Hospital: Arson

Mr Hazzard asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in the wake of the latest arson attack, what steps his Department will take to make the former Downe Hospital site in Downpatrick safe and manageable.

(AQW 15535/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Safety Executive visited St John's building, located within the old Downe Hospital site boundary following the recent arson attack; it has made a number of recommendations to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust). These are to: remove the roof; compartmentalise the building; erect scaffolding; remove external and internal asbestos; and complete an environmental clean of the site. The Trust will be submitting a business case to the Department and seeking funding to complete these recommended works.

In an attempt to try to stop any further vandalism, Pound Lane and St John's buildings will be demolished. In the interim, the Trust is working closely with the PSNI to re-secure the site and NIEA to re-secure and protect the listed buildings on site.

Land and Property Services (LPS) has been instructed to commence marketing the site.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Legislation

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures will be taken by his Department to ensure that any procedure carried out at the proposed Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast will conform to current legislation.

(AQW 15538/11-15)

Mr Poots: I refer to the answer I provided to AQW15421/11-15.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Opening

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when his Department was informed that a Marie Stopes Clinic would open in Belfast on 18 October 2012.

(AQW 15539/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department was notified on 9 October 2012 that the Marie Stopes clinic would open week commencing 15 October 2012.

DHSSPS: Staff Suspensions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many members of staff in his Department are currently (i) suspended due to internal investigations; and (ii) not suspended whilst facing internal investigations.

(AQW 15540/11-15)

Mr Poots: No staff are currently suspended from work pending internal investigations.

A total of seven staff are currently continuing in their duties while internal investigations are undertaken.

Oncology: Independent Funding Requests

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the process for an independent funding request for cancer treatment, including the perceived timescale if such a request is made.

(AQW 15541/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board has a process for considering those requests details of which may be found at the following link:

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has advised that its Internal Scrutiny Committee for Oncology and Haematology meets every week to review Individual Funding Requests (IFR) and forwards those it supports to the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) IFR Panel for consideration. The HSCB has advised that all individual funding requests, including those for cancer treatments, are responded to within one week of the Panel's weekly meeting.

Suicide: Strategies

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional measures or strategies are being considered to combat suicide.

(AQW 15544/11-15)

Mr Poots: The refreshed Protect Life strategy published in June 2012 contains a number of new actions. These include: involving sporting organisations in delivering positive mental health and wellbeing messages; identifying specific arts interventions that improve mental health; and providing community-based "Health Checks" in rural areas. As part of the roll out of the All-Island Action Plan on suicide prevention a new Men's Health Forum pilot project has been launched "Young Men and Suicide" has delivered a valuable new interactive online programme called 'WorkOut'.

The Public Health Agency are taking forward a number of additional and enhanced services. This includes: additional self harm and family support services, self harm training in support of NICE guidelines, additional and enhanced services for vulnerable and marginalised groups including Travellers, prisoners and LGB&T; piloting of a community mental health education programme targeting vulnerable groups and disadvantaged areas within the Belfast HSC Trust area; and the development and the development of a new Public Information Campaign

Suicide: Services and Initiatives

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are currently in place to help reduce the rate of suicide.

(AQW 15549/11-15)

Mr Poots: A wide range of services and initiatives have been put in place to address suicide, including:

- Community-led programmes and initiatives.
- Comprehensive social marketing campaigns to: encourage help-seeking; raise awareness of suicide and positive mental health; and reduce stigma associated with suicide and mental health.
- Lifeline and associated support services.
- The Card Before You Leave (CBYL) protocol at A&E sites.
- Local research into suicide.
- Bereavement support services.
- Training on suicide/mental health awareness.
- Deliberate Self Harm Registry in A&E Units.
- Development of community emergency response plans.
- Programmes targeted at vulnerable young men.
- Reporting guidelines for the media and ongoing media monitoring.
- Enhanced mental health crisis intervention services.
- Suicide prevention procedures at psychiatric in-patient facilities.
- Counselling.

These services are supported by annual investment of £6.7m under the Protect Life Strategy and by funding from mainstream mental health services. In addition, under Ministerial Co-ordination Group on Suicide Prevention, work has been initiated to involve sporting, cultural, and rural bodies in suicide prevention. Efforts to reduce substance misuse, improve community safety and cohesion, enhance safer custody, improve educational attainment, incorporate emotional wellbeing into the school curriculum, reduce bullying (including cyber bullying) and domestic violence, and strengthen families also contribute to addressing suicide in our society.

Bangor Health Centre

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans there are to redevelop the administration building at Bangor Health Centre.

(AQW 15552/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am aware that the administration building to the rear of Bangor Health Centre is in particularly poor condition that falls well short of acceptable. It is neither practical nor cost-effective to upgrade the existing building to provide modern healthcare services.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is currently working on plans to demolish the existing building and relocate staff to other locations within the Bangor / Newtownards area.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: RQIA

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's remit is focused on the quality of services provided, for his assessment of its ability to monitor the operation of the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast.

(AQW 15555/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department has been, and continues to be, in a process of seeking details through RQIA of the full range of services and medical professionals providing services at MSI, in order to determine whether this clinic would be regulated under the definition in the 2003 Order. The Department has sought legal advice based on the information received. Medical staff within the clinic are regulated through their own professional bodies. Abortion in Northern Ireland is regulated by criminal law.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Registration

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Marie Stopes Clinic in Belfast is required to be registered under Article 12 of The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003; and (i) whether it is registered; (ii) when it was registered; and (iii) whether there are any conditions attached to its registration.

(AQW 15559/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Marie Stopes establishment is not currently registered. The Department has been, and continues to be, in a process of seeking details through RQIA of the full range of services and medical professionals providing services at MSI, in order to determine whether this clinic would be regulated under the definition in the 2003 Order. Based on the information received, The Department has sought legal advice.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Regulations

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the management and control of the operations of the establishment of the Marie Stopes clinic, what regulations, pursuant to Article 23 of The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, apply to the clinic.

(AQW 15560/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department has been, and continues to be, in a process of seeking details through RQIA of the full range of services and medical professionals providing services at MSI, in order to determine whether this clinic would be regulated under the definition in the 2003 Order. On the basis of this information, The Department has sought legal advice.

DHSSPS: Disposals through Auctions

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the items which his Department has disposed of at auctions in (i) 2010/11; and (ii) 2011/12, including the auction value of each item.

(AQW 15573/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not disposed of any items at auctions in 2010/11 and 2011/12.

Suicide/Self-harm: East Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services and resources are in place to tackle suicide and self harm in east Belfast.

(AQW 15577/11-15)

Mr Poots: Residents and groups in East Belfast have access to suicide prevention services that are regionally available. These include: awareness raising and stigma reduction programmes; Lifeline; Deliberate Self Harm Registry services and the Card Before You Leave (CBYL) protocol; and training on suicide/mental health awareness.

In addition, the following services have been provided for East Belfast:

- Suicide Prevention Information Officer;
- Counselling and complementary therapies for individuals, families, children, and ex prisoners;
- Crisis response;
- Bereavement support;
- Mentoring for vulnerable young people;
- Mental health advocacy; and
- "Green Gym" conservation volunteering.

Organisations providing these services are either based in East Belfast or have city-wide coverage and include Contact NI, East Belfast Community Development Agency, East Belfast Independent Advice Centre, Suicide Awareness Support Group, Rainbow, New Life Counselling, Charter for NI, Barnardos, Mulholland Aftercare Services, and FASA.

Sudden Death Notification/"Card before You Leave"

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any problems or issues highlighted by the Health and Social Care Trusts in relation to the Sudden Death Forms and the Card Before You Leave scheme.

(AQW 15580/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Public Health Agency and the Health Trusts have worked with the PSNI to establish a system for the use of Sudden Death Notification forms to notify relevant statutory agencies about a sudden death. This was piloted in the Western Area and introduced across Northern Ireland on 1 April 2012, and is, therefore, relatively new. This system of formally reporting a suspected suicide is unique to Northern Ireland.

There were, initially, some issues with regards to the timescales within which the forms were received by the Trusts and the Public Health Agency. This has been improving and most forms are now being received within one week of a sudden death.

There is also the issue that someone who dies in hospital a number of days after a suspected suicide attempt is unlikely to be notified through this process.

The Health and Social Care Board has undertaken an evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of the Card Before You Leave scheme which is in operation at all accident and emergency departments. The report is expected to be completed by the end of the year. Any action arising from this review will be progressed by the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board. One of the initial concerns is the high volume of pre-arranged follow up appointments that are not attended.

Suicide: Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the recent spate of suicides in Belfast, what action his Department and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have taken in the (i) north; (ii) south; (iii) east; and (iv) west of the city.

(AQW 15582/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no evidence, through the Sudden Death notification system, of a spike in suspected deaths by suicide in the Belfast area over recent weeks. From the end of July this year, fifteen suspected deaths by suicide in the Belfast area have been notified to the Public Health Agency. Sadly, this is reflective of trends experienced over the last five years and work, therefore, is ongoing to address the high levels of suicide in areas of Belfast. This includes awareness raising, promotion of help-seeking behaviour, bereavement support, training for “gatekeepers”, and provision of counselling and crisis support.

Details of activities in specific areas of Belfast are attached.

Protect Life Strategy

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Bridge of Hope: Suicide & Self Harm Therapeutic Support	Ashton Community Trust	This programme aims to assist the North Belfast community toward better mental health, with a particular emphasis on those who are suffering stress and trauma as a result of the political conflict. This programme aims to help people cope with the stress and trauma of living in an area dealing with 30 years of political conflict and significant social and economic deprivation.	Bridge of Hope will deliver 860 complementary therapies to 143 people during the year April 2012 to March 2013 through Suicide Prevention Funding. In addition the organisation will continue to work with existing and new partners to raise awareness about the issue and to reach out to those who currently do not engage with services. The organization will play an active part in suicide prevention work and actively support the ‘moving on’ of individuals from services.	North Belfast
Mood Matters & Mental Health First Aid	Aware Defeat Depression	This project aims to increase awareness of positive mental health, prevention of mental ill health, reduced stigma, self help, and coping skills to deal with stress, anxiety and depression.	1 Mental Health First Aid programme – Belfast wide 5 Mood Matters programmes targeting pregnant women – Belfast wide 5 Mood Matters Programmes targeting Young People - N&W Belfast 4 Mood Matters Programmes targeting young people in S&E Belfast 2 Mood Matters Programmes targeting adults in S&E Belfast	Belfast wide

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Supporting Children & Young People Bereaved Through Suicide	Barnardo's	Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service aims to meet the needs of bereaved children and their families who have experienced complex and traumatic bereavement. This programme has developed an expertise in supporting children and young people bereaved through suicide.	30 packages of care 16 CYP receiving individual support 2 group event for 6 families 1 Christmas group event for 10 families 10 Training sessions to partner organisations including schools 2 Crisis Intervention Groups (if required)	Belfast wide
Pathways to Mental Health & Peace: Ex Prisoners & Families Support	Charter NI	Charter for NI & EPIC is key providers of services to ex prisoners have formed a partnership along with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, East Belfast Alternatives and East Belfast Mission. The programme will provide 284 professional confidential community based counselling sessions with a wraparound complementary service which comprises of 50 alternative therapies helping clients to enjoy better health and a more vital life, encouraging the client to feel comfortable and the motivation to utilize counselling services	284 counselling sessions 28 supervision sessions 50 alternative therapy sessions Hold a minimum of 4 information sessions in the target area Produce a report that will inform the steering group of progress Project running cost and overheads	East Belfast
Green Gym (Protect Life)	Conservation Volunteers	This Green Gym project aims to create the opportunity for positive citizenship, improved physical and mental health, raised awareness of environmental issues and the development of new skills and training toward employment for participants.	3 x10 week Green Gym projects to be delivered in S&E Belfast 8 taster sessions	South & East Belfast
S&E Belfast Youth Counselling Services	Contact	The counselling support will ensure that local people within the area feel supported by services that will improve their mental health and wellbeing. They will know how to access help in future and will be familiar with the onward referral organizations and services. This information can be shared amongst families and communities.	1 volunteer co-ordinator counsellor 16hpw delivering 350 counselling sessions in South and East Belfast primarily focused on young people	South & East Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
SOS Family Support Programme	East Belfast Community Development Agency	<p>This project aims to provide support for people bereaved through suicide and provide information on suicide prevention in East Belfast.</p> <p>Objectives</p> <p>1 To increase suicide prevention work through outreach and promotional work by the suicide prevention information officer</p> <p>2 To provide post-vention support, promoting hope, recovery and long term positive mental health for families bereaved by suicide</p> <p>3 Work to de-stigmatise suicide and self-harm through networking and outreach</p> <p>4 To develop governance standards, professional standards, and overall capacity of the SOS group.</p> <p>5 To ensure the SOS group's experiences are recognised and reflected in strategic development at policy level.</p> <p>6 To increase coordination and joined-up approach to addressing suicide in East Belfast, as well as Belfast and NI in general</p>	<p>1 Suicide Prevention Information Officer 25 hrs</p> <p>Programme Costs to support SOS activities</p> <p>100 Counselling Sessions</p> <p>1x12 week Suicide Therapy Group Programme</p> <p>Programme running costs and overheads</p>	East Belfast
Mental Health Advocacy Project	East Belfast Independent Advice Centre	<p>EBIAC will deliver a Mental Health Advocacy Project that will minimise the impact of external issues such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness and debt on mental health and wellbeing and suicide rates by using an interagency and collaborative approach with three interconnected strands i.e. Prevention; Intervention and Strategic working. A dedicated advocacy worker will provide practical assistance with multiple issues such as debt, housing problems, welfare benefit applications and disputes including representation at benefit appeal tribunals.</p>	To provide part funding to employ 1 full time Mental Health Advocacy Worker	East Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Womens Counselling & Complementary Therapies	Falls Women's Centre	This project aims to deliver a holistic counselling and complementary health service to women and their families within the Greater West Belfast area. Women and their families will be supported within a holistic wraparound service including advice, advocacy, family support, training and childcare, art therapy, benefit analysis, debt management, housing, training & education, personal development, young people's project, ethnic minority project.	258 Counselling sessions 172 Holistic therapy sessions 1 stress management course	West Belfast
FASA: Family Support & Suicide Prevention Response Services	FASA	This Protect Life service aims to provide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention Services in order to: Reduce the stigma of Suicide and Self Harm Raise awareness of help and support across Belfast, targeting N&W Belfast Deliver a major campaign regarding suicide in association with major corporate company Promote positive mental health and wellbeing across individuals, families and communities Promote help seeking behaviour Support those who are in suicidal crisis Support those bereaved by suicide Ensure a Community Suicide Response plan in Greater Shankill Contribute to the aims and outcomes of the Protect Life Strategy for NI	Funding to employ the following: 1 Community Suicide Liaison Officer 1 Crisis Response worker 1 Crisis Intervention Worker Part funding 1 Crisis Intervention Team Leader – 30 hours Programme Costs	North & West Belfast
Crisis Response Support (Out of Hours Pilot)	FASA	To provide out of hours crisis support in S&E Belfast for 150 individuals between April 2012 and 31 December 2012. To provide support for Belfast Response Plan activation if required.	To provide out of hours crisis support in S&E Belfast for 150 individuals between April 2012 and 31 December 2012. To provide support for Belfast Response Plan activation if required.	South & East Belfast
Holy Trinity Counselling Service	Holy Trinity Centre	The Holy Trinity Protect Life Project aims to provide appropriate psychological support through counselling as a method of intervention to those most at risk from self harm and suicide and for those who have been bereaved through suicide.	2 part time counsellors – 15 hpw 1 part time administrator – 15 hpw Project running costs and overheads	West Belfast
Provision of Out of Hours Counselling Project	Holy Trinity Centre	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	West Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
LCP: Lenadoon Counselling Project	Lenadoon Community Forum	<p>The aim of Lenadoon Counselling Project (LCP) is to provide a professional, structured and confidential counselling service to individuals and families from an exceptionally wide client-base living in west Belfast and beyond, and offer a safe environment where individuals can be listened to, respected and given a sense of safety and value.</p> <p>The overall objectives of LCP are to offer client-centred counselling based on assessment of need, promote and introduce community based counselling services through partnership working across all relevant sectors, establish and build upon a network of referrals among all relevant sectors to complement more referral procedures and provide and facilitate training that will equip individuals with skills and knowledge to build capacity within the mental health field.</p>	1032 Counselling sessions 2 ASIST workshops	West Belfast
Counselling project (Out of Hours Service)	Lenadoon Community Forum	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	West Belfast
Lighthouse: Family Support Services	Lighthouse	<p>Lighthouse aims to provide a beacon of hope and a path to recovery for those who have been affected by suicide and self harm. Lighthouse aims to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -work for the assistance of persons who are suicidal, despairing or in distress and thus reduce the incidence of suicide and self harm -alleviating distress and offer assistance to people who have suffered loss through suicide and anguish through self harm -promoting the fostering of positive mental health to improve the emotional wellbeing of people residing in Belfast and its environs -advancing the education of the public into, and raise awareness of, the causes and effects of suicide and self harm and into matters relating to the nature of grieving, bereavement and the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals that self harm. 	<p>Part funding to employ 1 full time co-ordinator 37hpwull time</p> <p>1 part time family support worker – 20hpw</p> <p>1 part time counsellor/crisis worker 20hpw</p> <p>1 part time art & personal development therapist 15hpw</p> <p>576 Sessional counselling sessions 12 pw</p> <p>624 Complementary therapies 12pw</p> <p>Administrative support</p> <p>Project Running Costs and overheads</p> <p>Staff supervision</p>	North Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Match of the Day: Mentoring Scheme for Vulnerable Young People	Mulholland Aftercare Services	<p>This project aims to reduce suicide ideation, self harm, loneliness and isolation in young males 16 – 25 who reside in economically deprived areas.</p> <p>The project will provide one to one mentoring with a volunteer for 25 young men, for the period of up to 1 year.</p> <p>group mentoring for 10 young males focusing on a series of 12 workshops over the year.</p> <p>group mentoring for 5 young males in MACS leaving and aftercare accommodation project, providing weekly group support from September 2011.</p> <p>-Promote and nurture positive self esteem. Safety and emotional well-being</p> <p>-Help empower young men to meet their full potential as active citizens within their communities</p>	<p>1 full time mentoring project worker 35hpw</p> <p>Contribution to volunteer match budget</p> <p>Project running costs and overheads – travel</p>	South & East Belfast
Falls Counselling Project: HEART Programme	Maureen Sheehan Centre	<p>Heart Protect Life Project will add value to a mental health improvement service established at the Healthy Living Centre through the CALM (Combating Anxiety by Lifestyle Management) programme and aim to reduce the risk factors with regards to suicide and self harm such as the impact of poverty, poor relationships, alcohol/drug abuse and increase protective factors such as coping skills, raised self esteem and the development of environments which are supportive and enable individuals to overcome or cope more effectively. The project will provide counselling and complementary therapies that are additional to the CALM service targeted at people who have self harmed, attempted suicide, have suicidal thoughts or are the families and or friends of those bereaved by suicide.</p>	<p>200 hours of counselling</p> <p>60 hours of complementary therapies</p> <p>Insurance cover for counsellors and therapists</p> <p>Supervision cost for counsellors</p>	West Belfast
Suicide Prevention and Support Counselling	New Life Counselling	<p>New Life Counselling aims to support individuals and families who have been affected by attempted suicide, suicidal ideation and self harming behaviours and those who have experienced bereavement as a result of suicide.</p> <p>This Protect Life funded project will provide counselling sessions for children and young people, adults and families affected by suicide.</p>	<p>2 FTE counsellors</p> <p>1 part time administrative officer</p> <p>800 counselling sessions for 200 CYP</p> <p>1000 counselling sessions for 350 adults</p> <p>10 counselling sessions for 3 families</p> <p>Programme costs – clinical supervision</p> <p>Project running costs & overheads</p>	North & West Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Protect Life - Mentoring Support for Vulnerable Young People	Opportunity Youth	Opportunity youth provide crisis mentoring support to young people and vulnerable adults, presenting with issues around suicide self harm, suicide prevention and emotional health and wellbeing concerns. The project will create opportunities for 72 young people Belfast Wide at risk and in crisis situations to access support, engage in appropriate action and support plans that address and reduce risk. Identifying risk and building protective factors, for young people and vulnerable adults so as they can and keep themselves safe in times of crisis.	1 mentor 30hpw 1mentor 22.5hpw Project running costs and overheads	Belfast wide
Co-cultural Counselling Services for Men	Rainbow	The programme will provide co-cultural minority sexual orientation counselling to gay and bisexual men (and those unsure of their sexual orientation) within the Belfast Trust Area. A support group will be established dependent on the identified needs of those accessing counselling support. This may be gay fathers, men living with HIV or young men's group. There will be a campaign targeted at the LGBT community to raise awareness of the increased risk of suicide and self-harm among this group. The provision of training to counselling organisations, and guidance documents will enable mainstream service providers to respond appropriately to the needs of Gay and Bisexual men and those unsure of their orientation. Partnerships with key organisations working in suicide prevention and mental health promotion will be created, strengthened and nurtured as appropriate.	1 part payment of salary for counsellor	Belfast wide
SASG Bereavement Support Service	Suicide Awareness Support Group	The overall aim of the Suicide Awareness and Support Group is to improve the quality of life for those bereaved by suicide within the Greater West Belfast area. Bereavement services at the SA&SG have been developed and designed to facilitate recovery and healing after a suicidal death. Identifying the individuality of need is established and individuals are supported within the delivery of our holistic services.	To employ 1 General Manager To employ 1 Development Worker To provide 343 counselling hours To provide 343 complementary therapies To deliver 3 ASIST training courses	West Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
TATE Belfast - Counselling & Complementary Therapies	Windsor Womens Centre	T.A.T.E. Belfast aims to offer a holistic approach to improving the health and emotional wellbeing of the community. The project delivers targeted counselling and complementary therapies to at risk groups in order to reduce health inequalities and raise the levels of health and emotional well-being.	200 counselling sessions 350 complementary therapy sessions 12 therapeutic art sessions 4 music therapy group sessions 12 craft class sessions 3 stress clinics Project running costs & overheads	South & East Belfast

Mental Health Promotion:

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Mental Health Promotion Activity	Belfast HSCT	To develop a rehabilitation programme of activities for young people who have a diagnosis of severe mental illness to promote the development of social and interpersonal skills and learn competencies required for independent living.	The team frequently run a health and wellbeing group with patients and interactive work with the patients. The team also provides education, family support and individual work whilst with the individual and family.	Belfast wide
Change Of Mind Community Of Interest	Belfast HSCT	Change of Mind Community of Interest confirmed the following 2012-2013 priorities consistent with the priorities set out in the current Mental Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008 and the anticipated Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:-Early Years Interventions capable of building emotional resilience and self esteem. Promote the mental health of "at risk groups" such as those identified under Section 75. of NI Act 1998 and within the Mental Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan 2003-08. Promote the mental health of ex-prisoners and their families.	A range of MHP projects across N&W Belfast	N&W Belfast
		Promote the mental health of isolated older people in the North and West Belfast locality. Participate in mental health promotion partnerships and collaborative working with other organisations to provide mental health promotion initiatives which have the potential to be mainstreamed by each organisation in subsequent years. Provide mental health promotion initiatives to reduce stigma and increase awareness for people with severe and enduring mental health needs and their carers within primary care settings.		

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
IMAGO project	Oasis Caring in Action	The IMAGO project is a befriending service that delivers an early intervention programme targeting vulnerable and 'at risk' people who have minor to moderate mental health problems. The project provides individuals with support, friendship and practical help linking them to local community, educational, health and social activities.	To employ 1 manager; 1 supervisor; 6 part time befrienders plus associated programme costs.	East Belfast
Music Therapy for Adolescents	Belfast HSCT	To provide music therapy for adolescents	To provide music therapy for adolescents	Belfast wide
Mental Health Programme: Mood Matters & MHFA	Aware Defeat Depression	This project aims to increase awareness of positive mental health, prevention of mental ill health, reduced stigma, self help, and coping skills to deal with stress, anxiety and depression.	To deliver 2 MHFA in N&W Belfast To deliver 19 Mood Matters Programmes in N&W Belfast	North & West Belfast
Self Harm Zest Training	Belfast HSCT	To provide self harm training within the BHSCT	To provide self harm training within the BHSCT	Belfast wide
Unscheduled care Pilot	Belfast HSCT	To pilot a 'first responder' project between the BHSCT and FASA employing two support workers to work in partnership with the USC team in Belfast Trust	To pilot a 'first responder' project between the BHSCT and FASA employing two support workers to work in partnership with the USC team in Belfast Trust	Belfast wide

Self-harm/Attempted Suicide

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have (i) self harmed; and (ii) attempted suicide in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area over the last six months.
(AQW 15583/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of people who have (i) self harmed and (ii) attempted suicide in the last 6 months is not available.

However, information is available from the Northern Ireland Registry of Deliberate Self Harm on the number of people who have presented with deliberate self harm at emergency care departments in the Belfast HSC Trust for the first quarter of 2012/13. The criteria for recording on the registry is based on the World Health Organisations definition of deliberate self harm, which includes self harm and attempted suicide; although, it is not possible to determine the number attempting suicide.

During the quarter ending 30 June 2012, 467 people presented with deliberate self harm at emergency care departments in the Belfast HSC Trust.

Emergency Services: Antisocial Behaviour, Downpatrick

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, over the last five years, how many times the emergency services have been called out to departmental property in Downpatrick because of anti-social behaviour.
(AQW 15613/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has attended 19 fires which were suspected of having been started deliberately at Departmental property in Downpatrick between 1 January 2008 and 17 October 2012.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is unable to provide the information requested as it does not categorise mobilisations by anti-social behaviour.

Suicide: Mid Ulster

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the work that has been carried out during his Ministerial term to combat suicide rates in Mid-Ulster.
(AQW 15615/11-15)

Mr Poots: During my term as Health Minister a range of services has been provided regionally which are available to people from the Mid Ulster constituency. These include:

- Lifeline 24/7 helpline and associated, locally-based, support services;
- The Deliberate Self Harm Registry, which operates at all A&E Units, and operation of the Card Before You Leave (CBYL) protocol at A&E sites;
- Training on suicide/mental health awareness; and
- Public information campaigning to: encourage help-seeking; raise awareness of suicide and positive mental health; and reduce stigma associated with suicide and mental health.

In relation to Mid Ulster, the Public Health Agency and Northern and Southern Trusts work with, and help fund, a number of organisations to deliver suicide and self harm prevention services. These organisations, some of which are based in Mid Ulster and some of which have Trust-wide coverage, include Contact NI, Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network, Aware Defeat Depression, Dare to Stretch, ZEST, NEELB/SELB, Mid-Ulster CAB, CRUSE, Niamh Louise Foundation, Opportunity Youth, Action Mental Health, Rainbow and Youth Action.

Services provided include crisis response and counselling for high risk groups such as families affected by suicide, young men, people who self harm, and people with substance misuse problems. Personal development programmes, and drama based awareness/education interventions have also been supported. In addition, community emergency response plans have been developed to respond to potential suicide clusters in the area.

Protect Life: Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust provides in (i) east; (ii) west; (iii) north; and (iv) south Belfast via Protect Life.

(AQW 15616/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no evidence, through the Sudden Death notification system, of a spike in suspected deaths by suicide in the Belfast area over recent weeks. From the end of July this year, fifteen suspected deaths by suicide in the Belfast area have been notified to the Public Health Agency. Sadly, this is reflective of trends experienced over the last five years and work, therefore, is ongoing to address the high levels of suicide in areas of Belfast. This includes awareness raising, promotion of help-seeking behaviour, bereavement support, training for “gatekeepers”, and provision of counselling and crisis support.

Details of activities in specific areas of Belfast are attached.

Protect Life Strategy:

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Bridge of Hope: Suicide & Self Harm Therapeutic Support	Ashton Community Trust	This programme aims to assist the North Belfast community toward better mental health, with a particular emphasis on those who are suffering stress and trauma as a result of the political conflict. This programme aims to help people cope with the stress and trauma of living in an area dealing with 30 years of political conflict and significant social and economic deprivation.	Bridge of Hope will deliver 860 complementary therapies to 143 people during the year April 2012 to March 2013 through Suicide Prevention Funding. In addition the organisation will continue to work with existing and new partners to raise awareness about the issue and to reach out to those who currently do not engage with services. The organization will play an active part in suicide prevention work and actively support the 'moving on' of individuals from services.	North Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Mood Matters & Mental Health First Aid	Aware Defeat Depression	This project aims to increase awareness of positive mental health, prevention of mental ill health, reduced stigma, self help, and coping skills to deal with stress, anxiety and depression.	1 Mental Health First Aid programme – Belfast wide 5 Mood Matters programmes targeting pregnant women – Belfast wide 5 Mood Matters Programmes targeting Young People - N&W Belfast 4 Mood Matters Programmes targeting young people in S&E Belfast 2 Mood Matters Programmes targeting adults in S&E Belfast	Belfast wide
Supporting Children & Young People Bereaved Through Suicide	Barnardo's	Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service aims to meet the needs of bereaved children and their families who have experienced complex and traumatic bereavement. This programme has developed an expertise in supporting children and young people bereaved through suicide.	30 packages of care 16 CYP receiving individual support 2 group event for 6 families 1 Christmas group event for 10 families 10 Training sessions to partner organisations including schools 2 Crisis Intervention Groups (if required)	Belfast wide
Pathways to Mental Health & Peace: Ex Prisoners & Families Support	Charter NI	Charter for NI & EPIC is key providers of services to ex prisoners have formed a partnership along with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, East Belfast Alternatives and East Belfast Mission. The programme will provide 284 professional confidential community based counselling sessions with a wraparound complementary service which comprises of 50 alternative therapies helping clients to enjoy better health and a more vital life, encouraging the client to feel comfortable and the motivation to utilize counselling services	284 counselling sessions 28 supervision sessions 50 alternative therapy sessions Hold a minimum of 4 information sessions in the target area Produce a report that will inform the steering group of progress Project running cost and overheads	East Belfast
Green Gym (Protect Life)	Conservation Volunteers	This Green Gym project aims to create the opportunity for positive citizenship, improved physical and mental health, raised awareness of environmental issues and the development of new skills and training toward employment for participants.	3 x10 week Green Gym projects to be delivered in S&E Belfast 8 taster sessions	South & East Belfast
S&E Belfast Youth Counselling Services	Contact	The counselling support will ensure that local people within the area feel supported by services that will improve their mental health and wellbeing. They will know how to access help in future and will be familiar with the onward referral organizations and services. This information can be shared amongst families and communities.	1 volunteer co-ordinator counsellor 16hpw delivering 350 counselling sessions in South and East Belfast primarily focused on young people	South & East Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
SOS Family Support Programme	East Belfast Community Development Agency	<p>This project aims to provide support for people bereaved through suicide and provide information on suicide prevention in East Belfast.</p> <p>OBJECTIVES</p> <p>1 To increase suicide prevention work through outreach and promotional work by the suicide prevention information officer</p> <p>2 To provide post-vention support, promoting hope, recovery and long term positive mental health for families bereaved by suicide</p> <p>3 Work to de-stigmatise suicide and self-harm through networking and outreach</p> <p>4 To develop governance standards, professional standards, and overall capacity of the SOS group.</p> <p>5 To ensure the SOS group's experiences are recognised and reflected in strategic development at policy level.</p> <p>6 To increase coordination and joined-up approach to addressing suicide in East Belfast, as well as Belfast and NI in general</p>	<p>1 Suicide Prevention Information Officer 25 hrs</p> <p>Programme Costs to support SOS activities</p> <p>100 Counselling Sessions</p> <p>1x12 week Suicide Therapy Group Programme</p> <p>Programme running costs and overheads</p>	East Belfast
Mental Health Advocacy Project	East Belfast Independent Advice Centre	<p>EBIAC will deliver a Mental Health Advocacy Project that will minimise the impact of external issues such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness and debt on mental health and wellbeing and suicide rates by using an interagency and collaborative approach with three interconnected strands i.e. Prevention; Intervention and Strategic working. A dedicated advocacy worker will provide practical assistance with multiple issues such as debt, housing problems, welfare benefit applications and disputes including representation at benefit appeal tribunals.</p>	To provide part funding to employ 1 full time Mental Health Advocacy Worker	East Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Womens Counselling & Complementary Therapies	Falls Women's Centre	This project aims to deliver a holistic counselling and complementary health service to women and their families within the Greater West Belfast area. Women and their families will be supported within a holistic wraparound service including advice, advocacy, family support, training and childcare. art therapy, benefit analysis, debt management, housing, training & education, personal development, young people's project, ethnic minority project.	258 Counselling sessions 172 Holistic therapy sessions 1 stress management course	West Belfast
FASA: Family Support & Suicide Prevention Response Services	FASA	This Protect Life service aims to provide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention Services in order to: Reduce the stigma of Suicide and Self Harm Raise awareness of help and support across Belfast, targeting N&W Belfast Deliver a major campaign regarding suicide in association with major corporate company Promote positive mental health and wellbeing across individuals, families and communities Promote help seeking behaviour Support those who are in suicidal crisis Support those bereaved by suicide Ensure a Community Suicide Response plan in Greater Shankill Contribute to the aims and outcomes of the Protect Life Strategy for NI	Funding to employ the following: 1 Community Suicide Liaison Officer 1 Crisis Response worker 1 Crisis Intervention Worker Part funding 1 Crisis Intervention Team Leader – 30 hours Programme Costs	North & West Belfast
Crisis Response Support (Out of Hours Pilot)	FASA	To provide out of hours crisis support in S&E Belfast for 150 individuals between April 2012 and 31 December 2012. To provide support for Belfast Response Plan activation if required.	To provide out of hours crisis support in S&E Belfast for 150 individuals between April 2012 and 31 December 2012. To provide support for Belfast Response Plan activation if required.	South & East Belfast
Holy Trinity Counselling Service	Holy Trinity Centre	The Holy Trinity Protect Life Project aims to provide appropriate psychological support through counselling as a method of intervention to those most at risk from self harm and suicide and for those who have been bereaved through suicide.	2 part time counsellors – 15 hpw 1 part time administrator – 15 hpw Project running costs and overheads	West Belfast
Provision of Out of Hours Counselling Project	Holy Trinity Centre	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	West Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
LCP: Lenadoon Counselling Project	Lenadoon Community Forum	<p>The aim of Lenadoon Counselling Project (LCP) is to provide a professional, structured and confidential counselling service to individuals and families from an exceptionally wide client-base living in west Belfast and beyond, and offer a safe environment where individuals can be listened to, respected and given a sense of safety and value.</p> <p>The overall objectives of LCP are to offer client-centred counselling based on assessment of need, promote and introduce community based counselling services through partnership working across all relevant sectors, establish and build upon a network of referrals among all relevant sectors to complement more referral procedures and provide and facilitate training that will equip individuals with skills and knowledge to build capacity within the mental health field.</p>	1032 Counselling sessions 2 ASIST workshops	West Belfast
Counselling project (Out of Hours Service)	Lenadoon Community Forum	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	To pilot an out of hours weekend suicide intervention service	West Belfast
Lighthouse: Family Support Services	Lighthouse	<p>Lighthouse aims to provide a beacon of hope and a path to recovery for those who have been affected by suicide and self harm. Lighthouse aims to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -work for the assistance of persons who are suicidal, despairing or in distress and thus reduce the incidence of suicide and self harm -alleviating distress and offer assistance to people who have suffered loss through suicide and anguish through self harm -promoting the fostering of positive mental health to improve the emotional wellbeing of people residing in Belfast and its environs -advancing the education of the public into, and raise awareness of, the causes and effects of suicide and self harm and into matters relating to the nature of grieving, bereavement and the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals that self harm. 	<p>Part funding to employ 1 full time co-ordinator 37hpw full time</p> <p>1 part time family support worker – 20hpw</p> <p>1 part time counsellor/crisis worker 20hpw</p> <p>1 part time art & personal development therapist 15hpw</p> <p>576 Sessional counselling sessions 12 pw</p> <p>624 Complementary therapies 12pw</p> <p>Administrative support</p> <p>Project Running Costs and overheads</p> <p>Staff supervision</p>	North Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Match of the Day: Mentoring Scheme for Vulnerable Young People	Mulholland Aftercare Services	<p>This project aims to reduce suicide ideation, self harm, loneliness and isolation in young males 16 – 25 who reside in economically deprived areas.</p> <p>The project will provide one to one mentoring with a volunteer for 25 young men, for the period of up to 1 year.</p> <p>group mentoring for 10 young males focusing on a series of 12 workshops over the year.</p> <p>group mentoring for 5 young males in MACS leaving and aftercare accommodation project, providing weekly group support from September 2011.</p> <p>-Promote and nurture positive self esteem. Safety and emotional well-being</p> <p>-Help empower young men to meet their full potential as active citizens within their communities</p>	<p>1 full time mentoring project worker 35hpw</p> <p>Contribution to volunteer match budget</p> <p>Project running costs and overheads – travel</p>	South & East Belfast
Falls Counselling Project: HEART Programme	Maureen Sheehan Centre	<p>Heart Protect Life Project will add value to a mental health improvement service established at the Healthy Living Centre through the CALM (Combating Anxiety by Lifestyle Management) programme and aim to reduce the risk factors with regards to suicide and self harm such as the impact of poverty, poor relationships, alcohol/drug abuse and increase protective factors such as coping skills, raised self esteem and the development of environments which are supportive and enable individuals to overcome or cope more effectively. The project will provide counselling and complementary therapies that are additional to the CALM service targeted at people who have self harmed, attempted suicide, have suicidal thoughts or are the families and or friends of those bereaved by suicide.</p>	<p>200 hours of counselling</p> <p>60 hours of complementary therapies</p> <p>Insurance cover for counsellors and therapists</p> <p>Supervision cost for counsellors</p>	West Belfast
Suicide Prevention and Support Counselling	New Life Counselling	<p>New Life Counselling aims to support individuals and families who have been affected by attempted suicide, suicidal ideation and self harming behaviours and those who have experienced bereavement as a result of suicide.</p> <p>This Protect Life funded project will provide counselling sessions for children and young people, adults and families affected by suicide.</p>	<p>2 FTE counsellors</p> <p>1 part time administrative officer</p> <p>800 counselling sessions for 200 CYP</p> <p>1000 counselling sessions for 350 adults</p> <p>10 counselling sessions for 3 families</p> <p>Programme costs – clinical supervision</p> <p>Project running costs & overheads</p>	North & West Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Protect Life - Mentoring Support for Vulnerable Young People	Opportunity Youth	Opportunity youth provide crisis mentoring support to young people and vulnerable adults, presenting with issues around suicide self harm, suicide prevention and emotional health and wellbeing concerns. The project will create opportunities for 72 young people Belfast Wide at risk and in crisis situations to access support, engage in appropriate action and support plans that address and reduce risk. Identifying risk and building protective factors, for young people and vulnerable adults so as they can and keep themselves safe in times of crisis.	1 mentor 30hpw 1mentor 22.5hpw Project running costs and overheads	Belfast wide
Co-cultural Counselling Services for Men	Rainbow	The programme will provide co-cultural minority sexual orientation counselling to gay and bisexual men (and those unsure of their sexual orientation) within the Belfast Trust Area. A support group will be established dependent on the identified needs of those accessing counselling support. This may be gay fathers, men living with HIV or young men's group. There will be a campaign targeted at the LGBT community to raise awareness of the increased risk of suicide and self-harm among this group. The provision of training to counselling organisations, and guidance documents will enable mainstream service providers to respond appropriately to the needs of Gay and Bisexual men and those unsure of their orientation. Partnerships with key organisations working in suicide prevention and mental health promotion will be created, strengthened and nurtured as appropriate.	1 part payment of salary for counsellor	Belfast wide
SASG Bereavement Support Service	Suicide Awareness Support Group	The overall aim of the Suicide Awareness and Support Group is to improve the quality of life for those bereaved by suicide within the Greater West Belfast area. Bereavement services at the SA&SG have been developed and designed to facilitate recovery and healing after a suicidal death. Identifying the individuality of need is established and individuals are supported within the delivery of our holistic services.	To employ 1 General Manager To employ 1 Development Worker To provide 343 counselling hours To provide 343 complementary therapies To deliver 3 ASIST training courses	West Belfast

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
TATE Belfast - Counselling & Complementary Therapies	Windsor Womens Centre	T.A.T.E. Belfast aims to offer a holistic approach to improving the health and emotional wellbeing of the community. The project delivers targeted counselling and complementary therapies to at risk groups in order to reduce health inequalities and raise the levels of health and emotional well-being.	200 counselling sessions 350 complementary therapy sessions 12 therapeutic art sessions 4 music therapy group sessions 12 craft class sessions 3 stress clinics Project running costs & overheads	South & East Belfast

Mental Health Promotion:

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
Mental Health Promotion Activity	Belfast HSCT	To develop a rehabilitation programme of activities for young people who have a diagnosis of severe mental illness to promote the development of social and interpersonal skills and learn competencies required for independent living.	The team frequently run a health and wellbeing group with patients and interactive work with the patients. The team also provides education, family support and individual work whilst with the individual and family.	Belfast wide
Change Of Mind Community Of Interest	Belfast HSCT	Change of Mind Community of Interest confirmed the following 2012-2013 priorities consistent with the priorities set out in the current Mental Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008 and the anticipated Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:-Early Years Interventions capable of building emotional resilience and self esteem. Promote the mental health of "at risk groups" such as those identified under Section 75. of NI Act 1998 and within the Mental Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan 2003-08. Promote the mental health of ex-prisoners and their families.	A range of MHP projects across N&W Belfast	N&W Belfast
		Promote the mental health of isolated older people in the North and West Belfast locality. Participate in mental health promotion partnerships and collaborative working with other organisations to provide mental health promotion initiatives which have the potential to be mainstreamed by each organisation in subsequent years. Provide mental health promotion initiatives to reduce stigma and increase awareness for people with severe and enduring mental health needs and their carers within primary care settings.		

Programme	Delivery Organisation	Programme Aim	Programme Detail:	Targeted area
IMAGO project	Oasis Caring in Action	The IMAGO project is a befriending service that delivers an early intervention programme targeting vulnerable and 'at risk' people who have minor to moderate mental health problems. The project provides individuals with support, friendship and practical help linking them to local community, educational, health and social activities.	To employ 1 manager; 1 supervisor; 6 part time befrienders plus associated programme costs.	East Belfast
Music Therapy for Adolescents	Belfast HSCT	To provide music therapy for adolescents	To provide music therapy for adolescents	Belfast wide
Mental Health Programme: Mood Matters & MHFA	Aware Defeat Depression	This project aims to increase awareness of positive mental health, prevention of mental ill health, reduced stigma, self help, and coping skills to deal with stress, anxiety and depression.	To deliver 2 MHFA in N&W Belfast To deliver 19 Mood Matters Programmes in N&W Belfast	North & West Belfast
Self Harm Zest Training	Belfast HSCT	To provide self harm training within the BHSCT	To provide self harm training within the BHSCT	Belfast wide
Unscheduled care Pilot	Belfast HSCT	To pilot a 'first responder' project between the BHSCT and FASA employing two support workers to work in partnership with the USC team in Belfast Trust	To pilot a 'first responder' project between the BHSCT and FASA employing two support workers to work in partnership with the USC team in Belfast Trust	Belfast wide

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Agency Staff

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many clerical and administration agency staff have been let go by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last two years, broken down by department; and whether these positions have been, or will be, filled by permanent staff.

(AQW 15622/11-15)

Mr Poots: Agency staff are used on a short-term basis by Trusts for a variety of reasons e.g. to cover sickness or maternity leave or to allow permanent staff to work on the development of new projects. In the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust the decision to appoint and terminate agency staff is a function delegated to managers throughout the Trust. While my Department requires the Trust to monitor the cost of Agency staff the level of detail requested is not held centrally or recorded locally.

Omagh: New Hospital

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the time scale for the start and completion of the new Omagh Hospital.

(AQW 15679/11-15)

Mr Poots: Work to deliver the new Omagh hospital is well underway. The site enabling works are progressing to plan and include demolitions, road widening and the construction of a new outer link road. Further works are scheduled to commence on site in the coming weeks. It is planned that construction of the main hospital building will begin in summer 2013 and will be completed by the end of 2015. Following handover and a period of commissioning the hospital is expected to open in 2016.

Family Support Hubs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the family support hubs that are currently operating in each (i) district council; and (ii) constituency area.

(AQW 15686/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is not possible to provide this information in the format that you have requested.

There are currently 17 Family Support Hubs located in the following locations:

Western Outcomes Area	Shantallow
	Waterside
	Creggan
	Dry Arch (Dungiven)
	Strabane
	Omagh
	Fermanagh
Northern Outcomes Area	Larne/Carrickfergus
	Ballymena
	Magherfelt/Cookstown
	Coleraine
Southern Outcomes Area	Newry
	Craigavon/Banbridge
	Armagh/Dungannon
South Eastern Outcomes Area	Lisburn
	Downpatrick
	Bangor
Belfast Outcomes Area	Currently under development

Health and Social Care Trusts: Pay Differentials

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to remove the differentials in pay between the staff in different Health and Social Care Trusts who do the same jobs.

(AQW 15784/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Agenda for Change process, which was implemented in partnership by HSC employers with Trade Unions, sought to grade jobs depending on the skills and responsibilities of the job. The implementation process contained a number of checks to ensure consistency within individual HSC organisations and across a number of other HSC organisations.

In addition, where individual staff had evidence that the grading applied to their job was incorrect they could ask their employer to undertake a review of the grading. In this part of the process the grading was subject to a Regional Quality Assurance exercise in order to validate the grading. Following the merger of the HSC Trusts in 2007 Trusts found that the grading of some staff, who had not requested a review, were out of step with others in the new organisation that were doing an identical job. Negotiations with Trade Unions during the summer of 2011 resulted in a collective "Clustering Agreement" which in certain circumstances allowed these staff to move to the higher grade from 1 October 2008.

In October 2011 my Department wrote to HSC employers asking them to ensure that equal pay principles were adhered to following the Review of Public Administration Trust mergers. This required individual employers to revisit all of the Agenda for Change grading for their staff and to take corrective action where there were grading inconsistencies which could not be objectively justified.

Downe Hospital: Arson

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of another arson attack on departmental property in Downpatrick, what more can be done to make the area less susceptible to anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 15801/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Safety Executive visited St John's building, located within the old Downe Hospital site boundary following the recent arson attack; it has made a number of recommendations to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust). These are to: remove the roof; compartmentalise the building; erect scaffolding; remove external and internal asbestos; and complete an environmental clean of the site. The Trust will be submitting a business case to the Department and seeking funding to complete these recommended works.

In an attempt to try to stop any further vandalism, Pound Lane and St John's buildings will be demolished. In the interim, the Trust is working closely with the PSNI to re-secure the site and NIEA to re-secure and protect the listed buildings on site.

Land and Property Services (LPS) has been instructed to commence marketing the site.

Suicide: East Belfast

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions are being taken to combat the recent epidemic of suicides in east Belfast.

(AQW 15812/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no evidence, through the Sudden Death notification system, of a sudden spike in suspected deaths by suicide in the East Belfast area over recent weeks. From March 2012, eight suspected deaths by suicide in the East Belfast area have been notified to the Public Health Agency. Sadly, this is reflective of trends experienced over the last five years. Work, therefore, is ongoing to tackle suicide in the area through the provision of services such as:

- A Suicide Prevention Information Officer;
- Counselling and complementary therapies for individuals, families, children, and ex-prisoners;
- Crisis response;
- Bereavement support;
- Mentoring for vulnerable young people;
- Mental health advocacy; and
- “Green Gym” conservation volunteering.

Residents and groups in East Belfast have access to suicide prevention services that are regionally available. These include: Lifeline; Deliberate Self Harm Registry services and the Card Before You Leave protocol; training on suicide/mental health awareness; and awareness raising and stigma reduction programmes;.

Within the past two weeks, senior officials from the Public Health Agency and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have met with community groups involved in suicide prevention in East Belfast to explore how services can be enhanced.

Suicide/Self-harm: Awareness

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the recently reported increases in self harm and suicide, what additional measures are being considered to raise awareness and to help those people affected.

(AQW 15839/11-15)

Mr Poots: The refreshed Protect Life strategy published in June 2012 contains a number of new actions to combat suicide and self harm. These include: involving sporting organisations in delivering positive mental health and wellbeing messages; identifying specific arts interventions that improve mental health; and providing community-based “Health Checks” in rural areas. As part of the roll out of the All-Island Action Plan on suicide prevention a new Men’s Health Forum pilot project has been launched “Young Men and Suicide” has delivered a valuable new interactive online programme called ‘WorkOut’.

The Public Health Agency is taking forward a number of additional and enhanced services. These include: additional self harm and family support services; self harm training in support of National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines; additional and enhanced services for vulnerable and marginalised groups and the development of a new public information campaign.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Regulations

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps were taken to ensure adequate regulation was put in place since he became aware, in January 2012, of the intention to open a Marie Stopes clinic; and why was an unregulated context allowed to continue.

(AQW 15902/11-15)

Mr Poots: Medical staff within the clinic are regulated through their own professional bodies. Abortion in Northern Ireland is regulated by criminal law.

The Department has been, and continues to be, in a process of seeking details through RQIA of the full range of services and medical professionals providing services at MSI, in order to determine whether this clinic would be regulated under the definition in the The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. On the basis of this information, the Department has sought legal advice.

Marie Stopes has confirmed that they intend to fully comply with all laws and regulatory systems in Northern Ireland. All organisations delivering health and social care are expected to operate within the existing legal framework. I am currently exploring legislative options to help ensure public confidence.

Whilst aware MSI were showing interest in Northern Ireland, the Department was informed on 9 October of the proposed opening of a clinic in the week commencing 15 October.

Adoption: Legal Judgement

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on what evidence he has based his decision to challenge the High Court ruling on adoption.

(AQW 15945/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am deeply disappointed at the judgment of Treacy J. My officials are currently considering the judgment in consultation with the Department's legal advisers. They will also need to consider the order of the court once it is available. It would not therefore be appropriate to comment further at this stage.

Department of Justice

Courts Estate: Disabled Parking

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the dates of audits or inspections carried out by the Courts Estate, in each of the last three years, to ensure that disabled car parking bays are not being abused by the public or staff at all facilities within his Department's remit; and (ii) whether he can offer an assurance that a zero tolerance policy is being enforced.

(AQW 15154/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): No specific audits or inspections have been carried out by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service on the use of disabled parking bays in the last three years. Courthouses with disabled parking bays are monitored by security staff.

Edward Connors: Serious Case Review

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he has ordered a Serious Case Review into the handling of convicted rapist Edward Connors, or whether he will instigate a review as a matter of urgency.

(AQW 15155/11-15)

Mr Ford: The guidance to agencies on public protection arrangements (PPANI), issued under Article 49 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, contains guidance on serious case reviews to be followed by the relevant criminal justice agencies. This guidance is available on the Department of Justice website.

The case referred to does not fall within the terms of the guidance.

Legal Aid: Bernadette, Stephen and Catherine McGeary

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) whether Legal Aid has been granted in each of the following cases (a) 12/096040 (Bernadette McGeary); (b) 12/096040 (Stephen McGeary); and (c) 12/096040 (Catherine McGeary) at Dungannon Magistrates Court; (ii) how much, to date, has been paid to each defendant; and (iii) for an estimate of the final cost of Legal Aid for each defendant, including the proposed preliminary inquiry.

(AQW 15156/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has no record of the ICOS reference quoted in the question. A check on the defendants' names showed that a legal aid certificate for Solicitor only has been granted to all three defendants.

As the case is still ongoing no bills have been received to date.

The committal proceedings will determine whether the defendants will be returned for trial to the Crown Court. At present there is insufficient information available to provide an accurate estimate of the final cost of the case.

Criminal Charges: 12 July 2012 Disturbances

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how many people, to date, have been charged in relation to the 12 July 2012 disturbances, broken down by court division; (ii) how many defendants received Legal Aid; (iii) how many legal firms have been instructed; (iv) how many certificates have been granted for counsel; and (v) how much Legal Aid has been paid to date.

(AQW 15157/11-15)

Mr Ford: As of 9 October 2012 31 individuals have been charged in relation to the 12 July 2012 disturbances in the Ardoyne area of Belfast. One of the individuals charged has subsequently died.

Twenty seven defendants have been granted legal aid for a solicitor only to represent them in the Magistrates Court. Legal aid has been granted for two defendants to have representation by Junior Counsel in the Magistrates Court.

Nineteen firms are on record for thirty of those charged and one individual is unrepresented.

The total amount of Legal Aid paid in respect of proceedings in the Magistrates Court to date is £720.00 (including VAT of £120.00).

Legal Aid: Bernadette McGeary

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much Legal Aid, since 2008, has been provided to Bernadette McGeary to defend fraud charges at Dungannon Magistrates Court; and why this case was eventually dismissed.

(AQW 15204/11-15)

Mr Ford: £1,946.79 (including VAT of £259.79 & disbursements of £202.48) was paid to the defendant's solicitors in respect of this case.

The reason why the case was dismissed is a matter for the court. The judiciary operate independently from Government and I can not comment on judicial decisions.

DOJ: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether any departmental staff have been charged with criminal offences; and (ii) what is his Department's position regarding staff employment whilst court proceedings are pending.

(AQW 15208/11-15)

Mr Ford: Employment whilst court proceedings are pending is governed by the NICS Staff Handbook which states "the person exercising formal disciplinary powers may, if the circumstances warrant it, pursue formal disciplinary action without waiting on the outcome of any police investigation and disposal of any resulting criminal proceedings". Careful consideration is given to appropriate action on a case by case basis.

As there are less than five members of staff within the Department of Justice who have criminal charges outstanding the actual number has been withheld. This is to protect the identity of the individuals concerned as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Edward Connors: Convictions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail all convictions, including dates and disposals, in the case of Edward Connors, prior to his conviction for rape committed in 2008.

(AQW 15209/11-15)

Mr Ford: Edward Connors had no criminal convictions prior to his conviction for rape.

Offender Levy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 14311/11-15, where the funds, and other funds accrued through the Offenders Levy, will be allocated.

(AQW 15210/11-15)

Mr Ford: Revenue collected from the Offender levy will be used to resource a dedicated Victims of Crime Fund. The Fund will pay for projects which support victims and witnesses in the justice process, as well as for local initiatives taken forward by groups working with victims in the community.

Criminal Justice: Political Party Office as Address

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether it is acceptable for a defendant to provide a political party office as an address as opposed to the actual place of residence.

(AQW 15280/11-15)

Mr Ford: While not prescribed by legislation, it is acceptable in practice for a defendant to provide a political party office as an address so long as the prosecuting authority is content that the address is suitable for summons service and, if required, the court is content that the address is suitable for bail purposes.

Legal Aid: Preliminary Inquiries

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 14447/11-15, in how many of the 1467 cases Legal Aid was provided; and the total cost of the Legal Aid.

(AQW 15282/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information sought could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Amnesty International: Martin Corey

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the dates of any representations that Amnesty International has made to his Department in relation to Martin Corey.

(AQW 15341/11-15)

Mr Ford: Northern Ireland Prison Service has no record of any representations made from Amnesty International on behalf of Mr Martin Corey.

Marian Price

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether Marian Price remains in the care of a general hospital or whether she has been returned to prison, including the date of return.

(AQW 15345/11-15)

Mr Ford: Mrs Marian McGlinchey remains under the care of the Belfast Trust.

Stalking: Legislation

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to strengthen the laws in relation to protecting people from stalking.

(AQW 15348/11-15)

Mr Ford: My answer to AQW/15346/11-15 indicated that there is currently no specific offence of stalking in Northern Ireland, though I am aware that both England and Wales and Scotland have recently created specific offences and penalties in this area. At this stage I have no plans to create similar legislation. I will keep developments in Great Britain under review.

Criminal Justice: Political Party Office as Address

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people who have been charged with criminal offences, currently going through the Belfast Magistrates Court system, have provided the office of a political party as an address.

(AQW 15416/11-15)

Mr Ford: One person currently before Belfast Magistrates' Court has provided an address that contains the name of a political party.

Criminal Justice: Preliminary Investigations

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many preliminary Investigations have been held in each of the last three years, broken down by court division; and how many of these cases did not proceed to trial.

(AQW 15417/11-15)

Mr Ford: Table A below sets out the number of cases for which a preliminary investigation was held in 2009, 2010 and 2011. Table B sets out the number of cases for which a preliminary investigation was held but where the case was not committed for trial in the Crown Court. Both tables are broken down by County Court Division.

Table A: Number of cases for which a Preliminary Investigation was held

County Court Division	Year		
	2009	2010	2011
Antrim	6	5	4
Ards	2	5	4
Armagh and South Down	6	11	4
Belfast	10	10	20
Craigavon	8	9	8
Fermanagh and Tyrone	11	4	11
Londonderry	1	0	2
Total Northern Ireland	44	44	53

Source: Integrated Court Operations System

Note: There may be more than one defendant in a case

Table B: Number of Preliminary Investigation cases not committed for trial in the Crown Court

County Court Division	Year		
	2009	2010	2011
Antrim	0	0	0
Ards	0	1	1
Armagh and South Down	0	2	0
Belfast	3	2	0

County Court Division	Year		
	2009	2010	2011
Craigavon	2	2	3
Fermanagh and Tyrone	3	1	5
Londonderry	0	0	2
Total Northern Ireland	8	8	11

Source: Integrated Court Operations System

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether he can give an assurance that the operation of the proposed Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast will be closely monitored to ensure there are no infringements of the law on abortion in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15422/11-15)

Mr Ford: The first obligation to comply with the law on abortion in Northern Ireland rests with the Marie Stopes organisation and the individuals concerned. As I understand it, the future regulation and monitoring of the operation of the proposed clinic will be a matter for the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority under the authority of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Minister of Health is currently considering how that might be achieved. If there is evidence of a crime having been committed, the police and independent prosecuting authorities will investigate and prosecute as appropriate.

Burglaries: Foyle

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) burglaries in each of the last three months in the Foyle constituency; and (ii) convictions in relation to these burglaries.

(AQW 15470/11-15)

Mr Ford: Information on the number of burglaries is collected by the Police Service of Northern Ireland. While information by constituency is available following an exercise at year end, in-year this information is only available broken down by police command area.

Number of burglaries in Foyle police command area June – August 2012

	June 2012	July 2012	August 2012
Burglary in a dwelling	28	24	32
Burglary in a building other than a dwelling	18	15	13

Further information in relation to burglaries may be obtained by contacting PSNI directly.

Conviction statistics for 2012 are not yet available. Conviction datasets only contain information on the location of the offender and not on the location of the offence.

Community Groups: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what work his Department is currently carrying out with community groups in the North Down area.

(AQW 15509/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department fully recognises the need to work in partnership with communities to identify their concerns about local criminal justice and community safety issues. In particular, the newly established North Down Policing and Community Safety Partnership will have a pivotal role in developing partnership working at a local level and in supporting communities in identifying problems and developing solutions to issues of local concern.

Similarly, the Youth Justice Agency and Probation Board for Northern Ireland deliver a range of services in partnership with community based organisations across North Down. The emphasis of this work is to help those in contact with the criminal justice system, address their offending behaviour, divert them from further crime, and, if necessary, reintegrate them into the community.

Further details of the work my Department is carrying out with community groups in the North Down area are given at Annex A. This list is not exhaustive, as the Department will engage with community groups on an ad-hoc basis as particular needs arise.

ANNEX A**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE WORK WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS IN NORTH DOWN**

Sponsoring Body	Community Group/Organisation	Activity
North Down Policing and Community Safety Partnership	Ashbury Community Group Breezemount Community Association Bloomfield Community Association Clandeboyne Community Association Harbour Community Association Holywood RECON Holywood Family Trust Redburn Community Association Kilcooley Action Groups Bangor Alternatives Rathgill Community Association Whitehill Community Association	The Partnership works with the listed groups to deliver in these areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Priority Youth Engagement Programme to address Anti-Social behaviour; ■ Good Morning Call Programme reducing fear of crime; ■ Intergenerational programmes; and ■ Safety of Seniors Crime Prevention Roadshows.
Youth Justice Agency (YJA)	Salvation Army	Use of Premises and reparation.
	FASA	Mentoring, 1-2-3 Counselling and reparation.
	North Down Community Network	Use of premises.
	Conservation Volunteers	Reparation.
	North Down YMCA	Programmes for young people.
	Rathgill Community Association	Reparation.
	Assisi Animal Sanctuary	Reparation.
	NI Alternatives	Reparation.
	Clandeboyne Community Association	Programmes for young people and reparation
	Growing Connections	Reparation. (Horticultural).
	Rathgael Gymnasium	Reparation.
	Simon Community	Programmes and counselling.
	Kilcooley Primary School	Time to Read – Business in the Community scheme where staff give time to help children with reading recovery.
	Elim Church Bangor	Staff from Juvenile Justice Centre assist with fortnightly football.
Probation Board NI	Assisi Animal Sanctuary	Funded through the Community Development Grant scheme to provide programmes for adjudicated offenders.
	Minnowburn Riding for the Disabled	Funded through the Community Development Grant scheme to provide programmes for adjudicated offenders.
	Oxfam Ireland	Funded through the Community Development Grant scheme to provide programmes for adjudicated offenders.

Sponsoring Body	Community Group/Organisation	Activity
	Conservation Volunteers	Funded by PBNI to work across wider areas but substantial work carried out in North Down area.
	FASA Drug and Alcohol Counselling	Funded by PBNI to work across wider areas but substantial work carried out in North Down area.
	FASA Community Development	Funded by PBNI to work across wider areas but substantial work carried out in North Down area.
	Dunlewey Advice Centre	Funded by PBNI to work across wider areas but substantial work carried out in North Down area.
	Relate	Funded by PBNI to work across wider areas but substantial work carried out in North Down area.

	Kilcooley Women's Centre	Programme referrals.
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS)	Ards Intercultural Forum	The Forum promotes and contributes to Good Relations. Staff from NICTS are involved in the Forum and assist in the sharing of information and raising awareness in the Ards, Bangor and Downpatrick Court Office. NICTS has also contributed to the development of the Ards Support Services Booklet for those new to the area.
The Appeals Service (TAS)	Citizens Advice Bureau and Independent Advice Sector	TAS arranges bi-annual liaison meetings with representatives from the Citizens Advice Bureau and Independent Advice Sector across Northern Ireland including North Down.

Illegal Fuel: Prosecutions and Convictions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions for the selling of illegal fuel in each of the last two years.

(AQW 15511/11-15)

Mr Ford: Court sentencing datasets do not distinguish illegal fuel selling from other oils related crime offences which would be prosecuted under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979.

HM Revenue & Customs have confirmed that for 2010/2011 there were four prosecutions and convictions and for 2011/2012 there were six prosecutions and convictions for oils related crime offences.

Antisocial Behaviour: Combating

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what additional measures are being considered to combat the problems of anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 15581/11-15)

Mr Ford: In July I launched the new Community Safety Strategy 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities' which sets the direction for reducing crime, anti-social behaviour and fear of crime in Northern Ireland over the next five years. In this Strategy I said that my Department would be developing regional action plans to take forward the delivery of the different strands of the strategy, including anti-social behaviour.

Recognising that delivery of the Strategy will only be achieved through partnership working my Department has established Interagency Delivery Groups for each of the strands of the strategy.

The Anti-social Behaviour Delivery Group, which includes representatives from DOJ, PSNI, Housing Executive, Housing Associations, DSD, and PCSPs, is currently developing an action plan of measures to take forward the strategic objectives of

the Strategy. The action plan will also incorporate measures to take forward the recommendations from the recent Criminal Justice Inspection report on the criminal justice system's approach to addressing anti-social behaviour.

My officials are scheduled to provide a written briefing on the action plans to the Justice Committee in January 2013.

At a local level, tackling anti-social behaviour is a strategic priority for the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships and their local action plans include measures and initiatives to deal with locally identified problems of anti-social behaviour.

Crime: Statistics

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what changes are being made to the monitoring of crime statistics to ensure that figures are available in a more timely fashion.

(AQW 15664/11-15)

Mr Ford: Data on convictions for 2007 and 2008 have been available for answering Assembly Questions since October 2011 and 2009 data since September 2012.

DOJ moved to a new platform for prosecution and conviction data from 2009 and work is currently progressing to process, quality assure and provide data from 2010 onwards. The immediate priority is to clear the backlog but, once this is done, our aim is that conviction and prosecution data will be processed, fully validated and be made available within six months after the year end.

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what arrangements are in place, or will be put in place, to effectively monitor that there are no breaches of the criminal law in the operation of the Marie Stopes clinic, Belfast.

(AQW 15777/11-15)

Mr Ford: The first obligation to comply with the law on abortion in Northern Ireland rests with the Marie Stopes organisation and the individuals concerned. As I understand it, the future regulation and monitoring of the operation of the proposed clinic will be a matter for the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority under the authority of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Minister of Health is currently considering how that might be achieved. If there is evidence of a crime having been committed, the police and independent prosecuting authorities will investigate and prosecute as appropriate.

Department for Regional Development

Roads: Communication on Delays

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are plans to improve the way information is communicated to commuters in relation to road delays and blockages.

(AQW 15292/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service presently keeps road users informed by means of the Trafficwatchni.com website, email alerts, the traffic information telephone helpline and CCTV images on the internet. There is also a dedicated Emergency News page, updated on a 24/7 basis, reporting the occurrence of roads related incidents from across Northern Ireland. In addition, my Department will continue to let BBC Radio Ulster broadcast live and free of charge from the Traffic Information and Control Centre during the morning and evening peak periods.

In an effort to improve the facilities provided, Roads Service is currently considering implementing social media enhancements linked to the Trafficwatchni.com website.

Car Parks: Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development how much additional revenue has been generated, since June 2012, from the new pay and display car parks in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Portadown; and (iii) Banbridge.

(AQW 15294/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that details of the additional revenue which been generated, since June 2012, at the new pay and display car parks in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge are shown in the table below:

Car Park	From	To	P & D Revenue *
Waring St, Lurgan	4 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	£2097.00
Moore's Lane, Lurgan	4 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	£1525.00
Magowan Bldgs, Portadown	2 Jun 2012	28 Sep 2012	£61368.00
West St, Portadown	2 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	£2462.00

Car Park	From	To	P & D Revenue *
William St, Portadown	2 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	£4378.00
Bridge St. East, Banbridge	3 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	£2344.00
Townsend St, Banbridge	3 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	£1803.00
Downshire Pl, Banbridge	2 Jun 2012	28 Sep 2012	£13103.00

* VAT is payable on these amounts.

I am also advised that sections of Magowan Buildings and Downshire Place were 'Pay on Foot' and 'Kiosk' car-parks, and have become Pay and Display since April 2012.

Car Parks: Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development how many parking tickets have been issued since June 2012 at the new pay and display car parks in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Portadown; and (iii) Banbridge.

(AQW 15295/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that details of the number of parking tickets that have been issued, since June 2012, at the new pay and display car parks in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge are shown in the table below:

Car Park	From	To	PCNs Issued
Waring St, Lurgan	4 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	159
Moore's Lane, Lurgan	4 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	149
Magowan Bldgs, Portadown	2 Jun 2012	28 Sep 2012	760
West St, Portadown	2 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	31
William St, Portadown	2 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	191
Bridge St. East, Banbridge	3 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	101
Townsend St, Banbridge	3 Jul 2012	28 Sep 2012	62
Downshire Pl, Banbridge	2 Jun 2012	28 Sep 2012	318

I am also advised that sections of Magowan Buildings and Downshire Place were 'Pay on Foot' and 'Kiosk' car-parks and have been converted to Pay and Display since April

Traffic Calming: Roads Service Southern Division

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to allocate additional funding for traffic calming measures in the Roads Service Southern Division, given the needs and the support of the community for traffic calming measures to be implemented in Donaghacloy and Blackskull.

(AQW 15297/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that traffic calming programmes across all Roads Service divisions are developed based on the availability of funding subject to other competing priorities. Given the volume of requests of this nature, within both the Banbridge District Council and Craigavon Borough Council areas, the prioritisation of all schemes progressed by Roads Service Southern Division must be dealt with in a fair and equitable manner.

Officials have further advised the assessments by Roads Service officials of both Blackskull and Donaghacloy for traffic calming measures returned a relatively high priority. However, it is unlikely either scheme will be taken forward based on current funding levels.

However, preliminary design work for both schemes has been completed that would allow schemes to be brought forward as early as possible subject to funding, competing priorities and the successful completion of the required statutory process. These plans will remain under consideration and compete with other sites for inclusion on a future works programme.

I would also advise the Member that community support and interest in improving road safety is always welcomed and is necessary to enable the delivery of any traffic calming schemes.

Street Lighting: Bangor West

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for the Bangor West area of Bangor.

(AQW 15319/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Footpaths: Bangor West

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new footpath resurfacing schemes are planned for the Bangor West area of Bangor.

(AQW 15320/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Dropped Kerbs: Bangor West

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new dropped kerb schemes are planned for the Bangor West area of Bangor.

(AQW 15321/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Flooding: Call-outs in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of call-outs for flooding over the last two years in the North Down area.

(AQW 15322/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, during the last two years, it has been called out 81 times during the normal working day to deal with flood related incidents within the North Down area.

Roads Service officials have further advised that they also respond to reported incidents outside normal working hours including those related to flooding. However, this information is not held in a format that can be readily interrogated to provide statistical analysis of call outs specifically related to flooding in North Down. I would advise the Member that, if he has a specific query in relation to this issue, Roads Service officials are willing to investigate the matter and provide further details.

In addition, I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that over the last two years it has received a total of 809 call-outs within the North Down area.

Roads Service: Road Safety at Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 6176/11-15, for an update on Roads Service Policy and Procedure Guide.

(AQW 15352/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is continuing to work on the development of a new Road Service Policy and Procedures Guide for Road Safety at Schools. This guide is aimed at improving Road Safety outside schools by introducing school safety zones, as well as part time 20mph speed limits, during school opening and closing times.

With the current financial restrictions, research is being carried out into how to most efficiently install part time 20mph speed limits at a low cost, whilst maintaining their effectiveness. This will ultimately mean that more schools can be treated within a shorter period of time.

This policy is due to be in place within the current financial year and will therefore allow work to be programmed to begin in the next financial year, subject to available funding.

Street Lighting: Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for the Holywood area.

(AQW 15367/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Footpaths: Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new footpath resurfacing schemes are planned for the Holywood area.

(AQW 15368/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Dropped Kerbs: Hollywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new dropped kerb schemes are planned for the Hollywood area.

(AQW 15369/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 14975/11-15.

Roads Service: Vesting Land

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on vesting land in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15370/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the expenditure on vesting land in each of the last three years is as follows:

Year	Expenditure (£)
2009/10	5,878,426.84
2010/11	7,392,109.99
2011/12	5,407,612.00

Millennium Way, Lurgan: Construction

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the length of the Millennium Way, Lurgan, still to be constructed.

(AQW 15381/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that 440 metres of the Millennium Way, from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road, still has to be constructed.

Millennium Way, Lurgan: Costs

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the cost of completing the final section of the Millennium Way, Lurgan.

(AQW 15383/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that current estimates of the cost of extending the Millennium Way, from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road, are in the range £5m - £7.5m.

Roads: Cost of Major Works Programme

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the cost of all current and proposed major road programmes in the 2011-15 budgetary period.

(AQW 15384/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The estimated costs of the various projects in the major works programme to be delivered by my Department's Roads Service in the 2011-15 budgetary period are as follows:

Project	Project Estimate £m
A2 Widening at Greenisland	£50 - 60
A5 - Londonderry to North of Strabane & South of Omagh - Ballygawley	£320 - 350
A8 Belfast to Larne Dual Carriageway	£110 - 120
A32 Cherrymount Link, Enniskillen	£12 - 16
A32 Shannaragh Realignment Scheme	£6 - 8

Roads Service is currently developing a range of other schemes for delivery in future budget periods.

Car Parking: Revenue in Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, for each of the next three years, to detail (i) the amount of revenue his Department intends to generate from parking charges in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge; and (ii) the administrative, and all other costs, associated with operating parking charges in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge.

(AQW 15385/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Due to the unforeseeable nature of public demand for car parking services, my Department is unable to predict the amount of revenue which will be generated from parking charges in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge over the next three years.

Due to the nature of the contract for provision of parking enforcement and car park management services, it is also not possible to provide such costs separately by individual car park.

Roads Service: Traffic Management

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) how much Roads Service has allocated to developing traffic management schemes in the 2012/13 budget; and (ii) how much the average traffic management scheme cost to deliver in 2011-12.

(AQW 15390/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for all road users by utilising a variety of Traffic Management measures through the Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM) programme.

The primary aim of any Traffic Management scheme is to assist road users to move safely and efficiently, by making best use of existing road space.

I can advise that the LTSM budget for 2012/13 is £5.5m, of which £1.8m has been allocated to traffic management activities.

Roads Service officials have advised that the cost of traffic management schemes varies considerably depending on the nature of the engineering measure used, the extent of the scheme under considerations and tendered unit rates. As the traffic management function covers a wide range of activities, this can therefore distort outputs or average costs. However, based on output information relating to traffic calming, collisions remedial and pedestrian crossings, approximately £4.8m was spent in 2011/12, delivering 120 schemes of this nature, giving an average cost of £40k per scheme.

Roads Service: Traffic Management

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) whether Roads Service's priority lists for traffic management schemes are compiled on a sectional or divisional basis; and (ii) the priority list for the eastern division.

(AQW 15391/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service implements various Traffic Management measures to assist road users move safely and efficiently by making best use of the existing road space. Such measures include:

- Road Safety Engineering, for example, traffic calming;
- Pedestrian Crossings; and
- Traffic Signs and road markings.

Each measure is assessed against established criteria and prioritised on an overall Divisional wide basis.

Information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

Translink: Smartlink Uptake

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) for his assessment of the uptake of Smartlink discount passes by people from socially deprived areas; and (ii) what steps he is taking to encourage their uptake.

(AQW 15392/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In relation to your specific questions Translink have advised:

- (i) that customers can purchase a Translink Smartlink card without having to register their details. As a result Translink has no statistical information available as to whether or not card holders live in "socially deprived" areas. However, it is generally accepted that usage of bus services is greater among lower income groups.
- (ii) that they carry out a significant amount of advertising and promotion on Smartlink card products. This includes:
 - Bus filler ads to promote Smartlink on Metro and Ulsterbus are running on panels on a continuous basis as and when free space is available;
 - Drivers handing out small credit card sized info to passengers who get on paying cash;

- Fresher Friends- Online Promotion (Sept- Nov 2012);
- 5000 post cards printed and distributed across student areas in Belfast highlighting a promotional fare on Metro (online only). – Metro Friends (Sept 2011);
- Metro Smartlink ad in 500,000 Metro timetables;
- Increased availability of topping up at now over 900 PayPoint Agents;
- Coffee shop promotion with Cairnshill Park and Ride for free coffee in Forest Side- April 2012;
- Smart Movers Initiative- targeting new housing developments along Metro routes; and
- Recent activity carried out in Coopers Mill to promote Smartlink to every house in the estate – over half of the residents availed of this offer.

Flooding: Drainage Improvements

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any additional drainage work been carried out in advance of the winter period to help ensure that public roadway areas most at risk from flooding are safeguarded.

(AQW 15405/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised it has carried out a number of improvements to the road drainage system during this financial year and further improvements are planned as part of its ongoing structural maintenance programme. Officials have further advised that the value of the work carried out is approximately £1.4 million.

In addition, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised that the value of the work it has carried out during the same period is approximately £6.4 million.

Should the Member have a specific query in relation to the location of these improvements, I would advise him to contact the relevant Roads Service Section Office directly.

Railways: Coleraine–Londonderry

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development for Translink's initial estimate of the weekly passenger numbers on the bus substitution service between Coleraine and Londonderry since the rail line was closed; and how does this figure compare to numbers of passengers on the rail line in the comparable time in 2011.

(AQW 15406/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In the period week commencing 01 August 2011 to week commencing 26 September 2011 there were 88,808 passenger journeys on this section of the rail network. In the comparable period in 2012, i.e. week commencing 30 July 2012 to 24 September 2012 there were 18,731 passenger journeys. However, the statistics for July to September 2012 are understated because of the flexible bus services available, not all of which are being recorded.

Concurrent with the above, Translink have recorded a significant increase in patronage of the Goldline 212 service between Derry~Londonderry and Belfast such that the total number of passengers travelling between Derry~Londonderry and Belfast using both bus and rail modes has increased slightly over last year's numbers. Translink attribute at least some of the increase to recent Goldline enhancement, such as new vehicles, wi-fi installation and additional Express services.

Winter Weather: Contingency Plans

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what action and contingency plans his Department is putting in place for the winter period.

(AQW 15429/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has assured me that it is well prepared for the incoming winter season and will be able to provide a high standard of service delivery for the gritting of roads.

Prior to the start of each winter service period, Roads Service carries out a significant amount of planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming season. In addition to a number of routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, and ensuring all winter service equipment is in working order. Every night, from the end of October 2012 until the middle of April 2013, Roads Service will have over 300 people on standby ready to salt main roads, helping drivers across Northern Ireland cope with the wintry conditions.

All Roads Service salt barns are at full capacity with stocks in excess of 75,000 tonnes with additional salt stock resilience held at six strategic locations totalling 38,100 tonnes. The current Winter Service salt contract also provides for the supply of a further 15,000 tonnes per month from October 2012 to April 2013, if required.

Roads Service has also entered into agreements with 23 of the 26 councils in Northern Ireland, for the treatment of busy town and city centre footways during periods of prolonged snow or ice.

In addition, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on other routes adopted or maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule. Roads Service currently provides approximately 4,800 salt bins and almost 50,000 grit piles on public roads.

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) officials have advised me that they are also taking all practicable steps to prepare for severe winter weather.

NIW maintains a well-developed Major Incident Plan to provide a fully planned, reactive response to operational incidents. The Plan has been regularly activated and exercised in response to real-life emergency situations during the year. In addition, part of the NIW incident management planning regime involves the regular preparation of a Winter Contingency Plan and this is currently being revised and updated for full implementation ahead of December 2012. The Plan is generally considered to provide the primary mode of preparation for severe weather conditions during the winter months. It provides a comprehensive list of activities to be implemented in advance of the winter season, incorporating lessons learned from previous incidents. NIW will also be revising its operating strategy to respond to any potential freeze/thaw event in the 2012/13 winter season.

NIW officials have further advised that Interactive Voice Recognition capabilities were enhanced following the 2010/11 freeze/thaw incident and this has been used to good effect in several subsequent major incidents. Furthermore, the implementation of a High Volume Call Answering (HVCA) Service is underway and the system will be in place by Christmas 2012. The purpose of the HVCA system is to field incoming call traffic relating to fault reports, provide customers with interruption information and allow them to report specific issues.

Car Parking: Residents

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to create residents only car parking areas in streets that have high levels of parking.
(AQW 15443/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As the Member may be aware, my Department's Roads Service first published its policy on the introduction of Residents' Parking Schemes in December 2007.

Such schemes are intended to resolve parking difficulties in residential areas, where parking generated by nearby businesses, sports facilities, hospitals, schools, universities, theatres and shopping areas, penetrates the residential streets and prevents residents from parking in reasonably close proximity to their homes. Parking surveys are used to gauge the extent of the parking difficulties and the extent to which they are caused by non-resident vehicles. Residents also have to be in favour of a scheme and, based on a minimum return rate of one-third of all households to a scheme questionnaire, two-thirds of those households surveyed must be in favour.

Roads Service has advised that Residents' Parking Schemes are currently being progressed in the Lower Malone and Stranmillis areas of Belfast and also in Londonderry and Antrim. Roads Service will continue to progress these schemes, together with the subordinate legislation required, as quickly as possible, with schemes likely to be delivered mid-late 2013.

Further schemes will be considered when additional funding becomes available.

Bridges: Risk Assessment

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development how many risk assessments his Department has carried out on bridges in each of the last three years, broken down by the type of bridge and the Roads Service division area.
(AQW 15480/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of 5,850 bridges across Northern Ireland. These are subject to a regime of regular and detailed inspections, where the condition of the bridge is assessed and a general risk assessment carried out. In the past 3 years, approximately 8,700 general inspections and 2,290 principal inspections have taken place. In addition, risk assessments have been carried out on 17 half-joint bridges and specialist underwater inspections have been undertaken on 80 bridges.

As you will appreciate, given the numbers involved, it would be impractical to list all of these inspections by Division and bridge-type. However, the following table sets out the number of bridges by Divisional area that are routinely inspected as part of Roads Service's two-year cyclic inspection programme:

Division	Masonry	Concrete	Steel	*Other
North	883	123	30	338
South	793	162	46	314
East	308	70	101	186
West	1,390	251	59	796

* Includes culverts, large pipes and composite bridges made of several construction types.

Bridges: Road-over-rail

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the work carried out on bridges following the 2003 study of all road over rail bridges, broken down by Roads Service division area.
(AQW 15482/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that following the 2003 road-over-rail study, 10 bridges were identified as requiring mitigation measures to reduce the risk of vehicle incursion.

The table below sets out details of the bridges assessed, relevant Divisional area and remedial measures taken:

Division	Bridge Name	Route	Remedial measure
Eastern	Finaghy Road North	C2	Substantial parapet strengthening work and provision of safety barrier
Eastern	Ballinderry Road	B104	Provision of low level safety barrier
Eastern	Cultra Avenue	U132	Extension to the masonry parapets
Eastern	Old Quay Road	U132	Extension to the masonry parapets
Northern	Poguestown	A2	Provision of low level safety barrier
Northern	Coastguard	U4086	Provision of low level safety barrier
Northern	Carnduff	A2	Provision of high level safety barrier
Northern	Irish Hill	C47	Provision of low level safety barrier
Southern	Killeen Bridge.	A1	Provision of low level safety barrier
Southern	Pritchards	C152	Provision of low level safety barrier

Bridges: Road-over-rail

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what works are still outstanding following the 2003 study of road over rail bridges, broken down by Roads Service division area.

(AQW 15484/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that no works are outstanding following the 2003 study.

Translink: Bus Usage, Antrim Area Hospital

Ms Brown asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions his Department has had with Translink regarding a subsidy for bus fares for staff members of Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 15515/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has had no direct discussions with Translink regarding this issue. I am aware that Translink have been in discussion with the relevant employer about tax incentive schemes available to encourage bus usage and which financially benefits employees.

Translink: Goldline, Dublin–Belfast

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development why the Goldline Express service from Dublin to Belfast does not pick up passengers at Newry Bus Centre.

(AQW 15584/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised me that the Goldline Service between Dublin and Belfast is licensed as an international (cross-border) service under EU Regulations. Under this arrangement passengers boarding in one member state (i.e. the Irish Republic) disembark within the other member state(s) (i.e. Northern Ireland) at scheduled stopping points agreed by the member states involved. The same is true, in reverse, for passengers boarding in Northern Ireland.

Passengers wishing to travel within their own member state(s) are catered for by services licensed under that State's own domestic regulations. In the case of Newry to Belfast (or major points along that route) Goldline Express Service 238 provides some 27 departures daily (Monday – Friday) supplemented by services 38 and 45 which are not express.

Transport: Door-2-Door/Rural Transport Fund

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what level of co-operation exists between rural transport providers, such as Easilift, and their urban counterparts in the Door-2-Door Scheme; and (ii) whether he intends to review the co-operation, particularly in rural towns and their surrounding areas.

(AQW 15597/11-15)

Mr Kennedy:

- (i) The Urban Door-2-Door Scheme and the Rural Transport Fund are different programmes, each with their own separate aims and objectives. Membership for the Door-2-Door scheme is set by this Department. Rural Community Transport Partnerships set their own criteria. There is a degree of ad-hoc co-operation.

- (ii) The Department has recently begun a consultation exercise in respect of the Urban Door-2-Door scheme and will look at all issues, including potentially that of co-operation with Rural Community Transport Partnerships in rural towns and their surrounding areas.

Railways: Derry-Coleraine

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to advertise the Derry-Coleraine rail link, after completion of the on-going work, to raise awareness and ensure passenger numbers return to pre-work levels.

(AQW 15599/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has confirmed that at the appropriate time, the re-opening of the line following completion of the track renewal project will be advertised and widely promoted.

Translink has further advised that they have run a series of successful awareness/promotion campaigns following re-opening of routes on completion of major engineering works on the Larne and Portrush Lines. Translink would anticipate carrying out similar-type activity in the case of the Londonderry-Coleraine Line but cannot be more specific at this early stage. Translink has agreed to consult with local stakeholders about its plans at the appropriate time.

West Belfast Taxi Association: Fuel Rebate

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has granted the West Belfast Taxi Association a fuel rebate, or similar assistance, at any time; and to provide details.

(AQW 15674/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As a holder of a Road Service Operators License for stage carriage routes West Belfast Taxi (Transport) Ltd also known as West Belfast Taxi Association has been a member of the Northern Ireland Fuel Duty Rebate scheme since April 2011. A pilot scheme operated from August 2010 and was subject to independent review against the terms and conditions of the scheme.

The current rate of rebate for scheme members is 43.21p per litre on eligible services.

West Belfast Taxi Association: Concessionary Fares

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the West Belfast Taxi Association has been provided with, or sought, support from his Department in relation to pensioner concession fares; and to provide details of the assistance.

(AQW 15677/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: West Belfast Taxi (Transport) Ltd also known as West Belfast Taxi Association is not a member of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares scheme nor is the Department in receipt of any formal application to join the scheme.

Traffic Lights: Springtown/Northland Roads, Derry

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development when Roads Service intends to install traffic lights on the Springtown Road at the junction with Northland Road, Derry.

(AQW 15786/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that due to uncertainty regarding the timescales for the proposed development on Springtown Road, it has investigated the merits of an improvement scheme at the junction of Springtown Road with Northland Road in Londonderry.

Officials have further advised that an initial assessment for the improvement scheme has met the criteria for progression to a more detailed appraisal. This proposal has been added to a list of similar schemes in the Derry City Council area that will be developed in accordance with current policy and procedures.

I can advise the Member that, subject to gaining approval at the various stages of the development process, a scheme proposal may then progress through for prioritisation within a future year's programme. Prioritisation will take account of future funding availability along with consideration of a number of other key issues, including the successful acquisition of any land required.

This scheme proposal is not included in the Derry City Council area programme for the 2012/13 financial year.

Department for Social Development

Community Asset Transfer: Group Capacity

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Community Asset Transfer, how he will ensure that groups which receive transferred assets have the capacity, business skills and entrepreneurship to cope and to maximise impact.

(AQW 15264/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The development of a policy framework for Community Asset Transfer is being led by my Department, supported by a cross-Departmental Steering Group. The Steering Group will consider a range of issues including the development of safeguards to ensure that transferred assets are appropriate and sustainable and that the receiving organisation has the business skill and capacity to maximise impact.

The agreed policy framework will be brought to the Executive for endorsement. It is intended that once published, it will be used by public bodies to support Community Asset Transfer. It will be the responsibility of the transferring and receiving organisations to ensure that only groups that are able to demonstrate a sustainable business plan will be able to proceed with Community Asset Transfer.

Community Asset Transfer: Group Training

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Community Asset Transfer, whether his Department, under his Programme for Government commitment to initiate a policy and legislation on the transfer of assets, will offer training and support to groups interested in receiving assets being transferred.

(AQW 15265/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My department is funding the Development Trusts Northern Ireland as a key partner to support the implementation of Community Asset Transfer policy. They will advise the Steering Group on the level of both monetary and non-monetary support required to facilitate successful Community Asset Transfer and will develop and deliver resources tailored to Northern Ireland circumstances. This will include awareness raising, practical advice, training and active support for a number of demonstration projects.

Community Asset Transfer: Policy and Legislation

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Social Development how he proposes to bring Northern Ireland up to the level of legislative and policy progress in England and Scotland, where Community Asset Transfer is enshrined in law.

(AQW 15266/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am aware that the legislative and policy framework to support Community Asset Transfer in England, Wales and Scotland is robust and that the practice has been actively promoted by central and local government for a number of years. There are important lessons to be learned from policy and practice elsewhere and my officials will ensure that the policy development process in Northern Ireland is informed by that experience.

A cross-Departmental Steering Group will consider a range of issues from the Northern Ireland perspective supported by research and analysis and early consultation with key stakeholders.

The Steering Group will make recommendations for policy options in Northern Ireland which may have implications for legislation. The ultimate decision on whether or not legislation is necessary will rest with the Executive.

Civil Service Pension Centre: Vacant Posts

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Pensions Service in Londonderry are currently vacant.

(AQW 15354/11-15)

Mr McCausland: On 17 October 2012 there were 18 vacant posts in the Northern Ireland Pension Centre in Londonderry.

Universal Credit: Job Losses

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether the implementation of Universal Credit will result in job losses within (i) the Social Security Agency; and (ii) Housing Benefit offices; and for an estimate of the number of jobs that will be lost.

(AQW 15365/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At present the Department, with its partner organisations, including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, are considering the implementation arrangements for Universal Credit which includes organisational and staffing issues.

Universal Credit will replace all legacy working age benefits and credits including Housing Benefit, and as such will have impacts on staffing across all of the current delivery organisations. However, whilst it is an issue that is being actively and carefully considered, no decisions have been taken at this time regarding the staffing pool for Universal Credit.

In addition, the Programme team is working closely with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions in designing a resourcing model that will enable the Programme to better understand the implications for staffing numbers across all of the impacted government organisations as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit.

Social Fund: Expenditure

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how much money was allocated to the Social Fund in each of the last three financial years; and how much will be allocated to the replacement fund for the next financial year.

(AQW 15373/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Expenditure on social fund over the last three years is in the table below and includes regulated and discretionary elements. Payments from the Social Fund are currently deemed annually managed expenditure outside of the funding allocated to, and controlled by, the NI Executive. Discretionary social fund includes budgeting and crisis loans and community care grants. As discretionary fund is cash limited the amounts paid generally equal the funding allocated which includes money from HM Treasury and loan repayments.

	2009-10 £000s	2010-11 £000s	2011-12 £000s
Regulated Scheme Expenditure	93,264	93,839	58,671
Discretionary Scheme Expenditure	73,503	80,080	77,774

From April 2013, devolved administration and local authorities have been tasked with developing new local provision to replace community care grants and crisis loans excluding alignment to benefit. The Budgeting Loans scheme will remain in place and will capture provision for crisis loans for alignment to benefit. Budgeting loans will be replaced as Universal Credit rolls out.

The Social Security Agency Social Fund Reform Project is developing the new Northern Ireland Discretionary Support Scheme. It is expected to include grant and loan awards to vulnerable customers in exceptional, extreme or crisis situations that meet the eligibility criteria and are on low incomes.

Funding for the new scheme will be based on the current amounts within annually managed expenditure which are expected to transfer across into Departmental Expenditure Limits controlled by the NI Executive. This includes funding for grants, loans and loan repayment.

The amount available to fund the new Discretionary Support Scheme will be finally agreed with the Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury prior to the new scheme commencing.

Universal Credit: Impact on Low Earners

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development whether he is aware of any research which shows that the introduction of Universal Credit may have more impact on claimants on lower incomes.

(AQW 15378/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department's Analytical Services Unit have been investigating the distribution of changes in entitlement by income decile under Universal Credit through the use of the recently developed Northern Ireland Policy Simulation Model and I have asked my officials to develop this work into a paper for future discussion at the Executive Sub-Committee on Welfare Reform.

Under the new arrangements for Universal Credit, transitional protection will be available to ensure that for those customers who move to Universal Credit they will not receive less as a result of their move, where their circumstances have remained the same.

Welfare Reform Bill: Regulations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to detail the regulations flowing from the Welfare Reform Bill that will be introduced by (a) affirmative; (b) confirmatory; and (c) negative resolution; (ii) why his Department is using the particular approach for each of the regulations; and (iii) the target date for receiving support from the Assembly for each set of regulations.

(AQW 15379/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table attached at Appendix 1 sets out the Regulations which are currently known to be required³, the form of Assembly Control attached to them and the target date for operation.

In terms of why my Department is using the particular approach for each set of Regulations, I should explain that the controls attached to subordinate legislation is normally set out within the primary legislation, in this case within the Welfare Reform Bill.

The Assembly controls are the same as those afforded to the Westminster Parliament through the corresponding Welfare Reform Act 2012 (the Act). However, whereas the Act uses the affirmative procedure, we use the confirmatory procedure. The use of the confirmatory procedure is a longstanding convention to allow us to maintain, insofar as possible, parity of timing with the corresponding Great Britain regulations.

Generally, the first set of Regulations made following the introduction of primary legislation is made using the confirmatory approach; this approach is used because it gives the Assembly an opportunity to debate the policy detail which is not often outlined during the passage of the relevant Bill. Thereafter, any amending Regulations are made by negative resolution as the underpinning policy will have been considered to have been agreed by the Assembly.

3 This is the current list of regulations as identified by Department for Work and Pensions.

Social Security: Payments

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of people who receive each social security payment (a) weekly; (b) fortnightly; and (c) monthly.

(AQW 15380/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department only holds this information for certain benefits. The available information is set out in the table below.

	Weekly		Fortnightly		Monthly	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Employment and Support Allowance	60	0.1	43,940	99.8	10	0.0
Income Support	380	0.5	73,080	99.5	0	0.0
Jobseekers Allowance	40	0.1	59,800	99.9	0	0.0
Pension Credit	91,410	96.6	2,740	2.9	470	0.5

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Housing Benefit

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development what proportion of housing benefit recipients (i) receive the payment themselves; or (ii) have it paid directly to their landlord.

(AQW 15382/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Housing Benefit is paid to 13% of claimants and the remaining 87% is paid directly to the landlord, over both the social and private rented sectors.

Welfare Reform: Block Grant

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 15131/11-15, how much of the £207m reduction in the Block Grant, that would result from a failure to implement the Welfare Reform Bill, would be spent on direct payments to people on benefits in Northern Ireland through maintenance of the current benefit system.

(AQW 15393/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In line with the HMT Statement of Funding Policy which governs the funding arrangements between the UK and the Devolved Administrations, the level of any adjustment to the NI Block grant will be a matter for discussion with UK Ministers. The current funding arrangements ensure that Northern Ireland can draw down its actual social security spending needs where parity is maintained.

Of the £207 million referred to, an estimated £113million relates to welfare spending controls which would not be delivered. HMT would also withdraw from Northern Ireland the additional resources from Universal Credit which promote the policy intent that work pays.

Resources allocated to the Northern Ireland Executive as part of its Spending Review 2010 settlement for the implementation of welfare reform could be impacted. Northern Ireland would also have to meet higher IT and administration costs to deliver services to around 600,000 social security customers and this region would not benefit from the significant cost advantages that would accrue from using the same systems as Great Britain and administering the same benefits.

Welfare Reform Bill: Commissioner for Children and Young People

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of his proposal that the second stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be agreed, (i) to detail the information in the Northern Ireland report that he considered to be 'out of date'; (ii) how this information resulted in 'fundamental flaws' in the report; (iii) how up to date information would have changed this report; and (iv) whether he plans to publish a rebuttal.

(AQW 15395/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I met with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) on 12 June to discuss the report and where we considered the report to be based on misinformation. For example:-

- The information used to calculate the number of children affected by the Benefit Cap included families in receipt of the Child Tax Credits' disability premium. With a few exceptions, families in receipt of the Child Tax Credits' Disability Premium will also be in receipt of Disability Living Allowance and, as such, will be excluded from the Benefit Cap. Further, the NICCY report does not mention whether the numbers are based on customers who qualify for Housing Benefit.
- References to changes required to Tax systems – the Northern Ireland Executive has no legislative competence in this area, income tax is, and will remain, an excepted matter.

- The Report talks about “stretching parity” and confuses parity with operational flexibilities. My recent announcement in the Assembly highlighted the flexibilities that I have secured to the way Universal Credit can be paid to protect the most vulnerable in our society and reflect Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances. I am on record as saying that breaking parity is not an option, as to do so will mean significant reductions in the block grant which means fewer resources for other Executive priorities such as schools and hospitals.
- The report recommends that the Executive should set up an expert group to look at the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). It takes no cognisance of the Expert Group chaired by Professor Harrington who report regularly on the WCA and who has already recommended changes to improve how mental health and cancer sufferers are assessed. My Department also reports to the Assembly on an annual basis. It is important people in Northern Ireland are assessed in the same way as the rest of the UK. Further, I chair an Executive Sub- Committee on Welfare Reform looking specifically at the issues around Welfare Reform and in particular how they will impact on the ground in Northern Ireland and what we as an Executive need to do to protect the vulnerable or those deemed most at risk.
- The Report makes no mention of measures such as:
 - extension of entitlement to claim 70% of childcare expenses regardless of hours worked;
 - removal of significant barriers to people moving into work through the use of tapers and disregards;
 - transitional protection arrangements;
 - discretionary housing payments and the increase in budget.
- The Report also makes a number of claims which have no supporting evidence to substantiate them. For example:
- “Welfare reform will have a devastating effect on children’s lives, on their ability to be healthy, happy, enjoy a good education and have a standard of living adequate for their full development”.
- “These changes mark the end of any serious attempt to tackle child poverty in the UK and to meet the targets of the Child Poverty Act”.
- “Many families with children will lose their owner occupied homes; others will fall into housing arrears until evicted by the private sector landlords while other families will ration food or buy less healthy food in order to meet shortfalls”.

Following my meeting with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, a further two meetings were held with officials to further discuss the implementation of welfare reform and operational flexibilities. I consider this matter to be closed and have no plans to issue a rebuttal. As I said during the debate on the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill, my officials will review the information contained within the published Equality Impact Assessment and update it where appropriate and whenever information is available.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the need for the retention of the Youth Employment and Support Allowance.

(AQW 15396/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At present, special arrangements apply which allow certain young people to qualify for contributory Employment and Support Allowance without having to satisfy the National Insurance contribution conditions which apply to all other claimants.

No other age group can qualify for contributory Employment and Support Allowance without having paid, or being treated as paid National Insurance contributions. Nor does any other contributory benefit have similar arrangements. Abolishing this measure will bring young people claiming Employment and Support Allowance in line with other groups and is the fairest way to proceed.

Young people will still be able to claim income-related Employment and Support Allowance which will not be subject to a time limit. A far greater percentage of younger people qualify for income-related Employment and Support Allowance than any other age group.

Removing special rules will simplify the benefit system in advance of the introduction of Universal Credit.

Universal Credit: Administration

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development whether he envisages any changes to the location of staff who will be involved in the administration of Universal Credit.

(AQW 15407/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The introduction of Universal Credit will replace existing in and out of work benefits including social security benefits, housing benefits and tax credits from October 2013 onwards.

At this stage the Castle Court Complex in Belfast has been identified as the launch site for Universal Credit, however no decisions have been taken regarding its staffing or staff selection arrangements.

As planning for the roll out of Universal Credit develops, more detailed consideration will be given to the organisational and staffing impacts which will include any potential changes to the work location of staff.

The Universal Credit Programme will however continue to engage with staff and their representative organisations as plans progress.

Social Housing: Overoccupancy

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the current level of over occupancy in both (i) publicly; and (ii) privately owned houses which are in receipt of housing benefit.

(AQW 15415/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not require this information to assess Housing Benefit in any tenure groups. However at the end of September 2012, the Waiting List indicated that there were 1,111 social housing tenants requesting a transfer who had been awarded points for overcrowding.

Rents are assessed in the private sector through rent levied by the landlord or the Local Housing Allowance rates, which relate directly to the size of the claimant's household and not the bedroom capacity of the property where they reside. Therefore, the Housing Executive does not hold reliable data on the number of bedrooms on private sector Housing Benefit claims.

Social Fund: Applications

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications have been made to the Social Fund over the last two financial years.

(AQW 15439/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Social Fund Applications

	2010-2011	2011-2012
Sure Start Maternity Grants	14,219	9,535
Funeral Payments	3,620	3,329
Community Care Grants	47,823	47,066
Budgeting Loans	152,988	156,687
Crisis Loans	159,210	152,464
Total	377,860	369,081

Social Fund: Expenditure

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money was paid out for applications to the Social Fund over the last two financial years.

(AQW 15440/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details expenditure from the Social Fund in the last two financial years:

Year	2010-11	2011-12
Total Expenditure (£000's)	173,919	136,445

This includes £82,085k in 2011-12 and £87,921k in 2010-11, paid for applications to the Social Fund for Crisis loans, Budgeting Loans, Community Care Grants, Sure Start Maternity Grants and Funeral Payments. £54,360k in 2011-12 and £85,998k in 2010-11 was paid to customers in receipt of benefit who qualified for Winter Fuel and Cold Weather Payments, payments are primarily automatic, with a small number via application.

Royston House, Belfast: Medical Examination Centre

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Social Development whether he will investigate alternative, ground floor, accommodation to Royston House, Belfast for carrying out medical assessments for benefits entitlement, as existing emergency escape arrangements for the building are not suitable for persons with disabilities, and some applicants have to travel to alternative locations including Ballymena and Portadown.

(AQW 15454/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Social Security Agency is currently in discussions with the Medical Support Services service provider relating to the medical examination centre in Royston House.

DSD: Apprenticeships

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many apprentices have been employed through departmental contracts in this financial year; and what percentage this number represents of the total posts allocated.

(AQW 15502/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Contracts awarded by my department are inclusive of social clauses where appropriate, including the use of apprenticeships. My officials are currently developing systems to monitor activity against social clause targets. Information on 2012/13 is not yet available.

Housing Executive: Unfit Properties, Ballymena/Ballymoney

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development how many declarations of unfitness have been issued by the Housing Executive in the (i) Ballymena district; and (ii) Ballymoney district; and what is the reason for the declaration in each case.

(AQW 15503/11-15)

Mr McCausland: When a social housing assessment is carried out by the Housing Executive and potential unfitness is identified the property in question is referred to Environmental Health for assessment. Since January 2012 there have been 22 cases referred to Environmental Health for assessment within the Housing Executive's Ballymena District office area. As a result ten properties were deemed to be unfit for human habitation. There have been no referrals to Environmental Health for the Housing Executive's Ballymoney District office area for the same period.

Of the ten properties mentioned above, seven were deemed unfit due to excessive dampness, two due to serious disrepair and one due to poor lighting, heating and ventilation. None of the properties in question are in the ownership of the Housing Executive.

Community Asset Transfer: Legislation

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Social Development whether he plans to introduce legislation to strengthen his Community Asset Transfer policy.

(AQW 15516/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am aware that legislation forms part of the enabling framework for Community Asset Transfer in the rest of the UK. The need for new legislation to support Community Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland will be considered by a cross-departmental Steering Group, supported by research and analysis and early consultation with key stakeholders.

The ultimate decision on whether or not legislation is necessary will rest with the Executive.

Community Asset Transfer: Policy

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Social Development when he will complete his review of the Programme for Government obligation to prepare a policy on Community Asset Transfer.

(AQW 15517/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department's commitment under the Programme for Government is to develop policy to support Community Asset Transfer and a cross-Departmental Steering Group has recently been established to govern this process. The Steering Group has broad representation and will consider a range of issues from the Northern Ireland perspective supported by research and analysis and early consultation with key stakeholders. I intend to bring policy recommendations to the Executive in March 2013.

Community Asset Transfer: Consultation

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Social Development who has been, and will be, consulted on his Community Asset Transfer policy and legislation.

(AQW 15518/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department has invited all government departments to participate in the process of developing a policy framework for Community Asset Transfer. A Steering Group has recently been established which has very good representation from across departments and also includes a representative from the Strategic Investment Board's Asset Management Unit.

My officials have already engaged informally with a range of stakeholders from central and local government and the third sector and will run a number of policy development workshops to engage people more formally and support the Steering Group.

My department is also working with the Development Trusts Northern Ireland as a key partner to support the implementation of Community Asset Transfer policy. They will engage separately with stakeholders to inform recommendations to the steering group on aspects of implementation and will also deliver a programme of awareness raising and training on Community Asset Transfer beginning next year.

Formal public consultation on Community Asset Transfer policy will be subject to Executive approval.

High Street Task Force

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the outcomes of the retail workshops that were held over the summer of 2012; and whether the findings will be published and implemented.

(AQW 15536/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Taskforce that I set up earlier this year to review the support which my Department provides for city and town centres across Northern Ireland has almost completed its review. My Officials are currently considering the evidence and their report will be with me shortly. I anticipate that the recommendations arising as a consequence of the review will require the consideration of Executive colleagues.

Social Housing: Waiting List

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of the housing waiting list is constituted of people who are seeking a single person dwelling; and what percentage of the current housing stock is suited to these people.

(AQW 15542/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are currently 40,080 applicants registered on the social housing waiting list and 57% (22,695) of those applicants were assessed and registered on the waiting list as requiring one bedroom accommodation. Of the Housing Executive's current stock of 88,990 properties there are currently 12% (10,920) which are one bedroom dwellings. In relation to Housing Association's current stock of 34,447 there are currently 22% (7,817) which are single dwelling accommodation.

Social Security: Bank Liaison Team

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development why the Bank Liaison Team offices in Lisahally are being relocated to Belfast.

(AQW 15887/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Bank Liaison team is part of the Social Security Agency's Payment management services. This service is currently dispersed across two locations Londonderry and Belfast with the majority of the function based in Belfast.

As part of its modernisation programme, the Agency is continuing to introduce new systems and methods of payment for its customers. Consequently it is also necessary to review staffing levels and location of posts as part of the Agency's efficiency programme.

The Bank Liaison Section is part of a wider reorganisation of the finance function within the Agency and work is ongoing to redeploy the affected staff taking account of the individual circumstances and business need. Discussions are ongoing with local staff and their representatives.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Union Flag

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission why the Union Flag was not flying from Parliament Buildings on the occasion marking the Ulster Covenant Centenary in the grounds of Stormont on 29 September 2012.

(AQW 14890/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission's policy is to fly the Union Flag at Parliament Buildings on the dates specified within the Flags Regulations (NI) Order 2000. Those dates do not include the 29th September 2012.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Revised Written Answers

Department for Regional Development

In this Bound Volume, page WA 101, please replace AQW 9917/11-15 with:

Roads: Gritting

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department is prepared for the gritting of roads during this winter.

(AQW 14614/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Prior to the start of each winter service season, my Department's Roads Service carries out a significant amount of planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, ensuring all winter service equipment is in working order and that there is an adequate stock of salt.

Salt barns, which are strategically placed in depots throughout Northern Ireland, are normally stocked to hold sufficient quantities of salt to provide the winter service programme for a full season without the need to restock. Following the severe weather experienced over recent years, Roads Service has reviewed these levels and has increased stocks significantly in order to be well prepared, in the event of a prolonged period of wintry weather. I can confirm that salt barns are filled to capacity at this time. Additionally, and if necessary, Roads Service also has arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period.

In addition, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on other routes adopted or maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule. Roads Service currently provides approximately 4,800 salt bins and almost 50,000 grit piles on public roads.

Every night, from the end of October 2012 until the middle of April 2013, Roads Service will have over 300 people on standby ready to salt main roads, helping drivers across Northern Ireland cope with the wintry conditions.

Officials have assured me that my Department's Roads Service is well prepared and will be able to provide a high standard of service delivery for the gritting of roads during the incoming winter season.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

In Bound Volume 77, page WA 148, please replace AQW 13939/11-15 with:

Bed and Breakfasts

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many referrals Bed and Breakfasts have received from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in each of the last five years, broken down by council area.

(AQW 13939/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The Northern Ireland Tourist Board offers all B&Bs in Northern Ireland the option to promote their properties for free on www.discovernorthernireland.com. Website views of B&B properties on NITB's consumer website, including details of how to book, over the past five years, are detailed below:

- 1st August 2007 - 31st July 2008 - 413,000 page views
- 1st August 2008 - 31st July 2009 - 254,845 page views
- 1st August 2009 - 31st July 2010 - 189,305 page views
- 1st August 2010 - 31st July 2011 - 143,547 page views
- 1st August 2011 - 31st July 2012 - 146,307 page views

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board offers all B&Bs in Northern Ireland the option to be listed on their online booking system. Visitors can make bookings for B&Bs which choose to use NITB's online booking system. The number of bookings made via this system for B&Bs, in each of the last five years, broken down by council area is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1:

District Council Area:	1st August 2007- 31st July 2008	1st August 2008- 31st July 2009	1st August 2009- 31st July 2010	1st August 2010- 31st July 2011	1st August 2011- 31st July 2012
Antrim Borough Council	1	0	3	2	1
Ards Borough Council	13	11	10	6	3
Armagh City and District Council	7	3	1	1	0
Ballymena Borough Council	3	2	0	0	2
Ballymoney Borough Council	0	3	0	0	2
Banbridge District Council	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast City Council	263	116	121	92	55
Carrickfergus Borough Council	8	11	1	0	0
Castlereagh Borough Council	0	0	0	0	0
Coleraine Borough Council	57	54	21	13	8
Cookstown District Council	4	12	1	2	1
Craigavon Borough Council	16	10	8	7	7
Derry City Council	109	62	36	23	11
Down District Council	34	33	12	15	7
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	0	3	2	1	0
Fermanagh District Council	22	29	23	8	11
Larne Borough Council	3	3	4	2	1
Limavady Borough Council	11	14	8	2	2
Lisburn City Council	1	1	2	4	0
Magherafelt District Council	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle District Council	116	91	84	109	31
Newry and Mourne District Council	18	6	5	1	2
Newtownabbey Borough Council	0	3	7	0	1
North Down Borough Council	28	15	19	3	0
Omagh District Council	9	9	4	2	1
Strabane District Council	4	1	0	0	0
Total B&B Bookings	727	492	372	293	146

Department of the Environment

In this Bound Volume, page WA 64, please replace AQW 14450/11-15 with:

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to list the councils which have a payment term for invoices from suppliers of (i) less than; and (ii) more than 30 days.

(AQW 14450/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

- (i) The 17 councils that have a payment term for invoices, with some suppliers, of less than 30 days are named in the attached list.

Council name
Antrim
Armagh
Ballymena
Ballymoney
Banbridge
Belfast
Carrickfergus
Coleraine
Craigavon
Down
Larne
Limavady
Lisburn
Magherafelt
Moyle
Newry and Mourne
Newtownabbey

- (ii) The 5 councils that have a payment term for invoices, with some suppliers, of more than 30 days are named in the attached list.

Council name
Antrim
Ballymena
Ballymoney
Carrickfergus
Limavady

In this Bound Volume, page WA 64, please replace AQW 14451/11-15 with:

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the supplier invoices paid by councils during the period 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012, (i) to detail the number of invoices paid within 10 working days of receipt of the supplier's invoice; (ii) to identify the councils which paid 90 percent or more of suppliers invoices within 10 work days of receipt; and (iii) to explain the performance of any council which failed to achieve the payment performance target of 90 percent.

(AQW 14451/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

- (i) The number of invoices paid within 10 working days of receipt of the supplier's invoice for each council, for the period 1 April to 31 August 2012, is detailed in the table below.

Council	(i)
Antrim	317
Ards	2,731
Armagh	1,437
Ballymena	1,629
Ballymoney	843
Banbridge	816
Belfast	6,977
Carrickfergus	465
Castlereagh	N/A
Coleraine	269
Cookstown	1,182
Craigavon	729
Derry	2,940
Down	1,069
Dungannon & S Tyrone	1,091
Fermanagh	1,781
Larne	611
Limavady	559
Lisburn	1,380
Magherafelt	1,239
Moyle	300
Newry & Mourne	501
Newtownabbey	2,772
North Down	2,575
Omagh	998
Strabane	451

N/A Council has advised that the information is not available

- (ii) None of the 26 District Councils have paid 90% of suppliers within 10 days of receipt of invoice.
- (iii) It should be noted that the recently issued Section 3.1.5 of the DFP Central Procurement Directorate's Guidance Note 06/12, which urges Departments to aim to pay at least 90% of valid invoices within 10 working days, is not mandatory upon district councils. District councils are bodies corporate as defined in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and as such are independent of central Government. They are responsible for their own financial affairs.

Following a number of questions on prompt payments, the department issued guidance in June recommending that councils should record their payment performance for the 2012/2013 year for 30, 10 (or other) day targets. The councils' performance

on prompt payments will be published as part of their annual accounts. This circular also encouraged councils to pay suppliers as promptly as possible and to endeavour to match the 10 day prompt payment commitment being made by central government in response to the current economic position and to keep its performance under review.

In this Bound Volume, page WA 64, please replace AQW 14452/11-15 with:

Councils: Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to supplier invoices paid by councils between 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012, to detail (i) the number of invoices paid; and (ii) the number paid (a) within 30 days; and (b) more than 30 days of receipt of the supplier's invoice.

(AQW 14452/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The number of invoices paid in total between 1 April and 30 August 2012, including those paid within and outside of 30 days from receipt of invoice, is set out below.

Council	(i) Total no paid	(ii) (a) Paid within 30 days	(ii) (b) Paid over 30 days
Antrim	4,243	1,477	2,766
Ards	5,389	4,669	720
Armagh	4,205	3,943	262
Ballymena	4,529	3,980	549
Ballymoney	2,599	2,495	104
Banbridge	2,160	1,605	555
Belfast	22,794	17,131	5,663
Carrickfergus	2,023	1,212	811
Castlereagh	3,356	N/A	N/A
Coleraine	3,839	2,521	1,318
Cookstown	2,143	2,105	38
Craigavon	4,384	2,586	1,798
Derry	7,482	5,402	2,080
Down	5,063	3,914	1,148
Dungannon & S Tyrone	1,948	1,707	241
Fermanagh	4,209	3,032	1,177
Larne	1,372	1,057	315
Limavady	2,876	2,216	660
Lisburn	5,217	4,995	780
Magherafelt	2,580	2,402	178
Moyle	1,495	965	530
Newry & Mourne	5,640	3,661	1,979
Newtownabbey	6,539	5,563	976
North Down	4,793	4,061	732
Omagh	2,422	1,975	447
Strabane	1,467	1,063	404

N/A Council has advised that the information is not available

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

In Bound Volume 73, page WA 483, please replace AQW 9917/11-15 with:

Human Embryos

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many human embryos have been destroyed in each year since the introduction of publicly funded IVF treatment.

(AQW 9917/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): As fertilisation and embryology issues are reserved matters, this question should be referred to the UK Government for response.

Official Report
(Hansard)
Indexes

Members' Index

Agnew, Mr Steven

Executive Committee Business

- Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion, 341
- Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 300
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 156, 157, 158, 162

Ministerial Statement

- Youth Justice Review, 331

Oral Answers

- Education
 - Primary Schools: Bangor, 254
- Employment and Learning
 - Education Maintenance Allowance, 308

Private Members' Business

- Unemployment, 305

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 203

Written Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
 - Animal Welfare, WA13
 - Aspergillosis, WA12
 - Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, WA235
- Culture, Arts and Leisure
 - Indoor Athletics, WA16
- Education
 - Educational Psychologists: Referrals, WA27, WA28
 - Priorities for Youth, WA27
 - Schools: Starting Age, WA26
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 - Biomass Heating, WA50
 - FG Wilson, WA43
 - Gas Development, WA285
 - Invest NI: Company Buyouts, WA286
 - Oil/Gas Exploration, WA50
 - Petroleum Licences, WA151, WA399
- Environment
 - Aspergillosis, WA159
 - Hydraulic Fracturing: Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA287
 - North Down Coastal Path, WA60
 - Planning Applications: External/Internal Consultees, WA63
 - Public Transport: Audio-visual Information, WA161
- Finance and Personnel
 - Grants: Online Application Portal, WA302
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Adoption: Legal Judgement, WA447
 - Genetically Modified Food, WA306
- Justice
 - Animal Cruelty: Offences, WA90
 - Animal Welfare: Convictions, WA315
 - Assisted Suicide: Legislation, WA314
 - Sex Offenders: Disclosure of Information, WA198
- Regional Development
 - Belfast City Centre: Bus Lanes, WA102
 - Car Parking: Footways, WA96
 - Holywood Esplanade: No-parking Area, WA96
 - Roads Service: Rubberised Asphalt Concrete, WA96

Social Development

- Employment and Support Allowance, WA466
- Helm Housing Association, WA108
- Housing Executive: Private Landlords, WA215
- Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, WA110, WA216, WA217
- Welfare Reform Bill: Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA465
- Welfare Reform: Block Grant, WA465

Allister, Mr Jim

Committee Business

- Farming, 40, 41, 42

Executive Committee Business

- Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 267, 270
- Education Bill: Second Stage, 184, 191, 222, 224, 225
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 18
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 149, 155, 163

Ministerial Statements

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 102
- North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 334
- North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 237
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 248
- Public Procurement, 5
- Youth Justice Review, 331

Oral Answers

- Culture, Arts and Leisure
 - Sports Clubs: Volunteers, 249
- Education
 - DE: Savings, 252
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 - Employment: Demographic Changes, 314
- Environment
 - Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 345
- Finance and Personnel
 - Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure, 350
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Health: Republic of Ireland Patients, 24
- Justice
 - Prison Officers: Memorial, 27
- Regional Development
 - Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 87

Private Members' Business

- Cross-border Education, 356, 357
- Economic Recovery, 58, 59
- The Disappeared, 274, 280
- Unemployment, 323

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 202

Revised Written Answers

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Human Embryos, RWA6

Written Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
 - DARD: Executive Papers, WA4
 - DARD: Headquarters, WA115
 - DARD: Quangos, WA124

- Farm Safety: Noxious Gas Detectors/Monitors, WA119
National Parks, WA115
- Assembly Commission
Parliament Buildings: Union Flag, WA352, WA469
- Culture, Arts and Leisure
Boxing: International Competitions, WA18
Boxing: Sectarianism, WA129
Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Funding, WA240
Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Great Escape, WA240
DCAL: Executive Papers, WA15
DCAL: Quangos, WA133
Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club, WA134
Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA132
- Education
Computer-based Assessment: Costs, WA271
DE: Quangos, WA38
Education Bill: Public Consultation, WA270
Literacy and Numeracy: Computer-based Assessments, WA374, WA375
Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA38
- Employment and Learning
DEL: Quangos, WA147
St Mary's University College: NDPB, WA41
St Mary's University College: UCAS, WA143
Stranmillis University College: Chairperson, WA142, WA143
Stranmillis University College: Financial Out-turn, WA143
Teacher Education: Review, WA143
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
DETI: Quangos, WA149
Electricity: Costs, WA50
E-Synergy: Remuneration, WA283
Fusion and Acumen Programmes, WA50
Growth Loan Fund, WA50
Invest NI: E-Synergy, WA283
Investment: Foreign Direct Investment, WA389
Investment: Job Creation, WA390
Life Science Hub UK, WA149
- Environment
Biffa: Waste Infrastructure, WA402
Climate Change Adaptation Programme, WA61
DOE: Quangos, WA291
Planning Applications: Bushmills Dunes Golf Resort, WA288
Planning Service: Paramilitary Memorials, WA171
Planning: Developers/NI Water, WA290
Road Freight Operator's Licence, WA59, WA64
Waste Management Groups: Assessment, WA402
Waste Management Groups: Preferred Bidders, WA295
- Finance and Personnel
Arm's-length Bodies: Payment of Invoices, WA413
Civil Service: Community Background Profile, WA179
DFP: Quangos, WA178
Directive 2011/7/EU: Consultation, WA412
Government: Financial Accountability, WA416
Peace III, WA183, WA301
Vacant Business Premises: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Ballycastle, WA182
Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Moyle, WA182
Welfare Reform Bill, WA183
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency, WA421
DHSSPS: Quangos, WA189
Health Trusts: Translation Services, WA78
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring, WA421
- Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Registration, WA427
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Regulations, WA427, WA447
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: RQIA, WA426
- Justice
Criminal Justice: Anonymity Orders, WA318
High Court: Judgements Outstanding, WA87, WA312
Legal Aid: Applications, WA94
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring, WA451, WA454
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Drivers: Ministerial, WA113
Judicial Appointments Commission: Lay Members, WA355
Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, WA1, WA225, WA227
Maze/Long Kesh: Regeneration, WA1
North/South Ministerial Council: Property, WA113
OFMDFM: Executive Papers, WA1
OFMDFM: Travel and Subsistence, WA2
Public Appointments, WA113
- Regional Development
Ballymena Railway Station, WA326
Belfast City Centre: Bus Lanes, WA103
Belfast Harbour Commissioners: Transfer of Funds, WA207
DRD: Quangos, WA212
NI Water: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing, WA326
Translink: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing, WA330
West Belfast Taxi Association: Concessionary Fares, WA462
West Belfast Taxi Association: Fuel Rebate, WA462
- Social Development
Housing Executive: Unfit Properties, Ballymena/Ballymoney, WA468
Housing Executive: Woodland House, Newtownabbey, WA335
Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA216
Welfare Reform Bill: Financial Consequences, WA344
- Anderson, Mr Sydney**
Oral Answers
Education
Donacloney Primary School, 253
Private Members' Business
Cross-border Education, 355, 359, 360
Food Banks, 50
The Disappeared, 274
Unemployment, 319
Written Answers
Agriculture and Rural Development
National Ploughing Championships, WA238
- Attwood, Mr Alex**
Executive Committee Business
Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 120
Ministerial Statement
North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242
Oral Answers
Environment
Planning Service: e-PIC, 347
Tourism: Popular Areas, 345, 346
Urban Blight, 346, 347

Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 344, 345

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared, 279

Revised Written Answers

Environment

Councils: Payment Terms, RWA3, RWA4, RWA5

Written Answers

Environment

Agricultural and Equestrian Animal Carcasses: Illegal Dumping, WA163

Animals: Threat of Extinction, WA66

Arc21: Energy from Waste, WA405

Areas of Townscape Character, WA63

Article 31 Planning Applications, WA407

Aspergillosis, WA159

Beaches, WA60, WA160

Biffa/Arc21, WA405

Biffa: Waste Infrastructure, WA402

Biffa: Waste Management, WA403

Cavanacaw: Gold Mine, WA65, WA154, WA288

Chauffeurs, WA406

Climate Change Adaptation Programme, WA61

Climate Change Bill, WA171

Councils: Adverse Weather, WA164

Councils: Bonfire Sites, WA155

Councils: Casual Staff, WA62

Councils: Management Structures, WA156

Councils: Part-time Staff, WA293

Councils: Payment Terms, WA64, WA160

Councils: Retired Staff Re-employed, WA165

Cyclists: Road Fatalities, WA157

Developers: Planning Conditions, WA170

DOE: Proposed Legislation, WA292

DOE: Quangos, WA291

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Postal Correspondence, WA405

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Vehicle Mileage, WA291

Driver Training and Testing: Compulsory Logbooks, WA403

Driver Training and Testing: Passenger Carrying Restriction, WA403

Drivers: New Driver Provisions, WA166

Environment: EU Funding, WA171

Farming: Low Carbon, WA72

Fixed Penalty Notices: Litter, WA294, WA297

Flooding: Compensation, WA404

Glenavy: Waste Incinerator, WA160

Goods Vehicles Operator's Licence: Temporary Permit, WA154

Goods Vehicles: Compliance Fees, WA293

Highway Code: Irish Language, WA288, WA289, WA296

Hydraulic Fracturing: Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA287

Invasive Species, WA158

Killard Point ASSI: Intertidal Survey, WA157

Local Government Reform: Chief Executives and Senior Posts, WA156

Local Government Reform: Costs, WA170

Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group, WA166, WA167

Local Government Reform: Preparedness, WA295

Local Government Reform: Rates Convergence, WA156

Local Government Reform: Redundancies, WA156

Local Government Service Delivery: Economic Appraisal, WA70

Local Government: Capacity Building, WA406

Local Government: d'Hondt System, WA407

Local Government: Debt Transfer, WA73

Marine Bill: Sellafield, WA165

Marine Strategy Framework Directive, WA62

MOT Test: Failure Rates, WA162

MOT Test: Numbers, WA404

MOT Test: Pre-1960 Vehicles, WA296

MOT Test: Vehicle Mileage, WA291

National Parks, WA59

NIEA: Planning Applications, WA170

North Down Coastal Path, WA60

North/South Ministerial Council: Environment, WA407

Packaging: Alternatives to Glass, WA65

Planning Application B/2011/0057/F, WA58

Planning Application Y/2008/0365/F, Carryduff, WA404

Planning Applications: Bushmills Dunes Golf Resort, WA288

Planning Applications: External/Internal Consultees, WA63

Planning Applications: Major Retail Developments, WA164

Planning Applications: Traffic Flow, WA59

Planning Policy Statement 21, WA63

Planning Policy Statement 5, WA167

Planning Service: Paramilitary Memorials, WA171

Planning Service: Staff, WA408

Planning System: Reform, WA69

Planning: Bovally, Limavady, WA169

Planning: Developers/NI Water, WA290

Planning: Roadside Advertising, WA164

Planning: Rose Energy, WA407

Public Transport: Audio-visual Information, WA161

Recycling, WA70

Recycling: Plant-based Plastics, WA65

Review of Public Administration: Costs, WA165

Road Freight Operator's Licence, WA59, WA64

Rose Energy, WA288

Rugby Road, Belfast: Listed Buildings, WA290

School Buses: Defects, WA72

Sea Fishing Defence, WA157

Sea Squirts, WA170

Sea Squirts: Strangford Lough, WA157

Single-use Carrier Bags, WA162, WA298, WA299

Slurry Spreading, WA71, WA72

Social Housing: New Schemes, WA164

Taxi Operators Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, WA161

Unauthorised Quarrying: Environmental Impact, WA159

Used Tyres: Disposal, WA159

Vehicle Licensing: Online Payment, WA158

Vehicle Licensing: Post Offices, WA158

Waste Management Groups: Assessment, WA402

Waste Management Groups: Preferred Bidders, WA295, WA299

Waste Repatriation: Raveagh Road, Eskragh, WA298

Water Pollution: North Down, WA167

Wind Turbines, WA405

Wind Turbines: ETSU-R-97 Methodology, WA72

Written Ministerial Statement

Environment

Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme, WMS1

Beggs, Mr Roy

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 204

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 101

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 236

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 245

Public Procurement, 3, 5

Youth Justice Review, 330

Oral Answers

Employment and Learning

FG Wilson: Job Losses, 306

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Flu Vaccination, 22

Justice

Human Trafficking, 29

Social Development

Supported Living Schemes, 93, 94

Private Members' Business

Unemployment, 318, 319, 320

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 202

Written Answers

Education

Schools: Absenteeism, WA276

Schools: Private-hire Transport, WA378

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI: Council Visits, WA49

Invest NI: Landholding, WA48

Finance and Personnel

DFP Press Releases: Press Association, WA411

DFP: Press Releases, WA185

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Accident and Emergency: Northern and Southern

Health and Social Care Trusts, WA418

Asylum Seekers: Unaccompanied Children, WA310

Family Support Hubs, WA445

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

DFP: Press Releases/Press Association, WA356

Beggs, Mr Roy (as Deputy Speaker)

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage, 259

Education Bill: Second Stage, 227, 229, 231, 232

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 127, 130, 135, 136, 140, 151, 152, 153, 155, 157, 158

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: EU Funding, 251

Education, 252

Donacloney Primary School, 253

Primary Schools: Bangor, 254

Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 256

Environment

Tourism: Popular Areas, 345, 346

Urban Blight, 347

Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 344, 345

Finance and Personnel

Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure, 350

General Register Office: Revenue, 347

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 352, 353, 355, 356, 357, 360, 361

Bell, Mr Jonathan

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 19

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 83, 118, 120, 128, 140, 143, 145, 149, 157

Oral Answers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Childcare Strategy, 193

Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 194, 195

Boylan, Mr Cathal

Adjournment

St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision, 283

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 100

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 241

Oral Answers

Environment

Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 344

Finance and Personnel

Government: Procurement, 350

Written Answers

Education

DE: Budget, WA277

Boyle, Ms Michaela

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 217

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 102

North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 334

Oral Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: Strabane, 314

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Investment Fund, 196

Written Answers

Social Development

Crilly Park, Killeter, County Tyrone, WA108

Bradley, Mr Dominic

Adjournment

St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision, 282, 285

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage, 258

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 263, 269

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 17

Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 296

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 74

Public Procurement, 3, 4

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: EU Funding, 251

Education
 DE: Savings, 253
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Broadband Delivery UK, 311
 Finance and Personnel
 Pensions: Public Sector, 348
 Justice
 Hate Crime, 25, 26
 Private Members' Business
 The Disappeared, 277, 278, 279
 Written Answers
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Air Passenger Duty, WA286
 Invest NI: Job Creation, WA402

Bradley, Ms Paula

Executive Committee Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 109
 Ministerial Statements
 Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 99
 Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 245
 Welfare Reform, 290
 Oral Answers
 Social Development
 Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, 93
 Private Members' Business
 The Disappeared, 280, 281
 Written Answers
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Social Investment Fund, WA356

Brady, Mr Mickey

Executive Committee Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 84, 125, 153
 Ministerial Statements
 Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 99
 Housing Strategy, 176
 Welfare Reform, 292
 Oral Answers
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Health: Republic of Ireland Patients, 24
 Private Members' Business
 Food Banks, 47, 51, 53
 Written Answers
 Regional Development
 Active Travel Demonstration Projects, WA215

Brown, Ms Pam

Executive Committee Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 133
 Ministerial Statements
 Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 99
 Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 246
 Welfare Reform, 292
 Oral Answers
 Social Development
 Fuel Poverty, 93
 Written Answers
 Environment
 Drivers: New Driver Provisions, WA166

Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Bone Health: Promotion, WA194
 Bone Health: Treatment, WA307
 Fracture Liaison Service, WA193
 Pressure Ulcers, WA193
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Gender Equality Strategy, WA357
 Regional Development
 Translink: Bus Usage, Antrim Area Hospital, WA461

Buchanan, Mr Thomas

Committee Business
 Farming, 38, 39
 Oral Answers
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Natural Gas: West Tyrone, 312
 Private Members' Business
 Cross-border Education, 351, 352
 Written Answers
 Education
 Education and Skills Authority: Membership, WA278
 Environment
 NIEA: Planning Applications, WA170

Byrne, Mr Joe

Committee Business
 Farming, 43, 44, 45
 Executive Committee Business
 Education Bill: Second Stage, 225
 Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 180
 Ministerial Statements
 North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 241
 North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 237
 Welfare Reform, 291
 Oral Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, 197
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Natural Gas: West Tyrone, 312
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly, WA5
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Salmon: Conservation, WA128
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 DETI: Collaborative Research, WA154
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Omagh: New Hospital, WA445

Campbell, Mr Gregory

Executive Committee Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 127, 151
 Ministerial Statements
 Housing Strategy, 175
 Welfare Reform, 292
 Oral Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, 198
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 23

Social Development
Housing: Dungannon, 92

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Ballykelly Forest: Maintenance, WA360
DARD: Annual Shows, WA125

Culture, Arts and Leisure
City of Culture 2013, WA241
Sport: Team GB and NI/Team Ireland, WA131

Education
GCSE: Grading Issues, WA247
Schools: Closures, WA274

Employment and Learning
University of Ulster: Senior Management Restructuring, WA280

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Energy: Domestic, WA395
Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart, WA57
Project Kelvin, WA57
Tourism: Film Industry, WA388

Environment
Councils: Payment Terms, WA160
Driver and Vehicle Agency: Postal Correspondence, WA405
Fixed Penalty Notices: Litter, WA297
Local Government Reform: Preparedness, WA295
MOT Test: Failure Rates, WA162
Planning Applications: Major Retail Developments, WA164
Single-use Carrier Bags, WA162

Finance and Personnel
Civil Service: Workforce Composition, WA76
Public Sector: Decentralisation, WA77
Rates: Empty Homes, WA184
Suicide: Change in Rate, WA415
Youth Unemployment: Change in Rate, WA409

Health, Social Services and Public Safety
A&E: Threats to Staff, WA85
Acute Hospitals: Car Parking, WA191
Autism: Adults, WA195
Suicide/Self-harm: Awareness, WA447

Justice
Courts: Hearing Centres, WA93
Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation, WA318
Magilligan Prison: Full-body Imaging Scanners, WA316
Magilligan Prison: Replacement, WA318

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Former MoD Lands: Costs, WA356
Public Appointments, WA114

Regional Development
A6 Dual Carriageway, WA211
Car Parking for Residents: Coleraine, WA321
Car Parks: Staff Guidelines, WA321
Flooding: Drainage Improvements, WA459
Railways: Coleraine–Londonderry, WA459
Road Safety: Coleraine Schools, WA210
Roads: Speed Limits, WA330
Water Charges, WA210

Social Development
Children: Income Poverty, WA220
Coleraine: Town Centre Development, WA215
Housing Executive: Double Glazing, WA345
SHAC Housing Association, WA111
Universal Credit: Administration, WA466
Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballysally, Coleraine, WA335

Warm Homes Scheme, WA112

Clarke, Mr Trevor

Committee Business
Farming, 33
Standing Order 59, 271

Oral Answers
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Health Technology, 22

Private Members' Business
The Disappeared, 275

Written Answers
Education
Transport: Home to School, WA141
Environment
Wind Turbines, WA405
Finance and Personnel
Family Law: Access Rights, WA74
Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Scope, WA355

Cochrane, Mrs Judith

Executive Committee Business
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 264
Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 297
Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 121, 158

Ministerial Statements
Housing Strategy, 175
Welfare Reform, 291

Written Answers
Culture, Arts and Leisure
Sport: Youth Participation, WA244
Environment
Chauffeurs, WA406
Finance and Personnel
Empty Premises Relief Scheme, WA411
Rates: Exemptions, WA73
Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, WA413
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
'Living with Long Term Conditions', WA422
Chronic Pain: Management, WA422, WA423
Chronic Pain: Services, WA422
Older People: Social Isolation, WA196
Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services, WA194, WA195, WA308
Pain Management: Population Plan, WA422
Regional Development
Roads Service: Traffic Management, WA458
Translink: Smartlink Uptake, WA458
Social Development
Community Asset Transfer: Group Capacity, WA462
Community Asset Transfer: Group Training, WA463
Community Asset Transfer: Legislation, WA348
Community Asset Transfer: Policy and Legislation, WA463

Copeland, Mr Michael

Executive Committee Business
Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 110, 111, 115, 126
Ministerial Statements
Housing Strategy, 175
Welfare Reform, 290

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Slurry Spreading, 201
Employment and Learning
NEETs: Support Programmes, 308
Justice

Prison Officers: Memorial, 27
Social Development
Social Enterprise, 90

Private Members' Business
Food Banks, 48

Written Answers

Education
Schools: Travel Passes, WA276
Environment
Social Housing: New Schemes, WA164
Finance and Personnel
Suicide: East Belfast, WA411
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Melanoma: Yervoy, WA424
Oncology: Independent Funding Requests, WA425
Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services, WA185
Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children: Clark Clinic, WA82
Suicide: East Belfast, WA423
Suicide: Tackling Rates, WA423
Regional Development
Flood Alleviation: Funding, WA214
Social Development
Housing Benefit, WA465
Housing Executive: Underspend, WA220
Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Contract, WA343
Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Criteria, WA343
Social Housing Development Programme, WA220
Social Housing: Overoccupancy, WA467
Social Security: Payments, WA465
Universal Credit: Impact on Low Earners, WA464
Welfare Reform Act 2012/Welfare Reform Bill, WA341
Welfare Reform Bill, WA222
Welfare Reform Bill: Regulations, WA342, WA464

Craig, Mr Jonathan

Adjournment
Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 363
Executive Committee Business
Education Bill: Second Stage, 214, 215
Oral Answers
Employment and Learning
NEETs: Support Programmes, 308, 309
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Health Technology, 22
Written Answers
Environment
Local Government: Debt Transfer, WA73

Cree, Mr Leslie

Executive Committee Business
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 262
Oral Answers
Culture, Arts and Leisure
DCAL: EU Funding, 251

Education

Primary Schools: Bangor, 254

Environment
Urban Blight, 346
Finance and Personnel

Government: Procurement, 350

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Social Investment Fund, 195, 196

Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses, WA402
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Health Service: Vacancies, WA192

Dallat, Mr John

Ministerial Statements
Public Procurement, 4

Oral Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Employment: Demographic Changes, 313
Environment
Tourism: Popular Areas, 346
Finance and Personnel
Government: Procurement, 351
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Health: Republic of Ireland Patients, 24

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
DARD Headquarters: Civil Servants, WA12
DARD Headquarters: Costs, WA12
Education
DE Capital Projects: East Derry, WA269
Education and Library Boards: Temporary Accommodation, WA249
Employment and Learning
Northern Regional College: Coleraine, WA147
Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Business: Funding for Coleraine and Limavady, WA151
Social Economy: Co-operative Movement, WA284
Environment
Councils: Bonfire Sites, WA155
Finance and Personnel
Rates: Rating Debt, WA300
Unemployment: Numbers, WA179
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Health and Social Care Trusts: Pay Differentials, WA446
Regional Development
Cycles: Parking Facilities, WA99
Penalty Charge Notices: Kilrea/Garvagh, WA212
Roads Service: Removal of Graffiti, WA99
Roads: Oil Spills, WA332
Translink: Disposal of Old Train Sets, WA332
Social Development
Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals, WA336
Disability Living Allowance: Doctors' Fees, WA336

Dallat, Mr John (as Deputy Speaker)

Adjournment
Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 164, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170
Committee Business
Farming, 34, 35, 37, 39, 41, 45

Executive Committee Business

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 185
- Suspension of Standing Orders, 177

Ministerial Statements

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 98, 102
- North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 334

Oral Answers

- Regional Development, 86
- Edward Street, Downpatrick, 90
- Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 86, 87, 88
- Social Development
- Social Enterprise, 91

Private Members' Business

- Cross-border Education, 342, 343
- Economic Recovery, 56, 58, 61, 62, 63
- Food Banks, 46, 47, 49, 51, 52, 55
- Unemployment, 319, 322, 323, 324

Dickson, Mr Stewart**Executive Committee Business**

- Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion, 341
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 137

Ministerial Statements

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 101
- Youth Justice Review, 329

Oral Answers

- Employment and Learning
- FG Wilson: Job Losses, 306
- Finance and Personnel
- Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, 348, 349

Written Answers

- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- Freedom of Information Act: Redacted Information, WA401
- Giant's Causeway: Creationism, WA400
- Giant's Causeway: Visitor Centre, WA401
- Natural Gas Network, WA389
- Finance and Personnel
- Business Bank, WA184
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Travel-to-work Area, WA421

Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne**Committee Business**

- Farming, 34, 35

Executive Committee Business

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 215, 216
- Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 179

Oral Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Agri-Food Strategy Board, 200
- Environment
- Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 344
- Justice
- Hate Crime, 26

Written Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Castlewellan Forest Park—Slievenaslat: Walking Trail, WA365
- Countryside Management Scheme, WA363
- DARD Headquarters: Relocation, WA360
- Farm Modernisation Programme, WA6
- Farm Safety Partnership: Website, WA12
- Sea Bass: Ban, WA4
- Slurry Tanks, WA117
- Culture, Arts and Leisure
- Goal Line Youth Centre, WA129
- Education
- Goal Line Youth Centre, WA38
- Schools: Area Planning, WA137, WA269
- Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA137
- Schools: Transport, WA26
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- National Ecosystem Assessment, WA400
- Tourism: Upper Bann, WA51
- Environment
- Goods Vehicles: Compliance Fees, WA292
- Finance and Personnel
- Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Upper Bann, WA181
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- Banbridge: Health and Care and Day Care Centres, WA196
- Dental Contracts, WA307
- Goal Line Youth Centre, WA85
- Justice
- Firearms Licensing, WA205
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
- Social Investment Fund, WA356
- Social Development
- Goal Line Youth Centre, WA221
- Housing Executive: Double Glazing, WA346
- Housing Executive: Window Replacement, WA346
- Welfare Reform Bill, WA223

Douglas, Mr Sammy**Executive Committee Business**

- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 147

Ministerial Statements

- Housing Strategy, 175

Private Members' Business

- Food Banks, 54, 55

Written Answers

- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- Tourism Development Scheme, WA401
- Finance and Personnel
- Air Passenger Duty, WA183
- Social Development
- Community Asset Transfer: Consultation, WA468
- Community Asset Transfer: Legislation, WA468
- Community Asset Transfer: Policy, WA468

Dunne, Mr Gordon**Ministerial Statements**

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 102
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 246

Oral Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Employment: Demographic Changes, 313

Written Answers

Education
Special Educational Needs: Statutory Assessment, WA277

Environment
Arc21: Energy from Waste, WA405
Biffa/Arc21, WA405

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Social Investment Fund, WA114

Social Development
Royston House, Belfast: Medical Examination Centre, WA467

Durkan, Mr Mark H

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 117, 118, 119, 120, 162

Ministerial Statements

Housing Strategy, 175
Welfare Reform, 290

Oral Answers

Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 23

Social Development
Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, 92, 93

Private Members' Business

Food Banks, 49

Written Answers

Finance and Personnel
Civil Service: Priority Pool for Transfer, Foyle, WA414
Civil Service: Surplus Posts, WA175
Civil Service: Vacant Posts, WA172
Welfare Reform Bill: Spending, WA305

Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Eating Disorders, WA197

Justice
Burglaries: Foyle, WA451

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Welfare Reform Advisory Group, WA2

Regional Development
Traffic Lights: Springtown/Northland Roads, Derry, WA462

Social Development
Civil Service Pension Centre, WA111, WA222
Housing Executive: Reversible Windows, WA338
Housing Executive: Transfers, WA338
Housing: One-bedroom Dwellings, WA337
Social Fund: Expenditure, WA463
Universal Credit: Job Losses, WA463
Welfare Reform Bill: Jobs at Risk, WA351

Easton, Mr Alex

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 235

Oral Answers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Social Investment Fund, 193, 194

Revised Written Answers

Regional Development
Roads: Gritting, RWA1

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Animal Welfare: Convictions, WA3
Farmers: Income, WA233
Fish Stocks, WA3
Hedgerows, WA9
Tree Planting, WA8

Culture, Arts and Leisure
Boxing: Funding, WA133
Football Pitches: Drainage, WA18
Irish Football Association: Funding, WA239
Musical Instruments for Bands Programme, WA128
Protestant Band Culture, WA239
Re-imaging Communities, WA129
Ulster-Scots Agency: Funding, WA129

Education

Bangor Grammar School, WA29
Certificate in Religious Education, WA36
Crawfordsburn Primary School: Transport, WA378
DE: Company Cars, WA381
DE: Special Bonus Payments, WA381
Holywood Primary School, WA29
Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor, WA276
Schools: Old Gransha Road Site, Bangor, WA29
Schools: Physical Education, WA26

Employment and Learning

Certificate in Religious Education, WA279
Further Education: Student Composition, WA148
Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor, WA41, WA143
Stranmillis University College: Ministerial Proposals, WA148

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Business: Support for Owners, WA149
Wi-Fi: Free in Town Centres, WA398

Environment

Animals: Threat of Extinction, WA66
Beaches, WA60
Councils: Adverse Weather, WA164
MOT Test: Numbers, WA404
Planning Policy Statement 5, WA167
Planning System: Reform, WA69
Recycling, WA70
Water Pollution: North Down, WA167

Finance and Personnel

Rates: Exemptions for Churches, WA76

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Bangor Health Centre, WA426
Bangor Hospital: X-ray Services, WA193

Justice

Community Groups: North Down, WA451
DOJ: Budget, WA317
DOJ: Savings Delivery Plans, WA94
Illegal Fuel: Prosecutions and Convictions, WA453
Prison Service: Grade Structures, WA199
Prison Service: Officer Numbers, WA199

Regional Development

Car Parking: Residents, WA460
Car-parking Charges: Christmas Waiver, WA329
Craigantlet Hills: Road Scheme, WA331
Craigantlet Hills: Roundabout, WA331
Craigantlet Hills: Through-route, WA331
Craigantlet Hills: Traffic Lights, WA331
Donaghadee Bypass, WA208
Donaghadee: Dropped Kerbs, WA102
Donaghadee: Street Lighting, WA102
DRD: Budget, WA322

Dropped Kerbs: Bangor West, WA456
 Dropped Kerbs: Holywood, WA457
 Dropped Kerbs: Millisle, WA209
 Flooding: Call-outs in North Down, WA456
 Footpaths: Bangor, WA321, WA322
 Footpaths: Bangor West, WA456
 Footpaths: Holywood, WA456
 Footpaths: Millisle, WA209
 NI Railways: Passenger Journeys, WA324
 North Down: Sewerage Network, WA98
 North Down: Street Lighting, WA98, WA99
 Park-and-ride Services, WA329
 Railway Stations, WA325
 Railways: Freight, WA212
 Road Safety: Bangor Grammar School, WA321
 Roads Service: Vesting Land, WA457
 Roads: Beechfield and Ashfield Estates, Donaghadee, WA320
 Roads: Gritting, WA101
 Roads: Potholes, WA333
 Salt Bins: North Down, WA326
 Salt Bins: Qualification Criteria, WA328
 Street Lighting: Bangor, WA321, WA322
 Street Lighting: Bangor West, WA455
 Street Lighting: Daylight Hours, WA99
 Street Lighting: Holywood, WA456
 Street Lighting: Millisle, WA211
 Traffic Calming: Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee, WA208
 Translink: Bomb Scares, WA322
 Translink: Passenger Journeys, WA325
 Translink: Train Services, WA325
 Social Development
 Child Maintenance, WA334
 Clondeboyne Village Community Association, WA104
 Housing Executive: Extreme Weather, WA109
 Housing Executive: Fuel Poverty, WA334
 Housing: Co-ownership, WA112
 Housing: One-bedroom Dwellings, WA334
 Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor, WA351
 Social Fund: Applications, WA467
 Social Fund: Expenditure, WA467
 Social Security: Computer System, WA108

Eastwood, Mr Colum

Committee Stage

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5, CS6, CS7, CS8, CS9, CS10

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Ethnic Minorities: Cultural Identity, 250
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Social Investment Fund, 194
 Social Development
 Supported Living Schemes, 94

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared, 275, 276

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Brandywell Stadium: Business Case, WA243
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Foyle: Job Promotion, WA44
 Growth Loan Fund, WA286, WA399, WA400
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Gluten-free Food: Prescribing Guidelines, WA80

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 European Commissioners: Visits to Northern Ireland, WA2
 Social Development
 Fort George: Decontamination, WA222

Elliott, Mr Tom

Committee Business

Farming, 35, 36, 39, 41

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 239
 North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 71
 Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 247
 Public Procurement, 5
 Youth Justice Review, 329

Oral Answers

Education
 DE: Savings, 253
 Environment
 Planning Service: e-PIC, 347
 Finance and Personnel
 DFP: Press Releases, 349

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared, 279

Written Answers

Environment
 Biffa: Waste Management, WA403
 Councils: Management Structures, WA155
 Highway Code: Irish Language, WA296
 Local Government Reform: Chief Executives and Senior Posts, WA156
 Local Government Reform: Rates Convergence, WA156
 Local Government Reform: Redundancies, WA156
 Local Government Service Delivery: Economic Appraisal, WA70
 National Parks, WA59
 Rose Energy, WA288
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Altnagelvin Area Hospital: PCI Service, WA420
 Health Service: Catering Costs, WA310
 Health: Direct Payments, WA196
 Transforming Your Care: South West Acute Hospital, WA420

Justice

Stalking: Convictions, WA319
 Stalking: Legislation, WA450

Farry, Dr Stephen

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 145

Oral Answers

Employment and Learning
 Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services
 Working Group, 310
 Education Maintenance Allowance, 307, 308
 FG Wilson: Job Losses, 306, 307
 NEETs: Support Programmes, 308, 309

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 352, 358, 359

Written Answers

Employment and Learning
 Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services
 Working Group, WA281, WA282
 Certificate in Religious Education, WA280

DEL: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA143
 DEL: Quangos, WA147
 DEL: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA283
 DEL: Staff Suspensions, WA42, WA280
 Education Maintenance Allowance, WA41, WA386
 Employment Law Review, WA387
 Employment: Careers Advisers, WA385
 Employment: Graduates, WA382
 Employment: Information and Opportunities, WA144
 Employment: Over-25s, WA388
 Employment: Sector Skills Councils, WA385
 FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses, WA386
 First4Skills: Administration, WA145, WA147
 First4Skills: Apprenticeships, WA147, WA148, WA279
 First4Skills: Job Losses, WA144, WA145, WA279
 First4Skills: Ministerial Assessment, WA147
 First4Skills: Training Contract, WA279
 Foyle College: Lands, WA41
 Further Education: Student Composition, WA148
 Higher Education: Essential Skills, WA278
 Higher Education: Maximum Student Number, WA146
 Higher Education: Working-class Protestants, WA281
 IBEC/CBI: Proposed Forum, WA386
 Jobless Households, WA40
 Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor, WA41, WA144
 Northern Regional College: Ballymena Campus, WA146
 Northern Regional College: Ballymoney Campus, WA387
 Northern Regional College: Coleraine, WA148
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Availability, WA383
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Electrical Industry, WA383, WA384
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Funding, WA385
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Numbers, WA384, WA387
 Queen's University Belfast: Funding, WA282
 Queen's University Belfast: Student Accommodation, WA282
 Skills Strategy, WA388
 St Mary's University College: NDPB, WA41
 St Mary's University College: UCAS, WA143
 Steps to Work, WA42
 Steps to Work/Step Ahead, WA42
 Stranmillis University College: Chairperson, WA142, WA143, WA283
 Stranmillis University College: Financial Out-turn, WA143
 Stranmillis University College: Ministerial Proposals, WA148
 Teacher Education: Review, WA143
 Universities: Funding, WA279
 University of Ulster: Magee Campus, WA148
 University of Ulster: Senior Management Restructuring, WA280
 Youth Employment Scheme, WA387
 Youth Unemployment, WA40, WA280

Fearon, Ms Megan

Committee Stage
 Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS8
 Executive Committee Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 134
 Oral Answers
 Education
 Magherafelt Learning Partnership, 256

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Employment: Demographic Changes, 314
 Private Members' Business
 Economic Recovery, 63
 Unemployment, 317
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Young People: Rural Areas, WA237
 Education
 Teachers: All-Ireland Mobility, WA376
 Environment
 Local Government: d'Hondt System, WA407
 Justice
 PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff, WA205

Flanagan, Mr Phil

Executive Committee Business
 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 10, 14
 Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 301
 Oral Answers
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Natural Gas: West Tyrone, 312
 Private Members' Business
 Cross-border Education, 351, 360, 361
 Economic Recovery, 56, 58, 64, 65, 67
 Unemployment, 302, 315, 323
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Single Farm Payment, WA364
 Assembly Commission
 Pensions: Ministers/MLAs, WA352
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 DCAL: Freedom of Information, WA15
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Hydraulic Fracturing: Fermanagh, WA153
 Finance and Personnel
 Registered Companies: VAT/PAYE, WA177
 Stormont Estate: Event Costs, WA302
 Social Development
 Housing: Negative Equity, WA221
 Mortgages: Arrears, WA221

Ford, Mr David

Ministerial Statement
 Youth Justice Review, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331
 Oral Answers
 Justice
 Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies, 28
 Hate Crime, 26
 Human Trafficking, 28, 29
 Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25
 Prison Officers: Memorial, 26, 27
 Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, 27, 28

Written Answers

Justice
 Access NI: Applications, WA318
 Amnesty International: Brendan Lillis, WA312
 Amnesty International: Gerry McGeough, WA199
 Amnesty International: Marian Price, WA197
 Amnesty International: Martin Corey, WA449
 Animal Cruelty: Offences, WA90
 Animal Welfare: Convictions, WA315

Animal Welfare: Sentencing, WA204
 Antisocial Behaviour: Combating, WA453
 Appeal Tribunals, WA86, WA315
 Assisted Suicide: Legislation, WA314
 Burglaries: Foyle, WA451
 Community Groups: North Down, WA451
 Courts and Tribunals Service: Small Claims, WA92
 Courts and Tribunals Service: Smoking Policy, WA314
 Courts Estate: Disabled Parking, WA448
 Courts: Delayed Cases, WA90
 Courts: Fermanagh and South Tyrone, WA86
 Courts: Hearing Centres, WA93
 Courts: Preliminary Inquiries, WA90
 Crime: Agricultural and Rural Figures, WA313
 Crime: Reasonable Force, WA204
 Crime: Statistics, WA454
 Crime: Use of Glass Bottles, WA93
 Criminal Charges: 12 July 2012 Disturbances, WA448
 Criminal Justice: Anonymity Orders, WA318
 Criminal Justice: Brothel Keeping/Controlling Prostitution, WA88
 Criminal Justice: Diminished Responsibility, WA198
 Criminal Justice: Mandatory Drug Tests, WA201
 Criminal Justice: Offender Levy, WA88
 Criminal Justice: Political Party Office as Address, WA449, WA450
 Criminal Justice: Preliminary Investigations, WA450
 Criminal Justice: Refusal to Answer Questions by Her Majesty's Forces, WA89
 Criminal Justice: Sexual Offences against a Child, WA91
 DOJ: Appointment of Funeral Director, WA89
 DOJ: Apprenticeships, WA319
 DOJ: Budget, WA317
 DOJ: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA198
 DOJ: Savings Delivery Plans, WA94
 DOJ: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA314, WA449
 DOJ: Staff Suspensions, WA89, WA197
 Domestic Abuse: Definition, WA92
 Edward Connors, WA92
 Edward Connors: Convictions, WA449
 Edward Connors: Serious Case Review, WA448
 Edward Paul Murphy, WA93, WA199
 Firearms Licensing, WA205
 Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation, WA316, WA317, WA318
 High Court: Judgements Outstanding, WA87, WA312
 Human Trafficking: North Down, WA200
 Illegal Fuel: Prosecutions and Convictions, WA453
 Legal Aid, WA198
 Legal Aid: Applications, WA94
 Legal Aid: Bernadette McGeary, WA449
 Legal Aid: Bernadette, Stephen and Catherine McGeary, WA448
 Legal Aid: Case 12/090450, WA314
 Legal Aid: Parades Commission Ruling, WA313, WA314
 Legal Aid: Preliminary Inquiries, WA449
 Magilligan Prison, WA206
 Magilligan Prison: Full-body Imaging Scanners, WA316
 Magilligan Prison: Replacement, WA318
 Marian Price, WA450
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, WA319

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring, WA451, WA454
 Muckamore: Sex Offenders, WA204
 North Belfast: Civil Disturbances, WA90
 Offender Levy, WA449
 Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, WA206
 Policing: Funding, WA204
 Prison Service: Appeals against Dismissal, WA199
 Prison Service: CAJ Meetings, WA87, WA89
 Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline, WA88, WA92, WA202, WA203
 Prison Service: Deaths in Custody, WA202
 Prison Service: Governors, WA313
 Prison Service: Grade Structures, WA199
 Prison Service: Officer Numbers, WA199
 Prison Service: Outline Estate Strategy, WA316
 Prison Service: Prisoner Assessment Unit Report, WA87
 Prison Service: Staff Dismissals, WA90
 Prison Service: Staff Suspensions, WA92
 Prison Service: Staff Training, WA313
 Prison Service: Voluntary Early Retirement, WA315
 Prisoners: Austin Creggan, Desmond Hamill, Tommy Hamill and Mark McGilloway, WA93
 Prisoners: Foreign National, WA89
 Prisoners: Remand, WA88
 Prisoners: Samaritans Listener Training Course, WA313
 Prisons: CCTV, WA86
 Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, WA315
 Prisons: Non-natural Deaths, WA201
 Prisons: Suicides and Attempted Suicides, WA315
 Prisons: Supporting Prisoners at Risk, WA314
 Prostitution: Paying for Services, WA198
 PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff, WA205
 PSNI: Business Cases, WA205
 Public Office: Misconduct, WA199
 Sex Offenders: Disclosure of Information, WA198
 Small Claims Court, WA94
 Speeding: A1/A2, WA313
 Stalking: Convictions, WA319
 Stalking: Legislation, WA450
 Thomas O'Brien, WA94
 Victims and Witnesses of Crime: Justice Committee Report, WA203
 Wheel Clamping: Private Land, WA204

Foster, Mrs Arlene

Executive Committee Business

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion, 339, 341
 Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 298, 301
 Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 338
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 150, 151

Oral Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Broadband Delivery UK, 310, 311
 Employment: Demographic Changes, 313, 314
 Natural Gas: West Tyrone, 312
 Renewable Energy, 312, 313
 Tourism: Strabane, 314
 Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 311, 312

Private Members' Business

Unemployment, 320, 322, 323

Revised Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Bed and Breakfasts, RWA1

Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Abbey Lodge Hotel Site, Downpatrick, WA55
Air Passenger Duty, WA286
Air Travel: Direct Flights, WA153
Belfast International Airport, WA44
Biomass Heating, WA50
Broadband: Garvaghy/Ballygawley, County Tyrone, WA398
Broadband: North Down, WA395, WA396
Broadband: Onwave, WA58
Broadband: Rural Areas of South Down, WA55, WA56
Business Bank, WA402
Business Subsidies: Rural Areas, WA46
Business: Funding for Coleraine and Limavady, WA151
Business: Support for Owners, WA149
Caterpillar/FG Wilson, WA47, WA287
Caterpillar: DETI Meeting, WA397
Child Trust Fund, WA45, WA286
Crown Estate: Revenue, WA287
DETI: Apprenticeships, WA389
DETI: Collaborative Research, WA154
DETI: Disposals through Auctions, WA399
DETI: EU Funding, WA396
DETI: Quangos, WA149
DETI: Staff Suspensions, WA395
Economy: Job Losses, WA283
Economy: Pipe Bands, WA44
Economy: Planning Delays, WA153
Economy: Productivity, WA401
Electricity: Costs, WA50
Energy: Domestic, WA395
E-Synergy: Remuneration, WA283
FG Wilson, WA43, WA153
FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses, WA402
FG Wilson: Grant Aid, WA47
FG Wilson: Job Losses, WA150, WA285, WA397
Fleadh Cheoil 2013: Accommodation, WA45
Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart, WA57
Forth and Foyle: Job Losses, WA287
Foyle: Job Promotion, WA44
Freedom of Information Act: Redacted Information, WA401
Fuel Poverty: Gas Network Extension, WA46
Fusion and Acumen Programmes, WA50
Gas Development, WA285
Gas Network: Extension, WA45, WA46, WA51
Giant's Causeway: Creationism, WA400
Giant's Causeway: Visitor Centre, WA401
Growth Loan Fund, WA50, WA286, WA399, WA400
Hydraulic Fracturing: Fermanagh, WA153
Innovation Strategy, WA58
Invest NI: Business Funding, WA47
Invest NI: Company Buyouts, WA286
Invest NI: Council Visits, WA49
Invest NI: E-Synergy, WA283
Invest NI: Funding, WA397
Invest NI: Job Creation, WA402
Invest NI: Landholding, WA48
Invest NI: Supply Chains, WA285
Investment: Foreign Direct Investment, WA389
Investment: Indigenous Businesses, WA401
Investment: International Companies, WA152

Investment: Job Creation, WA390, WA391

Job Creation, WA51

John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA149

Life Science Hub UK, WA149

Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas of South Down, WA56

Mourne Granite Trail, WA58

National Ecosystem Assessment, WA400

National Trust: Creationism, WA400

Natural Gas Network, WA389

Oil/Gas Exploration, WA50

Oil/Natural Gas: Prices, WA50

Petroleum Licences, WA151, WA399

Project Kelvin, WA57

Redundancies: Notification Period, WA150

Science Park, WA57

Science Park: Funding, WA389

Small Businesses: Grants/Schemes, WA45

Social Economy: Co-operative Movement, WA284

Solar Power: Grants, WA57

Telecommunications: 4G, WA402

Tourism Development Scheme, WA401

Tourism: Accommodation, WA150

Tourism: Angling, WA399

Tourism: Bed and Breakfasts, North Down, WA396

Tourism: Capital Assistance for Accommodation, WA57

Tourism: Causeway Coast and Antrim Glens, WA152

Tourism: Cruise Ships, WA151, WA152, WA285, WA286

Tourism: Film Industry, WA388

Tourism: Signage Policy, WA390

Tourism: South American Market, WA390

Tourism: Upper Bann, WA51

Tourist Board: Funding Support, WA150

Tourist Board: Online Accommodation Providers, WA284

Tourist Information Centres, WA153

Wi-Fi: Free in Town Centres, WA398

Frew, Mr Paul

Committee Business

Farming, 32, 33, 34, 38

Executive Committee Business

Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 179

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Wildlife Intervention Programme, 200

Private Members' Business

Unemployment, 318, 319

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture: Tuberculosis, WA123

Animal Welfare: Convictions, WA115

DARD: Headquarters, WA236

Farm Modernisation Scheme: Gas Detectors, WA11

Farm Quality Assurance Scheme: Gas Detectors, WA12

Farmers: Financial Assistance, WA236

Farms: Gas Detectors, WA11

Forest Service Headquarters: Relocation, WA9

Forest Service: Non-industrial Jobs, WA10

Red Squirrel Group: Membership, WA366

Red Squirrels: Adenovirus and Poxvirus, WA366

Slurry Tanks, WA5

Squirrel Forum: Membership, WA365

Woodland Cover, WA9
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Boxing: Funding, WA16
 Education
 Higher Education: Working-class Protestants, WA254
 Schools: Post-primary Preferences, WA22
 Sentinus: STEM, WA255, WA256
 Employment and Learning
 Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services
 Working Group, WA281, WA282
 Employment: Graduates, WA382
 Higher Education: Working-class Protestants, WA281
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Availability, WA383
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Electrical Industry, WA382, WA383, WA384
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Funding, WA384
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Numbers, WA384
 Youth Unemployment, WA280
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Investment: International Companies, WA152
 Environment
 Driver Training and Testing: Compulsory Logbooks, WA403
 Driver Training and Testing: Passenger Carrying Restriction, WA403
 Marine Strategy Framework Directive, WA62
 Planning Policy Statement 21, WA63
 Wind Turbines: ETSU-R-97 Methodology, WA72
 Social Development
 Fuel Poverty, WA348
 Older People: Poverty, WA349

Gardiner, Mr Samuel

Ministerial Statements
 Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 100
 Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 246
 Oral Answers
 Education
 Donacloney Primary School, 253
 Employment and Learning
 Education Maintenance Allowance, 307
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Transforming Your Care, 21
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Childcare Strategy, 193
 Social Development
 Fuel Poverty, 93
 Written Answers
 Education
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Curriculum/Examinations Roles, WA253
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations Policy, WA142
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Qualifications Equivalence, WA253
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Review of Qualifications, WA142
 English Baccalaureate, WA137
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Economy: Job Losses, WA283
 Economy: Productivity, WA401
 Redundancies: Notification Period, WA150
 Finance and Personnel
 Business: Redundancies, WA299

Regional Development
 Car Parking: Revenue in Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge, WA458
 Millennium Way, Lurgan: Construction, WA457
 Millennium Way, Lurgan: Costs, WA457
 Roads Service: Staff, WA333
 Roads: Cost of Major Works Programme, WA457

Girvan, Mr Paul

Executive Committee Business
 Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 261, 262
 Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012, 336
 Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 338
 Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 296
 Ministerial Statements
 Public Procurement, 3
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Cogry Manor/Bridge Road, Burnside: Viable Works, WA366
 Social Development
 Social Housing: New Mossley, Newtownabbey, WA224

Givan, Mr Paul

Adjournment
 Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 364
 Committee Stage
 Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5, CS6, CS8, CS10
 Executive Committee Business
 Education Bill: Second Stage, 187
 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 9
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 143, 150, 151, 152, 153
 Ministerial Statement
 Youth Justice Review, 328
 Oral Answers
 Social Development
 Housing Associations, 94
 Written Answers
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Boxing: Sectarianism, WA245
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Gas Network: Extension, WA51
 Oil/Natural Gas: Prices, WA50
 Finance and Personnel
 Rates: Payment Deferment, WA77
 Justice
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, WA319

Hale, Mrs Brenda

Adjournment
 Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 362, 366
 Executive Committee Business
 Education Bill: Second Stage, 219
 Ministerial Statement
 North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 334
 Oral Answers
 Finance and Personnel
 Pensions: Public Sector, 348

Justice

Prison Officers: Memorial, 26, 27

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Childcare Strategy, 193

Social Development
Social Enterprise, 90

Written Answers

Education
Special Educational Needs: Statements, WA380

Environment
Planning Applications: Traffic Flow, WA59

Finance and Personnel
Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Lagan Valley,
WA184

Hamilton, Mr Simon

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 119, 122, 123, 124,
125, 126, 130

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 238

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 57, 58, 67
Food Banks, 46, 47

Written Answers

Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Crohn's Disease/Colitis, WA79
Inflammatory Bowel Disease, WA78

Justice

Wheel Clamping: Private Land, WA204

Regional Development
A22: Flooding, WA214

Hazzard, Mr Christopher

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 169, 170

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 189
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 16

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 333
North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 240

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Flood Alleviation: Sullatober Water, Carrickfergus, 197
Education
Donacloney Primary School, 253
Regional Development
Edward Street, Downpatrick, 90
Social Development
Social Enterprise, 90

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 354, 355

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Fisheries Division: Relocation, WA127
Sandbags: Rivers Agency/Council Protocol, WA234

Education

Children and Young People's Strategy, WA29
Post-primary Schools: Careers Advice, WA30
Schools: Animal Welfare Awareness, WA36

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mourne Granite Trail, WA58
Tourism: South American Market, WA390

Environment

Invasive Species, WA158
Killard Point ASSI: Intertidal Survey, WA157
Sea Squirts: Strangford Lough, WA157

Finance and Personnel

Multiple Deprivation Measure, WA77

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Downe Hospital: Arson, WA425, WA446
Emergency Services: Antisocial Behaviour,
Downpatrick, WA436

Regional Development

Flooding: Killyleagh, WA320
Travelwise, WA209

Hilditch, Mr David

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 75
North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 72

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Flood Alleviation: Sullatober Water, Carrickfergus, 197
Employment and Learning
FG Wilson: Job Losses, 306
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Flu Vaccination, 21
Social Development
Town Centres: Investment, 91

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 354

Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
FG Wilson, WA153
Finance and Personnel
Civil Law Reform, WA416
Regional Development
A2: Update, WA213
Water Charges, WA212
Social Development
Welfare Reform Bill: HMRC Staff, WA351

Humphrey, Mr William

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 264
Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 123, 129, 149, 162

Ministerial Statements

Housing Strategy, 175
North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 75
North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 72
Youth Justice Review, 330

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
DCAL: Capital and Revenue Funding, 252

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 355
The Disappeared, 272, 273
Unemployment, 320

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
Northern Ireland Screen: Funding, WA241

Northern Ireland Screen: Funding Programmes, WA241
 Northern Ireland Screen: Individual Development Programme, WA242

Hussey, Mr Ross

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 Agricultural Wages Board, 198, 199
 Employment and Learning
 Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group, 309, 310
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Employment: Demographic Changes, 313
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 23

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared, 274, 275

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 Field Boundary Restoration, WA365, WA366
 Slurry Spreading, WA117
 Education
 Arvalee School and Resource Centre, WA380
 Knockavoe School, WA381
 Employment and Learning
 First4Skills: Administration, WA147
 First4Skills: Apprenticeships, WA147
 First4Skills: Ministerial Assessment, WA147
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Broadband: Garvaghy/Ballygawley, County Tyrone, WA398
 Environment
 Cavanacaw: Gold Mine, WA65, WA154, WA288
 Slurry Spreading, WA71
 Unauthorised Quarrying: Environmental Impact, WA159
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Mental Health: Western Health and Social Care Trust, WA424
 Midwife-led Unit: Omagh, WA424
 Paediatric Physiotherapists, WA81
 Social Development
 DSD Funding: Political Parties, WA112
 Red Sky, WA222

Irwin, Mr William

Committee Business

Farming, 36, 37

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 Ash Plants: Imports, WA366
 Employment and Learning
 First4Skills: Job Losses, WA145
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Solar Power: Grants, WA57
 Environment
 Slurry Spreading, WA72

Kelly, Mrs Dolores

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 221, 222, 233
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 106, 115, 121, 126, 135, 140, 154, 155, 162

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 Agricultural Wages Board, 199
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Flu Vaccination, 22
 Justice
 Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies, 28

Written Answers

Education
 School Maintenance Backlog: Upper Bann, WA249
 Schools: Key Stage Assessments, WA276
 Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: Upper Bann, WA138
 Finance and Personnel
 Government: Procurement, WA417
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 British-Irish Council: UNSCR 1325, WA113
 Gender Equality Review, WA226
 Gender Equality Strategy, WA2
 "The Gathering", WA2
 Regional Development
 Roads: Common Travel Area, WA97
 Social Development
 Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment, WA223
 Housing Executive: Double Glazing, WA110
 Social Housing Newbuilds: Upper Bann, WA335

Kelly, Mr Gerry

Oral Answers

Justice
 Hate Crime, 26

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Líofo 2015, WA245
 Finance and Personnel
 Government: Non-tax Revenue, WA417
 Social Development
 DSD: Collaborative Working, WA222

Kennedy, Mr Danny

Adjournment

Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 365, 366

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 140, 141

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 235, 236, 237

Oral Answers

Regional Development
 A55 Outer Ring, Belfast, 88
 Bus Station Offices and Depots, 88, 89
 Cycling, 89, 90
 Edward Street, Downpatrick, 90
 Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 86, 87

Revised Written Answers

Regional Development
 Roads: Gritting, RWA1

Written Answers

Regional Development
 A2: Timescale, WA98
 A2: Update, WA213
 A22: Flooding, WA214

A5 Dual Carriageway: Phased Implementation, WA98
 A6 Dual Carriageway, WA211
 Active Travel Demonstration Projects, WA215
 Adopted Roads and Sewers: North Down, WA329
 Adopted Roads: North Down, WA324
 Ballymena Railway Station, WA326
 Belfast City Centre: Bus Lanes, WA102, WA103
 Belfast City Centre: Traffic Congestion, WA102
 Belfast Harbour Commissioners: Transfer of Funds, WA207
 Bike Hire: Belfast, WA213
 Bridges: Risk Assessment, WA460
 Bridges: Road-over-rail, WA461
 Car Parking for Residents: Coleraine, WA321
 Car Parking: Footways, WA97
 Car Parking: Residents, WA95, WA460
 Car Parking: Revenue in Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge, WA458
 Car Parks: Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge, WA454, WA455
 Car Parks: Staff Guidelines, WA321
 Car-parking Charges: Christmas Waiver, WA329
 Craigtantlet Hills: Road Scheme, WA331
 Craigtantlet Hills: Roundabout, WA331
 Craigtantlet Hills: Through-route, WA331
 Craigtantlet Hills: Traffic Lights, WA331
 Cycles: Parking Facilities, WA99
 Donaghadee Bypass, WA208
 Donaghadee: Dropped Kerbs, WA102
 Donaghadee: Street Lighting, WA102
 DRD: Budget, WA322
 DRD: Capital Projects, WA95
 DRD: Flooding, WA95
 DRD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA207
 DRD: Quangos, WA212
 DRD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA331
 DRD: Staff Suspensions, WA101, WA208
 Dropped Kerbs: Bangor West, WA456
 Dropped Kerbs: Holywood, WA457
 Dropped Kerbs: Millisle, WA209
 Fair Employment Tribunal: Chairperson of NI Water, WA208
 Flags and Emblems, WA206
 Flood Alleviation: Funding, WA214
 Flooding: Call-outs in North Down, WA456
 Flooding: Clonduff Estate, WA214
 Flooding: Drainage Improvements, WA459
 Flooding: Home Insurance, WA320
 Flooding: Killyleagh, WA320
 Flooding: Newcastle, WA207
 Flooding: Resources, WA209
 Footpaths: Bangor, WA321, WA322
 Footpaths: Bangor West, WA456
 Footpaths: Holywood, WA456
 Footpaths: Millisle, WA209
 Holywood Esplanade: No-parking Area, WA96
 Housing: Unfinished Developments, WA326
 Kilkeel Bus Station, WA214
 Larne: Car Park Revenue, WA95
 Local Authorities: Speed Limits, WA101
 Millennium Way, Lurgan, WA332
 Millennium Way, Lurgan: Construction, WA457
 Millennium Way, Lurgan: Costs, WA457
 NI Railways: Passenger Journeys, WA325
 NI Water: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing, WA326
 NI Water: Water and Sewerage Charges, WA207
 NI Water: Water Meters, WA100, WA329
 North Down: Gully Inspection, WA211
 North Down: Penalty Charge Notices, WA96
 North Down: Sewerage Network, WA98
 North Down: Street Lighting, WA98, WA99
 Park-and-ride Services, WA329
 Penalty Charge Notices: Disabled Person's Parking Space, WA320
 Penalty Charge Notices: Kilrea/Garvagh, WA212
 Railway Stations, WA325
 Railways: Ballymena–Belfast, WA213
 Railways: Coleraine–Londonderry, WA459
 Railways: Derry–Coleraine, WA462
 Railways: Freight, WA212
 Railways: Signal Boxes, WA97
 Rathlin Island: Ferry Service, WA100
 Rathlin Island: Roads, WA215
 Road and Water Surety Bonds: North Down, WA323
 Road Safety: Bangor Grammar School, WA321
 Road Safety: Coleraine Schools, WA210
 Roads Service: Removal of Graffiti, WA99
 Roads Service: Road Safety at Schools, WA456
 Roads Service: Rubberised Asphalt Concrete, WA96
 Roads Service: Staff, WA333
 Roads Service: Traffic Management, WA458
 Roads Service: Vesting Land, WA457
 Roads: Adoption, WA211
 Roads: Beechfield and Ashfield Estates, Donaghadee, WA320
 Roads: Common Travel Area, WA97
 Roads: Communication on Delays, WA454
 Roads: Cost of Major Works Programme, WA457
 Roads: Gritting, WA101
 Roads: Oil Spills, WA332
 Roads: Potholes, WA333
 Roads: Roadside Advertising, WA208
 Roads: Speed Limits, WA330
 Rural Transport Fund, WA210
 Salt Bins: North Down, WA326
 Salt Bins: Qualification Criteria, WA328
 Street Lighting: Bangor, WA321, WA322
 Street Lighting: Bangor West, WA456
 Street Lighting: Daylight Hours, WA99
 Street Lighting: Holywood, WA456
 Street Lighting: Millisle, WA211
 Traffic Calming: Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee, WA208
 Traffic Calming: Roads Service Southern Division, WA455
 Traffic Lights: Maintenance/Operation, WA322
 Traffic Lights: Springtown/Northland Roads, Derry, WA462
 Translink: 60+ SmartPass, WA211
 Translink: Bomb Scares, WA322
 Translink: Bus Usage, Antrim Area Hospital, WA461
 Translink: Car Allowances, WA332
 Translink: Disposal of Old Train Sets, WA332
 Translink: Goldline, Dublin–Belfast, WA461
 Translink: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing, WA330
 Translink: Passenger Journeys, WA325
 Translink: Smartlink Uptake, WA458
 Translink: Train Services, WA325
 Transport: Door-2-Door/Rural Transport Fund, WA461
 Travelwise, WA209
 Unadopted Roads: North Down, WA322, WA324
 Water Charges, WA210, WA212

Water Charges: SMEs, WA213
 Water Infrastructure: Belfast, WA209
 West Belfast Taxi Association: Concessionary Fares, WA462
 West Belfast Taxi Association: Fuel Rebate, WA462
 Winter Weather: Contingency Plans, WA459

Kinahan, Mr Danny

Executive Committee Business
 Education Bill: Second Stage, 190, 191, 192, 204, 205
 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 15, 16
 Ministerial Statement
 North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 333
 Oral Answers
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Weightlifting, 251
 Education
 Special Educational Needs: Classroom Assistants, 255
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Health Technology, 22
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 195
 Private Members' Business
 Cross-border Education, 356, 359
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Rivers: Redesignation, WA126
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Lough Neagh: Fish Stocks, WA244
 Education
 Catholic Maintained Schools: Ownership, WA379
 Certificate in Religious Education, WA39
 Dickson Plan, WA136
 Education and Skills Authority, WA37, WA266, WA378, WA379
 Educational Psychologists: Referrals, WA270
 Schools: Area Planning, WA37
 Schools: Workforce Composition, WA141
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Working Group, WA253
 Transport: School Buses, WA252
 Voluntary Grammar Schools, WA270
 Environment
 Taxi Operators Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, WA161
 Finance and Personnel
 Public Procurement: Tenders, WA304
 Justice
 Muckamore: Sex Offenders, WA204
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy, WA114
 Strategic Support Fund, WA227, WA229, WA233

Lo, Ms Anna

Executive Committee Business
 Education Bill: Second Stage, 209
 Oral Answers
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Transforming Your Care, 21
 Justice
 Hate Crime, 26
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 194, 195

Social Development
 Social Enterprise, 91
 Private Members' Business
 Economic Recovery, 61
 Food Banks, 49
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Bovine Tuberculosis: Badgers, WA125
 Fishing: Strangford Lough, WA238
 Watercourses: Saintfield Road, Belfast, WA125
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Languages: First and Second, WA19
 Performing Arts, WA14
 Rugby Road, Belfast: Film Location, WA240
 Environment
 Areas of Townscape Character, WA63
 Packaging: Alternatives to Glass, WA65
 Recycling: Plant-based Plastics, WA65
 Rugby Road, Belfast: Listed Buildings, WA290
 Finance and Personnel
 Rates: Arrears, WA414
 Rates: HMOs, WA74
 Rates: Liability, WA75
 Rates: Non-payment, WA75
 Rates: Private Landlords, WA75
 Rates: Stranmillis, Belfast, WA303
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Belfast City Hospital: Sleep Clinic, WA188
 Sleep Apnoea: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, WA82, WA83
 Justice
 Crime: Use of Glass Bottles, WA93
 Regional Development
 Flooding: Home Insurance, WA320
 Flooding: Resources, WA209
 Water Infrastructure: Belfast, WA209

Lunn, Mr Trevor

Adjournment
 Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 363
 Written Answers
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Sport: Olympic Standard Swimming Pool, Bangor, WA135
 Ulster-Scots Agency, WA244
 Ulster-Scots Strategy, WA127
 Windsor Park, WA127
 Education
 DE: Development Proposals, WA275
 Drumragh Integrated College, WA272, WA273
 Education and Skills Authority, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Controlled Schools, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Integrated Sector, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Statutory/Advisory Role, WA377
 Employment and Learning
 Skills Strategy, WA388
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Belfast International Airport, WA44
 Environment
 Review of Public Administration: Costs, WA164
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Transforming Your Care: Neurological Conditions, WA78

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Social Investment Fund, WA357
 Regional Development
 A2: Timescale, WA98
 A5 Dual Carriageway: Phased Implementation, WA98

Lynch, Mr Seán

Ministerial Statements
 North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 235
 Youth Justice Review, 330
 Oral Answers
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Broadband Delivery UK, 310
 Justice
 Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies, 28
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Forest Service: Fire Breaks, WA6
 Environment
 North/South Ministerial Council: Environment, WA407
 Finance and Personnel
 Government: Tax Revenue, WA416
 Justice
 DOJ: Appointment of Funeral Director, WA89
 Thomas O'Brien, WA94
 Regional Development
 Bike Hire: Belfast, WA213
 Social Development
 Employment and Support Allowance, WA104

Lyttle, Mr Chris

Committee Stage
 Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5, CS6, CS8
 Executive Committee Business
 Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 300
 Ministerial Statement
 Youth Justice Review, 331
 Oral Answers
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 311
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Social Investment Fund, 194
 Private Members' Business
 Cross-border Education, 353
 The Disappeared, 276
 Unemployment, 316, 319, 323, 324
 Written Answers
 Education
 Shared Education, WA266
 Environment
 Climate Change Bill, WA171
 Finance and Personnel
 Flood Alleviation: East Belfast, WA177
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Cancer: Individual Funding Requests, WA309
 Health: North/South Shared Services, WA196
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Childcare Strategy, WA358
 Contested Space/Interface Programme, WA225
 Social Development
 Home Heating: Pay as you Go, WA335

McAleer, Mr Declan

Committee Business
 Farming, 37
 Ministerial Statement
 North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 236
 Oral Answers
 Employment and Learning
 Education Maintenance Allowance, 307
 Regional Development
 Bus Station Offices and Depots, 89
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy, WA237
 Education
 Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore: Newbuild, WA380
 Teachers: All-Ireland Mobility, WA375
 Employment and Learning
 Higher Education: Essential Skills, WA278
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Tourism: Angling, WA399
 Regional Development
 Traffic Lights: Maintenance/Operation, WA322
 Transport: Door-2-Door/Rural Transport Fund, WA461
 Social Development
 Melvin Bridge, Strabane, WA224

McCallister, Mr John

Adjournment
 Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 167
 Committee Stages
 Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5
 Executive Committee Business
 Education Bill: Second Stage, 232
 Ministerial Statements
 Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 98
 Oral Answers
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Organ Donation through Sport, 249
 Regional Development
 Cycling, 89
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly, WA13
 DARD Headquarters: Staff, WA126
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Fragility Fractures Working Group: Report, WA190

McCann, Mr Fra

Assembly Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34, 293
 Executive Committee Business
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 148, 158, 160, 161
 Ministerial Statements
 Housing Strategy, 176
 Welfare Reform, 291
 Oral Answers
 Employment and Learning
 NEETs: Support Programmes, 309
 Justice
 Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, 27
 Private Members' Business
 Food Banks, 47, 55

Written Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
 - National Ploughing Championships, WA239
- Culture, Arts and Leisure
 - DCAL: Procurement, WA245

McCarthy, Mr Kieran

Committee Business

- Farming, 36

Executive Committee Business

- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 12, 13
- Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 76
- Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 180

Ministerial Statements

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 99
- North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 334
- North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 240
- North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 236
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 245
- Public Procurement, 4

Oral Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
 - Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, 197
- Culture, Arts and Leisure
 - Ethnic Minorities: Cultural Identity, 250
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Transforming Your Care, 20, 21
- Justice
 - Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 203

Written Answers

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Fire and Rescue Service: Equipment, WA193
 - Fire and Rescue Service: Money Surrendered, WA307
 - Fire and Rescue Service: Standards, WA193
 - Inflammatory Bowel Disease: Designated Clinical Lead, WA191
 - Outpatient Appointments: Community Transport, WA189
- Regional Development
 - Rural Transport Fund, WA210

McCartney, Mr Raymond

Executive Committee Business

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 227
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 123, 124, 148, 149, 150, 151

Ministerial Statements

- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 247
- Youth Justice Review, 329

Oral Answers

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 23
- Justice
 - Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25

Written Answers

- Education
 - Schools: Entitlement Framework, WA277

McCausland, Mr Nelson

Assembly Business

- Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34, 293

Executive Committee Business

- Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 75, 76
- Suspension of Standing Orders, 177
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 77, 83, 84, 160, 161, 162, 163

Ministerial Statements

- Housing Strategy, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177
- Welfare Reform, 287, 290, 291, 292

Oral Answers

- Social Development
 - Fuel Poverty, 93
 - Housing Associations, 94
 - Housing: Dungannon, 92
 - Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, 92, 93
 - Social Enterprise, 90, 91
 - Supported Living Schemes, 93, 94
 - Town Centres: Investment, 91, 92

Private Members' Business

- Food Banks, 52, 53

Written Answers

- Social Development
 - Appeal Tribunals: Panel Members, WA334
 - Child Maintenance, WA334
 - Children: Income Poverty, WA220, WA345
 - Civil Service Pension Centre, WA111, WA222
 - Civil Service Pension Centre: Vacant Posts, WA463
 - Clandeboyne Village Community Association, WA104
 - Coleraine: Town Centre Development, WA215
 - Community Asset Transfer: Assistance Available, WA344
 - Community Asset Transfer: Consultation, WA468
 - Community Asset Transfer: Group Capacity, WA463
 - Community Asset Transfer: Group Training, WA463
 - Community Asset Transfer: Legislation, WA344, WA348, WA468
 - Community Asset Transfer: Policy, WA468
 - Community Asset Transfer: Policy and Legislation, WA463
 - Community Asset Transfer: Sustainability, WA344
 - Crilly Park, Killeter, County Tyrone, WA108
 - Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals, WA336
 - Disability Living Allowance: Doctors' Fees, WA336
 - Disability Living Allowance: Medical Assessments, WA104
 - DSD Funding: Political Parties, WA112
 - DSD: Access to Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland Website, WA333
 - DSD: Apprenticeships, WA468
 - DSD: Collaborative Working, WA222
 - DSD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA110
 - DSD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA337
 - Employment and Support Allowance, WA104, WA220, WA466
 - Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment, WA223
 - Fort George: Decontamination, WA222
 - Foyle: Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows, WA103
 - Fuel Poverty, WA348
 - Fuel Poverty: Social Development Committee Report, WA351
 - Goal Line Youth Centre, WA221
 - Helm Housing Association, WA108

High Street Task Force, WA469
 Home Heating: Pay as you Go, WA335
 Homeless People, WA340
 Housing Benefit, WA465
 Housing Executive: Audit, WA219
 Housing Executive: Double Glazing, WA110, WA345, WA346
 Housing Executive: External Cyclical Maintenance, WA108
 Housing Executive: Extreme Weather, WA109
 Housing Executive: Fuel Poverty, WA335
 Housing Executive: Private Landlords, WA215
 Housing Executive: Reversible Windows, WA221, WA338
 Housing Executive: Transfers, WA338
 Housing Executive: Underspend, WA220
 Housing Executive: Unfit Properties, Ballymena/Ballymoney, WA468
 Housing Executive: Window Replacement, WA335, WA346
 Housing Executive: Woodland House, Newtownabbey, WA336
 Housing: Complex Housing Needs, WA347
 Housing: Co-ownership, WA112
 Housing: Intimidation Points, WA107
 Housing: Negative Equity, WA221
 Housing: One-bedroom Dwellings, WA334, WA337
 Housing: Waiting List, WA338
 Housing: Waiting Lists for People with a Disability, WA105
 John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA111
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, WA344
 Living over the Shop, WA112
 Melvin Bridge, Strabane, WA224
 Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows: North Down, WA337
 Mortgages: Arrears, WA221
 National Insurance Numbers: Foreign Nationals, WA350
 Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor, WA351
 North Down: Disabled Facilities Grant, WA109
 North Down: Housing Executive Properties, WA109
 Older People: Poverty, WA349
 Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Contract, WA343
 Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Criteria, WA343
 Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA216
 Public Procurement: Social Clauses, WA345
 Red Sky, WA222
 Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, WA110, WA216, WA217, WA218
 Royston House, Belfast: Medical Examination Centre, WA467
 SHAC Housing Association, WA111
 Social Fund: Applications, WA346, WA467
 Social Fund: Expenditure, WA464, WA467
 Social Housing Development Programme, WA220
 Social Housing Newbuilds: Upper Bann, WA335
 Social Housing: Adaptations, WA347
 Social Housing: New Mossley, Newtownabbey, WA224
 Social Housing: Overoccupancy, WA467
 Social Housing: People with Disabilities, WA347
 Social Housing: Waiting List, WA469
 Social Security: Bank Liaison Team, WA469
 Social Security: Computer System, WA108, WA345

Social Security: Payments, WA465
 South Down: Disabled Facilities Grant, WA104
 Universal Credit: Administration, WA466
 Universal Credit: Impact on Low Earners, WA464
 Universal Credit: Job Losses, WA463
 Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballysally, Coleraine, WA335
 Warm Homes Scheme, WA112
 Welfare Reform Act 2012/Welfare Reform Bill, WA341
 Welfare Reform Bill, WA222, WA223
 Welfare Reform Bill: Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA465
 Welfare Reform Bill: Financial Consequences, WA344
 Welfare Reform Bill: HMRC Staff, WA351
 Welfare Reform Bill: Jobs at Risk, WA351
 Welfare Reform Bill: Regulations, WA342, WA464
 Welfare Reform: Block Grant, WA465

McClarty, Mr David

Ministerial Statements
 Housing Strategy, 176
 Oral Answers
 Education
 Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 255
 Social Development
 Town Centres: Investment, 91
 Revised Written Answers
 Environment
 Councils: Payment Terms, RWA3, RWA4, RWA5
 Written Answers
 Environment
 Councils: Payment Terms, WA64
 Finance and Personnel
 Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, WA302
 Justice
 Prison Service: Outline Estate Strategy, WA316
 Regional Development
 Housing: Unfinished Developments, WA326
 Social Development
 Community Asset Transfer: Assistance Available, WA344
 Community Asset Transfer: Legislation, WA344
 Community Asset Transfer: Sustainability, WA344
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, WA344

McCorley, Ms Rosaleen

Ministerial Statement
 Youth Justice Review, 330
 Oral Answers
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Organ Donation through Sport, 249
 Written Answers
 Justice
 PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff, WA205
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre, WA114

McCrea, Mr Basil

Adjournment
 Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 365
 Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 165, 167

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 184, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 334

Oral Answers**Education**

Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 256

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Broadband Delivery UK, 311

Justice

Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 352, 353

Economic Recovery, 62, 64, 65

Unemployment, 322, 323

Written Answers**Employment and Learning**

Education Maintenance Allowance, WA386

Employment: Careers Advisers, WA385

Employment: Information and Opportunities, WA144

Employment: Sector Skills Councils, WA385

Youth Employment Scheme, WA387

Youth Unemployment, WA40

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Science Park, WA57

Science Park: Funding, WA389

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fragility Fractures: Treatment, WA418

Health: Care Agencies, WA81

Health: Direct Payments, WA81

Social Development

Housing: Complex Housing Needs, WA347

Social Housing: Adaptations, WA347

Social Housing: People with Disabilities, WA347

McCrea, Mr Ian**Ministerial Statements**

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 101

Oral Answers**Education**

Magherafelt Learning Partnership, 256

Environment

Planning Service: e-PIC, 347

Finance and Personnel

Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, 349

Regional Development

Bus Station Offices and Depots, 88

Written Answers**Agriculture and Rural Development**

Moyola River, WA119

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Fishing: Moyola River, WA131

Education

AS Results, WA31

Gaelscoil Eoghain, Cookstown, WA37

School Transport: Magherafelt, WA30, WA31

Teachers: Autism-specific Training, WA272

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: Signage Policy, WA390

Environment

Vehicle Licensing: Online Payment, WA158

Vehicle Licensing: Post Offices, WA158

McDevitt, Mr Conall**Executive Committee Business**

Education Bill: Second Stage, 217, 218, 219

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 123, 135, 144, 145, 146, 162

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 99

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 245

Oral Answers**Environment**

Urban Blight, 346

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Transforming Your Care, 20

Justice

Human Trafficking, 29

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 195

Regional Development

Cycling, 89

Social Development

Town Centres: Investment, 91

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 356, 357

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 203

Written Answers**Education**

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and

Assessment: Examinations in England, WA274

Employment and Learning

First4Skills: Administration, WA145

Steps to Work, WA42

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Telecommunications: 4G, WA402

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Dental Fluorosis, WA80

Diabetes: Islet Cell Infusion Operation, WA79

Fluoridation, WA195, WA310

Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy, WA420

McDonnell, Dr Alasdair**Oral Answers****Education**

Primary Schools: Bangor, 254

Regional Development

A55 Outer Ring, Belfast, 88

McElduff, Mr Barry**Executive Committee Business**

Education Bill: Second Stage, 185

Oral Answers**Culture, Arts and Leisure**

Weightlifting, 250

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 342, 352, 357

Written Answers**Education**

Schools: Welfare of Registered Pupils, WA141

Employment and Learning

First4Skills: Apprenticeships, WA148

Environment

Waste Repatriation: Raveagh Road, Eskragh, WA298

Justice

Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, WA315

PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff, WA205

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Older People's Strategy, WA357

McGahan, Ms Bronwyn

Committee Stage

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 14

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 237

Youth Justice Review, 331

Oral Answers

Finance and Personnel

General Register Office: Revenue, 347, 348

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Investment Fund, 194

Social Development

Housing: Dungannon, 92

McGimpsey, Mr Michael

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Ethnic Minorities: Cultural Identity, 250

Private Members' Business

Food Banks, 51

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Boxing: Sectarianism, WA14

Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club, WA14

Education

Schools: Amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and

Donegall Road Primary Schools, WA138

Schools: First Language other than English or Irish,
WA264, WA265

Youth Service Provision: South Belfast, WA257

Employment and Learning

FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses, WA386

First4Skills: Apprenticeships, WA279

First4Skills: Job Losses, WA279

First4Skills: Training Contract, WA279

Queen's University Belfast: Funding, WA282

Queen's University Belfast: Student Accommodation,
WA282

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Caterpillar/FG Wilson, WA47, WA287

FG Wilson: Grant Aid, WA47

Environment

Local Government Reform: Costs, WA170

Finance and Personnel

Foreign Nationals: Migration, WA305

Social Development

National Insurance Numbers: Foreign Nationals, WA350

McGlone, Mr Patsy

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 266

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative

Consent Motion, 339

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 11, 12

Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern
Ireland) 2012, 298

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 130, 135, 136, 152

Ministerial Statements

Housing Strategy, 176

Youth Justice Review, 330

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agri-Food Strategy Board, 200, 201

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: Strabane, 314

Finance and Personnel

Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, 349

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 59, 62

Unemployment, 302, 317, 324

Written Answers

Education

Schools: Asbestos, WA29

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Investment: Job Creation, WA391

Job Creation, WA51

Tourist Board: Funding Support, WA150

Environment

Environment: EU Funding, WA171

Planning: Roadside Advertising, WA163

Finance and Personnel

Funding for Lending Scheme, WA73

People Deemed Out of Work, Unemployed and
Economically Inactive, WA415

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Ambulance Service: Recruitment Drive, WA311

Antrim Area and Causeway Hospitals: Staff Parking
Charges, WA195

Justice

Access NI: Applications, WA318

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Executive: Economic Subgroup, WA226

Regional Development

Fair Employment Tribunal: Chairperson of NI Water,
WA208

NI Water: Water Meters, WA100, WA329

Roads: Roadside Advertising, WA208

Water Charges: SMEs, WA213

Social Development

Homeless People, WA340

Housing: Waiting List, WA338

Social Fund: Applications, WA346

McGuinness, Mr Martin

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 7

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 65

Written Answers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

British-Irish Council: UNSCR 1325, WA113

Child Abuse: Non-institutional Settings, WA355

Childcare Strategy, WA358

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy, WA114

Contested Space/Interface Programme, WA225
 DFP: Press Releases/Press Association, WA356
 Drivers: Ministerial, WA113
 Economy: Executive Meeting, WA358
 European Commissioners: Visits to Northern Ireland, WA2
 Executive: Economic Subgroup, WA226
 Former MoD Lands: Costs, WA356
 Gender Equality Review, WA226
 Gender Equality Strategy, WA2, WA357
 Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WA115
 Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Scope, WA355
 Judicial Appointments Commission: Lay Members, WA355
 Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, WA1, WA225, WA227
 Maze/Long Kesh: Regeneration, WA1
 North/South Ministerial Council: Property, WA113
 OFMDFM: Apprenticeships, WA356
 OFMDFM: Disposals through Auctions, WA357
 OFMDFM: Executive Papers, WA1
 OFMDFM: Travel and Subsistence, WA2
 Older People's Strategy, WA357
 Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre, WA114
 Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA3
 Public Appointments, WA113, WA114
 Social Investment Fund, WA114, WA226, WA356, WA357
 Strategic Support Fund, WA227, WA229, WA233
 "The Gathering", WA2
 Welfare Reform Advisory Group, WA2

Written Ministerial Statements

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Amendments to the Terms of Reference of the
 Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WMS3
 Delivering Social Change Signature Projects, WMS2

McIlveen, Mr David

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 265, 266
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 140

Ministerial Statements

Public Procurement, 4

Oral Answers

Finance and Personnel
 General Register Office: Revenue, 348

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Fishing: River Bush, WA135
 River Bush: Anglers, WA19
 Video Games: Dangers, WA128
 Education
 Primary Schools: Modern Languages, WA30
 Schools: Absenteeism, WA140
 Teachers: Performance-related Pay, WA37
 Employment and Learning
 Higher Education: Maximum Student Number, WA146
 Jobless Households, WA40
 Northern Regional College: Ballymena Campus, WA145
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Small Businesses: Grants/Schemes, WA45
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Physical Activity Referral Programmes, WA191

Justice

Crime: Reasonable Force, WA204
 North Belfast: Civil Disturbances, WA89

McIlveen, Miss Michelle

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 210, 211, 213

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 74
 North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 71

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Sports Clubs: Volunteers, 248
 Education
 Special Educational Needs: Classroom Assistants, 254, 255
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Social Investment Fund, 196

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme, WA116, WA117
 Fishing: Data Collection, WA6
 Fishing: Days at Sea, WA6, WA7
 Fishing: Sentinel Fishery, WA367
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Boxing: Investment, WA14, WA15
 Minority Sports, WA15

Justice

Prison Service: Voluntary Early Retirement, WA315

McKay, Mr Daithí

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage, 258
 Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 260, 264, 266
 Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012, 336
 Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 337
 Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 295, 297

Ministerial Statements

Public Procurement, 3

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 DCAL: Capital and Revenue Funding, 252
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 311

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 62, 63, 68

Revised Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Bed and Breakfasts, RWA1

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 DARD: Apprenticeships, WA360
 DARD: LGBT Sector, WA359
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Alternative Ulster Covenant, 1913, WA134
 Education
 DE: Apprenticeships, WA266

Schools: Amalgamation of St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel, and Glenravel Primary School, WA248

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

DETI: Apprenticeships, WA389

Invest NI: Funding, WA397

National Trust: Creationism, WA400

Tourist Board: Online Accommodation Providers, WA284

Tourist Information Centres, WA153

Environment

MOT Test: Pre-1960 Vehicles, WA296

Planning Service: Staff, WA408

Finance and Personnel

Air Passenger Duty, WA301

Civil Service: Catholic/Protestant Breakdown, WA408

DFP: Apprenticeships, WA410

Executive: Bond Issuance, WA76

'Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-2010', WA73

Public Procurement: Social Clauses, WA303, WA408

Stormont Estate: Sale of Goods, WA179

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

DHSSPS: Apprenticeships, WA420

Justice

DOJ: Apprenticeships, WA319

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

OFMDFM: Apprenticeships, WA355

Regional Development

Rathlin Island: Ferry Service, WA100

Rathlin Island: Roads, WA215

Social Development

DSD: Apprenticeships, WA468

Housing Executive: Reversible Windows, WA221

Housing Executive: Window Replacement, WA335

McKevitt, Mrs Karen

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 170

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 156

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 235

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 72

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Wildlife Intervention Programme, 200

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Sports Clubs: Volunteers, 248

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Renewable Energy, 313

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Culture Night Belfast 2012, WA19

Currach Racing, WA18

Education

GCSE and A Level: Review, WA277

Schools: Broadband Access, WA35

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Broadband: Rural Areas of South Down, WA55

Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas of South Down, WA56

Social Development

Housing: Intimidation Points, WA107

Housing: Waiting Lists for People with a Disability, WA105

South Down: Disabled Facilities Grant, WA104

McLaughlin, Ms Maeve

Ministerial Statement

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 247

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Weightlifting, 250

Finance and Personnel

Pensions: Public Sector, 348

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Transforming Your Care, 20, 21

Social Development

Fuel Poverty, 93

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 68

Unemployment, 320

Written Answers

Employment and Learning

First4Skills: Job Losses, WA144

Foyle College: Lands, WA41

University of Ulster: Magee Campus, WA148

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Fleadh Cheoil 2013: Accommodation, WA45

Forth and Foyle: Job Losses, WA287

Innovation Strategy, WA58

Invest NI: Business Funding, WA47

Investment: Indigenous Businesses, WA401

Environment

Local Government: Capacity Building, WA406

Finance and Personnel

Executive: Borrowing Powers, WA417

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Health and Care Centre: Derry, WA419

Health: Care and Protection Plans, WA192

Psoriasis: Biologic Drugs, WA306

Psoriasis: Treatment, WA307

Safeguarding: Adult Referrals, WA192

Justice

PSNI: Business Cases, WA205

Social Development

Foyle: Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows, WA103

High Street Task Force, WA469

Public Procurement: Social Clauses, WA345

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, WA217

McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 265, 268

Education Bill: Second Stage, 226

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 141, 142, 143

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agri-Food Strategy Board, 200

Finance and Personnel

DFP: Press Releases, 349

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 63

The Disappeared, 273, 274, 276, 281

Written Answers

Employment and Learning

Employment: Over-25s, WA388

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Broadband: Onwave, WA58

Environment

Glenavy: Waste Incinerator, WA160

Justice

Policing: Funding, WA204

McMullan, Mr Oliver

Committee Business

Farming, 34, 36, 40

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 100

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 75

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 236

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 72

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 246

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, 198

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: EU Funding, 251

Employment and Learning

FG Wilson: Job Losses, 306

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Renewable Energy, 313

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Childcare Strategy, 193

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Farm Safety, WA7

Glenariff Forest Park, WA234

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Business Subsidies: Rural Areas, WA46

Crown Estate: Revenue, WA287

Fuel Poverty: Gas Network Extension, WA46

Gas Network: Extension, WA45, WA46

Tourism: Accommodation, WA149

Tourism: Causeway Coast and Antrim Glens, WA152

Environment

Farming: Low Carbon, WA72

Fixed Penalty Notices: Litter, WA294

Marine Bill: Sellafield, WA165

Sea Squirts, WA170

Slurry Spreading, WA71

Waste Management Groups: Preferred Bidders, WA299

Finance and Personnel

Taxation: Film and Television Industry, WA178

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fire and Rescue Service: Grievances, WA81

Justice

Crime: Agricultural and Rural Figures, WA313

Regional Development

Larne: Car Park Revenue, WA95

Roads: Adoption, WA211

McNarry, Mr David

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 184

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: EU Funding, 251

Environment

Urban Blight, 346, 347

Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

DETI: Disposals through Auctions, WA399

DETI: EU Funding, WA396

Tourism: Cruise Ships, WA151, WA152, WA285, WA286

Environment

Goods Vehicles Operator's Licence: Temporary Permit, WA154

Finance and Personnel

DFP: Disposals through Auctions, WA178

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

DHSSPS: Disposals through Auctions, WA427

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

OFMDFM: Disposals through Auctions, WA357

McQuillan, Mr Adrian

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 100

Public Procurement, 4

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture: Renewable Energy, WA238

DARD Headquarters: Benefits to North-west, WA13

DARD Headquarters: Savings, WA358

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Causeway Hospital: Car Parking, WA82

Regional Development

Belfast City Centre: Traffic Congestion, WA101

Maginness, Mr Alban

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 18, 19

Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 338

Ministerial Statement

Youth Justice Review, 329

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Organ Donation through Sport, 249

Education

Special Educational Needs: Classroom Assistants, 255

Employment and Learning

FG Wilson: Job Losses, 307

Justice

Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25

Regional Development

Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 87

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 66, 67

The Disappeared, 273, 274, 275

Unemployment, 323, 324

Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Business Bank, WA401

Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Equality, WA417

Justice

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, WA206

Maskey, Mr Alex

Assembly Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34, 294

Committee Stage

Charities Bill, CS1, CS2, CS3

Executive Committee Business

Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment)

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 76

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 103, 106, 111, 150, 152, 160, 163

Ministerial Statements

Housing Strategy, 174

Welfare Reform, 289

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Broadband: Rural Areas, 201

Written Answers

Employment and Learning

DEL: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA143

Finance and Personnel

Corporation Tax, WA183

Justice

DOJ: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA198

Regional Development

DRD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA207

Social Development

DSD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA110

Fuel Poverty: Social Development Committee Report, WA351

Molloy, Mr Francie**Ministerial Statement**

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 72

Oral Answers

Environment

Tourism: Popular Areas, 345

Written Answers

Employment and Learning

Employment Law Review, WA387

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Economy: Planning Delays, WA153

Social Development

Disability Living Allowance: Medical Assessments, WA104

Molloy, Mr Francie (as Principal Deputy Speaker)**Adjournment**

Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 362

Assembly Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34, 293, 294

Committee Business

Farming, 32, 34

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Consideration Stage, 295

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 17, 18, 19, 20

Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 295, 298

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 143, 144, 145, 146, 149

Ministerial Statements

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 245, 246, 248

Welfare Reform, 289

Oral Answers

Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 20

Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 24

Transforming Your Care, 21

Justice

Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies, 28

Hate Crime, 26

Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25

Private Members' Business

Unemployment, 302

Morrow, The Lord**Executive Committee Business**

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 130

Oral Answers

Finance and Personnel

DfP: Press Releases, 349

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared, 277, 278

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture: Mandatory Microchipping of Animals, WA119

Agriculture: Paperwork and Records for Animals, WA125

DARD: Staff Suspensions, WA117, WA126

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: Staff Suspensions, WA19, WA134

Education

DE: Staff Suspensions, WA138, WA141

Education Works: Advertising Campaign, WA254

Rossmar Special School, Limavady: Ministerial Visit, WA135

Employment and Learning

DEL: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA282

DEL: Staff Suspensions, WA42, WA280

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

DETI: Staff Suspensions, WA395

Environment

Agricultural and Equestrian Animal Carcasses: Illegal Dumping, WA163

Article 31 Planning Applications, WA407

Councils: Casual Staff, WA62

Councils: Part-time Staff, WA293

Councils: Retired Staff Re-employed, WA165

Finance and Personnel

DfP: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA302

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

DHSSPS: Staff Suspensions, WA420, WA425

Prisons: Healthcare, WA192, WA194

Prisons: Vulnerable Prisoners, WA194

Justice

Amnesty International: Brendan Lillis, WA312

Amnesty International: Gerry McGeough, WA199

Amnesty International: Marian Price, WA197

Amnesty International: Martin Corey, WA449

Appeal Tribunals, WA86, WA315

Courts and Tribunals Service: Smoking Policy, WA313

Courts Estate: Disabled Parking, WA448

Courts: Delayed Cases, WA90

Courts: Fermanagh and South Tyrone, WA86

Courts: Preliminary Inquiries, WA90

Criminal Charges: 12 July 2012 Disturbances, WA448

Criminal Justice: Brothel Keeping/Controlling Prostitution, WA88
 Criminal Justice: Diminished Responsibility, WA198
 Criminal Justice: Mandatory Drug Tests, WA200
 Criminal Justice: Offender Levy, WA87
 Criminal Justice: Political Party Office as Address, WA449, WA450
 Criminal Justice: Preliminary Investigations, WA450
 Criminal Justice: Refusal to Answer Questions by Her Majesty's Forces, WA89
 Criminal Justice: Sexual Offences against a Child, WA91
 DOJ: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA314, WA449
 DOJ: Staff Suspensions, WA89, WA197
 Domestic Abuse: Definition, WA92
 Edward Connors, WA92
 Edward Connors: Convictions, WA449
 Edward Connors: Serious Case Review, WA448
 Edward Paul Murphy, WA93, WA199
 Legal Aid: Bernadette McGeary, WA448
 Legal Aid: Bernadette, Stephen and Catherine McGeary, WA448
 Legal Aid: Case 12/090450, WA314
 Legal Aid: Parades Commission Ruling, WA313, WA314
 Legal Aid: Preliminary Inquiries, WA449
 Marian Price, WA450
 Offender Levy, WA449
 Prison Service: Appeals against Dismissal, WA199
 Prison Service: CAJ Meetings, WA87, WA89
 Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline, WA88, WA92, WA202, WA203
 Prison Service: Deaths in Custody, WA202
 Prison Service: Governors, WA313
 Prison Service: Prisoner Assessment Unit Report, WA86
 Prison Service: Staff Dismissals, WA90
 Prison Service: Staff Suspensions, WA92
 Prison Service: Staff Training, WA312
 Prisoners: Austin Creggan, Desmond Hamill, Tommy Hamill and Mark McGilloway, WA93
 Prisoners: Foreign National, WA89
 Prisoners: Remand, WA88
 Prisoners: Samaritans Listener Training Course, WA313
 Prisons: CCTV, WA86
 Prisons: Non-natural Deaths, WA201
 Prisons: Suicides and Attempted Suicides, WA315
 Prisons: Supporting Prisoners at Risk, WA314
 Prostitution: Paying for Services, WA198
 Public Office: Misconduct, WA199

Regional Development

DRD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA331
 DRD: Staff Suspensions, WA101, WA208
 Flags and Emblems, WA206
 Penalty Charge Notices: Disabled Person's Parking Space, WA319

Social Development

Appeal Tribunals: Panel Members, WA334
 DSD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA337
 Employment and Support Allowance, WA220

Private Members' Business

Unemployment, 316, 317

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Archery, WA245
 Environment
 Developers: Planning Conditions, WA170
 Planning: Rose Energy, WA407
 Regional Development
 Car Parks: Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge, WA454, WA455
 Millennium Way, Lurgan, WA332
 Traffic Calming: Roads Service Southern Division, WA455

Nesbitt, Mr Mike

Committee Stage

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5, CS6, CS7, CS8, CS9, CS10, CS11, CS12, CS13

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 8

Private Members' Business

The Disappeared, 277

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Ulster Scots: Reserved Matters, WA245
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Caterpillar: DETI Meeting, WA397
 FG Wilson: Job Losses, WA150, WA285, WA397
 Invest NI: Supply Chains, WA285
 John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA149
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA2
 Social Development
 John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA111

Newton, Mr Robin

Executive Committee Business

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion, 340
 Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 300

Oral Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 311

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 63, 64, 68
 Unemployment, 304, 305, 320

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
 DARD: Capital Budgets, WA4
 DARD: Flooding, WA4
 Employment and Learning
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Numbers, WA387
 Regional Development
 DRD: Capital Projects, WA95
 DRD: Flooding, WA95
 Flooding: Clonduff Estate, WA214

Moutray, Mr Stephen

Oral Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Broadband Delivery UK, 310

Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 73, 74, 75
 North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 71, 72, 73

Oral Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: Capital and Revenue Funding, 252

DCAL: EU Funding, 251

Ethnic Minorities: Cultural Identity, 250

Organ Donation through Sport, 249

Sports Clubs: Volunteers, 248, 249

Weightlifting, 250, 251

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

2013: World Police and Fire Games/City of Culture, WA131

Alternative Ulster Covenant, 1913, WA134

Archery, WA245

Boxing Clubs, WA17, WA128

Boxing: Funding, WA16, WA17, WA133

Boxing: International Competitions, WA18

Boxing: Investment, WA14, WA15

Boxing: Sectarianism, WA14, WA129, WA245

Brandywell Stadium: Business Case, WA243

Bushmills Research Station: Salmon, WA16

City of Culture 2013, WA239, WA241, WA244

Community Festivals Fund, WA131

Culture Company 2013, WA131

Culture Night Belfast 2012, WA19

Culture Night Holywood 2012, WA135

Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Funding, WA240

Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Great Escape, WA240

Currach Racing, WA19

DCAL: Executive Papers, WA15

DCAL: Freedom of Information, WA15

DCAL: Procurement, WA245

DCAL: Quangos, WA133

DCAL: Staff Suspensions, WA19, WA134

Fishing: Illegal, WA367

Fishing: Moyola River, WA131

Fishing: River Bush, WA135

Football Pitches: Drainage, WA18

Goal Line Youth Centre, WA129

Indoor Athletics, WA16

Irish Football Association: Funding, WA239

Languages: First and Second, WA19

Libraries: Stock Expenditure, WA134

Libraries: Stock Update, WA19

Líofa 2015, WA245

Líofa: Custom House Square Event, WA239

Lough Neagh: Fish Stocks, WA244

Lough Neagh: Salmon, WA16

Marching Bands: Funding, WA130, WA134

Minority Sports, WA15

Musical Instruments for Bands Programme, WA128

Northern Ireland Screen: Funding, WA241

Northern Ireland Screen: Funding Programmes, WA241

Northern Ireland Screen: Individual Development Programme, WA242

Performing Arts, WA14

Pipe Bands: Funding, WA17, WA129

Portavoe Reservoir: Disabled Car Parking, WA16

Protestant Band Culture, WA239

Re-imaging Communities, WA15, WA129

River Bush: Anglers, WA19

Rugby Road, Belfast: Film Location, WA241

Salmon: Conservation, WA128

Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club, WA14, WA134

Sport: Nation of Choice, WA243

Sport: Olympic Standard Swimming Pool, Bangor, WA135

Sport: Team GB and NI/Team Ireland, WA131

Sport: Youth Participation, WA244

Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA132

Ulster Scots: Reserved Matters, WA245

Ulster-Scots Agency, WA244

Ulster-Scots Agency: Funding, WA129

Ulster-Scots Strategy, WA127

Video Games: Dangers, WA128

Windsor Park, WA127

Ó hOisín, Mr Cathal

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 74

North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 237

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 71

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 246

Oral Answers

Regional Development

Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 87

Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

2013: World Police and Fire Games/City of Culture, WA131

City of Culture 2013, WA239, WA244

Community Festivals Fund, WA130

Culture Company 2013, WA131

Finance and Personnel

Executive: Capital Funding, WA184

O'Dowd, Mr John

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 170

St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision, 284, 285

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 181, 183, 188, 192, 204, 205, 207, 213, 214, 218, 221, 224, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 150, 151

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 332, 333, 334

Oral Answers

Education

DE: Savings, 252, 253

Donacloney Primary School, 253

Magherafelt Learning Partnership, 256, 257

Primary Schools: Bangor, 254

Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 255, 256

Special Educational Needs: Classroom Assistants, 254, 255

Written Answers

Education

Arvalee School and Resource Centre, WA380

AS Results, WA31

Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, WA247

Bangor Grammar School, WA29

Belfast Education and Library Board: Schoolchildren from North Down, WA142

Catholic Maintained Schools: Ownership, WA379

Certificate in Religious Education, WA36, WA39

Children and Young People's Strategy, WA29, WA375

Computer-based Assessment: Costs, WA271
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment: Curriculum/Examinations Roles, WA253
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment: Examinations in England, WA248,
 WA274
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment: Examinations Policy, WA142
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment: Income, WA139
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment: Qualifications Equivalence, WA254
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and
 Assessment: Review of Qualifications, WA142
 Crawfordsburn Primary School: Transport, WA378
 Curriculum Advisory and Support Service, WA268
 DE Capital Projects: East Derry, WA269
 DE: Apprenticeships, WA266
 DE: Budget, WA277
 DE: Capital Spend, WA267
 DE: Company Cars, WA381
 DE: Development Proposals, WA275
 DE: Non-departmental Public Bodies, WA23
 DE: Quangos, WA38
 DE: Savings Delivery Plan, WA135
 DE: Special Bonus Payments, WA381
 DE: Staff Suspensions, WA138, WA141
 Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore: Newbuild, WA380
 Dickson Plan, WA136
 Drumragh Integrated College, WA273, WA274
 Early Years Fund, WA255
 Early Years Strategy, WA39
 Education and Library Boards: Temporary
 Accommodation, WA249
 Education and Skills Authority, WA37, WA142, WA266,
 WA377, WA378, WA379
 Education and Skills Authority: Membership, WA278
 Education Bill: Public Consultation, WA270
 Education Maintenance Allowance, WA264
 Education Promotion: Advertising Budget, WA136
 Education Works: Advertising Campaign, WA254
 Education: Travellers, WA271
 Educational Psychologists: Referrals, WA28, WA270
 Educational Underachievement: Belfast, WA269
 English Baccalaureate, WA137, WA138
 Free School Meals, WA266, WA382
 Gaelscoil Eoghain, Cookstown, WA37
 GCSE and A Level: Review, WA275, WA277
 GCSE English: Ofqual, WA32
 GCSE: Awarding Organisations, WA32
 GCSE: Grading Issues, WA32, WA247
 Goal Line Youth Centre, WA38
 Higher Education: Working-class Protestants, WA254
 Hollywood Primary School, WA29
 Hollywood Primary School: Enrolment Numbers,
 WA272
 Hollywood Schools Scheme, WA37
 Integrated Services for Children and Young People,
 WA138, WA139, WA140, WA252
 Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor, WA276
 Knockavoe School, WA381
 Literacy and Numeracy: Computer-based
 Assessments, WA374, WA375
 Literacy and Numeracy: Improvement Scheme, WA376
 Ofqual: CCEA Examinations, WA248
 Post-primary Schools: Admissions, WA20

Post-primary Schools: Careers Advice, WA30
 Primary Schools: Admission Appeals, WA259
 Primary Schools: Admissions, WA259, WA270
 Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessment,
 WA263
 Primary Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA259, WA261
 Primary Schools: Mid Ulster, WA259
 Primary Schools: Modern Languages, WA30
 Priorities for Youth, WA27
 Rossmar Special School, Limavady: Ministerial Visit,
 WA135
 School Attendance: Business Travel, WA271
 School Maintenance Backlog: North Down, WA257
 School Maintenance Backlog: Upper Bann, WA249
 School Transport: Magherafelt, WA30, WA31
 Schools: Absenteeism, WA140, WA276
 Schools: Absenteeism, North Down, WA379
 Schools: Admissions, WA367
 Schools: Amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and
 Donegall Road Primary Schools, WA138
 Schools: Amalgamation of St Mary's Primary School,
 Glenravel, and Glenravel Primary School, WA248
 Schools: Animal Welfare Awareness, WA36
 Schools: Area Planning, WA37, WA137, WA269
 Schools: Asbestos, WA29
 Schools: Board Vacancies, WA27
 Schools: Boards of Governors, WA28
 Schools: Broadband Access, WA35
 Schools: Closures, WA274, WA376
 Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA137, WA268
 Schools: Entitlement Framework, WA277
 Schools: First Language other than English or Irish,
 WA264, WA265
 Schools: Focused Audits, WA136
 Schools: Formal Transformation Process, WA35
 Schools: Inspections, WA32, WA374
 Schools: Irish Medium, WA246
 Schools: Key Stage Assessments, WA276
 Schools: Major Projects, WA22
 Schools: Old Gransha Road Site, Bangor, WA29
 Schools: Physical Education, WA26
 Schools: Post-primary Preferences, WA22
 Schools: Private-hire Transport, WA378
 Schools: Relationship and Sexuality Education, WA27
 Schools: Rent, WA269
 Schools: Starting Age, WA26
 Schools: Transport, WA26
 Schools: Travel Passes, WA276
 Schools: Uniform Grants, WA23
 Schools: Welfare of Registered Pupils, WA141
 Schools: Workforce Composition, WA141
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Controlled Schools, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Integrated Sector, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Statutory/Advisory Role,
 WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Working Group, WA253
 Sentinus: STEM, WA255, WA256
 Shared Education, WA266
 Special Educational Needs: Statements, WA380
 Special Educational Needs: Statutory Assessment,
 WA278
 Special Needs Advisers, WA137
 Teachers: All-Ireland Mobility, WA375, WA376
 Teachers: Autism-specific Training, WA272
 Teachers: Performance-related Pay, WA37
 Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: North Down, WA256

Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: Upper Bann, WA138
 Transport: Home to School, WA141
 Transport: School Buses, WA252
 Traveller Education Support Service, WA271
 Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA38
 Voluntary Grammar Schools, WA270
 Youth Service Provision: South Belfast, WA257

O'Neill, Mrs Michelle

Committee Business

Farming, 41, 42, 44

Executive Committee Business

Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 178, 180

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agricultural Wages Board, 198, 199
 Agri-Food Strategy Board, 200, 201
 Broadband: Rural Areas, 201
 Flood Alleviation: Sullatober Water, Carrickfergus, 197
 Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, 197, 198
 Slurry Spreading, 201
 Sudden Oak Death, 198
 Wildlife Intervention Programme, 199, 200

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture: Mandatory Microchipping of Animals, WA119
 Agriculture: Paperwork and Records for Animals, WA125
 Agriculture: Renewable Energy, WA238
 Agriculture: Tuberculosis, WA118, WA124
 Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, WA8
 All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy, WA237
 Animal Welfare, WA13
 Animal Welfare: Convictions, WA3, WA115
 Animal Welfare: Maximum Sentence, WA358
 Animal Welfare: Sentencing, WA234
 Ash Plants: Imports, WA367
 Aspergillosis, WA12
 Ballykelly Forest: Maintenance, WA360
 Bovine Tuberculosis: Badgers, WA125
 Castlewellan Forest Park–Slievenaslat: Walking Trail, WA365
 Cogry Manor/Bridge Road, Burnside: Viable Works, WA366
 Countryside Management Scheme, WA120, WA235, WA236, WA358, WA359, WA363
 DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly, WA5, WA13
 DARD Headquarters: Benefits to North-west, WA13
 DARD Headquarters: Civil Servants, WA12
 DARD Headquarters: Costs, WA12, WA235
 DARD Headquarters: New Posts, WA8
 DARD Headquarters: Relocation, WA360
 DARD Headquarters: Savings, WA358
 DARD Headquarters: Staff, WA126, WA235
 DARD: Annual Shows, WA125
 DARD: Apprenticeships, WA360
 DARD: Capital Budgets, WA4
 DARD: Executive Papers, WA4
 DARD: Flooding, WA4
 DARD: Headquarters, WA115, WA127, WA236
 DARD: LGBT Sector, WA359
 DARD: Press Releases/Press Association, WA364

DARD: Quangos, WA124
 DARD: Staff Suspensions, WA117, WA126
 Eggs: Illegal/Non-compliant, WA359
 Farm Modernisation Programme, WA6
 Farm Modernisation Scheme: Gas Detectors, WA11
 Farm Quality Assurance Scheme: Gas Detectors, WA12
 Farm Safety, WA7, WA237
 Farm Safety Partnership: Website, WA12
 Farm Safety: Noxious Gas Detectors/Monitors, WA119
 Farmers: Financial Assistance, WA236
 Farmers: Income, WA233
 Farms: Gas Detectors, WA11
 Field Boundary Restoration, WA365, WA366
 Fish Stocks, WA3
 Fisheries Division: Relocation, WA127
 Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme, WA117, WA360
 Fishing: Data Collection, WA6
 Fishing: Days at Sea, WA6, WA7
 Fishing: Sentinel Fishery, WA367
 Fishing: Strangford Lough, WA238
 Forest Service Headquarters: Relocation, WA9
 Forest Service: Fire Breaks, WA6
 Forest Service: Job Locations, WA363
 Forest Service: Non-industrial Jobs, WA10
 Glenariff Forest Park, WA234
 Hedgerows, WA9
 Laying Hens Directive, WA13
 Lough Neagh Working Group, WA364, WA365
 Lough Neagh: Public Ownership, WA118
 Loughs Agency: Boat Patrols, WA361
 Moyola River, WA119
 National Parks, WA115
 National Ploughing Championships, WA238, WA239
 Red Squirrel Group: Membership, WA366
 Red Squirrels: Adenovirus and Poxvirus, WA366
 Rivers: Redesignation, WA126
 Rural Development Programme, WA8
 Rural Development Programme: Axes 1–4, WA362
 Rural Development Programme: Axis 3, WA361
 Rural Development Programme: Voluntary Modulation Moneys, WA361
 Sandbags: Rivers Agency/Council Protocol, WA234
 Sea Bass: Ban, WA4
 Single Farm Payment, WA364
 Slurry Spreading, WA117
 Slurry Tanks, WA5, WA117
 Slurry Tanks: Breathing Apparatus, WA236
 Squirrel Forum: Membership, WA365
 Tree Planting, WA8
 Watercourses: Saintfield Road, Belfast, WA126
 Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, WA235
 Wild Animals: Circuses, WA10
 Woodland Cover, WA9
 Young People: Rural Areas, WA238

Overend, Mrs Sandra

Committee Business

Farming, 39, 40

Executive Committee Business

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion, 340
 Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 300

Oral Answers

- Culture, Arts and Leisure
 - DCAL: Capital and Revenue Funding, 252
- Education
 - Magherafelt Learning Partnership, 256
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 - Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 312
- Environment
 - Tourism: Popular Areas, 345
- Finance and Personnel
 - General Register Office: Revenue, 348
- Justice
 - Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies, 28

Private Members' Business

- Economic Recovery, 60, 61
- Unemployment, 303, 318

Written Answers

- Education
 - Primary Schools: Mid Ulster, WA259
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Suicide: Mid Ulster, WA436

Poots, Mr Edwin

Executive Committee Business

- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 83, 122, 126, 135, 136, 139, 142, 145, 150

Ministerial Statements

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 95, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 242, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248

Oral Answers

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Flu Vaccination, 21, 22
 - Health and Care Centres, 24
 - Health Technology, 22, 23
 - Health: Republic of Ireland Patients, 24
 - Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 23, 24
 - Transforming Your Care, 20, 21

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 202, 203

Revised Written Answers

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - Human Embryos, RWA6

Written Answers

- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 - A&E: Threats to Staff, WA85
 - Accident and Emergency: Advanced Nurse Practitioners, WA186
 - Accident and Emergency: Northern and Southern Health and Social Care Trusts, WA418
 - Acute Hospitals: Car Parking, WA192
 - Adoption: Legal Judgement, WA448
 - Altnagelvin Area Hospital: PCI Service, WA420
 - Ambulance Service: Recruitment Drive, WA311
 - Antrim Area and Causeway Hospitals: Staff Parking Charges, WA195
 - Asylum Seekers: Unaccompanied Children, WA310
 - Autism: Adults, WA195
 - Banbridge: Health and Care and Day Care Centres, WA196
 - Bangor Health Centre, WA426
 - Bangor Hospital: X-ray Services, WA193

Belfast City Hospital: Sleep Clinic, WA188

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Agency Staff, WA445

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Meal Provision, WA83

Bone Health: Promotion, WA194

Bone Health: Treatment, WA307

Cancer: Individual Funding Requests, WA309

Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency, WA421

Causeway Hospital: Car Parking, WA82

Causeway Hospital: Consultants, WA197

Children: Healthcare in other Regions, WA79

Chronic Pain: Management, WA422, WA423

Chronic Pain: Services, WA422

Consultant-led Acute Medical Care, WA424

Crohn's Disease/Colitis, WA79

Dental Contracts, WA307

Dental Fluorosis, WA80

DHSSPS: Apprenticeships, WA420

DHSSPS: Disposals through Auctions, WA427

DHSSPS: Quangos, WA189

DHSSPS: Staff Suspensions, WA420, WA425

DHSSPS: Voluntary Early Retirement Schemes, WA185

Diabetes: Islet Cell Infusion Operation, WA79

Disability: Dental Treatment, WA421

Doctors: Locums, WA186

Doctors: Pension Contributions, WA83

Domiciliary Care Workers, WA85

Downe Hospital: Arson, WA425, WA446

Eating Disorders, WA197

Emergency Services: Antisocial Behaviour, Downpatrick, WA436

Family Support Hubs, WA445

Fire and Rescue Service: Equipment, WA193

Fire and Rescue Service: Grievances, WA81

Fire and Rescue Service: Money Surrendered, WA307

Fire and Rescue Service: Standards, WA193

Fluoridation, WA195, WA310

Fracture Liaison Service, WA193

Fragility Fractures Working Group: Report, WA190

Fragility Fractures: Treatment, WA418

Genetically Modified Food, WA306

Gluten-free Food: Prescribing Guidelines, WA80

Goal Line Youth Centre, WA85

Health and Care Centre: Derry, WA419

Health and Social Care Trusts: Pay Differentials, WA446

Health Service: Catering Costs, WA310

Health Service: Vacancies, WA192

Health Trusts: Translation Services, WA78

Health: Care Agencies, WA81

Health: Care and Protection Plans, WA192

Health: Direct Payments, WA81, WA196

Health: North/South Shared Services, WA196

Hospitals: Winter Pressures, WA84

Inflammatory Bowel Disease, WA78

Inflammatory Bowel Disease: Designated Clinical Lead, WA191

Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy, WA420

'Living with Long Term Conditions', WA422

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Legislation, WA425

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring, WA421

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Opening, WA425

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Registration, WA427

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Regulations, WA427, WA447

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: RQIA, WA426
 Melanoma: Yervoy, WA424
 Mental Health: Western Health and Social Care Trust, WA424
 Midwife-led Unit: Omagh, WA424
 Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Travel-to-work Area, WA421
 Older People: Social Isolation, WA196
 Omagh: New Hospital, WA445
 Oncology: Independent Funding Requests, WA425
 Outpatient Appointments: Community Transport, WA189
 Outpatients: Cancelled Appointments, WA311
 Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services, WA185, WA194, WA195, WA308
 Paediatric Physiotherapists, WA81
 Pain Management: Population Plan, WA422
 Physical Activity Referral Programmes, WA191
 Prescription Drugs: Generic and Branded, WA79
 Pressure Ulcers, WA193
 Prisons: Healthcare, WA192, WA194
 Prisons: Vulnerable Prisoners, WA194
 Protect Life: Belfast, WA437
 Psoriasis: Biologic Drugs, WA306
 Psoriasis: Treatment, WA307
 Public Health Agency: Small Grant Scheme, WA195
 Regional Fertility Centre, WA309, WA310, WA418, WA419
 Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children: Clark Clinic, WA82
 Royal Victoria Hospital: Short-stay Unit, WA308
 Safeguarding: Adult Referrals, WA192
 Self-harm/Attempted Suicide, WA436
 Sleep Apnoea: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, WA82, WA83
 Sports Clubs: Defibrillators, WA82
 Sudden Death Notification/"Card before You Leave", WA427
 Suicide/Self-harm: Awareness, WA447
 Suicide/Self-harm: East Belfast, WA427
 Suicide: Belfast, WA428
 Suicide: East Belfast, WA423, WA447
 Suicide: Mid Ulster, WA437
 Suicide: Services and Initiatives, WA426
 Suicide: Strategies, WA425
 Suicide: Tackling Rates, WA423
 Transforming Your Care: Neurological Conditions, WA78
 Transforming Your Care: South West Acute Hospital, WA420
 Ulster Hospital: Car Parking, WA86

Ramsey, Mr Pat

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 239

Oral Answers

Education

Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 256

Employment and Learning

NEETs: Support Programmes, 309

Environment

Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 344

Justice

Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, 27

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

DARD Headquarters: New Posts, WA8

Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Union Flag, WA352, WA469

Education

Education Maintenance Allowance, WA264

Schools: Relationship and Sexuality Education, WA27

Employment and Learning

IBEC/CBI: Proposed Forum, WA386

Finance and Personnel

Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, WA302

Justice

Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation, WA316, WA317

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Child Abuse: Non-institutional Settings, WA355

Regional Development

Railways: Derry-Coleraine, WA462

Social Development

Social Security: Bank Liaison Team, WA469

Ramsey, Ms Sue

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 98

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 244

Oral Answers

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Flu Vaccination, 21

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 202

Written Answers

Employment and Learning

Education Maintenance Allowance, WA41

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Accident and Emergency: Advanced Nurse

Practitioners, WA186

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Agency Staff, WA445

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Meal Provision, WA83

Children: Healthcare in other Regions, WA79

Disability: Dental Treatment, WA421

Doctors: Locums, WA186

Hospitals: Winter Pressures, WA84

Outpatients: Cancelled Appointments, WA311

Protect Life: Belfast, WA437

Royal Victoria Hospital: Short-stay Unit, WA308

Self-harm/Attempted Suicide, WA436

Sudden Death Notification/"Card before You Leave", WA427

Suicide/Self-harm: East Belfast, WA427

Suicide: Belfast, WA428

Robinson, Mr George

Executive Committee Business

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 268

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 101

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 241

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 247

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development

Slurry Spreading, 201

Regional Development
Cycling, 89

Private Members' Business
The Disappeared, 276

Written Answers

Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Air Travel: Direct Flights, WA153
Environment
Planning Application B/2011/0057/F, WA58
Planning: Bovally, Limavady, WA169
Justice
Animal Welfare: Sentencing, WA204
Regional Development
Railways: Signal Boxes, WA97

Robinson, Mr Peter

Executive Committee Business

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 30
Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 83, 142, 143, 145, 146

Oral Answers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Childcare Strategy, 193
Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 194
Parades, 196
Social Investment Fund, 193, 194, 195, 196

Written Answers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
British-Irish Council: UNSCR 1325, WA113
Child Abuse: Non-institutional Settings, WA355
Childcare Strategy, WA358
Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy, WA114
Contested Space/Interface Programme, WA225
DFP: Press Releases/Press Association, WA356
Drivers: Ministerial, WA113
Economy: Executive Meeting, WA358
European Commissioners: Visits to Northern Ireland, WA2
Executive: Economic Subgroup, WA226
Former MoD Lands: Costs, WA356
Gender Equality Review, WA226
Gender Equality Strategy, WA2, WA357
Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WA115
Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Scope, WA355
Judicial Appointments Commission: Lay Members, WA355
Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, WA1, WA225, WA227
Maze/Long Kesh: Regeneration, WA1
North/South Ministerial Council: Property, WA113
OFMDFM: Apprenticeships, WA356
OFMDFM: Disposals through Auctions, WA357
OFMDFM: Executive Papers, WA1
OFMDFM: Travel and Subsistence, WA2
Older People's Strategy, WA357
Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre, WA114
Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA3
Public Appointments, WA113, WA114
Social Investment Fund, WA114, WA226, WA356, WA357
Strategic Support Fund, WA227, WA229, WA233
"The Gathering", WA2
Welfare Reform Advisory Group, WA2

Written Ministerial Statements

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Amendments to the Terms of Reference of the
Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WMS3
Delivering Social Change Signature Projects, WMS2

Rogers, Mr Sean

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 167, 168

Committee Business

Farming, 35, 36

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: Second Stage, 206, 207

Ministerial Statements

Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 100
North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 333
Welfare Reform, 292

Oral Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Slurry Spreading, 201
Finance and Personnel
Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure, 350
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Health Technology, 23
Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Childcare Strategy, 193
Regional Development
Bus Station Offices and Depots, 89
Social Development
Housing: Dungannon, 92

Private Members' Business

Cross-border Education, 352

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, WA8
Rural Development Programme, WA8
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Domiciliary Care Workers, WA85
Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Social Investment Fund, WA226
Regional Development
Flooding: Newcastle, WA207

Ross, Mr Alastair

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 124, 138, 139, 140, 141, 151

Oral Answers

Employment and Learning
Education Maintenance Allowance, 308

Private Members' Business

Economic Recovery, 61, 62, 63
Unemployment, 324

Written Answers

Agriculture and Rural Development
Farm Safety, WA237
Environment
Single-use Carrier Bags, WA298, WA299

Ruane, Ms Caitriona

Adjournment

Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 164, 165, 166, 170

Executive Committee Business

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 220, 221
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 17
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 128, 129, 130

Ministerial Statement

- North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 239

Oral Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Sudden Oak Death, 198

Written Answers

- Finance and Personnel
- Narrow Water Bridge, WA417
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
- Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WA115
- Social Development
- Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment, WA223

Sheehan, Mr Pat**Executive Committee Business**

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 213, 214

Oral Answers

- Finance and Personnel
- Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure, 350
- Social Development
- Town Centres: Investment, 91

Speaker, The (Mr William Hay)**Adjournment**

- St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision, 282

Assembly Business

- Committee Membership, 173
- Suspension of Standing Orders, 6

Committee Business

- Standing Order 59, 271, 272

Executive Committee Business

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 190, 191, 192, 216, 224
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16
- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 77, 86, 119, 120, 123, 124, 125, 126, 160, 162, 163

Ministerial Statements

- Housing Strategy, 175
- North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 240, 241
- Public Procurement, 4, 5

Oral Answers

- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Agri-Food Strategy Board, 201
- Broadband: Rural Areas, 202
- Employment and Learning, 306
- NEETs: Support Programmes, 309
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group, 310
- Broadband Delivery UK, 311
- Employment: Demographic Changes, 314
- Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 312
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, 193
- Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 195
- Social Investment Fund, 194

Private Members' Business

- Economic Recovery, 63, 64, 65, 67, 68, 69
- The Disappeared, 272, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280
- Unemployment, 305, 316, 318, 319

Spratt, Mr Jimmy**Executive Committee Business**

- Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 125

Oral Answers

- Justice
- Human Trafficking, 28, 29
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
- Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 195
- Regional Development
- A55 Outer Ring, Belfast, 88

Written Answers

- Culture, Arts and Leisure
- Boxing Clubs, WA17
- Boxing: Funding, WA17
- Environment
- Planning Application Y/2008/0365/F, Carryduff, WA404
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- Regional Fertility Centre, WA309, WA310, WA418, WA419

Storey, Mr Mervyn**Adjournment**

- Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 165, 166, 167

Committee Business

- Farming, 34

Executive Committee Business

- Education Bill: Second Stage, 182, 184, 185, 187, 188, 189, 191, 192, 211, 215, 216, 217, 219, 229
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 19

Ministerial Statements

- Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 101
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 246

Oral Answers

- Culture, Arts and Leisure
- Weightlifting, 250
- Education
- Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 255
- Justice
- Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, 27

Private Members' Business

- Cross-border Education, 360

Written Answers

- Education
- Children and Young People's Strategy, WA375
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations in England, WA248
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Income, WA139
- Curriculum Advisory and Support Service, WA268
- DE: Capital Spend, WA267
- DE: Non-departmental Public Bodies, WA23
- DE: Savings Delivery Plan, WA135
- Early Years Fund, WA255
- Education: Travellers, WA271
- Educational Underachievement: Belfast, WA269
- Free School Meals, WA266, WA382
- GCSE English: Ofqual, WA32
- GCSE: Awarding Organisations, WA32

GCSE: Grading Issues, WA32
 Integrated Services for Children and Young People, WA138, WA139, WA140, WA252
 Ofqual: CCEA Examinations, WA248
 Post-primary Schools: Admissions, WA20
 Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessment, WA263
 School Attendance: Business Travel, WA271
 Schools: Admissions, WA367
 Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA268
 Schools: Focused Audits, WA136
 Schools: Formal Transformation Process, WA35
 Schools: Inspections, WA32, WA374
 Schools: Major Projects, WA22
 Schools: Rent, WA269
 Schools: Uniform Grants, WA23
 Traveller Education Support Service, WA271
 Employment and Learning
 Northern Regional College: Ballymoney Campus, WA387
 Stranmillis University College: Chairperson, WA283
 Environment
 School Buses: Defects, WA72
 Used Tyres: Disposal, WA159
 Finance and Personnel
 DFP: Savings Delivery Plan, WA417
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Causeway Hospital: Consultants, WA197
 Justice
 Magilligan Prison, WA206
 Regional Development
 Bridges: Risk Assessment, WA460
 Bridges: Road-over-rail, WA460, WA461
 Railways: Ballymena–Belfast, WA213
 Roads Service: Road Safety at Schools, WA456

Swann, Mr Robin

Committee Business
 Farming, 39, 44
 Ministerial Statements
 North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 74
 North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 72
 Oral Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Wildlife Intervention Programme, 199
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Sports Clubs: Volunteers, 248
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Renewable Energy, 313
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Health and Care Centres, 24
 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
 Parades, 196
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Agriculture: Tuberculosis, WA118
 Countryside Management Scheme, WA120, WA234, WA236, WA358, WA359
 DARD: Headquarters, WA127
 DARD: Press Releases/Press Association, WA364
 Eggs: Illegal/Non-compliant, WA359
 Lough Neagh Working Group, WA364, WA365
 Lough Neagh: Public Ownership, WA118
 Loughs Agency: Boat Patrols, WA361

Rural Development Programme: Axes 1–4, WA362
 Rural Development Programme: Voluntary Modulation Moneys, WA361
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Boxing: Funding, WA16
 Bushmills Research Station: Salmon, WA16
 Fishing: Illegal, WA367
 Líofo: Custom House Square Event, WA239
 Lough Neagh: Salmon, WA16
 Pipe Bands: Funding, WA17, WA129
 Re-imaging Communities, WA15
 Education
 Special Needs Advisers, WA137
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Child Trust Fund, WA45, WA286
 Economy: Pipe Bands, WA44
 Environment
 Highway Code: Irish Language, WA288, WA289
 Finance and Personnel
 Taxation: Conacre System, WA74
 Health, Social Services and Public Safety
 Consultant-led Acute Medical Care, WA424
 Regional Development
 NI Water: Water and Sewerage Charges, WA207
 Social Development
 DSD: Access to Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland Website, WA333
 Living over the Shop, WA112

Weir, Mr Peter

Executive Committee Business
 Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 262, 264, 265
 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 13
 Ministerial Statements
 North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 240
 North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 236
 Public Procurement, 4
 Oral Answers
 Education
 Primary Schools: Bangor, 254
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment
 Renewable Energy, 312
 Regional Development, 86
 Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 86, 87
 Private Members' Business
 Economic Recovery, 62, 64, 67, 68
 Food Banks, 50, 55
 Written Answers
 Agriculture and Rural Development
 Animal Welfare: Maximum Sentence, WA358
 Animal Welfare: Sentencing, WA234
 DARD Headquarters: Costs, WA235
 DARD Headquarters: Staff, WA126, WA235
 Forest Service: Job Locations, WA363
 Wild Animals: Circuses, WA10
 Assembly Commission
 Pensions: Ministers/MLAs, WA352
 Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Boxing Clubs, WA128
 Culture Night Hollywood 2012, WA135
 Libraries: Stock Expenditure, WA134
 Libraries: Stock Update, WA19
 Marching Bands: Funding, WA130, WA134

- Portavoe Reservoir: Disabled Car Parking, WA16
Sport: Nation of Choice, WA243
- Education**
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, WA247
Belfast Education and Library Board: Schoolchildren from North Down, WA142
Early Years Strategy, WA39
Education and Skills Authority, WA141
Education Promotion: Advertising Budget, WA136
GCSE and A Level: Review, WA275
Holywood Primary School: Enrolment Numbers, WA272
Holywood Schools Scheme, WA37
Literacy and Numeracy: Improvement Scheme, WA376
Primary Schools: Admission Appeals, WA259
Primary Schools: Admissions, WA259, WA270
Primary Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA259, WA261
School Maintenance Backlog: North Down, WA257
Schools: Absenteeism, North Down, WA379
Schools: Board Vacancies, WA27
Schools: Boards of Governors, WA28
Schools: Closures, WA376
Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA268
Schools: Irish Medium, WA246
Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: North Down, WA256
- Employment and Learning**
Education Maintenance Allowance, WA41
Steps to Work/Step Ahead, WA42
Universities: Funding, WA279
- Enterprise, Trade and Investment**
Broadband: North Down, WA395, WA396
Tourism: Bed and Breakfasts, North Down, WA396
- Environment**
Beaches, WA160
Cyclists: Road Fatalities, WA156
DOE: Proposed Legislation, WA292
Flooding: Compensation, WA404
Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group, WA166, WA167
- Finance and Personnel**
Pensions: Public Sector, WA183
Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA415
Youth Unemployment: Age Range, WA410
Youth Unemployment: UK Comparisons, WA410
- Health, Social Services and Public Safety**
DHSSPS: Voluntary Early Retirement Schemes, WA185
Doctors: Pension Contributions, WA83
Prescription Drugs: Generic and Branded, WA79
Sports Clubs: Defibrillators, WA82
Suicide: East Belfast, WA447
Suicide: Services and Initiatives, WA426
Suicide: Strategies, WA425
Ulster Hospital: Car Parking, WA86
- Justice**
Antisocial Behaviour: Combating, WA453
Courts and Tribunals Service: Small Claims, WA92
Crime: Statistics, WA454
Human Trafficking: North Down, WA200
Speeding: A1/A2, WA313
Victims and Witnesses of Crime: Justice Committee Report, WA203
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister**
Economy: Executive Meeting, WA358
- Regional Development**
Adopted Roads and Sewers: North Down, WA329
Adopted Roads: North Down, WA324
Car Parking: Residents, WA95
- Local Authorities: Speed Limits, WA101
North Down: Gully Inspection, WA211
North Down: Penalty Charge Notices, WA96
Road and Water Surety Bonds: North Down, WA323
Roads: Communication on Delays, WA454
Translink: 60+ SmartPass, WA211
Translink: Car Allowances, WA332
Unadopted Roads: North Down, WA322, WA324
Winter Weather: Contingency Plans, WA459
- Social Development**
Children: Income Poverty, WA345
Civil Service Pension Centre: Vacant Posts, WA463
Housing Executive: Audit, WA219
Housing Executive: External Cyclical Maintenance, WA108
Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows: North Down, WA337
North Down: Disabled Facilities Grant, WA109
North Down: Housing Executive Properties, WA109
Social Housing: Waiting List, WA469
Social Security: Computer System, WA345
- Wells, Mr Jim**
Executive Committee Business
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 10, 14
Ministerial Statements
Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 98
Private Members' Business
Food Banks, 51, 52
Question for Urgent Oral Answer
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 202
Written Answers
Agriculture and Rural Development
Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme, WA360
Laying Hens Directive, WA13
Rural Development Programme: Axis 3, WA361
Slurry Tanks: Breathing Apparatus, WA235
Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Abbey Lodge Hotel Site, Downpatrick, WA55
Tourism: Capital Assistance for Accommodation, WA56
Environment
Driver and Vehicle Agency: Vehicle Mileage, WA291
MOT Test: Vehicle Mileage, WA291
Sea Fishing Defence, WA157
Finance and Personnel
Rates: Orange Halls, WA409
Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Legislation, WA425
Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Opening, WA425
Justice
Legal Aid, WA198
Small Claims Court, WA94
Regional Development
Kilkeel Bus Station, WA213
Translink: Goldline, Dublin-Belfast, WA461
- Wilson, Mr Sammy**
Assembly Business
Suspension of Standing Orders, 6
Executive Committee Business
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage, 257, 259
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: First Stage, 6

-
- Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 259, 268, 269, 270
 - Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012, 335, 336
 - Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 337, 338
 - Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 297
 - Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 84
 - Ministerial Statements
 - Public Procurement, 1, 3, 4, 5
 - Oral Answers
 - Finance and Personnel
 - Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure, 350
 - DFP: Press Releases, 349
 - General Register Office: Revenue, 347, 348
 - Government: Procurement, 350, 351
 - Pensions: Public Sector, 348
 - Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, 349
 - Written Answers
 - Finance and Personnel
 - Air Passenger Duty, WA183, WA301
 - Arm's-length Bodies: Payment of Invoices, WA413
 - Business Bank, WA184
 - Business: Redundancies, WA300
 - Civil Law Reform, WA417
 - Civil Service: Catholic/Protestant Breakdown, WA408
 - Civil Service: Community Background Profile, WA179
 - Civil Service: Equality, WA418
 - Civil Service: Priority Pool for Transfer, Foyle, WA414
 - Civil Service: Surplus Posts, WA175
 - Civil Service: Vacant Posts, WA172
 - Civil Service: Workforce Composition, WA76
 - Corporation Tax, WA184
 - DFP Press Releases: Press Association, WA411
 - DFP: Apprenticeships, WA410
 - DFP: Disposals through Auctions, WA178
 - DFP: Press Releases, WA185
 - DFP: Quangos, WA178
 - DFP: Savings Delivery Plan, WA417
 - DFP: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA302
 - Directive 2011/7/EU: Consultation, WA413
 - Empty Premises Relief Scheme, WA411
 - Executive: Bond Issuance, WA76
 - Executive: Borrowing Powers, WA417
 - Executive: Capital Funding, WA184
 - Family Law: Access Rights, WA74
 - Flood Alleviation: East Belfast, WA177
 - Foreign Nationals: Migration, WA305
 - Funding for Lending Scheme, WA73
 - Government: Financial Accountability, WA416
 - Government: Non-tax Revenue, WA417
 - Government: Procurement, WA417
 - Government: Tax Revenue, WA416
 - Grants: Online Application Portal, WA302
 - Multiple Deprivation Measure, WA77
 - Narrow Water Bridge, WA417
 - 'Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-2010', WA73
 - Peace III, WA183, WA301
 - Pensions: Public Sector, WA183
 - People Deemed Out of Work, Unemployed and Economically Inactive, WA415
 - Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, WA302
 - Public Procurement: Social Clauses, WA303, WA408
 - Public Procurement: Tenders, WA304
 - Public Sector: Decentralisation, WA77
 - Rates: Arrears, WA414
 - Rates: Empty Homes, WA184
 - Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, WA302
 - Rates: Exemptions, WA73
 - Rates: Exemptions for Churches, WA76
 - Rates: HMOs, WA74
 - Rates: Liability, WA75
 - Rates: Non-payment, WA75
 - Rates: Orange Halls, WA409
 - Rates: Payment Deferment, WA77
 - Rates: Private Landlords, WA75
 - Rates: Rating Debt, WA300
 - Rates: Stranmillis, Belfast, WA303
 - Registered Companies: VAT/PAYE, WA177
 - Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, WA413
 - Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Lagan Valley, WA184
 - Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Upper Bann, WA181
 - Stormont Estate: Event Costs, WA302
 - Stormont Estate: Sale of Goods, WA179
 - Suicide: Change in Rate, WA415
 - Suicide: East Belfast, WA411
 - Taxation: Conacre System, WA74
 - Taxation: Film and Television Industry, WA178
 - Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA415
 - Unemployment: Numbers, WA179
 - Vacant Business Premises: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Ballycastle, WA182
 - Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Moyle, WA182
 - Welfare Reform Bill, WA183
 - Welfare Reform Bill: Spending, WA305
 - Youth Unemployment: Age Range, WA410
 - Youth Unemployment: Change in Rate, WA409
 - Youth Unemployment: UK Comparisons, WA410

Business Index

2

2013: World Police and Fire Games/City of Culture, WA131

A

A&E: Threats to Staff, WA85
A2: Timescale, WA98
A2: Update, WA213
A22: Flooding, WA214
A5 Dual Carriageway: Phased Implementation, WA98
A6 Dual Carriageway, WA211
A55 Outer Ring, Belfast, 88
Abbey Lodge Hotel Site, Downpatrick, WA55
Access NI: Applications, WA318
Accident and Emergency: Advanced Nurse Practitioners, WA186
Accident and Emergency: Northern and Southern Health and Social Care Trusts, WA418
Active Travel Demonstration Projects, WA215
Acute Hospitals: Car Parking, WA191, WA192
Adopted Roads and Sewers: North Down, WA329
Adopted Roads: North Down, WA324
Adoption: Legal Judgement, WA447, WA448
Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group, 309, 310, WA281, WA282
Agricultural and Equestrian Animal Carcasses: Illegal Dumping, WA163
Agricultural Wages Board, 198, 199
Agriculture: Mandatory Microchipping of Animals, WA119
Agriculture: Paperwork and Records for Animals, WA125
Agriculture: Renewable Energy, WA238
Agriculture: Tuberculosis, WA118, WA123, WA124
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, WA8
Agri-Food Strategy Board, 200, 201
Air Passenger Duty, WA183, WA286, WA301
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: First Stage, 6
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Accelerated Passage, 257–9
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Second Stage, 259–71
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Consideration Stage, 295
Air Travel: Direct Flights, WA153
All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy, WA237
Alternative Ulster Covenant, 1913, WA134
Altnagelvin Area Hospital: PCI Service, WA420
Ambulance Service: Recruitment Drive, WA311
Amendments to the Terms of Reference of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WMS3
Amnesty International: Brendan Lillis, WA312
Amnesty International: Gerry McGeough, WA199
Amnesty International: Marian Price, WA197
Amnesty International: Martin Corey, WA449
Animal Cruelty: Offences, WA90
Animal Welfare, WA13
Animal Welfare: Convictions, WA3, WA115, WA315
Animal Welfare: Maximum Sentence, WA358
Animal Welfare: Sentencing, WA204, WA234
Animals: Threat of Extinction, WA66
Antisocial Behaviour: Combating, WA453

Antrim Area and Causeway Hospitals: Staff Parking Charges, WA195
Appeal Tribunals, WA86, WA315
Appeal Tribunals: Panel Members, WA334
Arc21: Energy from Waste, WA405
Archery, WA245
Areas of Townscape Character, WA63
Arm's-length Bodies: Payment of Invoices, WA413
Article 31 Planning Applications, WA407
Arvalee School and Resource Centre, WA380
AS Results, WA31
Ash Plants: Imports, WA366, WA367
Aspergillosis, WA12, WA159
Assisted Suicide: Legislation, WA314
Asylum Seekers: Unaccompanied Children, WA310
Autism: Adults, WA195

B

Ballykelly Forest: Maintenance, WA360
Ballymena Railway Station, WA326
Banbridge: Health and Care and Day Care Centres, WA196
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, WA247
Bangor Grammar School, WA29
Bangor Health Centre, WA426
Bangor Hospital: X-ray Services, WA193
Beaches, WA60, WA160
Bed and Breakfasts, RWA1
Belfast City Centre: Bus Lanes, WA102, WA103
Belfast City Centre: Traffic Congestion, WA101, WA102
Belfast City Hospital: Sleep Clinic, WA188
Belfast Education and Library Board: Schoolchildren from North Down, WA142
Belfast Harbour Commissioners: Transfer of Funds, WA207
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Agency Staff, WA445
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Meal Provision, WA83
Belfast International Airport, WA44
Biffa/Arc21, WA405
Biffa: Waste Infrastructure, WA402
Biffa: Waste Management, WA403
Bike Hire: Belfast, WA213
Biomass Heating, WA50
Bone Health: Promotion, WA194
Bone Health: Treatment, WA307
Bovine Tuberculosis: Badgers, WA125
Boxing Clubs, WA17, WA128
Boxing: Funding, WA16, WA17, WA133
Boxing: International Competitions, WA18
Boxing: Investment, WA14, WA15
Boxing: Sectarianism, WA14, WA129, WA245
Brandywell Stadium: Business Case, WA243
Bridges: Risk Assessment, WA460
Bridges: Road-over-rail, WA460, WA461
British-Irish Council: UNSCR 1325, WA113
Broadband Delivery UK, 310, 311
Broadband: Garvaghy/Ballygawley, County Tyrone, WA398
Broadband: North Down, WA395, WA396
Broadband: Onwave, WA58
Broadband: Rural Areas, 201, 202
Broadband: Rural Areas of South Down, WA55, WA56
Budget: Non-identifiable Expenditure, 350
Burglaries: Foyle, WA451

Bus Station Offices and Depots, 88, 89
 Bushmills Research Station: Salmon, WA16
 Business Bank, WA184, WA401, WA402
 Business Improvement Districts Bill: Extension of Committee Stage, 32
 Business Subsidies: Rural Areas, WA46
 Business: Funding for Coleraine and Limavady, WA151
 Business: Redundancies, WA299, WA300
 Business: Support for Owners, WA149

C

Cancer: Individual Funding Requests, WA309
 Car Parking for Residents: Coleraine, WA321
 Car Parking: Footways, WA96, WA97
 Car Parking: Residents, WA95, WA460
 Car Parking: Revenue in Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge, WA458
 Car Parks: Lurgan/Portadown/Banbridge, WA454, WA455
 Car Parks: Staff Guidelines, WA321
 Car-parking Charges: Christmas Waiver, WA329
 Castlewellan Forest Park–Slievenaslat: Walking Trail, WA365
 Caterpillar/FG Wilson, WA47, WA287
 Caterpillar: DETI Meeting, WA397
 Catholic Maintained Schools: Ownership, WA379
 Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency, WA421
 Causeway Hospital: Car Parking, WA82
 Causeway Hospital: Consultants, WA197
 Cavanacaw: Gold Mine, WA65, WA154, WA288
 Certificate in Religious Education, WA36, WA39, WA279, WA280
 Charities Bill, CS1, CS2, CS3
 Chauffeurs, WA406
 Child Abuse: Non-institutional Settings, WA355
 Child Maintenance, WA334
 Child Trust Fund, WA45, WA286
 Childcare Strategy, 193, WA358
 Children and Young People's Strategy, WA29, WA375
 Children: Healthcare in other Regions, WA79
 Children: Income Poverty, WA220, WA345
 Chronic Pain: Management, WA422, WA423
 Chronic Pain: Services, WA422
 City of Culture 2013, WA239, WA241, WA244
 Civil Law Reform, WA416, WA417
 Civil Service Pension Centre, WA111, WA222
 Civil Service Pension Centre: Vacant Posts, WA463
 Civil Service: Catholic/Protestant Breakdown, WA408
 Civil Service: Community Background Profile, WA179
 Civil Service: Equality, WA417, WA418
 Civil Service: Priority Pool for Transfer, Foyle, WA414
 Civil Service: Surplus Posts, WA175
 Civil Service: Vacant Posts, WA172
 Civil Service: Workforce Composition, WA76
 Clondeboyne Village Community Association, WA104
 Climate Change Adaptation Programme, WA61
 Climate Change Bill, WA171
 Cogry Manor/Bridge Road, Burnside: Viable Works, WA366
 Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy, WA114
 Coleraine: Town Centre Development, WA215
 Committee Membership, 173
 Community Asset Transfer: Assistance Available, WA344
 Community Asset Transfer: Consultation, WA468
 Community Asset Transfer: Group Capacity, WA462, WA463
 Community Asset Transfer: Group Training, WA463
 Community Asset Transfer: Legislation, WA344, WA348, WA468
 Community Asset Transfer: Policy, WA468
 Community Asset Transfer: Policy and Legislation, WA463
 Community Asset Transfer: Sustainability, WA344
 Community Festivals Fund, WA130, WA131
 Community Groups: North Down, WA451
 Computer-based Assessment: Costs, WA271
 Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012, 335–6
 Consultant-led Acute Medical Care, WA424
 Contested Space/Interface Programme, WA225
 Coroners Service: Removal of Bodies, 28
 Corporation Tax, WA183, WA184
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Curriculum/Examinations Roles, WA253
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations in England, WA248, WA274
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Examinations Policy, WA142
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Income, WA139
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Qualifications Equivalence, WA253, WA254
 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment: Review of Qualifications, WA142
 Councils: Adverse Weather, WA164
 Councils: Bonfire Sites, WA155
 Councils: Casual Staff, WA62
 Councils: Management Structures, WA155, WA156
 Councils: Part-time Staff, WA293
 Councils: Payment Terms, WA64, WA160, RWA3, RWA4, RWA5
 Councils: Retired Staff Re-employed, WA165
 Countryside Management Scheme, WA120, WA234, WA235, WA236, WA358, WA359, WA363
 Courts and Tribunals Service: Small Claims, WA92
 Courts and Tribunals Service: Smoking Policy, WA313, WA314
 Courts Estate: Disabled Parking, WA448
 Courts: Delayed Cases, WA90
 Courts: Fermanagh and South Tyrone, WA86
 Courts: Hearing Centres, WA93
 Courts: Preliminary Inquiries, WA90
 Craigantlet Hills: Road Scheme, WA331
 Craigantlet Hills: Roundabout, WA331
 Craigantlet Hills: Through-route, WA331
 Craigantlet Hills: Traffic Lights, WA331
 Crawfordsburn Primary School: Transport, WA378
 Crilly Park, Killeter, County Tyrone, WA108
 Crime: Agricultural and Rural Figures, WA313
 Crime: Reasonable Force, WA204
 Crime: Statistics, WA454
 Crime: Use of Glass Bottles, WA93
 Criminal Charges: 12 July 2012 Disturbances, WA448
 Criminal Justice: Anonymity Orders, WA318
 Criminal Justice: Brothel Keeping/Controlling Prostitution, WA88
 Criminal Justice: Diminished Responsibility, WA198
 Criminal Justice: Mandatory Drug Tests, WA200, WA201
 Criminal Justice: Offender Levy, WA87, WA88
 Criminal Justice: Political Party Office as Address, WA449, WA450
 Criminal Justice: Preliminary Investigations, WA450
 Criminal Justice: Refusal to Answer Questions by Her Majesty's Forces, WA89
 Criminal Justice: Sexual Offences against a Child, WA91
 Crohn's Disease/Colitis, WA79

Cross-border Education, 342–3, 351–61
 Crown Estate: Revenue, WA287
 Culture Company 2013, WA131
 Culture Night Belfast 2012, WA19
 Culture Night Holywood 2012, WA135
 Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Funding, WA240
 Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: Great Escape, WA240
 Currach Racing, WA18, WA19
 Curriculum Advisory and Support Service, WA268
 Cycles: Parking Facilities, WA99
 Cycling, 89, 90
 Cyclists: Road Fatalities, WA156, WA157

D

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly, WA5, WA13
 DARD Headquarters: Benefits to North-west, WA13
 DARD Headquarters: Civil Servants, WA12
 DARD Headquarters: Costs, WA12, WA235
 DARD Headquarters: New Posts, WA8
 DARD Headquarters: Relocation, WA360
 DARD Headquarters: Savings, WA358
 DARD Headquarters: Staff, WA126, WA235
 DARD: Annual Shows, WA125
 DARD: Apprenticeships, WA360
 DARD: Capital Budgets, WA4
 DARD: Executive Papers, WA4
 DARD: Flooding, WA4
 DARD: Headquarters, WA115, WA127, WA236
 DARD: LGBT Sector, WA359
 DARD: Press Releases/Press Association, WA364
 DARD: Quangos, WA124
 DARD: Staff Suspensions, WA117, WA126
 DCAL: Capital and Revenue Funding, 252
 DCAL: EU Funding, 251
 DCAL: Executive Papers, WA15
 DCAL: Freedom of Information, WA15
 DCAL: Procurement, WA245
 DCAL: Quangos, WA133
 DCAL: Staff Suspensions, WA19, WA134
 DE Capital Projects: East Derry, WA269
 DE: Apprenticeships, WA266
 DE: Budget, WA277
 DE: Capital Spend, WA267
 DE: Company Cars, WA381
 DE: Development Proposals, WA275
 DE: Non-departmental Public Bodies, WA23
 DE: Quangos, WA38
 DE: Savings, 252, 253
 DE: Savings Delivery Plan, WA135
 DE: Special Bonus Payments, WA381
 DE: Staff Suspensions, WA138, WA141
 Dean Maguire College, Carrickmore: Newbuild, WA380
 DEL: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA143
 DEL: Quangos, WA147
 DEL: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA282, WA283
 DEL: Staff Suspensions, WA42, WA280
 Delivering Social Change Signature Projects, WMS2
 Dental Contracts, WA307
 Dental Fluorosis, WA80
 DETI: Apprenticeships, WA389
 DETI: Collaborative Research, WA154
 DETI: Disposals through Auctions, WA399
 DETI: EU Funding, WA396
 DETI: Quangos, WA149
 DETI: Staff Suspensions, WA395
 Developers: Planning Conditions, WA170
 DFP Press Releases: Press Association, WA411
 DFP: Apprenticeships, WA410
 DFP: Disposals through Auctions, WA178
 DFP: Press Releases, WA185, 349
 DFP: Press Releases/Press Association, WA356
 DFP: Quangos, WA178
 DFP: Savings Delivery Plan, WA417
 DFP: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA302
 DHSSPS: Apprenticeships, WA420
 DHSSPS: Disposals through Auctions, WA427
 DHSSPS: Quangos, WA189
 DHSSPS: Staff Suspensions, WA420, WA425
 DHSSPS: Voluntary Early Retirement Schemes, WA185
 Diabetes: Islet Cell Infusion Operation, WA79
 Dickson Plan, WA136
 Directive 2011/7/EU: Consultation, WA412, WA413
 Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals, WA336
 Disability Living Allowance: Doctors' Fees, WA336
 Disability Living Allowance: Medical Assessments, WA104
 Disability: Dental Treatment, WA421
 Doctors: Locums, WA186
 Doctors: Pension Contributions, WA83
 DOE: Proposed Legislation, WA292
 DOE: Quangos, WA291
 DOJ: Appointment of Funeral Director, WA89
 DOJ: Apprenticeships, WA319
 DOJ: Budget, WA317
 DOJ: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA198
 DOJ: Savings Delivery Plans, WA94
 DOJ: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA314, WA449
 DOJ: Staff Suspensions, WA89, WA197
 Domestic Abuse: Definition, WA92
 Domiciliary Care Workers, WA85
 Donacloney Primary School, 253
 Donaghadee Bypass, WA208
 Donaghadee: Dropped Kerbs, WA102
 Donaghadee: Street Lighting, WA102
 Downe Hospital: Arson, WA425, WA446
 DRD: Budget, WA322
 DRD: Capital Projects, WA95
 DRD: Flooding, WA95
 DRD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA207
 DRD: Quangos, WA212
 DRD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA331
 DRD: Staff Suspensions, WA101, WA208
 Driver and Vehicle Agency: Postal Correspondence, WA405
 Driver and Vehicle Agency: Vehicle Mileage, WA291
 Driver Training and Testing: Compulsory Logbooks, WA403
 Driver Training and Testing: Passenger Carrying Restriction, WA403
 Drivers: Ministerial, WA113
 Drivers: New Driver Provisions, WA166
 Dropped Kerbs: Bangor West, WA456
 Dropped Kerbs: Holywood, WA457
 Dropped Kerbs: Millisle, WA209
 Drumragh Integrated College, WA272, WA273, WA274
 DSD Funding: Political Parties, WA112
 DSD: Access to Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland Website, WA333
 DSD: Apprenticeships, WA468
 DSD: Collaborative Working, WA222

DSD: 'Holyland and Wider University Area Strategic Study', WA110

DSD: Staff Charged with Criminal Offences, WA337

E

Early Years Fund, WA255

Early Years Strategy, WA39

Eating Disorders, WA197

Economic Recovery, 56–69

Economy: Executive Meeting, WA358

Economy: Job Losses, WA283

Economy: Pipe Bands, WA44

Economy: Planning Delays, WA153

Economy: Productivity, WA401

Education and Library Boards: Temporary Accommodation, WA249

Education and Skills Authority, WA37, WA141, WA142, WA266, WA377, WA378, WA379

Education and Skills Authority: Membership, WA278

Education Bill: Public Consultation, WA270

Education Bill: Second Stage, 181–92, 204–33

Education Maintenance Allowance, 307, 308, WA41, WA264, WA386

Education Promotion: Advertising Budget, WA136

Education Works: Advertising Campaign, WA254

Education: Travellers, WA271

Educational Psychologists: Referrals, WA27, WA28, WA270

Educational Underachievement: Belfast, WA269

Edward Connors, WA92

Edward Connors: Convictions, WA449

Edward Connors: Serious Case Review, WA448

Edward Paul Murphy, WA93, WA199

Edward Street, Downpatrick, 90

Eggs: Illegal/Non-compliant, WA359

Electricity: Costs, WA50

Emergency Services: Antisocial Behaviour, Downpatrick, WA436

Employment and Learning, 306

Employment and Support Allowance, WA104, WA220, WA466

Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment, WA223

Employment Law Review, WA387

Employment: Careers Advisers, WA385

Employment: Demographic Changes, 313, 314

Employment: Graduates, WA382

Employment: Information and Opportunities, WA144

Employment: Over-25s, WA388

Employment: Sector Skills Councils, WA385

Empty Premises Relief Scheme, WA411

Energy: Domestic, WA395

English Baccalaureate, WA137, WA138

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion, 339–42

Environment: EU Funding, WA171

E-Synergy: Remuneration, WA283

Ethnic Minorities: Cultural Identity, 250

European Commissioners: Visits to Northern Ireland, WA2

Executive: Bond Issuance, WA76

Executive: Borrowing Powers, WA417

Executive: Capital Funding, WA184

Executive: Economic Subgroup, WA226

F

Fair Employment Tribunal: Chairperson of NI Water, WA208

Family Law: Access Rights, WA74

Family Support Hubs, WA445

Farm Modernisation Programme, WA6

Farm Modernisation Scheme: Gas Detectors, WA11

Farm Quality Assurance Scheme: Gas Detectors, WA12

Farm Safety, WA7, WA237

Farm Safety Partnership: Website, WA12

Farm Safety: Noxious Gas Detectors/Monitors, WA119

Farmers: Financial Assistance, WA236

Farmers: Income, WA233

Farming, 32–45

Farming: Low Carbon, WA72

Farms: Gas Detectors, WA11

FG Wilson, WA43, WA153

FG Wilson and First4Skills: Job Losses, WA386, WA402

FG Wilson: Grant Aid, WA47

FG Wilson: Job Losses, 306, 307, WA150, WA285, WA397

Field Boundary Restoration, WA365, WA366

Fire and Rescue Service: Equipment, WA193

Fire and Rescue Service: Grievances, WA81

Fire and Rescue Service: Money Surrendered, WA307

Fire and Rescue Service: Standards, WA193

Firearms Licensing, WA205

First4Skills: Administration, WA145, WA147

First4Skills: Apprenticeships, WA147, WA148, WA279

First4Skills: Job Losses, WA144, WA145, WA279

First4Skills: Ministerial Assessment, WA147

First4Skills: Training Contract, WA279

Fish Stocks, WA3

Fisheries Division: Relocation, WA127

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme, WA116, WA117, WA360

Fishing: Data Collection, WA6

Fishing: Days at Sea, WA6, WA7

Fishing: Illegal, WA367

Fishing: Moyola River, WA131

Fishing: River Bush, WA135

Fishing: Sentinel Fishery, WA367

Fishing: Strangford Lough, WA238

Fixed Penalty Notices: Litter, WA294, WA297

Flags and Emblems, WA206

Fleadh Cheoil 2013: Accommodation, WA45

Flood Alleviation: East Belfast, WA177

Flood Alleviation: Funding, WA214

Flood Alleviation: Sullatober Water, Carrickfergus, 197

Flooding: Call-outs in North Down, WA456

Flooding: Clonduff Estate, WA214

Flooding: Compensation, WA404

Flooding: Drainage Improvements, WA459

Flooding: Home Insurance, WA320

Flooding: Killyleagh, WA320

Flooding: Newcastle, WA207

Flooding: Resources, WA209

Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart, WA57

Flu Vaccination, 21, 22

Fluoridation, WA195, WA310

Food Banks, 46–55

Football Pitches: Drainage, WA18

Footpaths: Bangor, WA321, WA322

Footpaths: Bangor West, WA456

Footpaths: Holywood, WA456

Footpaths: Millisle, WA209

Foreign Nationals: Migration, WA305

Forest Service Headquarters: Relocation, WA9

Forest Service: Fire Breaks, WA6

Forest Service: Job Locations, WA363

Forest Service: Non-industrial Jobs, WA10

Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, 197, 198
 Former MoD Lands: Costs, WA356
 Fort George: Decontamination, WA222
 Forth and Foyle: Job Losses, WA287
 Foyle College: Lands, WA41
 Foyle: Job Promotion, WA44
 Foyle: Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows, WA103
 Fracture Liaison Service, WA193
 Fragility Fractures Working Group: Report, WA190
 Fragility Fractures: Treatment, WA418
 Free School Meals, WA266, WA382
 Freedom of Information Act: Redacted Information, WA401
 Fuel Poverty, 93, WA348
 Fuel Poverty: Gas Network Extension, WA46
 Fuel Poverty: Social Development Committee Report, WA351
 Full-body Imaging Scanners: Evaluation, WA316, WA317, WA318
 Funding for Lending Scheme, WA73
 Further Education: Student Composition, WA148
 Fusion and Acumen Programmes, WA50

G

Gaelscoil Eoghain, Cookstown, WA37
 Gas Development, WA285
 Gas Network: Extension, WA45, WA46, WA51
 GCSE and A Level: Review, WA275, WA277
 GCSE English: Ofqual, WA32
 GCSE: Awarding Organisations, WA32
 GCSE: Grading Issues, WA32, WA247
 Gender Equality Review, WA226
 Gender Equality Strategy, WA2, WA357
 General Register Office: Revenue, 347, 348
 Genetically Modified Food, WA306
 Giant's Causeway: Creationism, WA400
 Giant's Causeway: Visitor Centre, WA401
 Glenariff Forest Park, WA234
 Glenavy: Waste Incinerator, WA160
 Gluten-free Food: Prescribing Guidelines, WA80
 Goal Line Youth Centre, WA38, WA85, WA129, WA221
 Goods Vehicles Operator's Licence: Temporary Permit, WA154
 Goods Vehicles: Compliance Fees, WA292, WA293
 Government: Financial Accountability, WA416
 Government: Non-tax Revenue, WA417
 Government: Procurement, 350, 351, WA417
 Government: Tax Revenue, WA416
 Grants: Online Application Portal, WA302
 Growth Loan Fund, WA50, WA286, WA399, WA400

H

Hate Crime, 25, 26
 Health and Care Centre: Derry, WA419
 Health and Care Centres, 24
 Health and Social Care Trusts: Pay Differentials, WA446
 Health Service: Catering Costs, WA310
 Health Service: Vacancies, WA192
 Health Technology, 22, 23
 Health Trusts: Translation Services, WA78
 Health: Care Agencies, WA81
 Health: Care and Protection Plans, WA192
 Health: Direct Payments, WA81, WA196
 Health: North/South Shared Services, WA196
 Health: Republic of Ireland Patients, 24
 Health: 'Transforming Your Care', 95–102

Hedgerows, WA9
 Helm Housing Association, WA108
 High Court: Judgements Outstanding, WA87, WA312
 High Street Task Force, WA469
 Higher Education: Essential Skills, WA278
 Higher Education: Maximum Student Number, WA146
 Higher Education: Working-class Protestants, WA254, WA281
 Highway Code: Irish Language, WA288, WA289, WA296
 Hillsborough: Traffic Issues, 362–6
 Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, WA115
 Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Scope, WA355
 Hollywood Esplanade: No-parking Area, WA96
 Hollywood Primary School, WA29
 Hollywood Primary School: Enrolment Numbers, WA272
 Hollywood Schools Scheme, WA37
 Home Heating: Pay as you Go, WA335
 Homeless People, WA340
 Hospitals: Winter Pressures, WA84
 Housing Associations, 94
 Housing Benefit, WA465
 Housing Executive: Audit, WA219
 Housing Executive: Double Glazing, WA110, WA345, WA346
 Housing Executive: External Cyclical Maintenance, WA108
 Housing Executive: Extreme Weather, WA109
 Housing Executive: Fuel Poverty, WA334, WA335
 Housing Executive: Private Landlords, WA215
 Housing Executive: Reversible Windows, WA221, WA338
 Housing Executive: Transfers, WA338
 Housing Executive: Underspend, WA220
 Housing Executive: Unfit Properties, Ballymena/Ballymoney, WA468
 Housing Executive: Window Replacement, WA335, WA346
 Housing Executive: Woodland House, Newtownabbey, WA335, WA336
 Housing Strategy, 173–7
 Housing: Complex Housing Needs, WA347
 Housing: Co-ownership, WA112
 Housing: Dungannon, 92
 Housing: Intimidation Points, WA107
 Housing: Negative Equity, WA221
 Housing: One-bedroom Dwellings, WA334, WA337
 Housing: Unfinished Developments, WA326
 Housing: Waiting List, WA338
 Housing: Waiting Lists for People with a Disability, WA105
 Human Embryos, RWA6
 Human Trafficking, 28, 29
 Human Trafficking: North Down, WA200
 Hydraulic Fracturing: Fermanagh, WA153
 Hydraulic Fracturing: Greenhouse Gas Emissions, WA287

I

IBEC/CBI: Proposed Forum, WA386
 Illegal Fuel: Prosecutions and Convictions, WA453
 Indoor Athletics, WA16
 Inflammatory Bowel Disease, WA78
 Inflammatory Bowel Disease: Designated Clinical Lead, WA191
 Innovation Strategy, WA58
 Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS5–13
 Integrated Services for Children and Young People, WA138, WA139, WA140, WA252
 Intensity Modulated Radiotherapy, WA420
 Invasive Species, WA158
 Invest NI: Business Funding, WA47
 Invest NI: Company Buyouts, WA286
 Invest NI: Council Visits, WA49

Invest NI: E-Synergy, WA283
 Invest NI: Funding, WA397
 Invest NI: Job Creation, WA402
 Invest NI: Landholding, WA48
 Invest NI: Supply Chains, WA285
 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, 7–20, 30–2
 Investment: Foreign Direct Investment, WA389
 Investment: Indigenous Businesses, WA401
 Investment: International Companies, WA152
 Investment: Job Creation, WA390, WA391
 Irish Football Association: Funding, WA239

J

Job Creation, WA51
 Jobless Households, WA40
 Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 75–6
 John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA111, WA149
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, WA344
 Judicial Appointments Commission: Lay Members, WA355

K

Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor, WA276
 Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor, WA41, WA143, WA144
 Kilkeel Bus Station, WA213, WA214
 Killard Point ASSI: Intertidal Survey, WA157
 Knockavoe School, WA381

L

Languages: First and Second, WA19
 Larne: Car Park Revenue, WA95
 Laying Hens Directive, WA13
 Legal Aid, WA198
 Legal Aid: Applications, WA94
 Legal Aid: Bernadette McGeary, WA448, WA449
 Legal Aid: Bernadette, Stephen and Catherine McGeary, WA448
 Legal Aid: Case 12/090450, WA314
 Legal Aid: Parades Commission Ruling, WA313, WA314
 Legal Aid: Preliminary Inquiries, WA449
 Libraries: Stock Expenditure, WA134
 Libraries: Stock Update, WA19
 Life Science Hub UK, WA149
 Liofa 2015, WA245
 Liofa: Custom House Square Event, WA239
 Literacy and Numeracy: Computer-based Assessments, WA374, WA375
 Literacy and Numeracy: Improvement Scheme, WA376
 Living over the Shop, WA112
 'Living with Long Term Conditions', WA422
 Local Authorities: Speed Limits, WA101
 Local Government Reform: Chief Executives and Senior Posts, WA156
 Local Government Reform: Costs, WA170
 Local Government Reform: Political Reference Group, WA166, WA167
 Local Government Reform: Preparedness, WA295
 Local Government Reform: Rates Convergence, WA156
 Local Government Reform: Redundancies, WA156
 Local Government Service Delivery: Economic Appraisal, WA70

Local Government: Capacity Building, WA406
 Local Government: d'Hondt System, WA407
 Local Government: Debt Transfer, WA73
 Lough Neagh Working Group, WA364, WA365
 Lough Neagh: Fish Stocks, WA244
 Lough Neagh: Public Ownership, WA118
 Lough Neagh: Salmon, WA16
 Loughs Agency: Boat Patrols, WA361

M

Magherafelt Learning Partnership, 256, 257
 Magilligan Prison, WA206
 Magilligan Prison: Full-body Imaging Scanners, WA316
 Magilligan Prison: Replacement, WA318
 Marching Bands: Funding, WA130, WA134
 Marian Price, WA450
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland, 202, 203, WA319
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Legislation, WA425
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Monitoring, WA421, WA451, WA454
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Opening, WA425
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Registration, WA427
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: Regulations, WA427, WA447
 Marie Stopes Northern Ireland: RQIA, WA426
 Marine Bill: Sellafeld, WA165
 Marine Strategy Framework Directive, WA62
 Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, WA1, WA225, WA227
 Maze/Long Kesh: Regeneration, WA1
 Melanoma: Yervoy, WA424
 Melvin Bridge, Strabane, WA224
 Mental Health: Western Health and Social Care Trust, WA424
 Midwife-led Unit: Omagh, WA424
 Millennium Way, Lurgan, WA332
 Millennium Way, Lurgan: Construction, WA457
 Millennium Way, Lurgan: Costs, WA457
 Minority Ethnic Development Fund, 194, 195
 Minority Sports, WA15
 Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas of South Down, WA56
 Mobility/Wheelchair Bungalows: North Down, WA337
 Mortgages: Arrears, WA221
 MOT Test: Failure Rates, WA162
 MOT Test: Numbers, WA404
 MOT Test: Pre-1960 Vehicles, WA296
 MOT Test: Vehicle Mileage, WA291
 Mourne Granite Trail, WA58
 Moyola River, WA119
 Muckamore: Sex Offenders, WA204
 Multiple Deprivation Measure, WA77
 Musical Instruments for Bands Programme, WA128

N

Narrow Water Bridge, WA417
 National Ecosystem Assessment, WA400
 National Insurance Numbers: Foreign Nationals, WA350
 National Parks, WA59, WA115
 National Ploughing Championships, WA238, WA239
 National Trust: Creationism, WA400
 Natural Gas Network, WA389
 Natural Gas: West Tyrone, 312
 NEEs: Support Programmes, 308, 309
 Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor, WA351
 'Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-2010', WA73
 NI Railways: Passenger Journeys, WA324, WA325

NI Water: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing, WA326
 NI Water: Water and Sewerage Charges, WA207
 NI Water: Water Meters, WA100, WA329
 NIEA: Planning Applications, WA170
 North Belfast: Civil Disturbances, WA89, WA90
 North Down Coastal Path, WA60
 North Down: Disabled Facilities Grant, WA109
 North Down: Gully Inspection, WA211
 North Down: Housing Executive Properties, WA109
 North Down: Penalty Charge Notices, WA96
 North Down: Sewerage Network, WA98
 North Down: Street Lighting, WA98, WA99
 North/South Ministerial Council: Education, 332–5
 North/South Ministerial Council: Environment, WA407
 North/South Ministerial Council: Languages, 73–5
 North/South Ministerial Council: Property, WA113
 North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety, 238–42
 North/South Ministerial Council: Roads and Transport, 235–7
 North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways, 71–3
 Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Travel-to-work Area, WA421
 Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 242–8
 Northern Ireland Screen: Funding, WA241
 Northern Ireland Screen: Funding Programmes, WA241
 Northern Ireland Screen: Individual Development Programme, WA242
 Northern Regional College: Ballymena Campus, WA145, WA146
 Northern Regional College: Ballymoney Campus, WA387
 Northern Regional College: Coleraine, WA147, WA148

O

Offender Levy, WA449
 Office of the Police Ombudsman, 25
 OFMDFM: Apprenticeships, WA355, WA356
 OFMDFM: Disposals through Auctions, WA357
 OFMDFM: Executive Papers, WA1
 OFMDFM: Travel and Subsistence, WA2
 Ofqual: CCEA Examinations, WA248
 Oil/Gas Exploration, WA50
 Oil/Natural Gas: Prices, WA50
 Older People: Poverty, WA349
 Older People: Social Isolation, WA196
 Older People's Strategy, WA357
 Omagh: New Hospital, WA445
 Oncology: Independent Funding Requests, WA425
 Organ Donation through Sport, 249
 Outpatient Appointments: Community Transport, WA189
 Outpatients: Cancelled Appointments, WA311

P

Packaging: Alternatives to Glass, WA65
 Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services, WA185, WA194, WA195, WA308
 Paediatric Physiotherapists, WA81
 Pain Management: Population Plan, WA422
 Parades, 196
 Park-and-ride Services, WA329
 Parliament Buildings: Union Flag, WA352, WA469
 Peace III, WA183, WA301
 Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre, WA114
 Penalty Charge Notices: Disabled Person's Parking Space, WA319, WA320
 Penalty Charge Notices: Kilrea/Garvagh, WA212

Pensions: Ministers/MLAs, WA352
 Pensions: Public Sector, 348, WA183
 People Deemed Out of Work, Unemployed and Economically Inactive, WA415
 Performing Arts, WA14
 Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Contract, WA343
 Personal Independence Payment: Assessment Criteria, WA343
 Petroleum Licences, WA151, WA399
 Physical Activity Referral Programmes, WA191
 Pipe Bands: Funding, WA17, WA129
 Planning Application B/2011/0057/F, WA58
 Planning Application Y/2008/0365/F, Carryduff, WA404
 Planning Applications: Bushmills Dunes Golf Resort, WA288
 Planning Applications: External/Internal Consultees, WA63
 Planning Applications: Major Retail Developments, WA164
 Planning Applications: Traffic Flow, WA59
 Planning Policy Statement 21, WA63
 Planning Policy Statement 5, WA167
 Planning Service: e-PIC, 347
 Planning Service: Paramilitary Memorials, WA171
 Planning Service: Staff, WA408
 Planning System: Reform, WA69
 Planning: Bovally, Limavady, WA169
 Planning: Developers/NI Water, WA290
 Planning: John Lewis/Sprucefield Centre Ltd, WA2, WA3, WA216
 Planning: Roadside Advertising, WA163, WA164
 Planning: Rose Energy, WA407
 Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, WA206
 Policing: Funding, WA204
 Portavoe Reservoir: Disabled Car Parking, WA16
 Post-primary Education: Kilkeel, 164–71
 Post-primary Schools: Admissions, WA20
 Post-primary Schools: Careers Advice, WA30
 Prescription Drugs: Generic and Branded, WA79
 Pressure Ulcers, WA193
 Primary Schools: Admission Appeals, WA259
 Primary Schools: Admissions, WA259, WA270
 Primary Schools: Bangor, 254
 Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessment, WA263
 Primary Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA259, WA261
 Primary Schools: Mid Ulster, WA259
 Primary Schools: Modern Languages, WA30
 Priorities for Youth, WA27
 Prison Officers: Memorial, 26, 27
 Prison Service: Appeals against Dismissal, WA199
 Prison Service: CAJ Meetings, WA87, WA89
 Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline, WA88, WA92, WA202, WA203
 Prison Service: Deaths in Custody, WA202
 Prison Service: Governors, WA313
 Prison Service: Grade Structures, WA199
 Prison Service: Officer Numbers, WA199
 Prison Service: Outline Estate Strategy, WA316
 Prison Service: Prisoner Assessment Unit Report, WA86, WA87
 Prison Service: Staff Dismissals, WA90
 Prison Service: Staff Suspensions, WA92
 Prison Service: Staff Training, WA312, WA313
 Prison Service: Voluntary Early Retirement, WA315
 Prisoners: Austin Creggan, Desmond Hamill, Tommy Hamill and Mark McGilloway, WA93
 Prisoners: Foreign National, WA89
 Prisoners: Remand, WA88
 Prisoners: Samaritans Listener Training Course, WA313
 Prisons: CCTV, WA86

Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners, 27, 28, WA315
 Prisons: Healthcare, WA192, WA194
 Prisons: Non-natural Deaths, WA201
 Prisons: Suicides and Attempted Suicides, WA315
 Prisons: Supporting Prisoners at Risk, WA314
 Prisons: Vulnerable Prisoners, WA194
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Availability, WA383
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Electrical Industry, WA382, WA383, WA384
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Funding, WA384, WA385
 Programme-led Apprenticeships: Numbers, WA384, WA387
 Project Kelvin, WA57
 Prostitution: Paying for Services, WA198
 Protect Life: Belfast, WA437
 Protestant Band Culture, WA239
 PSNI: Agency and Associate Staff, WA205
 PSNI: Business Cases, WA205
 Psoriasis: Biologic Drugs, WA306
 Psoriasis: Treatment, WA307
 Public Appointments, WA113, WA114
 Public Health Agency: Small Grant Scheme, WA195
 Public Office: Misconduct, WA199
 Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiatives, WA302
 Public Procurement, 1–5
 Public Procurement: Social Clauses, WA303, WA345, WA408
 Public Procurement: Tenders, WA304
 Public Sector: Decentralisation, WA77
 Public Transport: Audio-visual Information, WA161

Q

Queen's University Belfast: Funding, WA282
 Queen's University Belfast: Student Accommodation, WA282

R

Railway Stations, WA325
 Railways: Ballymena–Belfast, WA213
 Railways: Coleraine–Londonderry, WA459
 Railways: Derry–Coleraine, WA462
 Railways: Freight, WA212
 Railways: Signal Boxes, WA97
 Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha, 23, 24
 Rates: Arrears, WA414
 Rates: Empty Homes, WA184
 Rates: Empty Premises Relief Scheme, WA302, 348, 349
 Rates: Exemptions, WA73
 Rates: Exemptions for Churches, WA76
 Rates: HMOs, WA74
 Rates: Liability, WA75
 Rates: Non-payment, WA75
 Rates: Orange Halls, WA409
 Rates: Payment Deferment, WA77
 Rates: Private Landlords, WA75
 Rates: Rating Debt, WA300
 Rates: Stranmillis, Belfast, WA303
 Rathlin Island: Ferry Service, WA100
 Rathlin Island: Roads, WA215
 Recycling, WA70
 Recycling: Plant-based Plastics, WA65
 Red Sky, WA222
 Red Squirrel Group: Membership, WA366
 Red Squirrels: Adenovirus and Poxvirus, WA366
 Redundancies: Notification Period, WA150
 Regional Fertility Centre, WA309, WA310, WA418, WA419

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme, 92, 93, WA110, WA216, WA217, WA218
 Registered Companies: VAT/PAYE, WA177
 Re-imaging Communities, WA15, WA129
 Renewable Energy, 312, 313
 Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 298–301
 Review of Public Administration: Costs, WA164, WA165
 River Bush: Anglers, WA19
 Rivers: Redesignation, WA126
 Road and Water Surety Bonds: North Down, WA323
 Road Freight Operator's Licence, WA59, WA64
 Road Safety: Bangor Grammar School, WA321
 Road Safety: Coleraine Schools, WA210
 Roads Service: Removal of Graffiti, WA99
 Roads Service: Road Safety at Schools, WA456
 Roads Service: Rubberised Asphalt Concrete, WA96
 Roads Service: Staff, WA333
 Roads Service: Traffic Management, WA458
 Roads Service: Vesting Land, WA457
 Roads: Adoption, WA211
 Roads: Beechfield and Ashfield Estates, Donaghadee, WA320
 Roads: Common Travel Area, WA97
 Roads: Communication on Delays, WA454
 Roads: Cost of Major Works Programme, WA457
 Roads: Gritting, WA101, RWA1
 Roads: Oil Spills, WA332
 Roads: Potholes, WA333
 Roads: Roadside Advertising, WA208
 Roads: Speed Limits, WA330
 Rose Energy, WA288
 Rossmar Special School, Limavady: Ministerial Visit, WA135
 Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children: Clark Clinic, WA82
 Royal Victoria Hospital: Short-stay Unit, WA308
 Royston House, Belfast: Medical Examination Centre, WA467
 Rugby Road, Belfast: Film Location, WA240, WA241
 Rugby Road, Belfast: Listed Buildings, WA290
 Rural Development Programme, WA8
 Rural Development Programme: Axes 1–4, WA362
 Rural Development Programme: Axis 3, WA361
 Rural Development Programme: Voluntary Modulation Moneys, WA361
 Rural Transport Fund, WA210

S

Safeguarding: Adult Referrals, WA192
 Salmon: Conservation, WA128
 Salt Bins: North Down, WA326
 Salt Bins: Qualification Criteria, WA328
 Sandbags: Rivers Agency/Council Protocol, WA234
 Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club, WA14, WA134
 Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 337–8
 School Attendance: Business Travel, WA271
 School Buses: Defects, WA72
 School Maintenance Backlog: North Down, WA257
 School Maintenance Backlog: Upper Bann, WA249
 School Transport: Magherafelt, WA30, WA31
 Schools: Absenteeism, WA140, WA276
 Schools: Absenteeism, North Down, WA379
 Schools: Admissions, WA367
 Schools: Amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and Donegall Road Primary Schools, WA138
 Schools: Amalgamation of St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel, and Glenravel Primary School, WA248

-
- Schools: Animal Welfare Awareness, WA36
 Schools: Area Planning, WA37, WA137, WA269
 Schools: Asbestos, WA29
 Schools: Board Vacancies, WA27
 Schools: Boards of Governors, WA28
 Schools: Broadband Access, WA35
 Schools: Changes to GCSEs, 255, 256
 Schools: Closures, WA274, WA376
 Schools: Enrolment Numbers, WA137, WA268
 Schools: Entitlement Framework, WA277
 Schools: First Language other than English or Irish, WA264, WA265
 Schools: Focused Audits, WA136
 Schools: Formal Transformation Process, WA35
 Schools: Inspections, WA32, WA374
 Schools: Irish Medium, WA246
 Schools: Key Stage Assessments, WA276
 Schools: Major Projects, WA22
 Schools: Old Gransha Road Site, Bangor, WA29
 Schools: Physical Education, WA26
 Schools: Post-primary Preferences, WA22
 Schools: Private-hire Transport, WA378
 Schools: Relationship and Sexuality Education, WA27
 Schools: Rent, WA269
 Schools: Starting Age, WA26
 Schools: Transport, WA26
 Schools: Travel Passes, WA276
 Schools: Uniform Grants, WA23
 Schools: Welfare of Registered Pupils, WA141
 Schools: Workforce Composition, WA141
 Science Park, WA57
 Science Park: Funding, WA389
 Sea Bass: Ban, WA4
 Sea Fishing Defence, WA157
 Sea Squirts, WA170
 Sea Squirts: Strangford Lough, WA157
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Controlled Schools, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Integrated Sector, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Statutory/Advisory Role, WA377
 Sectoral Support Bodies: Working Group, WA253
 Self-harm/Attempted Suicide, WA436
 Sentinus: STEM, WA255, WA256
 Sex Offenders: Disclosure of Information, WA198
 SHAC Housing Association, WA111
 Shared Education, WA266
 Single Farm Payment, WA364
 Single-use Carrier Bags, WA162, WA298, WA299
 Skills Strategy, WA388
 Sleep Apnoea: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, WA82, WA83
 Slurry Spreading, 201, WA71, WA72, WA117
 Slurry Tanks, WA5, WA117
 Slurry Tanks: Breathing Apparatus, WA235, WA236
 Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, WA413
 Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Lagan Valley, WA184
 Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Upper Bann, WA181
 Small Businesses: Grants/Schemes, WA45
 Small Claims Court, WA94
 Social Economy: Co-operative Movement, WA284
 Social Enterprise, 90, 91
 Social Fund: Applications, WA346, WA467
 Social Fund: Expenditure, WA463, WA464, WA467
 Social Housing Development Programme, WA220
 Social Housing Newbuilds: Upper Bann, WA335
 Social Housing: Adaptations, WA347
 Social Housing: New Mossley, Newtownabbey, WA224
 Social Housing: New Schemes, WA164
 Social Housing: Overoccupancy, WA467
 Social Housing: People with Disabilities, WA347
 Social Housing: Waiting List, WA469
 Social Investment Fund, 193, 194, 195, 196, WA114, WA226, WA356, WA357
 Social Security: Bank Liaison Team, WA469
 Social Security: Computer System, WA108, WA345
 Social Security: Payments, WA465
 Solar Power: Grants, WA57
 South Down: Disabled Facilities Grant, WA104
 Special Educational Needs: Classroom Assistants, 254, 255
 Special Educational Needs: Statements, WA380
 Special Educational Needs: Statutory Assessment, WA277, WA278
 Special Needs Advisers, WA137
 Speeding: A1/A2, WA313
 Sport: Nation of Choice, WA243
 Sport: Olympic Standard Swimming Pool, Bangor, WA135
 Sport: Team GB and NI/Team Ireland, WA131
 Sport: Youth Participation, WA244
 Sports Clubs: Defibrillators, WA82
 Sports Clubs: Volunteers, 248, 249
 Squirrel Forum: Membership, WA365
 St John's Primary School, Middletown: Nursery Provision, 282–5
 St Mary's University College: NDPB, WA41
 St Mary's University College: UCAS, WA143
 Stalking: Convictions, WA319
 Stalking: Legislation, WA450
 Standing Order 59, 271–2
 Steps to Work, WA42
 Steps to Work/Step Ahead, WA42
 Stormont Estate: Event Costs, WA302
 Stormont Estate: Sale of Goods, WA179
 Stranmillis University College: Chairperson, WA142, WA143, WA283
 Stranmillis University College: Financial Out-turn, WA143
 Stranmillis University College: Ministerial Proposals, WA148
 Strategic Support Fund, WA227, WA229, WA233
 Strategic Waste Infrastructure Programme, WMS1
 Street Lighting: Bangor, WA321, WA322
 Street Lighting: Bangor West, WA455, WA456
 Street Lighting: Daylight Hours, WA99
 Street Lighting: Hollywood, WA456
 Street Lighting: Millisle, WA211
 Sudden Death Notification/"Card before You Leave", WA427
 Sudden Oak Death, 198
 Suicide/Self-harm: Awareness, WA447
 Suicide/Self-harm: East Belfast, WA427
 Suicide: Belfast, WA428
 Suicide: Change in Rate, WA415
 Suicide: East Belfast, WA411, WA423, WA447
 Suicide: Mid Ulster, WA436, WA437
 Suicide: Services and Initiatives, WA426
 Suicide: Strategies, WA425
 Suicide: Tackling Rates, WA423
 Superannuation Bill: Consideration Stage, 295–8
 Supported Living Schemes, 93, 94
 Suspension of Standing Orders, 6, 177
- T**
 Taxation: Conacre System, WA74
 Taxation: Film and Television Industry, WA178
 Taxi Operators Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, WA161
-

Teacher Education: Review, WA143
 Teachers: All-Ireland Mobility, WA375, WA376
 Teachers: Autism-specific Training, WA272
 Teachers: Performance-related Pay, WA37
 Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: North Down, WA256
 Teaching and Non-teaching Posts: Upper Bann, WA138
 Telecommunications: 4G, WA402
 The Disappeared, 272–82
 “The Gathering”, WA2
 Thomas O’Brien, WA94
 Tourism Development Scheme, WA401
 Tourism: Accommodation, WA149, WA150
 Tourism: Angling, WA399
 Tourism: Bed and Breakfasts, North Down, WA396
 Tourism: Capital Assistance for Accommodation, WA56, WA57
 Tourism: Causeway Coast and Antrim Glens, WA152
 Tourism: Cruise Ships, WA151, WA152, WA285, WA286
 Tourism: Film Industry, WA388
 Tourism: Popular Areas, 345, 346
 Tourism: Signage Policy, WA390
 Tourism: South American Market, WA390
 Tourism: Strabane, 314
 Tourism: Upper Bann, WA51
 Tourism: Visitor Numbers, 311, 312
 Tourist Board: Funding Support, WA150
 Tourist Board: Online Accommodation Providers, WA284
 Tourist Information Centres, WA153
 Town Centres: Investment, 91, 92
 Traffic Calming: Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee, WA208
 Traffic Calming: Roads Service Southern Division, WA455
 Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre, 86, 87, 88
 Traffic Lights: Maintenance/Operation, WA322
 Traffic Lights: Springtown/Northland Roads, Derry, WA462
 Transforming Your Care, 20, 21
 Transforming Your Care: Neurological Conditions, WA78
 Transforming Your Care: South West Acute Hospital, WA420
 Translink: 60+ SmartPass, WA211
 Translink: Bomb Scares, WA322
 Translink: Bus Usage, Antrim Area Hospital, WA461
 Translink: Car Allowances, WA332
 Translink: Disposal of Old Train Sets, WA332
 Translink: Goldline, Dublin–Belfast, WA461
 Translink: Grievance Cases/Whistle-blowing, WA330
 Translink: Passenger Journeys, WA325
 Translink: Smartlink Uptake, WA458
 Translink: Train Services, WA325
 Transport: Door-2-Door/Rural Transport Fund, WA461
 Transport: Home to School, WA141
 Transport: School Buses, WA252
 Traveller Education Support Service, WA271
 Travelwise, WA209
 Tree Planting, WA8

U

Ulster Covenant: Centenary, WA38, WA132, WA415
 Ulster Hospital: Car Parking, WA86
 Ulster Scots: Reserved Matters, WA245
 Ulster-Scots Agency, WA244
 Ulster-Scots Agency: Funding, WA129
 Ulster-Scots Strategy, WA127
 Unadopted Roads: North Down, WA322, WA324
 Unauthorised Quarrying: Environmental Impact, WA159
 Unemployment, 302–5, 315–25
 Unemployment: Numbers, WA179
 Universal Credit: Administration, WA466

Universal Credit: Impact on Low Earners, WA464
 Universal Credit: Job Losses, WA463
 Universities: Funding, WA279
 University of Ulster: Magee Campus, WA148
 University of Ulster: Senior Management Restructuring, WA280
 Urban Blight, 346, 347
 Used Tyres: Disposal, WA159

V

Vacant Business Premises: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Ballycastle, WA182
 Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Moyle, WA182
 Vacant Domestic Properties: Ballysally, Coleraine, WA335
 Vehicle Licensing: Online Payment, WA158
 Vehicle Licensing: Post Offices, WA158
 Vehicle Testing and Licensing: EU Proposals, 344, 345
 Victims and Witnesses of Crime: Justice Committee Report, WA203
 Video Games: Dangers, WA128
 Voluntary Grammar Schools, WA270

W

Warm Homes Scheme, WA112
 Waste Management Groups: Assessment, WA402
 Waste Management Groups: Preferred Bidders, WA295, WA299
 Waste Repatriation: Raveagh Road, Eskragh, WA298
 Water Charges, WA210, WA212
 Water Charges: SMEs, WA213
 Water Infrastructure: Belfast, WA209
 Water Pollution: North Down, WA167
 Watercourses: Saintfield Road, Belfast, WA125, WA126
 Weightlifting, 250, 251
 Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs’ Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, 178–80
 Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, WA235
 Welfare Reform, 287–92
 Welfare Reform Act 2012/Welfare Reform Bill, WA341
 Welfare Reform Advisory Group, WA2
 Welfare Reform Bill, WA183, WA222, WA223
 Welfare Reform Bill: Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA465
 Welfare Reform Bill: Financial Consequences, WA344
 Welfare Reform Bill: HMRC Staff, WA351
 Welfare Reform Bill: Jobs at Risk, WA351
 Welfare Reform Bill: Regulations, WA342, WA464
 Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage, 77–86, 103–64
 Welfare Reform Bill: Spending, WA305
 Welfare Reform Bill: Standing Order 34, 293–4
 Welfare Reform: Block Grant, WA465
 West Belfast Taxi Association: Concessionary Fares, WA462
 West Belfast Taxi Association: Fuel Rebate, WA462
 Wheel Clamping: Private Land, WA204
 Wi-Fi: Free in Town Centres, WA398
 Wild Animals: Circuses, WA10
 Wildlife Intervention Programme, 199, 200
 Wind Turbines, WA405
 Wind Turbines: ETSU-R-97 Methodology, WA72
 Windsor Park, WA127
 Winter Weather: Contingency Plans, WA459
 Woodland Cover, WA9

Y

Young People: Rural Areas, WA237, WA238
Youth Employment Scheme, WA387
Youth Justice Review, 327–31
Youth Service Provision: South Belfast, WA257
Youth Unemployment, WA40, WA280
Youth Unemployment: Age Range, WA410
Youth Unemployment: Change in Rate, WA409
Youth Unemployment: UK Comparisons, WA410, WA410

Strangers' Index

Committee Clerk, The

Committee Stages

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill, CS6,
CS12

McGivern, Mr Roy (Department of the Environment)

Committee Stages

Charities Bill, CS1, CS2

Smith, Ms Maggie (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister)

Committee Stages

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill), CS6,
CS7, CS8

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 October 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement - Public Procurement

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding Public Procurement, following which he replied to questions.

2.2 Motion - Suspend Standing Orders

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 8 October 2012.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support nemine contradicente.

2.3 First Stage - Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA 15/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, introduced a Bill to set the rate of air passenger duty for the purposes of section 30A(3) to (5A) of the Finance Act 1994.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

2.4 Motion - Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

3. Question Time

3.1 Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots.

3.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Motion - Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021 (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Committee Business

5.1 Motion - Extension of Committee Stage: Business Improvement Districts Bill (NIA 9/11-15)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 13 December 2012, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill (NIA Bill 9/11-15).

Chairperson, Committee for Social Development

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5.2 Motion - Crisis in Farming

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the current crisis in farming caused by the failure of the food supply chain to react to rising production costs and feed prices in particular; further notes the lack of transparency within the food supply chain and the existence of a very significant differential between Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Republic of Ireland producer prices; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to acknowledge the crisis and to bring forward initiatives to alleviate the short-term financial pressures on farmers.

Chairperson, Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion - Foodbanks

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the growth in the number of foodbanks established by churches, charities and other community organisations; welcomes the positive response by these sectors to the needs of people and families suffering from the ill effects of the economic downturn; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that his Department continues to support and promote the work of foodbanks.

Mr S Hamilton

Mr S Douglas

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.2 Motion - Path to Economic Recovery

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes, with concern, the continuing pursuance of austerity measures by the British and Irish Governments, and the subsequent detrimental effects on our local economy; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to impress, on both Governments, the need to follow a path to economic recovery that is based

on job creation, progressive taxation, the protection of the most vulnerable, and the provision of first class front-line public services.

Mr P Flanagan

Mr D McKay

6.3 Amendment No.1

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'notes' and insert:

'that the UK Government, as well as those in the Republic of Ireland and many other European countries, continue to pursue policies of austerity; expresses its concern about the detrimental effect this is having on the Northern Ireland economy; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge HM Government to reassess its deficit reduction strategy in light of recent evidence and seek to stimulate economic growth by measures such as a short term increase in capital spending and targeted VAT reductions.'

Mr S Hamilton

Mr P Weir

Mr A Ross

6.4 Amendment No.2

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'economy' and insert:

', including contributing to rising local unemployment levels; calls on the Executive to address these effects by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy; and further calls on the Executive to establish a commission in the style of the Commission on Scottish Devolution to present the British Government with an evidence based argument on how further devolved powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to encourage job creation, progressive taxation, protection of the most vulnerable, and the provision of first class front-line public services.

Mr P McGlone

Mr C Eastwood

Mr A Maginness

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, Amendment No.1 **fell** (Division 1).

The Question being put, Amendment No.2 **fell** (Division 2).

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** (Division 3).

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.48pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

8 October 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

8 October 2012

Division 1

Path to Economic Recovery - Amendment 1

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'notes' and insert:

'that the UK Government, as well as those in the Republic of Ireland and many other European countries, continue to pursue policies of austerity; expresses its concern about the detrimental effect this is having on the Northern Ireland economy; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge HM Government to reassess its deficit reduction strategy in light of recent evidence and seek to stimulate economic growth by measures such as a short term increase in capital spending and targeted VAT reductions.'

Mr S Hamilton

Mr P Weir

Mr A Ross

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 38

Noes: 51

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: *Mr G Robinson and Mr Spratt.*

NOES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: *Mr Flanagan and Ms Maeve McLaughlin.*

The amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

8 October 2012

Division 2

Path to Economic Recovery - Amendment 2

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'economy' and insert:

‘, including contributing to rising local unemployment levels; calls on the Executive to address these effects by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy; and further calls on the Executive to establish a commission in the style of the Commission on Scottish Devolution to present the British Government with an evidence based argument on how further devolved powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to encourage job creation, progressive taxation, protection of the most vulnerable, and the provision of first class front-line public services.

Mr P McGlone

Mr C Eastwood

Mr A Maginness

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 11

Noes: 78

AYES

Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Durkan.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Flanagan and Ms Maeve McLaughlin.

The amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

8 October 2012

Division 3

Path to Economic Recovery - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes, with concern, the continuing pursuance of austerity measures by the British and Irish Governments, and the subsequent detrimental effects on our local economy; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to impress, on both governments, the need to follow a path to economic recovery that is based on job creation, progressive taxation, the protection of the most vulnerable, and the provision of first class front-line public services.

Mr P Flanagan

Mr D McKay

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 43

Noes: 46

AYES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: *Mr Flanagan and Ms Maeve McLaughlin.*

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: *Mr G Robinson and Mr Spratt.*

The Motion was **negatived**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 3 - 8 October 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

- Education Bill (NIA Bill 14/11-15)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

- Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2011-2012 (DOJ)
- Schedule for the Retention and Disposal of Public Records for Coleraine Borough Council (DCAL/PRONI)
- Charitable Donations and Bequests Annual Report to 31 March 2012 (DSD)
- The Southern Health and Social Care Trust Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2012 (Amended Version) (DHSSPS)
- Cookstown District Council Disposal and Retention Schedule (DCAL/PRONI)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

- S.R. 2012/369 The Social Fund (Cold Weather Payments) (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
- S.R. 2012/374 The Child Support (Great Britain Reciprocal Arrangements) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
- Draft S.R. 2012 Draft Local Government (Indemnities for Members and Officers) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)

For Information Only:

- S.R. 2012/338 (C.32) The Safeguarding Board (2011 Act) (Commencement No.1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DHSSPS)
- S.R. 2012/367 (C.34) The Construction Contracts (2011 Act) (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DFP)
- S.R. 2012/370 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No.6) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/371 The Loading Bays and Parking Places on Roads (Amendment No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/372 (C.35) The Pensions (2008 No.2 Act) (Commencement No.10 and Supplementary Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

- Consultation on DARD's Proposals for Managing SFP/LFACA Dual Use Claims (DARD)
- Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Health and Social Care Trust Annual Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2012 (DHSSPS)
- Drinking Water Quality in Northern Ireland, 2011 (DOE)
- Southern Health and Social Care Trust Annual Report 2011-2012 (DHSSPS)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 October 2012

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement - North South Ministerial Council meeting in Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Inland Waterways Sectoral Format, following which she replied to questions.

2.2 Statement - North South Ministerial Council meeting in Language Body Sectoral Format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Language Body Sectoral Format, following which she replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

2.3 Motion - Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister for Social Development

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

2.4 Second Stage - Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15)

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, moved that the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15) be agreed.

2.5 Reasoned Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'That' and insert:

'the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be not agreed pending further consideration and adjustment to better reflect the specific circumstances, obligations and needs of our people; because, while recognising the need for a simplification of the benefit system and development of work incentives, the Bill's proposals have their origins in austerity policies being pursued at Westminster which are targeted at the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society and which clearly do not adequately address the specific circumstances and needs of our people and will create significant hardship and difficulties for many individuals and families living in socially disadvantaged unionist and nationalist communities; in addition, the payment proposals of Universal Credit:

- (a) do not reflect the specifics of our labour market and the prevalence of the weekly wage;
- (b) fail to take account of an established pattern of direct payments to landlords; and

- (c) in proposing a single household payment, fail to meet specific statutory equality obligations which require social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children;
- and furthermore the Bill fails to take account of:
- (i) the impact of increased punitive measures on jobseekers in a society emerging from conflict and recovering from a legacy of discrimination in employment;
 - (ii) the fact that there is currently no statutory duty to provide affordable childcare, yet the Bill increases conditionality for lone parents;
 - (iii) the existing housing stock and the legacy of segregated housing, in relation to the introduction of an under-occupancy penalty;
 - (iv) the high rate of error in the Work Capability Assessment which is creating hardship and uncertainty amongst many sick and disabled people who are being wrongly declared fit for work; and
 - (v) the anomaly of a benefit cap that was primarily devised to address extortionate housing costs in London but has discriminatory consequences for families here with more than the average number of children.'

Mr M Brady
Mr F McCann

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.26pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Regional Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy.

3.2 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland.

4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Statement - Transforming Your Care

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding Transforming Your Care, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

4.2 Second Stage - Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15) (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Reasoned Amendment **fell** (Division 1).

The Welfare Reform Bill passed Second Stage (Division 2).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

5. Adjournment

Ms Caitríona Ruane spoke to her topic on Post-Primary education provision in the Kilkeel area.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.09am.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

9 October 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

9 October 2012

Division 1

Second Stage: Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15) - Reasoned Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'That' and insert:

'the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be not agreed pending further consideration and adjustment to better reflect the specific circumstances, obligations and needs of our people; because, while recognising the need for a simplification of the benefit system and development of work incentives, the Bill's proposals have their origins in austerity policies being pursued at Westminster which are targeted at the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society and which clearly do not adequately address the specific circumstances and needs of our people and will create significant hardship and difficulties for many individuals and families living in socially disadvantaged unionist and nationalist communities; in addition, the payment proposals of Universal Credit:

- (a) do not reflect the specifics of our labour market and the prevalence of the weekly wage;
- (b) fail to take account of an established pattern of direct payments to landlords; and
- (c) in proposing a single household payment, fail to meet specific statutory equality obligations which require social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children;

and furthermore the Bill fails to take account of:

- (i) the impact of increased punitive measures on jobseekers in a society emerging from conflict and recovering from a legacy of discrimination in employment;
- (ii) the fact that there is currently no statutory duty to provide affordable childcare, yet the Bill increases conditionality for lone parents;
- (iii) the existing housing stock and the legacy of segregated housing, in relation to the introduction of an under-occupancy penalty;
- (iv) the high rate of error in the Work Capability Assessment which is creating hardship and uncertainty amongst many sick and disabled people who are being wrongly declared fit for work; and
- (v) the anomaly of a benefit cap that was primarily devised to address extortionate housing costs in London but has discriminatory consequences for families here with more than the average number of children.'

Mr M Brady

Mr F McCann

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 42

Noes: 60

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: *Mr Brady and Mr F McCann.*

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: *Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.*

The amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

9 October 2012
Division 2

Second Stage: Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15)

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 60

Noes: 42

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: *Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.*

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: *Mrs McKevitt and Mr Rogers.*

The Second Stage was **agreed**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 October 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA Bill 15/11-15)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

 - Draft S.R. 2012/ The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DETI)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Proposals to Widen the Powers of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland and Extend its Remit to Include the Further Education Sector (DEL)
9. Departmental Publications
 - Northern Ireland Museums Council Annual Report and Financial Statements 2011-2012 (DCAL)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 9 October 2012

2011-2015 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12				
Superannuation Bill NIA Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12	26.09.12				
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill NIA Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12	25.06.12	26.10.12					
Business Improvement Districts Bill NIA Bill 9/11-15	25.06.12	17.09.12	05.11.12					
Criminal Justice Bill NIA Bill 10/11-15	25.06.12	03.07.12	14.12.12					
Charities Bill NIA Bill 11/11-15	02.07.12	11.09.12	23.10.12					
Welfare Reform Bill NIA Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	27.11.12					
Education Bill NIA Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12							
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill 15/11-15	08.10.12							

**2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill 12/11-15	02.07.12	25.09.12	13.11.12					

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

*** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.*

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 October 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Roy Beggs replace Mr John McCallister as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Mr John McCallister replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; and that Mr John McCallister replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr R Swann

Mrs S Overend

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - Housing Strategy Consultation

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, made a statement regarding the Housing Strategy Consultation, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

3.2 Motion - Suspend Standing Orders

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 October 2012.

Minister for Social Development

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support nemine contradicente.

3.3 Motion - The draft Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the draft Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.4 Second Stage - Education Bill (NIA 14/11-15)

The Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, moved that the Second Stage of the Education Bill (NIA 14/11-15) be agreed.

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

4. Question Time**4.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson. The junior Minister, Mr Bell, also answered a number of questions.

4.2 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

5. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

5.1 Marie Stopes Clinic

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer, tabled by Mr Jim Allister.

6. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)**6.1 Second Stage - Education Bill (NIA 14/11-15)**

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Welfare Reform Bill passed Second Stage (Division).

7. Adjournment**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.01pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

15 October 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

15 October 2012

Division

Second Stage: Education Bill (NIA 14/11-15)

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 77

Noes: 15

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Byrne, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Rogers, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Boyle and Mr Hazzard.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Kinahan.

The Second Stage was **agreed**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 10 - 15 October 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - North Eastern Education and Library Board Annual Report and Accounts 2011-2012 (DE)
 - Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Article 65)-Code of Practice C (DOJ)
 - Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Article 60)-Code of Practice E (DOJ)
 - Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Article 60A)-Code of Practice F (DOJ)
 - Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Article 65)-Code of Practice H (DOJ)
 - Anti-Social Behaviour - An inspection of the criminal justice system's approach to addressing anti-social behaviour in Northern Ireland (DOJ)
 - Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) Annual Report and Accounts 2011/12 (OFMDFM)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

 - S.R 2012/375 The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DFP)
 - S.R. 2012/377 The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

For Information Only:

 - S.R 2021/364 The Prohibition of Waiting (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 - Delivering Social Change Signature Projects (OFMDFM)
 - Strategic Waste Infrastructure Program (DOE)
8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on the Review of the Animal By-Products (Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 (DARD)
 - Consultation on the Northern Ireland Housing Strategy 2012-2017 (DSD)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

- Sixth Periodical Review of Parliamentary Constituencies Publication of Revised Proposals Report (Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland) (NIO)

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 October 2012

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 **Statement - North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Transport Sectoral Format: Roads and Transport Issues**

The Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Transport Sectoral Format: Roads and Transport, following which he replied to questions.

2.2 **Statement - North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Transport Sectoral Format: Road Safety Issues**

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Transport Sectoral Format: Road Safety Issues, following which he replied to questions.

2.3 **Statement - The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service**

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The sitting was suspended at 12.17pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 **Culture, Arts and Leisure**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

3.2 **Education**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd.

4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

4.1 **Motion - Accelerated Passage - Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA 15/11-15)**

Proposed:

That the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA Bill 15/11-15) proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support nemine contradicente.

4.2 Second Stage - Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA 15/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved that the Second Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA 15/11-15) be agreed.

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Committee Business

5.1 Motion - Amend Standing Order 59

Proposed:

Leave out Standing Order 59 and insert –

‘59. Assembly and Executive Review Committee

- (1) There shall be a standing committee of the Assembly to be known as the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.
- (2) The committee may -
 - (a) exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
 - (b) report from time to time to the Assembly and the Executive Committee.
- (3) The committee shall consider -
 - (a) such matters relating to the operation of the provisions of Parts 3 and 4 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as enable it to make the report referred to in section 29A(3) of that Act; and
 - (b) such other matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive Committee as may be referred to it by the Assembly.’

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support nemine contradicente.

6. Private Members’ Business

6.1 Motion - The Disappeared

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes that it is 40 years since the first abduction of what would become known as ‘The Disappeared’ occurred; acknowledges that, to date, seven families have been denied the right to bury loved ones because of the actions of republican paramilitaries who abducted, murdered and hid the victims’ remains; commends the dignified perseverance of the families and the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains (ICLVR); pledges its support to those families in their ongoing fight for justice; and calls on all those with information to co-operate fully with the ICLVR so that this harrowing chapter of our history can be closed.

Mr W Humphrey

Ms P Bradley

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Mr Dominic Bradley spoke to his topic on Nursery provision at St John's Primary School, Middletown, Co Armagh.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.36pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

16 October 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 October 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

- S.R. 2012/378 The Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DHSSPS)

For Information Only:

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 16 October 2012

2011-2015 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12				
Superannuation Bill NIA Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12	26.09.12				
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill NIA Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12	25.06.12	26.10.12					
Business Improvement Districts Bill NIA Bill 9/11-15	25.06.12	17.09.12	05.11.12					
Criminal Justice Bill NIA Bill 10/11-15	25.06.12	03.07.12	14.12.12					
Charities Bill NIA Bill 11/11-15	02.07.12	11.09.12	23.10.12					
Welfare Reform Bill NIA Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	27.11.12					
Education Bill NIA Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	03.12.12					
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill 15/11-15	08.10.12	16.10.12	N/A	N/A				

**2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill 12/11-15	02.07.12	25.09.12	13.11.12					

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 October 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement - Report on Progress on Welfare Reform Issues

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, made a statement regarding an update on Welfare Reform Issues, following which he replied to questions.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Welfare Reform Bill - Standing Order 34

Proposed:

That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Welfare Reform Bill is compatible with human rights.

Mr F McCann

Mr M Brady

An explanatory statement was made by the member who proposed the motion and by a member who opposed it.

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** (Division 1).

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Consideration Stage - Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill (NIA 15/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved the Consideration Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill.

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

Bill NIA 15/11-15 stood referred to the Speaker.

4.2 Consideration Stage - Superannuation Bill (NIA 6/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved the Consideration Stage of the Superannuation Bill.

One amendment was tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed**, without division, that Clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 1, to Clause 2, was **agreed** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed**, without division, that Clause 2, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed**, without division, that Clauses 3 and 4 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

Bill NIA 6/11-15 passed Consideration Stage and stood referred to the Speaker.

4.3 Motion - Draft Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the draft Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion - Unemployment Rates

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes, with grave concern, that the unemployment rate has risen by 19,000 in the three years between the quarters ended July 2009 and July 2012, and that 23.5 percent of 18-24 year olds, some 24,000 young people, are unemployed with little prospect of work; acknowledges that the role of InvestNI is to grow the local economy; expresses dismay that InvestNI appears to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the trend of jobs moving overseas; further notes that the Executive has not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland Green New Deal Group or developed the proposals of the 'Jobs Plan' published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and InvestNI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals.

Mr P McGlone

Mr A Maginness

5.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'economy;' and insert:

'expresses dismay that InvestNI appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson; notes, with concern, that there was no dedicated InvestNI business start-up scheme in place for over a year; further notes that the Executive has not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland Green New Deal or developed the proposals of the 'Jobs Plan' published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and InvestNI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals, and to give a commitment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning in making bids for the significant Barnett Consequential arising from the Youth Contract Initiative, as announced by the Coalition Government at Westminster, to tackle youth unemployment specifically.'

Mrs S Overend

Mr B McCrea

The Speaker took the Chair.

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

6. Question Time

6.1 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

6.2 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster.

7. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

7.1 Motion - Unemployment Rates (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division 2).

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** (Division 3).

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.00pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

22 October 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

22 October 2012

Division 1

Welfare Reform Bill - Standing Order 34

Proposed:

That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Welfare Reform Bill is compatible with human rights.

Mr F McCann

Mr M Brady

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 40

Noes: 44

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr F McCann and Ms Ruane.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Ms Brown.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result:

Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kinahan, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

The Motion was **negatived**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

22 October 2012

Division 2

Unemployment Rates - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'economy;' and insert:

'expresses dismay that InvestNI appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson; notes, with concern, that there was no dedicated InvestNI business start-up scheme in place for over a year; further notes that the Executive has not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland Green New Deal or developed the proposals of the 'Jobs Plan' published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and InvestNI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals, and to give a commitment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning in making bids for the significant Barnett Consequential arising from the Youth Contract Initiative, as announced by the Coalition Government at Westminster, to tackle youth unemployment specifically.'

Mrs S Overend

Mr B McCrea

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 41

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mrs Overend.

NOES

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dunne and Mr Frew.

The Amendment was **made**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

22 October 2012

Division 3

Unemployment Rates - Motion as amended

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with grave concern that the unemployment rate has risen by 19,000 in the three years between the quarters ended July 2009 and July 2012 and that 23.5% percent of 18-24-year-olds, some 24,000 young people, are unemployed with little prospect of work; acknowledges that the role of Invest NI is to grow the local economy; expresses dismay that Invest NI appeared to display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the job losses at FG Wilson; notes with concern that there was no dedicated Invest NI business start-up scheme in place for over a year; further notes that the Executive has not adequately funded the job creation proposals of the Northern Ireland Green New Deal or developed the proposals of the jobs plan published by a business alliance including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, supported by the Executive and Invest NI, to tackle rising unemployment by launching a robust job creation and business support strategy based on these proposals and to give a commitment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning in making bids for the significant Barnett Consequential arising from the Youth Contract initiative, as announced by the coalition Government at Westminster, to tackle youth unemployment specifically.

The Question, as amended, was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 41

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Overend and Mr Rogers.

NOES

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dunne and Mr Frew.

The Motion, as amended, was **carried**.

Superannuation Bill

Marshalled List of Amendments

Consideration Stage

Monday 22 October 2012

Amendments tabled up to 9.30am Thursday, 18 October 2012 and selected for debate

The Bill will be considered in the following order-

Clauses and Long Title

Amendment 1

Clause 2, Page 2, Line 32

Leave out 'Before' and insert 'The scheme shall be subject to negative resolution and before'

Chair, Committee for Finance and Personnel

Northern Ireland Assembly

**Papers Presented to the Assembly on
17 - 22 October 2012**

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Western Education and Library Board Annual Report and Accounts 2011-12 (DE)
 - Northern Ireland Certification Officer for Trade Unions and Employers' Associations Annual Report 2011-12 (DEL)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

 - S.R. 2012/376 The Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Codes of Practice) (Revision of Codes C, E, F and H) Order 2012 (DOJ)
 - S.R. 2012/380 The Social Security (Habitual Residence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 - Announcement of Amendments to the Terms of Reference of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 October 2012

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement - Youth Justice Review

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding the Youth Justice Review, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

2.2 Statement - North South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral Format

The Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral Format, held on 17 October, following which he replied to questions.

2.3 Motion - The Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

2.4 Motion - The Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

2.5 Legislative Consent Motion - Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, as amended in Committee in the House of Commons, dealing with the UK Green Investment Bank and payments to directors of quoted companies, should be considered by the United Kingdom Parliament.

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion - Cross-Border Education

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the report 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-Border Undergraduate Education' (May 2011) based on research by the European Employment Services Cross-Border Partnership at the request of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry Joint Business Council; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to remove the barriers which limit student flows within the island of Ireland.

Mr B McElduff

Mr P Flanagan

Mr F McCann

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.28pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood.

4.2 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Motion - Cross-Border Education (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division).

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

6. Adjournment

Mrs Brenda Hale spoke to her topic on traffic issues in Hillsborough Village.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.00pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

23 October 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

23 October 2012

Division 1

Cross-Border Education - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the report 'A Study of Obstacles to Cross-Border Undergraduate Education' (May 2011) based on research by the European Employment Services Cross-Border Partnership at the request of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry Joint Business Council; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to remove the barriers which limit student flows within the island of Ireland.

Mr B McElduff

Mr P Flanagan

Mr F McCann

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 52

Noes: 28

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Flanagan and Mr McElduff.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Anderson and Mr Buchanan.

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 October 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
 - Assembly Members' Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2012
 - Report on the Charities Bill (NIA Bill 11/11-15) (Committee for Social Development) (NIA 68/11-15)
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

For Information Only:
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on the Zoonoses (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DARD)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
 - The Safety of Services Provided by Health and Social Care Trusts (NIAO)
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 23 October 2012

2011-2015 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12				
Superannuation Bill NIA Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12	26.09.12	22.10.12			
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill NIA Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12	25.06.12	26.10.12					
Business Improvement Districts Bill NIA Bill 9/11-15	25.06.12	17.09.12	13.12.12					
Criminal Justice Bill NIA Bill 10/11-15	25.06.12	03.07.12	14.12.12					
Charities Bill NIA Bill 11/11-15	02.07.12	11.09.12	23.10.12	23.10.12				
Welfare Reform Bill NIA Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	27.11.12					
Education Bill NIA Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	03.12.12					
Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) NIA Bill 15/11-15	08.10.12	16.10.12	N/A	N/A	22.10.12			

**2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Civil Service (Special Advisers) NIA Bill 12/11-15	02.07.12	25.09.12	13.11.12					

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.